

Hurricane survivors swap Caribbean seas for English peas

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Displaced medical student Victoria Smith, who is now studying in the School of Medicine at the University of Central Lancashire after leaving her medical school in Sint Maarten in the Caribbean because of hurricane Irma, poses for a portrait

When they signed up to study in the Caribbean they thought they were heading for an island paradise. But when Hurricane Irma devastated Sint Maarten, they ended up being transferred to drizzly northern England

instead.

When the Category Five [storm](#) destroyed the island's infrastructure last month, more than 700 students and staff at American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine (AUC) found themselves with nowhere to go.

So they approached their foreign exchange partners in East Lancashire hospitals trust for help—and they in turn contacted the local university in Preston, some 30 miles (50 kilometres) north of Manchester.

"We said, well, why not bring the whole school over," said Professor Mike Thomas, vice chancellor of the University of Central Lancashire.

And so, hundreds of them took the 4,000-mile journey to continue their studies at a medical school in northern England.

"It all happened in nine days, and our students have been really welcoming," Thomas said.

"The students that have come over from the Caribbean obviously have had a lot of trauma, it's not a good place to have been in the hurricane, and we've been making them as welcome as we can."

'Scariest moment'

Debrah Bergeron, 33, from San Diego, California, fought back tears as she recalled the fury of the storm and how she feared September 6, 2017 would be her last day on Earth.



Displaced medical students Victoria Smith (L), Debrah Bergeron (C) and Nathaniel Minigh (R), are now studying in the School of Medicine at the University of Central Lancashire after leaving their medical school in Sint Maarten in the Caribbean

"I was fairly sure that we wouldn't make it out," she told AFP, saying she was one of the few students who had stayed off campus, later realising it was "a big mistake".

"When the eye passed over we looked outside and most of the buildings had lost their windows and balconies. Chunks of the buildings had been ripped off by the storm.

"We knew the second half of the storm would be much stronger, and by the end of it there were six of us hunkered down in a bathroom in the centre of the house.

"It was the scariest moment of my life, and when it was over the relief was just indescribable."

From Puerto Rico to Preston

The storm killed 124 people when it swept across the Caribbean and Florida, and AUC's hurricane-resistant building was used first as a storm shelter and then as a makeshift hospital.

The students were evacuated by the US Air Force then flown first to Puerto Rico, then to Chicago and eventually on to Preston.



Displaced medical student Daniel Matienzo, who is now studying in the School of Medicine at the University of Central Lancashire after leaving his medical school in Sint Maarten in the Caribbean because of hurricane Irma, poses for a portrait

Far from being disheartened at leaving Caribbean skies, some said they preferred life under the grey English clouds.

"Preston is very friendly," Bergeron said.

"I love all the mom and pop shops," she said, referring to small, often family-owned corner shops.

"I know all the names of the people in the shop where I buy my dinner, often times, and it's just something you don't get in a city like San Diego.

"And I don't mind the rain—honestly."

Cold, but no hurricanes

For some, it was relief enough to be far from the threat of another storm.



The Caribbean island of St Martin, under Dutch-French control, was devastated by Hurricane Irma

"There aren't any hurricanes in Preston," said 25-year-old Victoria Jordan Smith of Louisiana.

"There's wind, there's rain and there's cold. I don't like the cold at all, I'm from a very warm place, but I'm not very keen on going through another hurricane."

The students have been picking up the local dialect and even trying some of Lancashire's famous delicacies such as "parched peas"—black peas soaked in salt, vinegar and butter.

'Chips are crisps'

"For a town that's so cold, everyone is really warm," said Nathaniel Minigh, a 25-year-old [student](#) from Orlando, Florida.

"I love the English lingo: French fries are called chips, chips are called crisps, and soccer is called football.

"We actually met some people in a pub the other day who were fans of American football, so it was just so nice to bond over something like sport."



Displaced medical students Victoria Smith (L), Debrah Bergeron (C) and Nathaniel Minigh (R), who are now studying in the School of Medicine at the University of Central Lancashire after leaving their medical school in Sint Maarten in the Caribbean

Seamus Murphy, 40, who serves parched peas and potatoes from a food stand in Market Square, said the students have added "a real buzz" to the town.

"People are hearing a different accent, and they have been going over to them in the square and asking them how they're doing," he said.

"A few of them came and tried the parched peas, and they have been learning a bit about the local history as well.

"They're just taking everything in."

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