

WHEN A HURRICANE HITS

By Chase Binder

The last six weeks have been cruel indeed. Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria have laid waste to large swaths of Texas, Florida and many Caribbean islands, including our own Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands. Yet another mass shooting, this time in Las Vegas, has left a stain on America's uniquely branded fun city and another hole in our collective heart.

With the possible exception of Houston, all of the affected destinations have the distinct character of being vacation and leisure spots—places where, at any given point in time, a large proportion of the people “on the ground” are visitors. As such, they are at a clear disadvantage if disaster strikes—be it natural or man-made. They are in unfamiliar territory. Sometimes a foreign country. Sometimes a strange town without apparent infrastructure like public transportation. Sometimes a city so large as to overwhelm.

How will you react if you find yourself in such a precarious spot? Is there anything you can do to protect yourself? Certainly. Just analyze what you've been seeing on the news over the past six weeks. What have been the critical needs? Evacuation. Shelter. Food and water. Medical care. Money and resources. Communication.

I put communication last, but I believe it is an overriding necessity in today's world. A simple example: Bud and I were in Florida in the days leading up to Hurricane Irma's landfall. We didn't have viable access to Wi-Fi at our new little home, but travel pals Chuck and Debra Douglas did over at their house. They were able to find a way to get us all out. Without Wi-Fi and the ability to communicate instantly with a wide range of friends who might be able to help, we would have all been stuck.

Communication becomes even more critical when a catastrophic event happens and you're in a foreign country. I have written before about the US State Department's STEP Program (Safe Traveler Enrollment Program, at travel.state.gov). This is a free service where you register with the State Department. You provide key identifiers: passport number, name, age, gender, address, home and cell phones. You also provide a contact here in the US who does not normally travel with you. Once you are registered, you add your flight, cruise ship or other transportation information and dates. Do the same for your accommodations, including address and phone. If you do this, the State Department *will* be looking for you. They *will* come and get you. But they can't do that unless they know where you are.

Bud and I have registered with STEP for years, but after talk-



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ing at length with some folks who were evacuated in C-130's off St. Maarten after Irma, I realize I had made some false assumptions. I thought the State Department would be organized with military-style efficiency, fully provisioned and professional. I thought our taxes would pay for any services. I thought they would bring us back to the US.

Turns out...not so much. US law requires the State Department to charge you an amount equal to “commercial fare” for the C-130 flight. (Note that this does not mean that you get free peanuts or a window seat—you're strapped into a military transport). They take you where they take you—in this case, the San Juan airport. You are responsible for accommodations, onward flights—everything. You had better have communication and resources!

And about that military-style efficiency and professionalism? There are confounding variables. If the airport is severely damaged, the large C-130's can't land, let alone take off. If the State Department is understaffed (the current situation), it's quite possible that untrained junior staff will be arriving. The message here is that your government is limited in what it is actually able and willing to do. Expect to rely on government, but expect to fend for yourself as well.

We Americans are used to relying on our cell phones and tablets almost no matter where we are in the world. But guess what? If cell towers are down (witness Puerto Rico, St. Maarten and many more islands), your cell phone will not work. And Wi-Fi? If there's no electricity, no cable...no Wi-Fi. No communication. No booking another flight. No calling home to Mom to help.

So how to protect yourself? Plan ahead. Never leave the country without registering with STEP. Ever. Always leave key info with a relative or friend (copy of your passport, itinerary, contact info. Names and info for travel companions). Al-

ways. Always travel with color copies of the info pages of your passport (ours are laminated). Always. Travel with back-up credit cards as well as frequent flyer and contact info for all the airlines you use. One leg of our evacuation route out of Florida was on Southwest. We flew down on Jet Blue...I had to scramble for our Southwest info. Even when you're traveling in the US, let

someone know where you're going and always keep ID somewhere on your person. Always.

Never forget that communication will be key in almost all emergency situations. Be at the ready by always having your phone charged. In fact, I now keep a portable phone charger in my pocketbook and I'm thinking of adding a second.

Anything Goes ALL ABOARD at the Palace Theatre



While we try to be as accommodating as possible, we actually meant the hit musical, *Anything Goes*. ALL ABOARD! for this splendid production. A winner of three Tony Awards®, including Best Musical Revival and Choreography.

Set on the S. S. American, an ocean liner that sails between New York and England with a comically colorful assemblage of passengers. Among those passengers is Reno Sweeney, a popular nightclub singer and former evangelist. With Reno is Billy Crocker, a young broker on Wall Street, who has fallen in love with a beautiful woman he met in a cab. As Billy says goodbye to his boss and Reno, who are both on the boat, Billy follows as he sees his mystery woman. Billy stows away on the ship in hopes of winning fair lady's heart.

Along with our heroes, stowed away on the boat is the infamous “Moonface” Martin, a second-rate gangster labeled “Public Enemy 13,” and his girlfriend, Bonnie. “Moonface” and Bonnie have dis-

guised themselves as a minister and a missionary and, innocently aided by Billy, board the ship under their assumed identities, stranding the ship's real chaplain back at the port.

The musical introduced such songs as “Anything Goes,” “You're the Top,” and “I Get a Kick Out of You.” Song, dance, and farcical antics ensue as Reno and Moonface try to help Billy win the love of his life. There's no telling what could go right...or wrong...for the characters in this amazing show.

Catch this boat while it's still docked from October 20, 2017-November 11, 2017. Tickets range from \$25 for children 6-12 and \$39-\$46 for adults.

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