

'The Great Escape'

How one hotel company rescued 1,600 guests and staff from Hurricane Katrina

By Thomas Daly & Paul Frederick

The lodging industry learned many lessons as the result of actions taken, or not, during the devastation that was Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in August of 2005. As another hurricane season approaches, the following account may be of help as lodging facilities prepare for the worse.

The Storm

Hurricane Katrina traveled a wavering and erratic course over the Gulf of Mexico for period of several days in late August 2005. After first making landfall in Florida, the storm regenerated in the Gulf reaching a Category 5, but its final landfall was unpredictable.

New Orleans had seen many a hurricane approach but their path historically diverted away. This City had seen hurricane-related flooding before, but not since 1969. That distant and irregular history of the consequences of a major storm striking this much-below-sea-level City, provided a false sense of security for both its residents, visitors and especially its state and local government officials. This time New Orleans's luck would run out as the largest natural disaster in U.S. history struck this city head-on.

Many patrons of hotels in New Orleans either could not or did not evacuate as Hurricane Katrina approached the city on August 29, 2005. Vertical evacuation was common practice in Louisiana, which included moving into high-rise hotels for shelter. For those Hilton patrons remaining, Hilton's management closed its four smaller hotels there and concentrated it resources, staff and patrons in its largest hotel, the 1200 room Hilton New Orleans Riverside in the hotel district, whose elevation was a few feet higher than the rest of city, precluding the flooding of many of those hotels when the levees would later fail.

Disaster planning is a part of the Emergency Procedures policy for Hilton's family of brands. Each hotel's Executive Committee is required to review and practice all such procedures, including those for hurricanes, semiannually. Those on the East and Gulf coasts of the U.S., are particularly aware of the need for such diligence for hurricanes.

The Deluge

With the onset of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in the early morning hours of Monday August 29, 2005 normal commercial power was lost to the City's hotel district and all routine communication capabilities including hard line telephony, cell phones, email and voice-over-internet-protocol (VOIP) failed. Some 300 cell phones towers in the region were destroyed. Phone company switching centers were flooded.

Earlier in the week the Hilton New Orleans Riverside hotel had been provided with satellite telephones, providing a crucial voice link to Hilton's corporate resources in Texas and California during this disaster.

The storm broke many of the hotel's windows and the incoming water did significant damage to the Hilton's infrastructure, especially its communications capabilities.

As power failed, the hotel's emergency generator, routinely tested and maintained, worked flawlessly but, as with most such 'emergency' generators, it was both limited as to its supply of fuel, ability to operate for long periods and the amount of equipment, systems and lighting it supported.

The vast majority of emergency generators in U.S. commercial facilities are not the 'continuous duty' type but are the 'standby' type, intended to operate only for a limited duration. When operating at full load the Hilton generator's fuel consumption was voracious. The hotel was also equipped with rechargeable lanterns for staff and more than 1200 glow sticks and flashlights for patron's use, but their operational duration was also short lived.

The Decision

The reality of the situation became clear only a few hours after the hurricane struck and the amount of devastation became apparent. No one was coming to help anytime soon. The City government was dysfunctional and the State of Louisiana was ill-prepared, despite ample warning, to deal with a storm of this magnitude.

Normal power was not going to be restored in the foreseeable future to non-critical facilities, such as hotels. Fuel for emergency generators to provide critical power and lighting was a fungible asset with re-supply unlikely.

If the storm was not deadly and destructive enough, the subsequent failure of the levees and massive flooding later compounded the challenges and options for relief.

Immediate decisions were needed to safeguard more than 1600 Hilton employees and guests, now at significant peril. While not known at the time, looting, man-made property destruction and violence would ensue within hours.

On a conference call at 0300PDT on Tuesday August 30, 2005, a small group of Hilton executives in Austin, Beverly Hills and Chicago, in consultation via satellite phone with the Hilton New Orleans Riverside's acting general manager and its Director of Security (a retired New Orleans Police Department Captain), decided to evacuate all stranded employees and patrons with solely private resources via a bus convoy. That effort would be led on the ground by a dedicated Hilton management and security team in New Orleans and in nearby Baton Rouge.

After the group crisis call decision to get the buses to New Orleans and to set up a command post in Baton Rouge, our regional security manager needed to figure out how to get to Baton Rouge, get supplies shipped and set up a command post (he lived in South Florida). At 4:00am he was able to book a flight through Houston, also was able to reserve a rental car at the Baton Rouge Airport, the last one left, which was a Lincoln Town Car. At 1600CDT on Wednesday August 31st we had boots on the ground in Baton Rouge standing up our command center. Supplies for the command post were overnighted from our corporate office in Beverly Hills, CA and arrived in Baton Rouge first delivery the morning of Sept 1st.

The Calvary

After the decision was made to rescue those stranded, Hilton General Managers in Dallas, Houston, Austin and San Antonio began to assemble more than thirty-five charter buses and drivers to make up Hilton's 'Midnight Express'. By late afternoon Wednesday August 31, 2005, those resources were on their way, initially to Baton Rouge.

By that evening the security situation at the Convention Center was now the focal point of TV and radio media, and our bus drivers were concerned for their safety and the security of the motorcade as there were reports on the news about fuel trucks being shot at, and looting in and around the area of the convention center. We attempted through contacts at the National Guard, State Police and New Orleans PD to obtain a law

enforcement escort of the buses to the Hilton New Orleans Riverside next to the Convention Center, to no avail. Public resources were limited and not available to assist at that time, with officials suggesting we wait until morning to see if the situation changed.

At 01:50CDT on Thursday September 1, 2005 on a scheduled check in call, the Hilton New Orleans Riverside management advised that the security situation near the hotel was deteriorating and a dawn evacuation would be riskier. The convoy was given the 'go' signal to proceed.

Leaving the initial staging point in Baton Rouge, the buses stopped first at the New Orleans Airport Hilton, another hotel that had approximately 100 stranded guests and employees. The Airport Hilton was about 16 miles from the Hilton Riverside.

At 02:15CDT, the bus drivers agreed to head downtown in a caravan with two local managers from the New Orleans Airport Hilton without a police escort. The re-fueled caravan, with fresh supplies of batteries, lanterns and flashlights moved into New Orleans, stopping periodically to negotiate roadblocks with the State Police and National Guard who, after some '*who are these guys?*' moments, allowed the buses to proceed.

The Hilton Riverside is only a few blocks from the Superdome, a hastily set-up 'last resort' evacuation center, initially for 10,000 city residents, later increased to more than 20,000 refugees. With roof damage to the Superdome, these evacuees were then directed to leave the Superdome and move to the Convention Center which was adjacent to the Hilton. At both locations food and water were in short supply. Restrooms facilities failed. Chaos ensued.

The Escape

At 03:30CDT the charter buses arrived at the Hilton Riverside using a service road behind the Convention Center, with their headlights off, lead in by the hotel's Security Director. Patrons and team members were quickly loaded onto the buses. The caravan at 04:05CDT then made its way through the devastation, winding through largely deserted streets back to Baton Rouge. The parade of buses, with weary but elated passengers, arrived at Hilton's Embassy Suites in Baton Rouge at 0630CDT, 2 ½ hours later, which is normally a one hour and fifteen-minute trip.

All guests and staff were fed, given access to showers, the internet, phones and, for those that needed it, prescription medications. The Embassy Suites Baton Rouge took advantage of relationships with local vendors who donated food and beverage for our weary guests and 187 guests had their daily medical prescriptions filled with a ten day supply. All were then afforded their choice of destinations for one of the four Texas cities

where Hilton had facilities until they could make transportation arrangements to return home. All local transportation, hotel accommodations, food, lodging and related services were complimentary for both employees and guests. Hilton employees in Baton Rouge came out of the woodwork to assist the arriving guests, even on their days off, including past employees who just wanted to help.

By noon on September 1st the last bus left for Texas. The Embassy Suites Baton Rouge and corporate staff had processed all guests and employees from New Orleans that needed a place to stay.

The Aftermath

Two days later, on Saturday September 3rd, we were able to go back to New Orleans and review the conditions of the Hilton properties. Power was still out, the National Guard was patrolling the streets, and we discovered looters had breached several of our hotels. We secured the building and posted armed security personnel to keep unauthorized persons away.

We set up a new Hilton command post at the New Orleans Airport Hilton which had power restored quickly since they were on the airport's electrical grid. For the next two months we had a dedicated command post of corporate personnel daily to include, security, human resources, risk management, nurses, finance, purchasing and engineering, to assist the hotel staffs will restoration efforts.

Lessons Learned

Some of the lessons learned follow:

First, in a catastrophic event resulting in interruption of commercial power understand that normal vendors who supply fuel and repair/maintenance services for commercial building emergency generators will not be available. You are on your own.

Second, supplemental fuel supplies, typically 55 gallon drums of diesel fuel, need to be acquired and stored (outdoors) in advance to provide critical extra time for the facility's emergency generator to operate, while the likely evacuation decision is made.

Third, knowing the generator's fuel consumption in gallons-per-hour when fully loaded and the amount of available fuel are key metrics in real-time decision making. When the generator stops, the limited lighting and power stops.

Fourth, material handling equipment to move 400-pound fuel drums and manually operated pumps to transfer fuel must be acquired in advance. Spare parts and materials including oil, oil filters, fuel filters, air filters, batteries and the knowledge of on-site engineering personnel to service the generator accordingly is critical to keep the generator running.

Fifth, generator fuel tanks need to be periodically emptied, cleaned and re-fueled with filtered fuel to avoid clogging the generator's fuel system.

Sixth, a large stock of glow sticks, lanterns and flashlights needs to be acquired, stored and routinely replaced. That precaution is routine throughout the Hilton system and is audited regularly. Backup supplies in nearby cities and a plan to get them to the hotel in need must be set up in advance.

Seventh, satellite telephones with spare batteries and chargers are the only sure means of communications in disasters of this magnitude and their acquisition and practiced use must be a part of the facility's emergency procedures. They can be purchased and maintained in advance or acquired (rented) for short durations. Have a relationship with a vendor.

Eighth, for internal communications traditional two-way radios are essential. Never rely on cell phones. More than 300 cell phone towers were destroyed in this event and it took weeks to re-establish that technology's infrastructure. Your own two-way radio system including a base station, uninterruptible power supplies, repeaters, radios, chargers and spare batteries is your only guarantee of reliable internal communications.

Ninth, most importantly, know that time is of the essence. Do not procrastinate and do not worry about any financial issues. Act decisively and in the interest of the safety of your staff and patrons. Spare no expense doing so. Senior management needs to appoint a crisis manager and give him or her unfettered authority. There is no 'budget' for a situation like this. Spend what you need and deal with any second-guessing green eye shade types later. Insurance should cover most of what you spend, even the \$3,000 bill for the rental of the Lincoln Town car for transportation.

Finally, after action 'lessons learned' meetings among all key players, with candid discussions of what worked and what didn't, are critical to improving plans and their execution when the next disaster strikes.

These lessons proved invaluable just two months later when Hurricane Wilma struck Cancun, Mexico where our Hilton Cancun Resort guests and employees sheltered in place at a school house while Wilma stalled over Cancun for 5 days. We then used our model from Katrina and, when it was safe, bused everyone to another city where we had hotels about 5 hours away.

Epilogue

Internally within Hilton, this event was deemed 'The Great Escape'. Sixteen hundred plus employees and patrons were evacuated from the devastation that was New Orleans without injury or death, in an unprecedented private sector rescue initiative.

Key Hilton personnel at corporate, regional and hotel levels stepped up. In their careers with Hilton, this was their finest hour.

This life-saving experience for our guests and staff in this crisis was reflected in the complimentary letters thereafter and was better than any 'loyalty' program we could have ever concocted.

They will never forget and neither will we.

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DOUBLETREE HOTEL NEW ORLEANS



HILTON NEW ORLEANS RIVERSIDE



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