

## **Hurricane Irma's calamitous sweep through Florida & it's not over yet**

**In the days leading up to the storm, more than 6.5 million Floridians were told to evacuate.**

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In a calamitous northward sweep from the Everglades to the Florida Panhandle, a weakening but still monstrously powerful Hurricane Irma battered a string of cities on the state's palm-fringed west coast Sunday before advancing toward Georgia and the Carolinas.

Irma, downgraded early Monday to a Category 1 storm and expected to lose its hurricane status later in the day, yielded watery misery and hours of scouring winds even in areas that avoided a direct hit, like Miami, and flattened buildings in the Florida Keys, where it first made landfall.

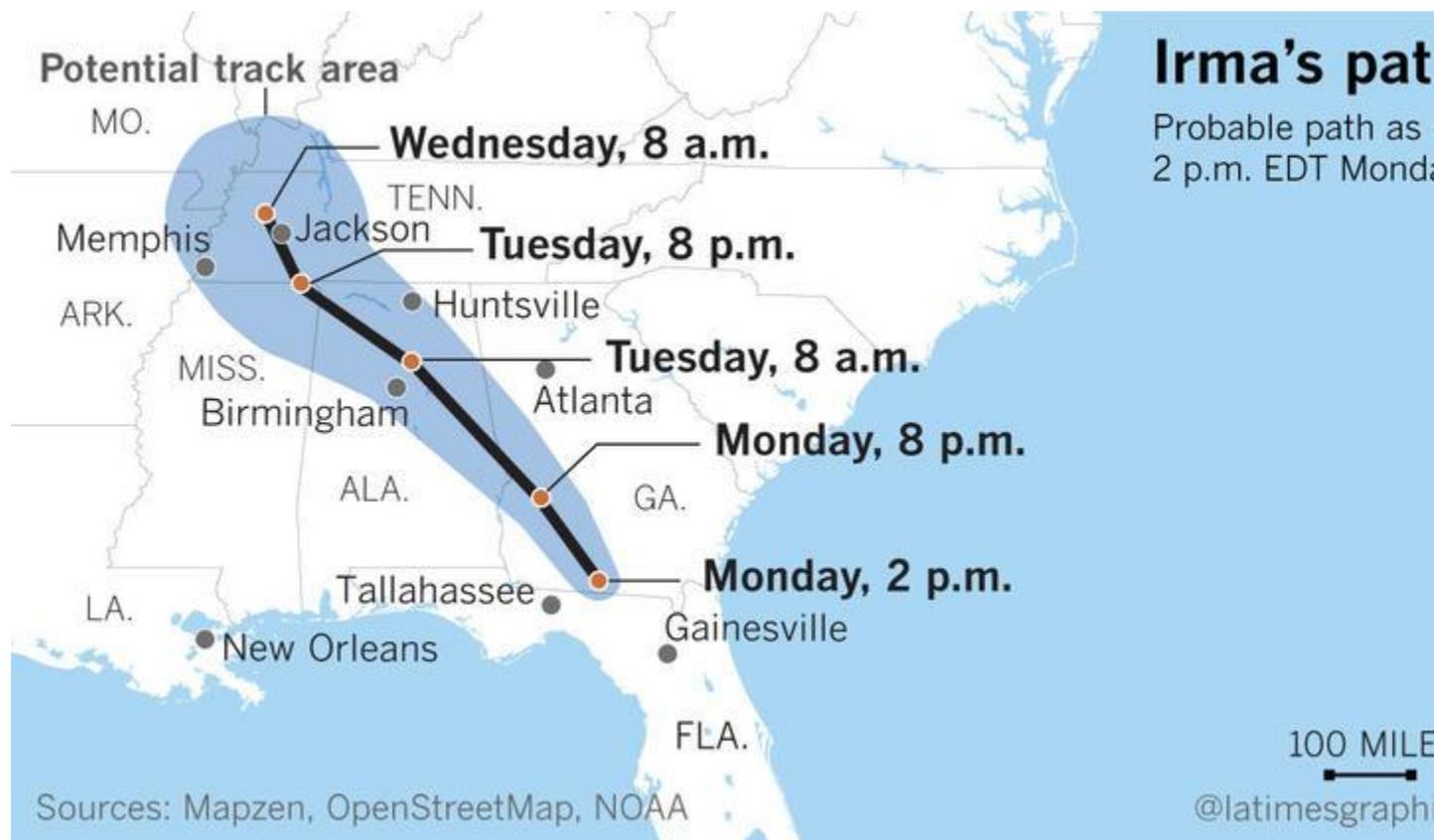
So broad and punishing was the storm's reach that no corner of Florida, the country's fourth most-populous state, was unaffected.

### **Live updates: Hurricane Irma surging up from Florida Keys »**

And Irma was an avatar of night terrors: As darkness fell Sunday, the storm was bearing down on the populous Tampa Bay region, rendered especially vulnerable to deadly storm surges by the bay's funnel shape.

But as the storm moved over land, losing punch but gaining speed, a slight tack to the northeast appeared to spare Tampa the worst of its furies and instead imperiled the theme-park destination of Orlando, and the center of the state saw repeated Irma-spawned tornadoes.

There were at least four deaths. A man in the Florida Keys drove his car into a light pole, and a woman driving on a toll road in central Florida ran into a rail. In a rural area southeast of Tampa, two law-enforcement officers died after their vehicles crashed head-on. None of the incidents was linked conclusively to the storm.



With more than 4 million homes and businesses without power and a vast reckoning of the destruction still at hand, President Trump moved to free up funds for a huge rebuilding effort.

“Right now we’re worried about lives, not cost,” he told reporters as he returned to the White House from a weekend at the presidential retreat of Camp David.

Sunday’s dizzying sequence of stormy weather saw dual landfalls by the hurricane over a span of little more than six hours. After striking the Keys in

midmorning, the eye of the storm moved over Marco Island, south of Naples. And soon after came the floodwaters, with water levels in Naples increasing 7 feet in just 90 minutes.

As the storm's trajectory took it north, water was sucked from part of Tampa Bay, exposing a muddy expanse that would normally be underwater — a frightening portent of flooding to come when that water, and more, comes rushing back.

“MOVE AWAY FROM THE WATER!” appealed the National Hurricane Center after photos on social media showed people and dogs frolicking on the bay's exposed sand.

The cities bracketing Tampa Bay — Tampa and St. Petersburg, with a population of some 3 million people between them — were forecast to be clobbered later Sunday by sustained hurricane-force winds. A direct hit on the area would be the first in nearly a century.

“We are about to get punched in the face by this storm,” Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn declared.

The storm's passage by no means marks the end of the danger. "Once this system passes through, it's going to be a race to save lives and sustain lives," William B. “Brock” Long, the Federal Emergency Management Agency administrator, said on "Fox News Sunday."

With the storm on a havoc-filled trajectory, much of Florida was a jumbled tableau of overflowing shelters, boarded-up buildings and deserted streets in normally bustling urban centers. Palm trees blew sideways, with fronds snapping under the assault; tree branches flew like missiles.

In Pinellas County, which encompasses St. Petersburg, officials announced a curfew, and sheriff's deputies hurried to relocate 1,000 inmates from the Pinellas County Jail.

An overnight curfew was also announced in Miami, where almost horizontal sheets of rain whipped through downtown all day long, and the wind seemed to come simultaneously from all directions. Whitecaps were visible on Brickell Avenue, a main north-south waterfront artery, and other major streets flooded as well.



The wind made weapons of debris and even coconuts from palm trees, and powerful gusts threatened some two dozen construction cranes dotting Miami. At least two collapsed in Sunday's winds.

By nighttime in Miami, the winds, while still fierce, had diminished to the point where it was possible to stand outside without tumbling over, and the

rain had given way to clearing skies. A few people ventured outside, some walking their cooped-up dogs.

For those sheltering in hotels, board games and boredom — a contrast to the angry panorama outside — carried the day. “It’s fine; at least it’s safer than the house,” said Chris McShane, who was staying at a Homewood Suites in the Brickell area in downtown Miami with his wife, Jennifer, and their children, Ashley, 1 and Riley, 2, after the family fled their home in the city’s north.

Amid the storm’s ravages came small points of light. A woman in Miami’s Little Haiti neighborhood went into labor and emergency responders were unable to reach her, so doctors coached her through the birth by phone, the city of Miami reported on Twitter. Sunday morning, mother and baby — a girl — were safely transported to Jackson Hospital by fire crews, the city reported.

In Florida alone, more than 6.5 million people were told to flee in advance of the storm, leading to days of jampacked highways and frantic searches for gasoline amid one of the nation’s largest emergency evacuations ever. More than half a million others were ordered to evacuate in Georgia.

In downtown Fort Myers, on Florida’s southwest coast, the hurricane’s leading edge was so strong that it was hard to walk a block. Ominously, the Caloosahatchee River’s level dropped sharply, its lowered tide likely heralding a storm surge.

Some seemed ill-equipped to face an epic weather event, armed with little more than bravado.

“I got rum, cheese, tortillas,” announced Michael Gandy, a sunburned 77-year-old, who was keeping an eye on his boat from a marina-side apartment complex in Fort Myers.

People who had left everything they owned behind could only worry and wait as the wind and water reached a crescendo. “I’m worried I won’t have a house

to go back to,” said Diana Frana, who fled her canal-side home in Cape Coral, on Fort Myers’ outskirts.

Florida’s lifeblood is tourism, so the storm-stranded included many from out of state — and from outside the U.S. An Argentine family, the Mureoccas, spent a week at Walt Disney World, but were thwarted when they tried to fly back to Buenos Aires after visiting Miami Beach.

“It’s not what we planned,” said Leonardo Mureocca, 44, who was stuck at a hotel near Miami’s airport with his wife and two daughters, 8 and 12. “This is our first hurricane — we don’t have this kind of thing.”

By the time the storm hit, Floridians had already had a grim preview of Irma’s fury: The storm left a trail of destruction across the eastern Caribbean, barreling up through the lush Leeward Islands and killing at least two dozen people.

More than 36 hours after being pummeled by what was still then a Category 5 storm, a shaken Cuba was still assessing the damage Sunday. Initially, the storm had not been expected to make landfall there, but it passed directly over northern islands, with effects felt as far away as the capital, Havana. Passing over Cuba probably weakened the storm as it punched onward toward Florida, scientists said.

Even while the storm raged, there were sober assessments of a long and painful recovery for the storm zone on the U.S. mainland. Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), speaking on CNN, said weeks and months of disruption are to be expected.

“This storm has covered the whole state of Florida,” he said, predicting a “slow slog” back to any semblance of normalcy.

A determined few Floridians seized any opportunity – even a fleeting one like the hurricane’s eye, a period of relative calm – to check on homes and property.

John Krowzow, who is 74, slipped away to check on the situation in Corkscrew Woodlands, a mobile home park for seniors in Estero, a hard-hit town near Fort Myers.

“I feel good!” he said after finding that his mobile home, raised on cinder blocks, was intact.

## **The incredible stories of the die-hards who looked Irma in the face – and stayed**

### **UPDATES:**

**11:20 p.m.** Irma was downgraded to a Category 1 storm.

**4:05 p.m.** More than 2 million without power, the storm’s approach to Fort Myers.

**2:10 p.m.:** This article was updated with news that the storm has weakened to a Category 2 storm.

**12:55 p.m.** A second landfall, comments from Tampa’s mayor.

**11:05 a.m.** More than 1.5 million now without power.

**9:35 a.m.** Flooding in downtown Miami-

**7:55 a.m.** A tropical storm warning for Atlanta-

*This article was originally published at 6:40 a.m.*