

Irma cancels honeymoon, postpones funeral, disrupts trips

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A canceled honeymoon, a postponed funeral, an “evacuation vacation” and a fall foliage trip substituting for a beach getaway.

These are some of the ways in which Hurricane Irma affected travelers. Long-held plans were disrupted, hours were spent seeking refunds for airfare and hotels and in a few cases, a happy alternative was found.

Here are a few stories.

EVACUATION VACATION

Lesley Cohen, a travel agent with SmartFlyer, not only rebooked lots of clients whose travel plans were disrupted by Hurricane Irma, but she also booked herself an “evacuation vacation.”

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Cohen has a waterfront home in a Tampa, Florida, flood zone but didn't want to be on the road. She decided to try to fly out, but the only place she could get tickets for was San Francisco. So she planned a last-minute trip there with her daughters, 6 and 8, who “had never been on a flight that long in their lives,” and her mom.

With help from friends in the travel industry, and using points wherever she could, she booked a hotel and planned an itinerary that included the Japanese tea garden, the Golden Gate Bridge, Lombard Street and more. “It helped to be distracted,” she said.

She noted that she'd had a lot of clients “coming to me, freaking out” about disrupted cruises, flights and more. “We always talk about this with our clients,” she said. “Things happen, it's out of our control. So you try to make the best of it.”

FALL COLORS INSTEAD OF THE BEACH

Renee McFerron and her husband were supposed to be hunting for seashells in Florida later this month. Instead they'll be enjoying fall colors on a road trip in their home state of Colorado.

“I worked on this plan for months,” McFerron said, recounting her research for the aborted Florida trip. “I happened to see this airfare sale on Frontier. I looked up hurricane season. It said the end of September was the tail end of hurricane season. I said, ‘Surely I'll be OK.’ It didn't turn out to be so OK.”

They'd planned to fly in and out of Fort Myers, Florida, rent a car, stay at beach hotels and then drive to Key West. She canceled when she saw the hurricane forecast because if she waited until after it hit, she wouldn't get her money back. “Why go ahead with a vacation that could be a total disaster and risk losing deposits?” she said. But it took hours on the phone and online with the airline and two hotel booking sites to get all the refunds straightened out.

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“My lesson learned was I'm not using these third-party (hotel booking) websites anymore,” she said. “It was really a learning experience.”

STRESS ON TOP OF MOURNING

Kim Gorode's family planned to fly to Florida this past weekend for her grandfather's funeral. Instead, her dad drove her newly widowed grandmother north, away from her home in Boynton Beach, as the hurricane approached.

“Part of a funeral is to get closure,” Gorode said. “Not only have we not been able to get closure, but there were new levels of stress and worries.”

Now that everyone is safe, stress levels are down but it's still “very strange and unsettling.” Damage to the house is unknown and a service for her grandfather “has been postponed indefinitely until we can figure out what is going on down there.”

A CANCELED HONEYMOON

Kelli Howard of Tulsa, Oklahoma, is getting married in January and planned a honeymoon in St. Thomas. “We didn't want to do the typical Mexico resort thing,” she said. “We had an Airbnb all picked out and were really excited about it.” But the hurricane “changed our plans. ... We were worried that things on the island wouldn't be rebuilt in time.”

They couldn't reach the Airbnb owners, but because they canceled so far in advance, they got a full refund.

“We're flying to San Francisco instead,” Howard said. “We'll do a lot of food tourism. We love pretending we're like Anthony Bourdain, traveling and going to restaurants.”

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