

SPECIAL REPORT

Road to Recovery

Hit with the one-two punch of Hurricane Dorian and the pandemic, the Abacos begin the process of rebuilding.
By Bob Arrington

On September 1, 2019, Hurricane Dorian, one of the most powerful recorded hurricanes to ever make landfall, stalled over the Bahamas as the world watched in horror. Stationary over Elbow and Man-O-War Cays in the Abacos, Dorian's wind and rain wreaked havoc on the defenseless islands for more than 24 hours. NOAA reported Dorian's maximum sustained winds at 185 mph, with peak gusts up to 220 mph. The storm inundated the islands—20 feet of water washed over them.

In the months since, as we have all been consumed by the global pandemic, the Bahamas have had to handle multiple crises, each laid atop one another: the loss of homes, COVID-19 and the devastation to the country's tourism-based economy.

Man-O-War Cay was ground zero for the storm and is now a good representation of post-hurricane life in the Abacos. The inhabitants of this much-loved "Out Island" have been hard at work rebuilding homes and businesses. James Pleydell-Bouverie, a local resident and realtor on the island, said, "We are well down the road to recovery, but much work remains." One of the island's first goals was to utilize the generous donations already made to the island. Community leaders set up a 501(c)(3) fund to solicit, hold and distribute money for approved projects. The local directors of the fund reached out to second homeowners and supporters of Man-O-War who had an interest in seeing critical infrastructure projects completed. The directors quickly established a list of priorities, with shelter, food and personal safety being the highest need.

Cha Boyce, the Executive Director of Friends for the Environment, was on Elbow Cay when the storm struck. She reported for the South Florida PBS program *Changing Seas—Live*: "We knew that this hurricane was coming, and people were preparing as they do for hurricanes, by stocking up on supplies and boarding up their houses. We were all just hunkering down and getting ready for the day, but nobody could ever have imagined the devastation that was coming." Boyce, who is still living and working on the island, said, "Things are slowly getting back to pre-storm conditions," but adding COVID to the mix has slowed the progress. Boyce expressed concern that "one of the greatest challenges will be trash removal. In 48 hours the storm produced the equivalent of 30 years of trash. Processing and removal of trash from an island in normal times is difficult. This will take a monumental effort to remove."

KEVIN DAVIDSON



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Construction has started on Miss Annie Albury's new Sail Loft shop after the original storefront was eradicated by Hurricane Dorian.

Unfortunately, the wind dispersed much of that trash and storm debris into the ocean. With most of the focus placed on the destruction to the islands, little attention is paid to the damage sustained by marine life. A panel of experts brought together by the ANGARI Foundation presented a program: Hurricane Dorian—Impacts Below the Surface. The program highlights the destruction to the Abaco reefs and subsea habitats. Damage to the island's reefs can have a severe impact on the island's fishing and diving industries. Boyce's organization, Friends for the Environment, is part of a group organizing an effort to remove the debris and help restore the reefs.

While Dorian was devastating for the Abacos, there's a chance for something good to come of it. Many islands are taking advantage of the rebuilding process to build back better, with more resilient structures and utilities. An example of this is the rebuilding of the Government Dock on Man-O-War. Using funds donated by the United Way of Palm Beach, the new "Community Dock" is designed to be

stronger than the previous. The new pier will be a welcoming point for visitors, and it will also act as a community center.

Businesses are working hard to reestablish themselves and hire their employees back. Pleydell-Bouverie on Man-O-War reports that the grocery store is fully operational, with the hardware store and boatyards close behind. A welcome piece of news is that Albury Brothers Boat Builders, who have been building on the island since 1952, are back in business with new boats under construction.

A favorite of visitors to Man-O-War is the Sail Loft where Miss Annie Albury makes her famous sail bags. Albury's Sail Shop has been operating for three generations on Man-O-War Cay. The sail shop is well-known for its colorful items, all made from a sturdy canvas sail fabric. Unfortunately, Miss Annie's shop, which was built on a pier over the water, was completely destroyed in the storm, but a new pier has been completed and construction has started on her new shop.



Businesses are working hard to reestablish themselves, with inns, marinas, restaurants, shops and grocery stores finally reopening their doors.



According to Pleydell-Bouverie, speaking specifically for Man-O-War, "All of the navigation channels are clear of obstructions, and navigation lights have been replaced. Moorings are in place for visiting boats, and fuel is available as well." While there are still a few derelict boats remaining along the shoreline, most have been removed. "Of the approximately 80 boats washed onto land, only about 20 remain," he says.

The neighboring islands have made similar progress. At press time, the Hope Town Inn and Marina on Elbow Cay are open, along with most of the restaurants and shops. On Green Turtle Cay, the Green Turtle Marina is open, as is Sid's Grocery. On Guana Cay, Orchid Bay Marina is open with gas and diesel available, but not at the water's edge. Fuel can be taken out to the docks in 100-gallon containers by forklift and pumped aboard from there. Guana Lumber is fully operational, and they have installed a desalinization pump for clean water. Dive

Guana rebuilt the dive shop's docks to be stronger than they were pre-storm.

"The outpouring of generosity from donors around the world has been nothing short of spectacular," says Pleydell-Bouverie. "The container loads of supplies and materials that arrived in the days after the storm did so without requiring support from the relief fund. Outside the Man-O-War Relief Fund's infrastructure focus, the community is benefiting from the generosity of donors who are responding to individual needs."

We have no way of knowing what restrictions will be in place in the coming months from the pandemic, but that notwithstanding, our friends in the Abacos have the welcome mat rolled out and are hopeful that annual cruisers will return this year. They look forward to seeing old friends and making new ones. Boaters visiting the islands play an essential role in the economy. Let's show the Abacos our love and support by visiting as soon as possible. □

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