

New Orleans Residents Make the Best of Hurricane Gustav's Aftermath

Sounds of jazz have yet to return to the Big Easy · Candles, camping gear and camaraderie at 'hurricane parties'

Not for the first time, the people of New Orleans are getting used to the idea that living in a major city in the most powerful country on earth is no guarantee against the lights going out.

Residents of the affluent lower garden district are still without electricity today, finding their elegant Victorian mansions returned to an old south era of candlelight, propane stove cooking and - without television or the internet - an obligation to amuse themselves.

People who stayed behind are responding with good humor and a shrug of the shoulders. They braved Gustav by gathering for "hurricane parties," aided by stockpiles of alcohol, and expressed relief when it proved to be a near-miss rather than another Katrina.

Steven Rosen, 52, had never been through a hurricane before, so he hunkered down with candles, camping lanterns and camaraderie. "We had a lot of friends, a lot of munchies, and drank beer before it got warm," said the property maintenance worker.

"We had plenty of food stocked up and had a charcoal barbecue last night - anything in the freezer, so as not to waste it. We listened to the weather radio because we had no TV. This was my first hurricane so I soaked it all in and it was a great experience. I'd go through it again."

He was not alone in looking on the bright side and relishing the temporary return to a simpler way of living. Carl Traub, 29, a dispatcher for a limousine company, said: "We're using candles and a propane stove. It's like camping outdoors. When you live here, you get used to it. No matter that this is a modern country, in New Orleans you know you might always go back to the basics."

Elderly residents also braved Gustav, including 89-year-old Juliette Court, who stayed behind with her son in their 100-year-old home. She said pragmatically: "It didn't bother me, it wasn't that bad. It was just like a storm, not a hurricane. But I miss TV."

Her son, Victor Klein, 61, author of a collection of ghost stories of New Orleans, laughed about the timing. "I'm happy this came when it did during the Republican convention. Maybe evangelists will realize, God is pissed off with these guys."

Many people in the neighborhood are gathered at The Avenue Pub on St Charles Avenue, a boulevard lined by trees and hundreds of mansions. Some trees have been uprooted and leaves are scattered on the ground, but overall damage appears minimal. The pub is operating thanks to its own power generator but running short of food after serving first responders and others for the past three days.

Earlier today Polly Watts, 43, owner of the pub, was sending out messages from a smartphone asking friends if they knew of any grocery shops that had reopened. She said she believed the official decision to evacuate the city had been justified, a view supported by many of her customers.

There has been minor flooding in the upper ninth ward from water splashing over the western side of the Industrial Canal flood wall. But the lower ninth ward, which was wiped out when the same canal failed in 2005, remains dry.

There is still no jazz to be heard in the city that made it famous. Armstrong Park, home of a statue of Louis Armstrong holding aloft a trumpet, remains closed.

New Orleans' central business district remains virtually deserted, the skyscrapers heightening the eerie atmosphere of an I Am Legend-style disaster movie. Hotels and restaurants remained locked and dark. A taxi sat unattended with its back window smashed.

A row of military jeeps were lined up outside the city's convention center where national guard soldiers congregated. Policemen were on patrol with dogs to prevent criminal opportunists. A handwritten sign in one shop window said bluntly: "You loot, we shoot."