

- Home
- News ▶
- Technology ▶
- Markets ▶
- Personal Journal ▶
- Weekend & Leisure ▶
- Opinion ▶

- TODAY'S NEWSPAPER
- MY ONLINE JOURNAL
- ONLINE EXCLUSIVES
- RESEARCH & TOOLS

- FIND A JOB
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Government Predicts Bad Hurricane Season

Forecast for 13 to 16 Atlantic Storms Worries Travelers; Resorts, Cruise Lines Dangle Deals

By VALERIE BAUERLEIN and AVERY JOHNSON
May 23, 2006; Page D1

Vacationers planning summer or fall getaways to the East Coast, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean are facing the threat of another unusually ominous hurricane season, though government scientists say it won't be as devastating as last year's storms.

Researchers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecast a "very active" 2006 hurricane season with 13 to 16 named Atlantic tropical storms, meaning storms with winds of at least 39 miles per hour. As many as 10 of those storms are expected to reach hurricane strength, with four to six growing into menacing hurricanes with winds of at least 111 mph. Two to four hurricanes are expected to roar ashore in the Caribbean or U.S. by the end of November, scientists said.

NOAA scientists said conditions point to another unusually active storm season partly because of warm sea surface temperatures and relatively low wind shear, which when stronger makes it harder for storms to form and strengthen.

About the only good news: The predicted level of storm activity falls short of the 28 named storms, 15 hurricanes and seven major hurricanes during 2005, the most destructive storm season in recorded history.

The likelihood of another busy hurricane season and memories of last year's helter-skelter evacuations by vacationers, including some who were stranded in emergency shelters, airports and battered hotels, is scaring away some travelers who used to worry about

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Dow Jones, Reuters

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little more than packing enough suntan lotion. Tourism in Florida, hit by two hurricanes in 2005 and four in 2004, will climb 3.2% this year, down from a 7.6% increase from 2004 to 2005, predicts Visit Florida, the state's tourism marketing agency. Cruise bookings in the Caribbean have plunged, even though most ships can be steered away from approaching hurricanes.

"Predictions in the weather community may even worry travelers to New England this year," says Carol Horner, co-owner of Carlson Wagonlit Travel in Virginia Beach, Va., adding that back-to-back seasons of seemingly nonstop hurricane misery have scared many of her clients away from summer travel in areas vulnerable to storms.

Adam Dennany, a 27-year-old auto technician from Plainwell, Mich., planning a honeymoon in October, changed his mind about the Dominican Republic because of hurricane worries. "We wanted some place a little more safe," he said. The couple now plans to go to Los Cabos, Mexico, on the Pacific coast.

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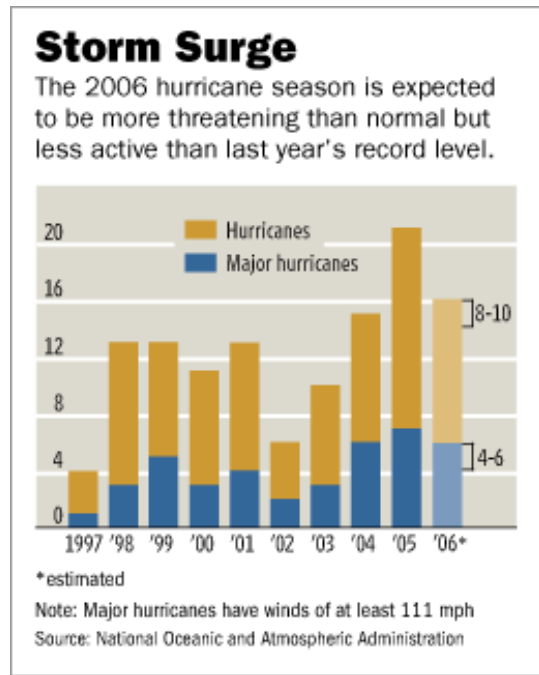
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As a result, some resorts, hotels, real-estate agents and cruise lines have launched an aggressive discounting push aimed at persuading vacationers to ignore their hurricane jitters. Some of the area's best hotels are reducing room rates by more than \$100 a night, while others are offering free nights. And a growing number of travelers are being offered free travel insurance to cover expenses in case a hurricane cancels or interrupts their vacation.

Drastic price cuts are common right after hurricanes hit, especially in destinations that don't sustain any storm damage but are worried business will suffer because of images of destruction elsewhere. This year, the storm-related offers started up well before the official June 1 start of hurricane season, meaning vacationers can save hundreds or thousands of dollars if they can live with the uncertainty of being in the potential path of a

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storm.

Cruise-line operator [Carnival Corp.](#)'s Carnival Cruise Lines is cutting prices by as much as 20% compared with last year to counteract softness in Caribbean bookings. Travelers are particularly leery of ports such as Cozumel, Mexico, which sustained severe damage from Wilma last year. But even ports in potential hurricane paths such as Galveston, Texas, and Miami could cause concern. Carnival's Caribbean cruises of five days or less start at \$229 a person. Weeklong trips start at \$449.

The "deals" section of travel Web site TripAdvisor LLC, part of [Expedia Inc.](#), includes a \$220-a-night rate during October and November at the GR Solaris Cancun & Spa, a four-star resort in Cancún. The all-inclusive package costs about \$100 a night more until July 21, a period when fewer hurricanes typically form. The Omni Cancun Hotel, with 353 renovated suites and luxury villas that include such amenities as marble floors, starts at \$125 a night, according to LastMinuteTravel.com. Bargains are scarce, however, in places that weren't pummeled by storms in the past year or two.

In the Florida Panhandle, hit by Dennis last year and Ivan in 2004, Suzanne Craig is offering "a full hurricane refund" to anyone renting her one-bedroom condominium on Santa Rosa Beach, between Destin and Panama City. The unit is about 100 yards from the white-sand beach along the Gulf of Mexico. Dennis destroyed two of the surrounding resort's three walkways, but much of the sand swept away by the storm has been replaced.

Resort Vacation Properties of St. George Island, Fla., a 25-mile-long sliver of land linked to the mainland by one bridge, now gives all travelers who rent vacation homes complimentary trip insurance that will cover their costs if they have to cancel due to a storm. Sandals Resorts, which has 12 adults-only Caribbean properties, promises a free replacement vacation if hurricane-force winds of at least 74 mph strike during your trip.

Amelia Island Plantation, along the Atlantic Ocean near Jacksonville, Fla., began offering its "storm-free guarantee" for group meetings from mid-August to mid-October after three events were shifted to Arizona instead, said Richard Goldman, the resort's vice president of marketing. Under the new policy, any meeting canceled due to a hurricane can be rescheduled at the same price through 2008, with a free party included.

So far, airfares aren't being pushed lower by worries that the coming hurricane season will be unusually active. The combination of strong travel demand overall and fewer airline seats has resulted in escalating prices, and carriers could quickly cut fares if hurricanes sap demand on some routes.

John Hopkins, a Dauphin Island, Ala., real-estate agent, isn't offering any discounts because so many properties "washed away" that demand is strong for everything still livable. Dallas public-relations executive Brian Cummings wanted to rent the same house as last year, but "it wasn't there," he said. Instead, he booked a six-bedroom house about 20 miles away for the last week in June. "We're keeping our fingers crossed," he said.

Besides the NOAA estimates, other researchers are also expecting a tough hurricane season. AccuWeather Inc. predicts that as many as five hurricanes will hit the U.S. during the coming storm season.

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