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DESTINATIONS

Acapulco Bounces Back After Deadly Hurricane

By: Linda Humphrey October 31, 1997 **Traces of the Oct. 9 storm could be found in the still-muddy residential streets behind the Acapulco convention center.**

Travel Weekly hotel editor Linda Humphrey traveled to Acapulco for a firsthand assessment of the resort city's tourism infrastructure in the wake of Hurricane Pauline, which slammed the region in early October and left 142 people dead. Her report follows.

ACAPULCO, Mexico -- I checked into the beachfront Elcano hotel here with a suitcase full of bottled water. But I found four bottles of water in my room, the taps running and the pool ready for swimmers.

The scene was a far cry from the first news reports to emerge after the storm, which indicated serious water shortages and mud-filled hotel pools. Venturing out onto Acapulco's glitzy boulevard, I inspected most of the resort city's major hotels and found them in top form.

Storm waters had inundated a scattering of hotel rooms -- including 24 at the 364-room Mayan Palace and 20 at the 220-room Sheraton, where one drained pool was strewn with rocks. Beyond those traces of the tragedy, however, both hotels were operating normally and planned to reopen the damaged rooms by next month.

Outside, dozens of blue-and-white VW Bug taxis zoomed along the main strips, the Costera Miguel Aleman and the Cuauhtemoc, where mud previously had buried cars up to their roofs.

The water rationing is over. My hotel did shut off the water for one night, from midnight to 5 a.m., for pipe repairs, but the water was always hot, the shower pressure strong.

Traces of the Oct. 9 storm could be found in the still-muddy residential streets behind the Acapulco convention center. And a few beachfront restaurants had been swept into the bay.

Representatives from Royal Caribbean, which books pre- and post-cruise stays at the Fiesta Americana, Hyatt and Princess, inspected the hotels and announced the line would not accept cancellations without penalty prompted by the hurricane.

I found just a few American vacationers here except for a group of 120 passengers who had disembarked from Holland America's Noordam for a stay at the Acapulco Hyatt. (Americans still are leery of visiting here. See below.)

"Acapulco has cleaned up 100%," said HAL passenger Martin Lake, of Pittsburgh, who strolled by the Hyatt's pool on a breezy night.

Other Americans I ran into included a couple from Missoula, Mont. "Everything is back to normal," said Steve Sann, who was lounging by the Elcano pool at sunset with his girlfriend, Terry Lane. They basked on a boat all day with another couple, rented with a driver for \$120. "This place is so romantic," Lane said. "It's not like Cancun, which is all partying high school kids." "We're having a great time," Sann said. "The weather is perfect. The water is fine. What I like is that no one's here but us. Just the locals and us."

Even as Acapulco sweeps away the traces of Hurricane Pauline, the city faces a second disaster: Americans are canceling their trips.

"We're losing our Thanksgiving and Christmas season," said Jason Lavender, who rents luxury villas for Grupo Se Renta S.A. When 25 of his American clients called to cancel, Lavender offered to fly them down to view the city's comeback. But they would not even take a free ticket.

"They think there's a cholera epidemic here. They think there's no clean water. They think there are thousands of homeless people dying on the streets," he said. "The news reports have done more damage to us than the hurricane did. Many more people will suffer from this bad image."

The city reported 20 cases of cholera among the local people.

The Princess hotel, which was not hit by the storm, lost four U.S. groups. "We have [the news media] to thank for that," said sales executive Andres Olmos Quevedo. To lure tourists back, Aeromexico and Mexicana will offer international travelers free tickets from Mexico City to Acapulco.

The city typically draws 65% of its winter tourists from the U.S., said Lillian Lobato of the convention and visitors bureau. Groups from other countries plan to arrive, she said, with 400 people scheduled to attend a French film festival Nov. 20 to 23.