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PRACTICAL TRAVELER/TROPICAL STORM SEASON

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

It's come the first big hurricane of the season, accompanied by news photographs of flattened

hotels in Kingston, Jamaica; of

boarded-up buildings in Tulum, Mexico; and of tourists crowding the airport in Cancun. It's deja vu all over again.

And though resorts of Mexico, Belize, the Cayman Islands and other areas brushed by Hurricane Dean escaped nearly unscathed, hotel and tourism officials in those places quickly recognized that they had to get the word out as wary travelers begin to plan fall and winter vacations that they were open.

"They're all yelling and screaming to people that, 'We are back open,'" said Steve Cosgrove, president of Dynamic Travel and Cruises in South Lake, Tex.

Mexico, which only recently recovered fully from the destruction of Hurricane Wilma, which pummeled Cancun and other parts of the Yucatan in October 2005, has been especially proactive. Just after Hurricane Dean the ninth-most-intense Atlantic hurricane ever recorded passed over Mexico in late August, Eduardo Chaillo, regional director for the Mexico Tourism Board, flew to New York to assure tour operators and airlines that major tourist destinations including Cancun, the Maya Riviera, Puerto Morelos, Isla Mujeres and Cozumel had not been damaged by the hurricane.

For the tourist businesses, the stakes were high. "All the news was saying, get out of Cancun and get to the airport," said John W. Prenay, a travel agent in Annapolis, Md., who specializes in vacations for single parents. Some of his clients rebooked because of the storm. "I think there will be a perception Mexico and the islands are below par, and I think the hotels and resorts and tour operators will have to react to that and put out some progressive pricing to counteract that."

Hotels and travel bookers have been offering deals to spur demand. Orbitz decided to turn its Ski Sale, scheduled to begin Oct. 1, into a Sun and Ski Sale. Expect to see discounts of at least \$75 for three-night beach packages in Mexico and the Caribbean.

Immediately after the storm, Apple Vacations sent travel agents a fax that read, "Great News! Cancun & Riviera Maya ESCAPED HURRICANE DEAN!" and listed last-minute deals, including \$699 for a seven-night all-inclusive vacation, including airfare, to Mexico from Baltimore.

Blue Bay Getaway, an all-inclusive resort in Cancun, introduced a rate of \$70 a person a night, a 30 percent saving off standard rates, for stays up to Dec. 20. Mexico Boutique Hotels began offering a fourth night free for bookings of three nights made by Sept. 10 at certain hotels, with arrival between Sunday and Wednesday. And Karisma Hotels cut its low-season rates as much as 35 percent along the Maya Riviera in Mexico, south of Cancun.

Even in areas not hit directly by Hurricane Dean, resorts are offering incentives. The Reef Resort on Grand Cayman, which experienced wind gusts of 64 miles per hour and high swells, is offering 25 percent off regular rates in hurricane season for trips booked by Sept. 7, with a free room upgrade and a Hurricane Eraser welcome cocktail.

To dispel any hurricane jitters, the resort is also offering to refund the price of unused nights to any guest who must cut a vacation short because of a hurricane, and to throw in a free five-night room voucher.

Resorts in Jamaica, which sustained gale force Category 4 winds as the hurricane's eye passed about 50 miles to its south, have also been offering incentives. Chukka Caribbean Adventures extended its Buy One Get One Free offer for nature tours in Jamaica: bookings can now be made until Sept. 30 for tours in September and October. And Half Moon Montego Bay, a luxury resort, began accepting reservations for its Fall Break package starting at \$149 a night in late August, a couple of weeks earlier than planned.

"I want your readers to know Jamaica is open for business," Aloun N' Dombet Assamba, the island's minister of tourism, entertainment and culture, said in a telephone interview the day after the storm. All hotels on the island are in operation except Jake's Resort on the hard-hit south side of Jamaica. It is closed until Sept. 28 for repairs. ESIDES bringing discounts for the next few months, the hurricane created some last-minute

opportunities, travel specialists say. On the Wednesday after the storm, Gavin Greenwood, commercial director at Alltornative, an adventure tour company based in Playa del Carmen, about 40 miles south of Cancun, was spreading the word that its nine offices were "100 percent operational" with more than 300 tourists on tour that day. He said he expected reservations to decrease as much as 10 to 15 percent because of news of the hurricane, opening space for other vacationers.

Turtle Inn, a 25-room resort in Belize owned by Francis Ford Coppola, was fully booked for Christmas, New Year's and Easter, but hurricane-related cancellations have opened up a few spots.

Travelers who want to take advantage of last-minute opportunities could have trouble finding flights. Airlines tend to cut back on service during the off-season, limiting nights to keep planes full.

Some areas are still recovering from the storm. Costa Maya, the up-and-coming cruise port on the Yucatan Peninsula near the border of Belize, took a beating and is expected to be closed for at least six months. Some of the thatched-roof cabanas along the Maya Riviera were heavily damaged, including the restaurant at Zamas in Tulum, and some of its beachfront cabanas. For information on small, privately owned tourist places on the Maya Riviera, check Locogringo.com, which reports the status of more than 100.

Many travelers aren't fazed. In a survey of more than 1,200 travelers conducted by TripAdvisor from Aug. 15 to 20, 95 percent said hurricanes did not affect their fall travel plans.

Of course, all of this could change if another big storm sweeps through. Hurricane Dean was only the fourth named storm and first hurricane of the 2007 Atlantic season; 13 to 16 named storms are likely, 7 to 9 of them hurricanes, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"For hurricane season, the fat lady hasn't sung yet," said Steve Cosgrove of Dynamic Travel and Cruises. "She hasn't even gotten warmed up."