

Barbuda: “My heart, my home”

For Jamaila Beazer, travelling with her two young daughters, the choppy ferry crossing on the *Barbuda Express* from Antigua is worth it, despite the big waves, the rocking and the roughness. The boat is taking her home. The young mother is one of a number of people now returning to Barbuda after September’s Hurricane Irma ripped across the 62-square-mile island and left 99 per cent of buildings damaged.

“Barbuda is my heart, my home: for six years since my marriage,” says the 24-year-old Antiguan. “I love the people. I’ve grown to appreciate them. Honestly they’re very helpful and caring and they’re the ones who make me want to help rebuild Barbuda.”

However, the rebuilding and the return may not be easy for the estimated 150 to 300 people resettling on Antigua’s sister island after the mandatory evacuation of the entire population of 1,600 several days after Irma hit. Access to water and power remains a problem but Jamaila and her husband Otine have received help from aid workers to make their house habitable again. Having made several return trips to get things ready, she is not daunted.

“I can cope. It’s not as bad as people would think. I can stand it, I guess I’m strong enough to survive. There’s a generator and we do have water. It’s manageable,” she argues. Her children, Melody, 5, and Majesty, 1, may not be doing so well, though. “To be honest, they’re not coping because what they want is television and the things that they normally have. But I try my best to make them feel as comfortable as possible. They have a tablet. I plan on letting them do more outdoor activities. I do my best to help them understand.”

Enrique Whyte, another traveller on the ferry, would dearly love to be one of those going home permanently but for the 17-year-old, visiting Barbuda for the weekend, the time is just not right. His home is in ruins and when he stays on the island he has to sleep in a tent. “When I go back to Barbuda I feel like I want to cry when I look at my house. It looks rubbish. There’s no roof, no windows, clothes scattered about,” he says. And although he has been made to feel welcome in Antigua, where he goes to school, he is not happy. “I want to go back to Barbuda. I miss everything about it. We used to ride horses, go fishing, cool out, have fun...I just want to go home. At the moment I feel very sad all the time.”

Also visiting, but in brighter circumstances, is a group of Italian tourists, making one of the first ferry trips back. The tour guide Federico Genre is glad to be able to return and show his clients the famous frigate birds, the Martello Tower (a former British fort), and ‘Princess Diana’ beach. “Barbuda is wonderful and by going we can help restart the economy. It is the most beautiful Caribbean island I have ever seen.”