



KEVIN SPREEKMEESTER PHOTOS

The island's freshest spices can still be found in St. Georges's spice market, above, though many of the nutmeg trees were destroyed; Hurricane Ivan shredded the roofs on 90% of the buildings, below.

Storm gave them lemons, they made lemonade

GRENADA

One year after Hurricane Ivan's path of destruction

By KEVIN SPREEKMEESTER

Just north of Venezuela, in the Caribbean Sea, lies the tropical paradise of Grenada, a tiny island with a population of slightly more than 100,000.

Last winter, Grenada took a direct hit from Hurricane Ivan, catching most Grenadians unprepared. Nearly every hurricane season, storms from the southeast scream toward Grenada, only to veer north before reaching land. For 50 years, they have followed that path — until Ivan. The hurricane's Category 5 winds snapped trees, shredded the roofs of 90% of the buildings on the island and devastated the Grand Etang rain forest, sending Mona monkeys into hiding for almost six months.

But the spirit of the Grenadians was apparently untouched. Today, there are sobering reminders of Ivan's fury but there is also optimism as the island rebuilds and prepares to welcome back tourists this winter.

Air Canada Vacations, for example, will return to Grenada with charters in December.

Tourists will find the island's beautiful beaches have been restored to white-sand perfection.

Grand Anse is the island's most popular beach and home to several hotels, including the Grenada Grand Hotel, one of the largest hotels on the island. During Ivan, its roof was ruined, gardens were wrecked and many of the rooms sustained water damage. However, like most other hotels on the island, management used the disaster as an opportunity to upgrade facilities.

Nicknamed the Spice Island, lush Grenada is as famous for its home-grown spices as it is for its beaches. In the capital of St. Georges, at the main open-air market by the harbour, you can still find some of the island's freshest spices and delicacies for sale, even though Ivan destroyed many of the local nutmeg trees and nearly wiped out its main crop.

My guide, a fifth-generation Grenadian named Kennedy, worries the nutmeg logo on the Grenada flag will soon be replaced by a cruise ship, as tourism overtakes agriculture on the island's road to recovery.



The drive north along Grenada's east coast is a winding, mountainous route. A stop at the small town of Gouyave takes you to the Dougalston Estate and Nutmeg Plant. The 300-year-old plantation was mostly spared by Ivan. Parts of the original stone framework still stand, bringing to life a time when slaves toiled for the plantation owners, who watched from their mansions on the hills.

Further north, in the parish of St. Patrick, Jean Thompson is slowly renovating an old manor house to accommodate guests. Thompson was educated in Ottawa and Montreal before returning to her homeland. Rooms on her plantation start at around \$60 per night.

In the centre of the island, the Grand Etang rain forest was once the eco-jewel of the Caribbean. Parts of it still look brown and burnt as a result of the hurricane. But the forest has started to replenish itself, and the Mona monkeys have reappeared.

Mercifully, Ivan never touched the great reefs and dive sites around Grenada, still home to a colourful array of sea life, from star fish to barracudas.

"Grenada is all about the total experience," says Sophy Khwaja, spokeswoman for Air Canada Vacations. "It was a great property for us before the hurricane because it's so different from traditional Caribbean destinations. It's very quaint and there is the eco-tourism." Khwaja, along with a team from Air Canada Vacations and 15 Toronto firefighters went to the island after Ivan to volunteer in the clean-up.

Still, Grenada has had to adapt. The Grenada Chocolate factory now makes chocolate just

two days a week instead of every day because Ivan destroyed the cocoa supply. Some hotels are only partially open, and there are fewer taxis waiting at the St. Georges' harbour to take visitors from the cruise ships.

But from the images of devastation one year ago, there's a message from Grenada that could go out to the folks of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, devastated by Hurricane Katrina: "Better than before!"

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IF YOU GO

■ The water supply is drinkable, although it is always best to use bottled water. Electricity has been restored to the island and runs on 220 volts. Internet access is available.

■ Recommended lodgings that are open and fully operational include La Luna (laluna.com); Grenada Grand Hotel on Grand Anse Beach (grandbeach.com); The Flamboyant (flamboyant.com); Bel Air Plantation (belairplantation.com); and True Blue Bay Resort and Marina (www.truebluebay.com).

■ Air Canada and BWIA operate regularly scheduled flights from Toronto and Montreal to Barbados or Trinidad, with connections on LIAT and Caribbean Star to Grenada. Air Canada Vacations starts a non-stop charter from Toronto to Grenada on Dec. 18, through to March 27, 2006 (www.aircanadavacations.com).

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