

To hell and back: A personal account of Hurricane Wilma

Submitted By Laura Ritchie

How quickly a situation deteriorates...

On Wednesday evening I was playing sand volleyball on the pristine white beaches of Cancun. The waves of the approaching hurricane were overtaking our court, but only adding to the adventure of our two-on-two battle. With sand plastered to the side of my face, I assured my husband the hurricane approaching would either miss us or pass by on a single day of vacation. No worries, with disaster there are always memorable experiences.

Just three days later, I'm standing in line behind three hundred people to get a breath of fresh air, and when I say a breath, I mean literally a three-second pause and inhalation of a little outdoor quasi-freshness from the doorway of our confines. People around me are sweat drenched. Some have bedding now soaked with crap - literally. The ration of fruit I ate for breakfast was undoubtedly contaminated with a mist of toilet water. People around me are starting to vomit. The word bathroom now means a garbage can. No power, no communication with the outside world, no water to wash our hands, and a thick stench of stagnant air surrounds us that can only be produced by nearly a thousand people in a hot building with the windows boarded up. Our real lives are impossible worlds away.

This was the nightmare of hurricane Wilma, shared by some 30,000 tourists (including myself) and who knows how many Mexican natives on the Yucatan Peninsula. For me, the experience from ducking in rooms to avoid imploding windows to suffering from food poisoning, while horrible, gave me a greater understanding of how so many have survived much greater and longer-lasting tragedies. It was also an opportune time for all of us to see what we're made of, and made us appreciate our families and the rich and delicious details of our everyday lives.

Thursday, October 20

Thursday morning we were evacuated from our hotel. The staff members, who were our sand volleyball adversaries, assured us the evacuation was just a precaution, that we'd likely spend one night in a shelter filled with plenty of food and water and be back to our hotel to continue our vacation by Friday afternoon. Consequently, my husband and I didn't pack any extra bottles of water or snacks to help us through the ordeal.

Visitors throughout Mexico's tourist hub - Cancun, Cozumel, Riviera Maya - were all evacuated by an organized effort of the hotel chains and the Mexican government. Their swift response and allocation of generators, food, and water to a good many of the shelters put our government's response to hurricane Katrina to shame.

A large number of hotel guests, including myself were relocated to a technical college about 20 miles inland from Cancun. Each of the modest-sized buildings were built with concrete walls and steel rooftops, which were further reinforced by plywood and two by fours installed over the windows by our hotel staff.

Thursday was nothing more than a day of strong winds, and knowing I would be holed up in the shelter at least overnight, I decided to make lemonade from lemons. I stripped down to my

bikini and laid a towel down on a patch of grass to read my book, during the first gusts of what thus far was only a tropical storm in our region.

With the weather certainly not fierce as of yet, we were a little aggravated at this point to have been banished from the land of margaritas and lawn chairs so soon. It could not have been predicted, however, that 500-mile long Wilma would eventually slow her progression to only a few clicks per hour. That night, our group of more than 800 tourists and hotel staff laid on hard tile floors, packed side by side in hallways and every room of the college. Overall, we were most definitely safe, and our basic needs were met - plenty of food and water, working bathrooms, and the power was still operational.

Thursday night we attempted sleep while the first of Wilma's dangerously high winds began knocking at the windows.

Friday, October 21

Friday we lost power and all communication with the outside world. The hotel staff members who volunteered to accompany our group to the shelter had the colossal job of keeping our diverse crowd calm and safe. They had the task of making sure everyone had enough to eat and drink, while dealing with angry tourists jonesing for a cigarette. Scarily enough, despite being in a building with every window boarded up and people packed in like cattle, some nicotine addicts lit up in the restrooms, despite the warnings of the shelter leaders.

With all communication lost - there were literally no phone lines or cell phone towers that were working -- Wilma's progression and our place in the storm was reduced to mere speculation. Every 12 hours or so, the staff was somehow able to get an update from the Mexican government, which I believe was delivered via land during lapses of the fierceness of Wilma's barrage. Even these reports, however, were greeted with skepticism, as each new statement gave graver news than the last.

The eye of the hurricane was reportedly supposed to hit Cancun head on, and with every military brief we learned the eye loomed not closer, but further away, securing our fate for additional hours and days, in what now we referred to as "Cellblock H" (donned due to being building H of the hotel campus) or the "Sweat Pit", for longer and longer increments of time. Each subsequent report brought a short wave of despair and nausea at the thought of spending another night in the now filthy and unsanitary shelter.

During Wilma's pummeling of our encampment, life deteriorated by the hour. By Saturday afternoon the large windows over the stairs of our two-story shelter had been blown out, despite the wood coverings adhered by three inch-long nails. With it, the entire window frame and much of the cement of that corner of the building fell with it, producing a wind shoot from windows to the doorway at the end of the hall (the only access point not boarded off.)

Oddly enough, despite being able to look down the hall and literally see the fierce winds of the hurricane zipping by, no air circulated to the rest of our building. The winds were so strong that they shot entirely past, leaving the rest of the shelter in a thick, hot, funk. The worst casualty of the window implosion was that the only bathrooms in the shelter were located in the now hurricane-encompassed hallway, cutting off the upstairs from the downstairs, and everyone from the facilities.

Our new makeshift bathrooms were waste paper baskets, which when full were dumped outside. We now had no running water and because the original bathrooms in Wilma's hallway had backed up, the entire place was now contaminated with a sort of fecal mist.

It wasn't so much a fear of dying that ate away at people, it was more an erosion of so many basic freedoms and dignities. I remember waiting in line for the makeshift bathroom, in which three garbage cans were each positioned between two chairs, located behind a sheet. Women entered in groups of three, and I remember the teenager in front of me absolutely mortified as her mom encouraged her forward in the line, telling her basically, "you've gotta do what you've gotta do." Even though she was fourteen or fifteen the look she gave her mother reminded me of a scared, pleading toddler.

As I made my way through the dark, thick air of the corridors people lay slack faced trying to stay cool. When a baby slept a mom curled up and cried, regrouping for when she'd have to be strong for her infant.

An Asian family had three young children in tow, and did their best to keep them safe and fed, as they anxiously watched their supply of diapers and baby snacks dwindle.

Food and water for some time now had been rationed in a half-hazard way. Basically once or twice a day the staff would put out a certain quantity of water and once it was gone that was it for a while.

Children or the sick could obtain additional water or supplies if necessary. During this stint a man had a heart attack, another man received cuts on his legs that became infected and grossly swollen, and an additional fellow would soon be shipped out of the shelter for lack of enough food to keep his diabetes in check.

Worries on the horizon now quickly transitioned from getting back to the hotel and downing servesas to what diseases were being cultivated in the two-inches of water in some hallways and rooms, infections and gangrene that could be caused by unsanitary wounds, and the physical stability of our shelter.

Characters were revealed. My hubby was a volunteer to squeegee the messy "fecal hallways" to keep as many folks' sleeping areas as dry as possible. He also was always one of the last to get in line to eat, making sure the children and elderly had enough. Parents stayed strong for their kids and the hotel staff were patient, calming, and plain amazing in their diligence. People overall were surprisingly polite, offering "excuse me," "sorry," and "no problem," for the many inadvertent bumps in the tight quarters.

Many also made the best of the situation, and tried to ease the boredom and hunger pangs of the youngsters housed within the heart of the disaster.

At one point I remember laughing to myself as I passed a tightly circled group including hotel staff and kids of all ages playing blackjack. Eight and ten year olds saying "hit me" or "I'll stay" reminded me that life is more about what you make of a situation than the actual conditions of your plight.

A high point of Friday included the staff's rescue of a litter of puppies, which washed ashore towards the door of the shelter. Kids enjoyed the tiny litter, but others worried about the additional germs brought in considering the already grossly unsanitary conditions.

That night sleeping my writer's mind was spinning thoughts of lice, rats, and plague. Sometimes creativity has its price.

Saturday, October 22

More windows have imploded inwards. Various rooms have concocted their own makeshift safety nets. Being that the upstairs is now separated from down, I later found their conditions were somewhat worse. I talked to a woman from England that said she counted 90 people sharing one standard-sized classroom on Saturday. In an effort to stay dry, and have a few feet of personal space, they stacked tables like bunk beds and sat on top of desks.

The danger factor was greater on Saturday than any other day. My room was located at the very end of the hall, and just outside of the room was another large boarded up window, which blew out with tremendous force. In order to keep the hundreds of people sleeping in that hallway safe, volunteers within the shelter propped tables up into the window, wedging one side onto the outside of the window and securing them impressively.

In our room, with Wilma now battering our windows, the boys tied up blankets and sheets as an extra protection against flying glass in case they should give way.

Upstairs the refugees repaired a shattered window by disassembling chairs and using parts of them as hooks, which they ingeniously fastened to the outside of the window. MacGyver style, Cellblock H's upper level crew used screws from the chairs, the cordoned hooks, tables, and drills brought in by the staff to secure the temporarily-open window of their domicile.

The hallway adjoining the aforementioned hurricane and bathroom corridor now had a dam constructed of hotel comforters and towels, which were periodically wrung out to keep those sleeping nearby somewhat dry and free of contaminated water. Men took shifts to squeegee water out of the hallway and assist the soggy, disgusting, and likely disease-ridden dam.

Despite that food supplies were limited, some overzealous eaters went through the food lines more than once, causing others to go hungry. A small percentage of those in the shelter hoarded food in fear we would run out entirely. Sadly, a few gluttonous hogs saddled up for seconds merely to obtain a midnight snack.

Late Saturday and throughout the night someone new got sick almost by the minute. Diarrhea and vomiting when a person isn't able to rinse their mouth out, brush their teeth, take a shower, or take refuge in their own private bathroom, brings the need for many to escape the sweat pit that much more urgent.

Sunday, October 23

The worst of Wilma was now finally behind us. With the approach of morning we were released to the out of doors and exuberantly tasted the sweet clean air, while taking in the wreckage of our surroundings.

For the first few hours in the outdoors people were just plain happy to breathe. We were told of a plan to return us to a section of our hotel, where we would be sharing rooms in groups of eight.

Our group took up a collection for the hotel staff, who had kindly volunteered their time and remained uplifting and encouraging during the toughest of times, despite their personal worries of their own homes and families. Two garbage bags full of 20 to 100 dollar bills were collected for the staff to help get their families through the months ahead in which they may be out of work.

In a touching off the cuff speech, one of the staff members talked about how regardless of our skin color we pulled through together as a team and proclaimed, "We're the survivors of Hurricane Wilma!" Oddly enough, it was these moments of conquest and relief that home was approaching that produced tears in most of us, rather than during moments of desperation.

As the evening waned on, people started to get more restless, and very hungry as well. Moods became increasingly volatile, and fights were always close at hand, but luckily were kept in check with great effort by those most upset. With nothing but a few bites for breakfast, as nightfall approached many in the crowd obtained a mob mentality as individuals vied for spots on the bus. At one point I remember being walked to the bus in a group and a lady typifying the "angry boisterous American" nearly attacking me for my spot. Some volunteered to be on the last bus, while other men tried to find ways to board the shuttle ahead of the elderly and families with children.

Our ride back to the hotel was a dangerous adventure in and of itself. The water came up to the bus floor, and we actually were traveling the wrong way on the highway as only one lane was open. Buildings were obviously ravaged, rooftops gone, walls caved in, palm trees decapitated, and the green mangrove swamps were now nothing but naked sticks. Cancun lied in near ruin.

When we arrived at the hotel, we waited in line for three hours to get room assignments and then a good hot meal.

Monday, October 24 - Wednesday, October 26

The days that followed were a mix of highs and lows and lots of frustrations. Getting out of the country was a crapshoot. The airport was cordoned off by the Mexican military, only letting specific travel company buses cross the threshold. Communication was still nonexistent as cell towers were out and traditional phone lines were down. Our families still didn't know if we were dead or alive. For the most part water was still off, and we continued to need a real shower. Our first night back at the hotel we washed ourselves with water we were told was likely contaminated from the pool.

Contaminated? Probably. Contaminated more than us? Not likely.

When we finally did get a plane out of the country it was basically to any U.S. city you could find a flight to, and our particular flight almost had to turn around when two men came to blows. By this point, fuses were so short there was so little else anyone could handle, and every hour tried each person's patience in incremental ways. Those triad of days were a series of waiting in line and always getting unsatisfying, unclear answers to our questions.

Aftermath

In the end, Wilma ended up being a more powerful hurricane than Katrina, however claimed far fewer lives, likely thanks to the Mexican government's swift initial response. The category five "Bitch" allegedly caused 42 deaths, basically destroyed the resort town of Playa del Carmen, seriously damaged 1,000 Cancun homes, pummeled Cuba, the Yucatan peninsula consistently for more than 36 hours, and then racked up immense damages in Florida. Wilma was the sixth major hurricane of the record-breaking 2005 Atlantic hurricane season, the most intense of its kind ever recorded in the Atlantic basin, and among the top ten costliest hurricanes ever recorded in the Atlantic.