



AP Photo/David McFadden, File

In this September 2014 file photo, sunbathers walk along a badly eroding patch of resort-lined crescent beach in Negril in western Jamaica. While some islands in the Caribbean were hard-hit by this season's hurricanes, others were relatively unscathed and are open for business as usual.

With several islands in recovery mode, some vacation advice

By BETH J. HARPAZ
AP Travel Editor

Some travelers looking ahead to winter and spring getaways may be wondering what their options are when it comes to Caribbean islands, with all the headlines about hurricane damage.

Some islands like Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and St. Martin have ways to go in recovery from the storms. But many other places were relatively unscathed. Island destinations where it's business as usual include Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas.

Here are some recommendations from a couple of travel experts about other spots you might consider if you had your heart set on an island destination that's now off-limits, but you're still hoping for sun, sand and sea.

Beaches, history and diving

Brian Major, executive editor for the Caribbean and Latin America for the trade media company travAlliance-media, says if you look on a map, it's easier to understand the storms' path. The hurricanes mainly impacted the Caribbean's northeastern Leeward Islands, which include among other destinations Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, St. Martin, Dominica, Anguilla and St. Barts.

Largely unaffected were islands located farther south, like Grenada and Trinidad,



AP Photo/Audrey McAvoy, File

In this January 2016 file photo, Kent Terada shows the shaka or "hang loose" sign while sitting at Ala Moana Beach Park in Honolulu. Americans looking for island getaways without using their passports might consider Hawaii as an alternative to Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands this season.

and farther west, like Jamaica and the Dominican Republic.

Major offered a few other islands as alternatives to hurricane-impacted destinations.

- Consider Martinique or Curacao if you're looking for the European cultural mix found on St. Martin. There's "terrific air service" to Martinique, he said, and "an excellent highway system" if you care to rent a car, "wonderful food" and mostly boutique hotels, along with interesting historic sites like the Schoelcher Library, named

for a famed abolitionist. On Curacao, you'll find great diving, Dutch-style gabled houses on the waterfront and local food vendors at Plasa Bieu.

- Consider Montserrat for rugged landscapes and outdoor adventures like what Dominica is known for. Montserrat is a volcanic island with soaring mountains, inland rivers, waterfalls, diving and snorkeling.

- The Bahamas, like the Virgin Islands, offer a little of everything, with easy access from many U.S. cities (about

300 miles or 480 km from Florida). They offer "every stripe of resort, from all-inclusive to small historic." Travelers who want to experience the famed Atlantis waterpark on Paradise Island without paying for lodging at the resort often stay across the street at the Comfort Suites. For adventurers, head to Exuma Island. There are even small private islands where you can pitch a tent.

- Try Barbados for "cosmopolitan flair" and "nice beaches." A former British colony, it offers

everything from UNESCO World Heritage sites to horse racing. Hotels range from all-inclusives like Sandals to three- and four-star and boutique hotels. It's easy to rent a car and drive around (though Americans must learn to stay on the left) or hire a driver for a tour.

For information on how hurricanes affected individual islands and resorts, Major recommended the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association.

Eco-adventures, casinos and culture

Kelly A. Luf, a Boston-based leader for Liberty Travel's Northeast region, offers these ideas for travelers looking for island alternatives to hurricane-impacted destinations.

- Consider St. Lucia "for a customer who was maybe hoping for something like St. John, where they could have a lot of outdoor eco-adventure." Experiences include hiking, hot springs and mineral baths, and diving to underwater national parks.

- Try Aruba "if you love a vibrant downtown and shopping like you'd find on St. Thomas." Aruba also offers "excellent casinos and gaming" and "incredible beaches."

- Barbados might work "if you enjoyed the refinement and food on the French side of St. Martin." It's got "European-style culture" and great dining options that make it

"the only island that's Zagat-rated." You'd be "equally wowed" with an upscale meal at The Cliff or a fish sandwich from a chattel house, a traditional local eatery.

No passport? Consider Hawaii

Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have always been favorites among Americans who prefer to travel without a passport. Luf said her office was able to rebook travelers to Hawaii whose trips to St. Thomas and Puerto Rico were canceled because of the hurricanes. These customers thought Hawaii was unaffordable, she said, but ended up vacationing there for "not much more" than the Caribbean. While of course Hawaii is a longer haul for East Coast residents than the Caribbean, Luf noted that there are nonstop flights available. Another option: Norwegian Cruise Line sails out of Honolulu.

Liberty Travel has an excellent online FAQ for Caribbean travel.

About Cuba

Travel to Cuba remains legal for U.S. citizens, the island has cleaned up hurricane damage and prices are lower than in recent years. Just be aware of warnings from the U.S. State Department about unexplained sonic attacks in Cuba and be sure to comply with travel regulations. The Trump administration has said it will issue new regulations but so far has not.

You won't believe the thing that makes great cheese straws

By ELIZABETH KARMEL
Associated Press

The South is credited with creating the cheese straw but no one knows who, where or why exactly. There is one vague story about leftover cheese being added to biscuit dough to make a snack but I don't buy it.

Cheese straws are closer to a crumbly savory shortbread cookie than they are to flaky biscuits. These days, the term "cheese straws" encompasses a category of savory crackers in all different shapes and some even made with puff pastry.

The recipe that I grew up with was a simple dough made in a bowl with a fork. It was rolled into a ball and mashed down flat with the same fork in a crisscross pattern like a peanut butter cookie. The ingredients were few: best-quality butter, extra-sharp cheddar, all-purpose flour and a pinch of cayenne pepper. They were served as a nibble before dinner and wrapped up with a bow as a gift at the holidays. These days there are so many commercial companies making all manner of cheese straws in every



Elizabeth Karmel via AP

Cheese straws.

possible flavor combination that "cheese straws" have become a category of cheese crackers.

Last week, I decided to make up a batch of cheese straws to serve with cocktails before a dinner party that I was hosting. The recipe that I use is a mashup of the recipe that my mother made with a secret ingredient that I discovered in Paris many years ago.

When I was in college, I visited one of my best friends who was doing a year abroad and lived with a family in a tony neighborhood of Paris.

Expecting to meet the lady of the house, I rang the bell. Instead, I met Sena, the jovial family cook who was infatuated with all things American. Sena ran the house, did all the marketing and cooking and looked after my friend. She invited me in and I couldn't wait to taste her French food. Instead, she placed a plate of the best cheese straws that I had ever tasted in front of me with some iced tea. She was beaming. I was a little disappointed. She was obviously proud of herself, thinking she was very American chic

servicing cold tea and cheese straws to two Southern girls.

I took a bite to be polite. Little did I know that that bite would change my cheese straw game forever. Always the inquisitive one, I had to know why they were better than all the cheese straws that I had tasted before. I complimented Sena, and then asked, "What is your secret?"

When she told me, I couldn't help but laugh out loud. Her secret was Rice Krispies cereal. When I pressed her, she admitted that she picked up her secret many years before from an exchange student from Alabama.

I loved that I had to travel all the way to Paris, to pick up a cheese straw tip from a girl from Alabama. And, to this day, I add Rice Krispies cereal to my cheese straws. Try it. I guarantee that you won't be able to stop eating and/or making them.

Elizabeth Karmel is a barbecue and Southern foods expert. She is the chef and pit master at online retailer CarolinaCueToGo.com and the author of three books, including "Taming the Flame."

CHEDDAR AND CAYENNE CHEESE STRAWS WITH A PARIS TWIST

Servings: 20 servings (3 per serving)
Start to finish: 2 hours, 45 minutes (Active: 15 minutes)

- 2 sticks unsalted butter, softened
- 1 pound extra-sharp cheddar cheese, grated by hand
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper or more to taste
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups Rice Krispies cereal

Mix first six ingredients with a fork or clean hands until all the ingredients are well distributed. It will be a stiff dough but it will all come together eventually. Add Rice Krispies and mix until evenly distributed — you will need to use your hands at this stage.

Cover and chill for 2 hours. Roll into small balls or logs. Place on ungreased cookie sheet fitted with parchment paper, and mash down with a small fork in a crisscross pattern.

Bake at 325 F for 20-25 minutes or until golden on the edges.

Chef's Note: The larger you make them, the longer they will take to cook. I like them slightly darker, but if you like them on the lighter side, bake for less time.

Remove from oven and let sit on cookie sheet for 5 minutes. Transfer to a cooling rack, and let cool completely. Store in an airtight container.

Nutrition information per cheese straw: 235 calories; 156 calories from fat; 17 g fat (12 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 49 mg cholesterol; 211 mg sodium; 12 g carbohydrate; 0 g fiber; 0 g sugar; 6 g protein.