

## SAVED BY THE LUGGAGE

### The Story of Hurricane Luis

The first day of Hurricane Luis began with strong winds and rough seas. The weather was uncomfortable but there was undeniably a feeling of anticlimax, of being a little let down. After all, for the previous couple of days local radio had been issuing a series of increasingly stern warnings. We should prepare for a very rough time indeed. The approaching hurricane was 1200km in diameter, it was moving across the sea at only 8 mph (a bad sign) and it had wind speeds of 250 mph. This rated it at category 4 (of 5). It threatened to be stronger than anything that had hit the Northern Antilles in living memory.

We had arrived in St Barths three days before, looking for a new and more adventurous life. We just hadn't expected it to come like this. The beautiful but badly run down house and buildings at Eden Rock which we had bought, and which were to become the new family home, did not yield much in the way of anti-hurricane barricades or equipment. But the house was built of stone and hardwood and looked strong enough, so we were inclined to stay there rather than seek sanctuary in the island school – the course of action suggested on the radio.

So, as the islanders cranked up their various responses to the coming threat, the Eden Rockers went out to buy plywood, screws, nails, tools and timber. Work commenced.

After the first 20 hours, we knew the buildings better and had boarded up the whole of the main house and the various bungalow windows. It was at that stage that we looked out on the morning of the first day. Lesley prepared bread and honey and we drank coffee. It had been enjoyable to handle tools again and to make things – but was the effort going to be wasted?

We didn't have long to wait to find out. Suddenly the wind increased and it was screaming through every weak joint in our defences, tugging and yanking mightily at the coconut trees and island buildings outside. We had left only the windows to the north and west end of the roof unreinforced - they had been shuttered a couple of weeks previously against an earlier hurricane alert. Now, with the first puff or two, the shutters blew off and the windows caved in. We stiffened our resolve and continued to work inside, taking down pictures and finding safer areas for the better furniture etc. It was too rough to climb the roof.

At 1 am the radio announcer stated that the hurricane was coming.

'...Was coming...?' So what exactly was this thing outside that was lashing the trees and screaming at us? He continued by commenting that all we had at present was a severe tropical storm..... but that the eye if the Hurricane Luis was heading straight for St Barths..... and that anyone able to do so should go immediately to sheltered sanctuaries. Finally, before ceasing radio transmission (to try to save his equipment, he said) the announcer introduced the Governor, who wished everyone luck and God's blessing. He prayed we would all survive this thing together. We stood silently and gathered our thoughts. Jane said "ooh - it's arriving after lunch".

We looked outside and watched a phenomenon develop. Within an hour the distinction between sky and sea had disappeared. In their place was one grey mass of smashing, hammering wind and water that was not so much blowing as delivering incessant tearing concussions. Like explosions they staggered the air, sea and buildings, seemingly the very land itself and everything that stood attached to it. There was no thought now of anti-climax.

The time was 2 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon and there was light enough to see by, although we were cagey now about looking through the glass, for fear of it shattering in our faces. We were fortunate to be high on our rock, with some strong stone walls to shelter behind. From time to time we crept outside to watch the thing unfold and to take photographs.

In common with many other easy-natured people, Jane's a generous packer of luggage. 'If it's there, chuck it in the bag', seems to be the rule. For this trip to St Barths, we were in fact moving home, so in fairness we did have a great deal of kit that simply had to go. At Charles de Gaulle in Paris we found ourselves surrounded by twenty-five big bags, and check-in staff saying "ooh la la la la" a good deal, as the luggage overweight kilo counter swung to digits grown dusty through lack of use. The Eden Rock restaurant contains a number of heavy hardwood tables and some rickety old windows that face north - the direction from which Luis was expected to attack first. There hadn't been enough time to unpack and to find a place to put the luggage, so a table and luggage 'island' was built tight up against our weakest north facing door, and the whole structure sheeted together with tarpaulin and rope.

At three o'clock Luis was right over the island. Beneath us, from our vantage point on Eden Rock, we could see huge seas rolling past us either side, through the beach restaurants and houses, crossing the road and creaming on into the island lagoon. Trees, roofing and other debris soared through the air, landed and bounced, and crashed on, causing

more damage. After the storm was over, the bow section of a small boat was found 600ft up a hill in the centre of the island. In nearby St Maarten, 800 boats were smashed together and sunk inside the harbour which had previously been well regarded by yachties as a safe 'hurricane hole'.

We had lost the room with the old shutters, so now despite being situated 100ft above the sea, pure sea water was pouring through the windows and into the house. Seemingly endless, successive hammering concussions continued to rock the structure to its foundations. The weakest north facing door could not be expected to last. Our party had withdrawn into the strong lee-side kitchen and from apertures in the wall we watched the door. It had to go, and surely with it the ceiling and roof would go too. At one stage, we took a chance, ran to the door and succeeded in nailing an 8' x 4' timber sheet to the inside frame. Later we found all the nails broken. The underground rain water system had been drained as a possible final bolt hole for safety.

The north door held. At 5 o'clock, the wind started to shift into the west but its force remained the same. We redoubled our efforts to fortify the house inside and occasionally outside. On one brave crawl to locate an additional external coach bolt, Steve Haines was missed by 10ft as the grill hood, complete with its external extractor fan assembly (weighing about 300kgs), was ripped off and flew past him, eventually grounding 50 yards away.

But by now, we were beginning to feel that we were in charge. We felt that we could outwork the thing. Another 15 hours went by. We fortified ahead of the wind as it circled us, cutting, screwing, sprigging, nailing and bolting. Eventually, we ran out of materials and were obliged to break up the upstairs beds to reinforce the windows. The girls and Spencer, aged 6, were sheltering uncomplainingly under the concrete sink unit in the kitchen. St Maarten radio revived briefly to describe conditions in St Barths as 'un catastrophe' .....the waves being described as 'énorme'.

Now the house was a mess. Daylight had gone and salt water ran freely through the ceilings and the house. Misty torchlight somehow added to the sharpness of the images. Amongst the piles of chairs, tables, beds, piano, pictures and plants – a lone wild sea-bird was to be seen. Shrewdly, he had waddled in through an open lee-side door. He stayed with us for 20 hours before cheerfully flying off onto a calmer sea, to Spencer's great disappointment.

After about 40 hours, Luis drifted north. Later, somewhere east of New York, he lobbed a 95 ft high wave at the QE 2.

Back on St Barths, people emerged to look around. Houses and hotels had been flung into the sea. Water and electricity systems were so badly damaged that they remained out of service for the following three weeks. Roads were blocked and so much had been changed that whole sections of the island became almost unrecognisable. This was helped by there being absolutely no leaves left on the trees, and so, interestingly, it was possible to see much more than is normally the case.

Tragically, throughout the islands, there were human fatalities, as well as thousands of animals large and small – so many in fact that the sea was poisoned. (Swimming was banned for 3 weeks in St Barths.)

The very poorest people occupy shanty accommodation which had no chance of withstanding the likes of Luis. It is said that a further number of fatalities occurred in St Maarten when gunfights broke out between looters and the Dutch police. Happily, incidents of this type did not happen on St Barths, which under a strong Mayor and with mainstream French Army and Navy help quickly came to grips with the work required. The tourist season was eventually scheduled to start on December 1st later that year, a couple of weeks later than usual.

The Eden Rockers escaped injury – we were only a little inconvenienced by unsightly sores on our feet and bodies, probably caused by wearing wet clothes and track shoes for days and nights on end.

As the winds died away, we went first to test how close we had come to facing a really tight corner – which would have happened if the weak north door given way. We checked the gap between the doorframe and the tables and bags. They had not moved a millimetre! Good old Janey.

Truly, we had been “saved by the luggage”.

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*02.10.95*