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Exclusive: 5 Years After Hurricane Maria Puerto Rican Business Owners Strive to Rebuild

Business owners and entrepreneurs continue betting on progress despite the continued struggles people have faced after Hurricane Maria hit the island in 2017.

Por **Karla Montalván** | Septiembre 20, 2022



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What is one of the greatest misconceptions about life post-Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico?

Xiomara Rodríguez (Director of Communications at Discover Puerto Rico): A major misconception, in even the year following the Hurricane, was that the Island wasn't ready to welcome tourists back. The destination declared that the Island was "open for tourism" for their winter season, four months after Hurricane Maria in December 2017.

By then, all airports were fully operational, 75% of hotels were back in business and major tourist attractions were already cleaned up and restored. Cruise lines like Royal Caribbean and Carnival resumed transit calls roughly one year later, too.

Puerto Rico has always had a strong spirit and culture, and post-Hurricane Maria, our communities moved forward with determination. This is reflected in the standout tourism success we've seen [over] the past year: lodging revenue, arrivals and people employed in tourism have all seen the highest numbers on record.



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Some examples:

- In 2022, our second quarter of lodging revenue in Puerto Rico reached a record \$452 million, a 92% growth over the same period in 2019.
- Year-to-date hotel demand through June is 21% higher than [in] 2021.
- Since the beginning of 2022, Puerto Rico has broken its record of jobs in the Leisure and Hospitality sectors every month, now surpassing 86,700 employed, the most on record.
 - Workers in the Leisure and Hospitality sectors have increased by 15.4% in the past 12 months, with 3,300 new jobs being created in 2022 alone.
- The Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in San Juan arrivals saw a 23% increase from 2021 with 2.1 million passengers, the highest total number of passengers since 2017.

Despite the work still to be done in Puerto Rico, tourism is thriving. This is a testament to Puerto Rico's progress, which has been on an upswing since Hurricane Maria, and the destination was among those leading the travel industry's recovery amid COVID-19. This is largely due to the commitment of the local community to help the Island bounce back even stronger. Tourism is a big economic driver for the Island, representing 6.5% of the Island's GDP.

How can people contribute to Puerto Rico's economy and help businesses thrive?

DPR: It's simple: come enjoy and experience the *Boricua* way of life. Our local community is special. The DMO involves the local community in nearly everything we do—from concept testing to working with local creatives on [the] Island to tapping local tastemakers in the tourism industry—we are determined to see our Island thrive and spotlight the *Boricuas* that work to make that happen every day.

People can contribute to Puerto Rico's economy by traveling to the Island and supporting the local business that make the *Boricua* experience what it is. A survey by Entrepreneurs for Puerto Rico discovered that 96% of all [businesses] on the Island are local, meaning tourism dollars have a strong impact on the backbone of the Island's economy.



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Further, these local businesses generate 83% of the jobs on the Island. By visiting and shopping local, your support will be felt. Since Puerto Rico is a US territory, shipping gifts from local vendors is also a fun way to support and share the *Boricua* spirit with your loved one off Island.

What was one of the more difficult things you experienced post-Hurricane Maria that you feel was left out of all the media coverage?

DPR: While we are experiencing bright days in Puerto Rico's tourism history, we must not forget the tourism businesses that were impacted in the wake of the storms five years ago. And while visiting Puerto Rico is remarkable in terms of the experiences you can have—we boast a culture unlike any other, three of the world's five bioluminescent bays and El Yunque, the only rainforest in the US forest system, to name just a few

notable offerings—it is the support of the local community that continues to be what we focus on.

While it was a challenge to see the hardships of our local community, it's rewarding to support them now—and we encourage visitors to do so. That's also why we launched our recent campaign "Live Boricua"—to invite visitors to come live life authentically.

As business owners, what have been some of the greatest challenges you have faced over the last five years?

Jorge Jorge Flores, President & CEO of Toro Verde Adventure Park: At Toro Verde Adventure Park, we faced a variety of challenges, from roads damaged to employees who emigrated. Although the zip lines did not suffer any damage, the restaurants, gift shop and the attraction of the Bulls Maze did.

The flora and the fauna were severely affected. We had to undergo many obstacles that year, but we were able to rebuild and opened [in] March 2018. 2019 was an excellent year and 2020 was shaping up the same, but like everyone else the Pandemic came, and we had to close for almost all year.



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Once the restrictions were lifted, we were able to open, and the park excelled. Since then, we have been stable in the numbers of people who visit us. Maria and the Pandemic both taught us the power we have to be reborn and the importance of staying united as a country to overcome any challenge.

Gloriana Lopez-Lay, Founder of Rogative PR: The idea of Rogative was inspired by my own travels and experiences living outside of Puerto Rico. After Hurricane Maria, I made the decision to move back to the island to help restore the local economy.

Rogative's purpose was to provide local artisans with a way to get back on their feet after the Hurricane. Today, our beautiful products pay tribute to the iconic elements of the Island's artistry. This provides our customers with the opportunity to carry a piece of Puerto Rico with us, wherever life may take them.

The launch of Rogative has been extremely rewarding albeit not very easy. The first challenge that I had to overcome was shifting the mindset from a corporate world career to entrepreneurship. This shift meant overcoming the challenge of pivoting from a service industry to a full brand development, manufacturing and fulfillment operation.



Today, I am personally involved in all aspects of the brand from the creative development and manufacturing of our collections to the sales strategy of our portfolio of products. This 360° involvement is one of the reasons why it has been such a rewarding endeavor regardless of the personal challenges.

Federico Stubbe, Jr., CEO of PRISA Group: PRISA Group, a family-owned developer and builder in Puerto Rico, is no stranger to the tremendous adversity Puerto Ricans have faced throughout the years. When DISTRITO T-Mobile was first conceptualized in 2013 to bring a world-class entertainment complex to the heart of San Juan, there's no way we could have planned for the challenges that followed.

Puerto Rico was in the midst of bankruptcy, then was battered by two hurricanes within the same year. Subsequently, there was political unrest, on top of that, the Island dealt with ongoing earthquakes for the better part of a year, and finally, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through all of these obstacles, we kept our eye on executing DISTRITO T-Mobile as a beacon of hope to show the community that there's no better time than now to rebuild stronger and better to benefit our population and those who visit us.



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It has, quite literally, taken a village to rebuild the Island and reintroduce the Puerto Rico we know and love. As a result, we've had the privilege of seeing people rediscover the destination post-Hurricane Maria and uncover culturally enriching experiences at world-class new developments on the Island.

What are your hopes for the future of Puerto Rico?

JJF: As a Puerto Rican businessman, I want this Island to continue to prosper day by day. I wish for everyone to see how wonderful we are and that we can achieve any goal we propose. As a company, we strive to expand the Toro Verde brand to other countries so that other businesses see us as an example.

GLL: By nature, I am a very positive person causing me to be extremely hopeful for the future of my Island. We have the tools to make Puerto Rico a better place, starting with our people. Thanks to Rogative, I have had the privilege to meet and work with people that are "hungry" to work hard and improve themselves. This by itself is very invigorating.

I am also hopeful that the government will maximize properly all the funds received from Hurricane Maria, the pandemic, and any other incentive to strengthen our economic development capabilities including improving our education system. I am a true believer that education is the foundation for a strong society which will ultimately result in stronger economic growth.

FS: My hope for the future of Puerto Rico is that we use this unique moment in time to reposition the Island and create long-term sustainable economic growth for everyone. We must continue to learn from the past to help us thrive now and in the future and grow the Island to its full potential.

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