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Wicked winds: The worst hurricanes in Mexico's history

Christine Delsol, Special to SFGate.com

Wednesday, September 9, 2009



Hurricane Jimena bore down on Los Cabos as a Category 4 hurricane, fueled by 150 mph winds, only to sweep by the peninsula last week with merely a swat at the multimillion-dollar resorts. But it delivered a jarring reminder that hurricane season is upon us.

Mexico's hurricane season technically begins in June and lasts through November, but most hurricanes, and certainly the most destructive, strike in September and October, when the warm ocean waters that fuel the storms reach peak temperatures.

Since that most famous of October hurricanes, **Wilma**, ripped up the Yucatán's eastern coast in 2005, every impending hurricane incites a flurry of travel cancellations, hotel evacuations and boarded-up windows. The reaction might be frenzied, but it is not unjustified; whether it's the effect of global warming, as many scientists assert, or merely the swing of the meteorological pendulum, the past 15 hurricane seasons have brought storms of increasing frequency and intensity.

Hurricanes through time

One of my most vivid memories of the **Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve** on the Caribbean coast is a small and otherwise unremarkable Maya ruin with a hurricane "early warning system" — a hole bored through one wall, which sets off an unholy howl when the winds preceding a hurricane begin to advance. Maya hieroglyphics gave us one of the first human records of hurricanes; their God of Storms, **Huracán** — a featured player in Popul Vuh, the Maya "bible" — gives us the name for these unpredictable tempests.

Christopher Columbus provided the first dated records, and official hurricane counts start with the storm he weathered in 1502 on his fourth and final Caribbean expedition. He warned the Spanish governor of the island of **Hispaniola** to postpone departure of his fleet of 30 treasure ships for Spain. The governor brushed him off, and when the storm struck two days later, Santo Domingo (in today's Dominican Republic) was devastated, at least 20 of the ships sank, and about 500 sailors were lost, along with a fortune in gold — while Columbus anchored safely in an island cove.

Mexico's worst storms

Mexico, lying between two warm oceans, has been battered throughout its history by the storms

that form as the oceans heat in summer, sending humid air up like a hot-air balloon, gulping more humid air to generate high pressure and screaming winds. These tempests are categorized according to wind strength, from Category 1 (73 mph) to Category 5 (155 mph or more). Here is a look at Mexico's worst hurricanes since storms were first named in 1950.

1955:

Hilda, Sept. 19: This Energizer bunny of a storm hit the eastern Yucatán between Chetumal and Cozumel with 115 mph winds, weakened over land but intensified to a 130 mph Category 3 hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico and then hit Tampico. 300 dead, \$120,000,000 in damage (1955 dollars), mostly from flooding. The name Hilda was reused in 1964 and then retired.

Janet, Sept. 27: The most powerful hurricane of the 1955 Atlantic hurricane season and one of the strongest Atlantic storms on record, Janet made landfall on the Yucatan's Caribbean coast just north of the British Honduras (Belize) border. It ground the town of Corozal into rubble and scoured neighboring Chetumal (now Quintana Roo's state capital) with 175 mph winds, sparing only four buildings. Janet made another landfall in Veracruz state, between the cities of Nautla and Veracruz, without causing fatalities or appreciable damage. But the subsequent flooding in Tamaulipas was one of the worst natural disasters in Mexico's history, killing as many as 800 and stranding thousands more. 1,300 dead, \$45 million damage in Mexico alone.

1959:

Mexico, Oct. 27: Hurricanes are less common, and Category 5 storms extremely rare, on Mexico's Pacific Coast, making the Mexico hurricane one for the record books. Hitting western Mexico with 162 mph winds, it took at least 1,000 lives and possibly twice that many, while destroying one-fourth of the homes in Cihuatlan (Jalisco state). A massive landslide near Minatitlan (Colima) alone killed 800. Venomous snakes and scorpions uncovered by the slide killed still more in the aftermath. It remains Mexico's deadliest Pacific hurricane. 1,000-2,000 dead, \$45 million damage.

1967:

Beulah, Sept. 20: Landing on the U.S.-Mexico border near the Rio Grande Valley, Beulah is best known as one of Texas' five worst hurricanes of the 20th century. It also brought Mexico's worst floods of the 20th century, wrecking towns and villages in the process but taking relatively few lives. 38 dead, \$100 million damage.

1988:

Gilbert, Sept. 14: The most powerful storm ever recorded in the Atlantic leveled nearly all 250 homes in the village of La Carbonera, in the northeastern state of Nuevo León. Gilbert came ashore

in the Yucatán as a Category 5 hurricane with winds of 185 mph and raked Campeche on its way into the Gulf of Mexico before hitting northern Mexico at Category 3. It eventually dissipated in Monterrey, but not before causing the Río Santa Catarina, which crosses the state capital, to overflow its banks. 202 deaths, \$2 billion damage.

1995:

Opal, Oct. 2: The strongest of the abnormally active 1995 Atlantic season's hurricanes developed on the northern Yucatán coast and intensified as it moved slowly westward into the Bay of Campeche, where it became a hurricane. It strengthened further as it moved northeast, becoming a Category 4 hurricane. Most of Mexico's damage was from rains that flooded Tabasco, Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Yucatán as the storm headed for landfall near Pensacola Beach, Fla. Because Hurricane Roxanne immediately struck the same area of Mexico, damage estimates from the two storms could not be separated. 19 dead, \$1.5 damage (combined).

Roxanne, Oct. 9: Formed in the Bay of Campeche following Hurricane Opal's landfall near Panama City, Florida, Roxanne was the fifth and final major hurricane of the active 1995 season. The Category 3 storm sustained winds of 115 mph, devastating great swaths of Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz and Yucatán states. Torrential rains and Gulf waters surging hundreds of yards inland caused the worst floods Campeche had seen since 1927. Five people died when a petroleum barge with 245 people on board sank, and state-owned Pemex was forced to stop all drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, costing the country millions of dollars. 14 dead, \$1.5 billion damage (combined).

1997:

Pauline, Oct. 8: One of the strongest and deadliest hurricanes to land on the western coast, Pauline developed near Huatulco (Oaxaca state) and gained strength as it traced the coastline northward, reaching peak winds of 185 mph. Up to 16 inches of rain produced floods and mudslides in some of Mexico's poorest villages in Oaxaca and Guerrero states, leaving more than 20,000 people homeless — some estimates go as high as 300,000 — and devastating the resort city of Acapulco. 250 to 400 dead, \$7.5 billion damage.

2005:

Emily, July 10: The most powerful of five named storms — the most ever recorded in July — made landfall on the Yucatán Peninsula as a Category 4 storm, first on Cozumel and then north of Tulum on the mainland. After crossing the Bay of Campeche, it made a final and devastating landfall in the northern state of Tamaulipas. It was the strongest hurricane ever to form earlier than August. Tourists and residents were evacuated, entire towns were wiped out, and vast areas were flooded — but fatalities were minimal. 9 dead, \$632 million damages.

Wilma, Oct. 19: The most destructive hurricane ever, reaching wind speeds of 175 mph, pummeled Mexico's Yucatán coasts in several places, causing immeasurable losses to tourism, agriculture and the entire economy. Its eye swept through Cozumel, made landfall in Cancún and raked Ciudad del Carmen in Campeche. By parking over some of Mexico's busiest tourist destinations, the slow-moving storm wreaked maximum damage. Thousands were evacuated, power was out for weeks, the airport was closed, and looting was widespread. 19 dead, \$8 billion-\$10 billion damages.

2007:

Dean, Aug. 21: The first hurricane of the season was a Category 5 with winds reaching 165 mph that swept through the Caribbean before landing on the Yucatán's Costa Maya near the town of Majahual. It sat on a sparsely populated region of the Yucatán for about 12 hours before moving to the Bay of Campeche in weakened form and making a second landfall near Gutierrez Zamora in Veracruz state. It battered Pemex's oil fields, destroyed hundreds of buildings in Majahual and closed the Costa Maya cruise port for a year. 12 dead, more than \$200 million damage.

Hurricane travel

The greatest **risk of meeting a hurricane** is in Baja California Sur, the Yucatán coast, and the Gulf coast from Veracruz to the Texas border. Baja's hurricanes, however, don't reach the intensity of Atlantic hurricanes hitting the eastern coasts. The safest coastal stretches are Veracruz to Tampico along the Gulf, and the Guatemala border to Acapulco on the Pacific. If you believe statistics, Cancún is due for another brush with a hurricane this year, although a direct hit is still **five or six years away**.

Travel during hurricane season actually has some advantages: fewer crowds, lower airfares and hotel rates. And unlike earthquakes or tornadoes, you have plenty of warning if you need to get out of the way.

If you're headed to Mexico, see the Aug. 29, 2007 Mexico Mix for **hurricane advice** on how to prepare before you go, what to do while you're there and how to get through a hurricane in the unlikely event one catches up with you.

Christine Delsol is a former Chronicle travel editor and author of "Pauline Frommer's Cancún & the Yucatán."

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