

Hurricane Ian escapees find unlikely refuge at Florida casino

Written by Administrator

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Floridians begin to assess the damage caused by Hurricane Ian

Floridians are returning to their homes to find destruction after Ian slammed the state as a Category 4 hurricane.

Cody Godwin, USA TODAY

MICCOSUKEE RESERVATION, Florida – Some passed the time playing blinking slot machines, swimming in the pool and eating at a 24-hour restaurant. Others who fled Hurricane Ian in trailers and motorhomes set up camp in the parking lot of the tribal casino on the edge of the Everglades.

“The most important thing is we're safe,” said Ping Hu, 46, whose home in Sanibel Island was cut off by the hurricane that had left two fellow residents dead.

The Miccosukee Casino & Resort was just one of the countless hotels, friends' homes and

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shelters across South Florida where evacuated residents, families and retirees temporarily holed up this week.

Thursday night, one group sat on folding chairs and sipped beers to watch the sun dip below the grassy expanse stretching back toward the hurricane-ravaged west coast. They commiserated together, wondering if their homes were ruined. They read news reports, texted friends for electricity updates and debated when to return.

Mostly, they were just glad to have found this unlikely, but welcoming, refuge.

"This is the first hurricane I've been through. They told us, 'We have no power. Don't come back,'" said Greg Deem, 70, who lives in an upscale motorhome resort in Naples and also has a home in Ohio. "I'm very glad I'm here, in a parking lot at a casino."

By Friday, some were checking out to return to assess the damage in coastal cities and residences further inland that had been flooded by torrential rains. Others were still unsure if it was safe and extending their stay, said resort manager Karen Whiting.

"People are worried. They don't know what they're going to find when they go back," said Whiting, who said the 302-room hotel was nearly full.

Lori Kearn, 69, and her husband, Raymond, 75, said they believed their home had survived near Arcadia, about 25 miles northwest of Port Charlotte.

"There's no power, there's no water. Some trailers have been tipped over," Lori Kearn said.

In the elevators, some displaced residents hauled bags of groceries to their rooms.

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Marco Island resident Kathleen Tuttle, 72, said this week marked the first time she evacuated ahead of a hurricane since her husband passed away. Previously, they had weathered such storms together at home.

"I feel very blessed having found this refuge," she said.

Those who had evacuated knew there was work ahead: Cleaning out condo refrigerators, checking on cars left behind, and navigating cleanup and insurance.

Hu, an accountant who bought a home earlier this year on Sanibel Island with her husband and two daughters, said she considered waiting out the hurricane before heeding calls for evacuation on Tuesday.

With her husband out of town on business, she packed a small bag — figuring she'd be back after a night or two. Hotel rooms were scarce, so she secured one at the casino resort, located on what Whiting said was a parcel of the Miccosukee Indian Reservation.

Her children, ages 4 and 7, loved it. There was a pool, bright colors and lights. It felt like a cruise, she said. Amid displays about the Miccosukee's history, they met other hurricane evacuees. For some, it was simply the first place they spotted after crossing Highway 41 through the everglades.

On Thursday, a sign posted at the front desk said the resort was suspending its policies to allow children at the hotel because of the disaster.

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“Mommy, we’re going to stay here forever, right?” one of her daughters asked.

She had no easy answer.

Sanibel's washed-out bridge meant no access to the island, their home, the school that her daughter attends and their belongings. She thinks her home survived but wasn't certain about the damage. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said repairing the road to Sanibel would take time.

Sanibel Island officials said Thursday that 200 households remained on the island during the storm and that at least two people had died following the storm. At least 40 were evacuated, they said, with some taken to hospitals.

“It’s just really scary,” Hu said, who was weighing whether to decamp to a family property in St. Louis.

Next to their trailer in the parking lot, a generator hummed on Thursday night nearby as the Kearns sat outside with Deem — who they said had first sauntered over after arriving and asked, “Is this hurricane happy hour?” They became fast friends.

Deem joked that, since arriving Tuesday, he “donated” to the casino slot machines. Raymond Kern celebrated that he had broken even.

Maybe, given the circumstances, that was the best for which anyone could hope.

Chris Kenning is a national news writer. Reach him at ckenning@usatoday.com and on Twitter [@chris_kenning](https://twitter.com/chris_kenning)

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