

CARIBBEAN

With Caribbean hotel closures, a perception problem for open villas

By [Johanna Jainchill](#) / January 07, 2018

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St. Barth Properties' Villa Java has been repaired and is ready for guests.

The Caribbean's upscale villa-rental industry took an outsized hit from the one-two punch of hurricanes Irma and Maria last September.

Many of the islands that were heavily damaged were places with strong villa-rental cultures, such as St. Barts and Anguilla. As those islands recover, the villa industry faces the additional challenges of public perception about their condition following the storms and the subsequent decline in airlift. Both are being driven, at least in part, by the closing of so many large hotels.

Because each villa is distinctly located and uniquely built, the disparity in damage spans a wide spectrum. On several islands, the state of the hotel industry does not mirror that of the villa housing stock. The rental homes that are repaired or were never damaged in the first place are working to get the word out that they are open for business.

"We have to fight the perception that the hurricanes created a swath of destruction across the Caribbean," said Steven Lassman, vice president of Villas of Distinction. "We're trying very hard to push the word out that these islands are ready and able, and your vacation will be fantastic."

The problem is acute on St. Barts, where the largest hotels are not slated to open until later this year: Le Guanahani, the island's biggest resort with 67 rooms, and Eden Rock, St. Barths say they will open this summer (Eden Roc's 80-property Villa Rental is open for business). The Hotel Christopher St. Barth will reopen in February, Villa Marie Saint-Barth in March, Le Manapany in April and Hotel Le Toiny in October.

Le Sereno and Isle de France have not set reopening dates.

However, villa rental companies like Villas of Distinction, St. Barth Properties and Wimco all report that 50% of their villa inventory is available, with more properties slated to reopen this month.

On Anguilla, the Four Seasons Resort & Residences is set to open on March 23, the CuisinArt Golf Resort & Spa this summer and the Belmond Cap Juluca in November. Reopening dates have not been announced for Altamer, Anacaona Boutique Hotel, Arawak Beach Inn or Anguilla Great House Beach Resort.

Meanwhile, Villas of Distinction said 63% of its Anguilla villas, or 40 of 64 units, are open, and the tourist board said the island has more than 600 guestrooms available in villas, small hotels and apartment rentals.



St. Barth Properties' Villa Nikki is open.

The problem is not limited to villas. Small hotels also are being hurt by the closings of the islands' largest properties.

Stephanie Monnet, reservations manager at the 25-room LeVillage Saint-Barth Hotel, said that prebooked guests were surprised to find that the property had never closed; they had assumed they'd have to rebook or get a refund.

"People have the wrong information on what's going on on the island," she said. "Because the [largest] hotels are closed, people think we're closed, which is not the case."

Airlift remains a problem

That does not seem to be enough to sway the airlines, which drastically cut airlift to Puerto Rico and St. Martin, the islands that Anguilla and St. Barts depend upon for their guests' arrivals.

St. Barts and Anguilla have small airports that can only accept small, regional aircraft. The majority of their tourists take short flights or ferries from larger islands.

As a result, they've borne an outsized impact from the reduction in airline capacity to both St. Martin and Puerto Rico following the storms: The Caribbean Tourist Organization reported that in December, Puerto Rico lost more than 162,000 airline seats, a drop of 33% compared with December 2016, while St. Martin lost more than 84,800 seats, a drop of 35%.

"That's your biggest challenge with regard to full recovery," Lassman said. "Getting the St. Martin airport up and running and getting the capacity back in, that's the challenge this winter for St. Barts and Anguilla."

Peg Walsh, president of St. Barth Properties, said that the airlift problem was "very frustrating for our clients" and cited examples of people who wanted to book but were stymied by the lack of flight options.

"A lot of clients just rolled over to the same dates next year, so next season we're already quite booked," she said.

In contrast, in Turks and Caicos, which also suffered a major hit from the storms but where the hotels and airlift rebounded quickly, villa rentals are thriving, Lassman said.

Villa bookings were strong in Anguilla and St. Barts over the holidays, as owners reduced minimum stays and offered other incentives, though generally not in the form of lower prices, Walsh said. There was still some unusual last-minute holiday availability on both islands, inventory that is often scooped up by the end of the previous summer.

Walsh said that bookings in March are "really good," thanks to a three-day yacht race around St. Barts that "brings a lot of people and crew. That's good."

Lassman said the villa situation presents opportunity for both agents and clients.

"I think you'll see value," he said, adding that Villas of Distinction will launch a Caribbean sale this month. "We want to create value for the consumer and show them the destination is ready for customers. ... That is what is going to drive people. They want to have good value."