

# Tiny, colorful Key West hunkers down to ride out Irma

September 10 2017, by Leila Macor

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Wind and rain from Hurricane Irma began lashing Islamorada, in the Florida Keys, on Saturday night

Long after everyone on Key West, Florida had been ordered with utmost urgency to evacuate, a few hardy islanders remained defiantly, even jovially, hunkering down in homes, hotels or school gyms against the ferocious winds of Hurricane Irma.

The eye of the storm moved directly over the island chain early Sunday, and the local National Weather Service (NWS) office tweeted that winds were gusting up to 90 miles per hour (145 kilometers per hour), with storm surges up to 10 feet (three meters) expected.

"I won't lie," ABC quoted a Key West resident as saying. "It's definitely frightening."

Videos sent on Twitter showed scenes of tremendous winds lashing palm trees into unnatural angles, with violent torrents of rain flying sideways, and white-capped waves being driven through empty city streets, lapping at the base of darkened houses.

One tweet showed a "storm chaser" stepping out of his car to hold up a wind gauge. The man, in blue windbreaker and black helmet, had to lean at a nearly 45-degree angle to keep from being blown over—and then was knocked flat anyway.

Key West, barely four miles long and one mile wide, probably seemed even smaller than that on Sunday as it shuddered through its pummeling by a storm of historic size and power. But while thousands of Floridians have evacuated the Keys, some hard-core locals continued to hold out.

## **'All seem to get along'**

The island is known for its fondness of partying, its tolerance and its tightknit community. It is a place, singer/songwriter Jimmy Buffett told author William McKeen, where "people who couldn't get along up on the mainland—rednecks, hippies, straights, homosexuals—all seem to get along just fine."



Thousands of people evacuated the Florida Keys ahead of Hurricane Irma, but some on Key West boarded up homes or moved to shelters to ride out the powerful storm

Tight-knit islanders were quick on Sunday to use social media to help one another. When someone tweeted a picture of a man "either lying down or passed out on Duval St.," another Twitter user soon sent images of passersby helping the man to safety.

Key West—once called "Cayo Hueso," or "Island of Bones" by the Spanish—has seen its share of hurricanes. On this day in 1960, Hurricane Donna hammered the Keys, damaging or destroying three in every four homes.

One of the worst storms, the Labor Day hurricane in 1935, killed hundreds of people. It destroyed much of an island-hopping railway linking the keys to the mainland, adding to a sense of isolation.

The subsequent construction of the Overseas Highway, built on some surviving railroad trestles, helped make Key West a destination again, drawing artists and writers, from author Ernest Hemingway to playwright Tennessee Williams.

Despite the bravado and hard-boiled toughness some islanders are known for, there was no doubt about the seriousness of the situation.

First responder Maggy Howes described the howling storm on CNN, from the relative safety of a concrete house on Key Haven, a mile east of Key West, where she said several good friends were waiting the [storm](#) out.

"No one is dancing in front of windows right now. We all have life jackets, shoes on. We have kits ready to take with us if something should happen."

"There's absolutely no way anybody can be outside right now," she said.

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