

It never ceases to amaze me how the human brain can block out certain memories, yet retain others with no real logic to it, at least as far as I can grasp. Having been through an ordeal like Hurricane Wilma really makes one wonder how this is. I still have a hard time sleeping at times, with visions going through my mind of the reality that the hurricane laid on us.

By Christmas, it will have been two months behind us. Still, it's difficult to gage just how devastating the storm had been, but looking at the images on this site sent in from people everywhere, it makes the devastation very real.

My husband and I were visiting Cancun to commence the purchase of a townhome in Playa del Carmen. As we headed to Cancun that week, we saw the "tropical depression" on the news, and thought "it will pass", what's the big deal. Those tropical depressions happen all the time during the hurricane season. In the past, we would look at images of devastation from tornados, hurricanes, major storms and floods, thinking it'll never happen to us; we're in a good area. We're exempt from such atrocities designed by Mother Nature. Well, after experiencing the hurricane first hand, our attitude had been "adjusted".

As fate would have it, we had just signed the documents that allowed the wire transfers to reach the selling party, and were awaiting a call from our bank to verify the transfers. All the while, the wind was really kicking up and in the back of our minds, we're thinking, "it'll pass, it's only wind". Meanwhile, we headed into downtown Cancun to meet with the Notario to get our signatures notarized. On the way to town, we noticed, with great dismay, the people of the town removing their boats from the water, sandbagging the shoreline, and obviously in a state of subdued chaos trying to beat the storm. By this time, it was evident we were going to get hammered by the storm.

Back at the Royal Solaris hotel, the scene was nervous anticipation of the obvious. We had planned to stay there only one night, and then spend the rest of the week at our new "winter" house. We rented a car, and wisely, purchased the optional insurance. Having a car while visiting Cancun kept us quite mobile, so we were able to get around and check out the scenery. We had our luggage in the car and were ready to head to Playa.

At this point, the word from the hotel management was that the government had ordered an immediate evacuation of the entire hotel zone, and we were directed to board a bus and head to the shelter – in our case, the Universidad Cancun de Tecnologica. Since we had the car, we followed the bus to the campus, and parked in the lot. Who knows, when the storm passes, we can head to Playa and stay at our newly acquired house. Well, it didn't quite work out that way.

Finding a suitable spot at the shelter was somewhat difficult as there were 800 people to be accommodated. The hotel anticipated just two or three days of placement there, and packed enough food and supplies to last the expected duration. They even set up a DJ on the second floor of the classrooms to entertain the children, of which there were many. All seemed to be in order and pretty organized. We found a spot in a classroom on the

main floor, shared with several others people from all over the world. This two day visit would be quite interesting! However, the two days' stay was only the beginning.

Mentally tracking the storm with little information, no power and no connection to the outside world became an incredible challenge. Minutes turned to hours, then to days. Five days of shelter stay pushed many of us to the limits of our anguish, and gave us a lot of time to reflect upon our own lives, while putting our survival instincts into high gear. One takes for granted the convenience of electricity, bathroom facilities, running water and comfort of a bed, as we were to discover. Even something basic like reaching for the refrigerator for a late night snack, getting a hot cup of coffee, or having a cigarette (if you smoke) is not given a second thought in our world of comfort. I suppose that not "knowing" when the storm will pass was the most frustrating thing of the whole ordeal.

Hammered with 150 MPH winds for hours on end, hearing the loud thumps of debris hitting the shelter or plywood panels being ripped off by the wind, and the inevitable but unanticipated crashing of window pane to the interior corridors were certainly frightening highlights of the shelter visit. Hours on end of volunteers and hotel employees using squeegees to keep the rain water from leaching into the sleeping areas. Not to mention the incredible pressure to your ears associated with a sealed building in the midst of ravaging winds. What kept us going was the conversation and camaraderie experienced with our "friends" in the shelter. Whenever possible, we would make light of the scenario, trying hard to keep positive, and induce laughter to break the silence.

We were promised the center of the "eye" in which air pressure would equalize, daylight would be seen, and perhaps birds would be flying. Unfortunately, we never experienced the eye of the storm; apparently we were on the outskirts of the eye, and were outside of the clear area, experiencing the consistent wind and rain for days on end. Most of us were terribly upset and frustrated that we could not contact the outside world, to let our families know we're still alive and safe in the shelter.

Probably the most unexpected behavior we had experienced was the consistent uplifted attitude of the hotel staff, smiling constantly and cheerfully in the face of the dreadful conditions. One could guess that the Mexican people serving the shelter must have had a lot of experience with these storm conditions, but that was not the case. Hurricane Wilma was a first in Cancun, never before experienced by the people living in this region. For them, not knowing about their own families' safety seemed to be secondary to their desire to care for the people stranded in the shelter. This attitude to aid the tourists is the force behind our desire to help them in return.

Five days later, after the storm had passed, some of the people in the shelter decided to put together a collection for the hotel employees in recognition of their unselfish aid to all of those in the shelter. It was certainly a gesture of kindness that we believe is a cornerstone of humanity and goes a long way to provide for the people who helped us. Those generous people who contributed to the collection should be proud to have helped the people who helped us. We returned to the hotel where we were fed and accommodated for days until the airport was ready to get us back home.

To further continue our efforts to show our gratitude, we have offered Hurricane Wilma tee shirts through this website and as of December 2005, have collected well over \$1000 in funds. We have contacted Royal Solaris management along with Wal Mart management to formulate a means to distribute the funds, via “gift cards” to the 68 employees of Solaris who assisted in our stay during and after the storm. We will have distributed the cards before Christmas. Some of the employees are still temporarily unemployed until after January so with the help of the Human Resource department at Solaris, we will be distributing the cards equally. During our visit to Solaris in November, we rounded up some of the staff and put the tee shirts on them for this picture:



I want to thank all of you who have contributed to this site in the form of images, stories and purchases of tee shirts and sweat shirts. The entire proceeds go to people who helped us through the terrifying days of Hurricane Wilma.

On the positive side, our townhouse weathered the storm quite well. There is something to say about a structure made out of concrete. We have stayed in the new house for several days and will be back every month or so, since I believe that the region is the most beautiful place to visit ever. And the people, goes without saying more. Also, the people we met during the stay at the campus have become our very dear friends, of whom we plan to meet with during a future “alumni” get-together. Viva Cancun!

Sue Spina
John Spina aka “Raymond the photographer”