

## A Vacationer's Tale

## Hurricane Rita's Mood Matched by Travel Companion

By Kim J. Gifford

Savvy vacationers know that there are certain unspoken rules. Such rules don't need to be delineated, because they are obvious. For example, don't book passage on a sinking ship, avoid erupting volcanoes, and by all means, don't drive into disaster when others are driving away.

While I have always abided by the first two—they seem relatively straightforward—the third offers some wiggle room. It all hinges on the definition of disaster or the potential for one, I thought. Yet, I soon discovered that my emphasis was wrong—forget about qualifying the disaster, much more important to focus on the fact that everyone is driving *away* from it.

Yet, last fall in the process of obtaining this wisdom, I broke this third rule and traveled with my friend Joan to San Antonio, Texas just as Hurricane Rita was about to touch down. Not a wise move under any circumstance, but consider that Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans only weeks before.

People were scared, uncertain where the new threat might hit, and evacuating probable site Houston for San Antonio in droves. Thus, even if Rita missed our route, the likelihood of us meeting chaos at our destination was good, really good.

Already, many of the Katrina victims had migrated to the Lone Star State, so even before this new scenario, San Antonio was not the best location for travelers; many of the hotels already booked with evacuees. Now we were hearing of the possibility of gasoline shortages and the need to stock up on bottled water.

Still we were undaunted. Joan had a son in Marshall, Texas, who could keep us informed. Driving almost straight through from Vermont, we were to leave on Friday, Sept. 23 and arrive in San Antonio on Monday the 26th.

The hurricane was supposed to touch ground on Sunday, so the way we figured it there would be plenty of time to assess the damage and reroute or turn around before getting into any trouble. After all, this wasn't an ordinary pleasure trip. We had a reason for our journey—the 2005 Pug Dog National Specialty, the top-of-the-

line, annual dog show geared specifically for pugs. We were bringing three: Lumpi, a splashy fawn making his debut; The Big Mamoo, a black; and Beau Diddley, a veteran fawn taking his last bow in the ring.

Now, anyone who knows me can attest I'm not exactly adventuresome. I always carry an umbrella and am the last one to head out in a snowstorm. I like situations that are predictable, controllable. Even on this trip, I was the good Girl Scout, storing six-packs of water, rain gear, and extra canned food in the storage compartment mounted on the top of Joan's Dodge Caravan.

"Be prepared" may have been my motto, but in all my planning, I neglected to realize that storms sometimes move in from unexpected fronts.

**Setting Sail**

I learned that lesson when we broke another one of those traveler rules: Don't set sail on a voyage with someone you barely know. Joan had decided to invite a friend, Bonnie, from New Jersey, a psychic who had visited for a day or two once or twice before. Good, another driver to spot us, I thought, and a psychic at that. Maybe she might have some insight into the outcome of this adventure. Yes, Bonnie wanted to come, but could she bring her dogs?

She arrived the morning of our departure, a blonde Fran Drescher from the sitcom "The Nanny," complete with a "New Joisey" accent to rival the actress's own.

"Hurricane Bonnie?" I wondered, as she whirled in with coffeemaker, Swiss chocolate, air mattress, and two dogs that were decidedly *not* pugs to attend the Pug Dog Nationals.

As I scanned for a weather station on the radio and packed emergency gear, she set up a luxury suite for herself in the back seat. She sported shorts and sandals while I slipped on knee-high rain boots and wondered if Joan had any floatation devices for the pugs.

Oblivious to my concerns, Joan hopped in the driver's seat whistling Dixie and merrily honking the horn. Bonnie hadn't heard anything much about a hurricane, but had some conspiracy theories to

share on the Kennedy assassination and the death of Princess Di. Perhaps her psychic abilities only worked in reverse, detecting trouble in the past. Suddenly, I began to have some premonitions of my own. Still, I remained in the car breaking my own rule: It's okay to bail ship.

A day into the trip, Bonnie's dogs disclosed their personalities. One yelped, the other peed; both had chronic diarrhea. Bonnie begged for pit stops, Joan refused to give them. Joan drove when she should have been sleeping, Bonnie slept when she should have been driving. I spent my time refereeing and calling home for updates on Hurricane Rita.

**Our Private Hurricane**

The fourth-most intense Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, Rita made landfall on Sept. 24 at the Louisiana-Texas border, our exact point of entry into the state. Although she had landed a good day-and-a-half before our arrival in Texas, reports told of damage, flash flooding, downed power lines, and even tornados along our path. I envisioned the Caravan twirling around in the sky like Dorothy's house, five dogs' heads hanging out the windows, pugs' eyes bulging.

Family suggested extending our travel time and choosing another route into Texas. Too late. As we approached Memphis—the home of Elvis Presley—rain was heavy, but any change would be backtracking and Joan was not hearing of that.

Not to be deterred from our sightseeing, we did a drive-by past the gates of Graceland and considered stopping for dinner. The rain was pounding so hard we missed the turn into the restaurant, got lost and found ourselves headed back in the wrong direction. The Caravan was hot and humid, tempers even hotter.

As Hurricane Rita became less severe, the storm inside the car intensified. Bonnie wanted to tour the whole of Graceland. Joan hoped to beat Rita's wake. We should have opted for a nap. After two days non-stop on the road, not one of us was sound enough to be making any decisions.

The radio claimed the storm, complete with tornados, would reach Arkansas, the state ahead of



This picturesque pug named Lumpi was the reason the author drove into the teeth of Hurricane Rita last summer.

us, by 7 p.m.

"Well, if we're not stopping at Graceland, let's keep driving. We should be in Arkansas before 7," Bonnie suggested.

"Why do we want to drive into the storm?" I inquired. My companions conceded, taking a hotel room for a few hours and just in the nick of time.

As the winds picked up, I donned my raincoat and began to move the dog crates into the hotel. A strong gust suddenly shoved me and the dog crate I was carrying, complete with a 22-pound pug, across the parking lot as if we were a feather. As I made my way back, Joan and Bonnie, now soaking wet, stared at my rain slicker in wonder.

"Whatever made you think to pack that?"

I rolled my eyes just as Joan let out a yelp. "Something's the matter with Beau Diddley!"

Pugs are a brachycephalic breed, meaning their flat faces and small nostrils make it difficult to breathe and easy to succumb to

heat and humidity. All the time in the hot car had led Beau to begin suffering a heat stroke.

"Get him inside, cool him down quickly. Put him in the bathtub and turn the air-conditioner on," one of them shouted.

"Don't cool him too rapidly and keep him out of the cold air," the other contradicted.

I stood frozen, scared for the dog and wondering how much it would cost to book a flight back to Vermont. "I want to go home," I announced.

Joan and Bonnie appeared shocked. "Stop being such a baby," Bonnie said. Apparently, I had no idea how to enjoy a vacation!

Fortunately, Beau survived, welcoming the bath and remaining in the doorway to the bathroom, where the cool air from the air-conditioner reached him, but not too directly.

It seems the art of good travel is compromise.

At an Arkansas gas station the next morning, we learned just

how close those tornados had come, one breezing through our path only 20 minutes ahead of us. Disaster averted, we made our way to San Antonio where the Big Mamoo earned a 4th place finish in his class and our newcomer and old-timer did us proud by simply making it around the ring.

It would be nice to say we had broken the rules, beaten the odds and walked away from the journey consummate travelers with a good tale to tell, yet, when it comes to vacationing there are always new lessons to learn. Before returning home, for example, we discovered roof-mounted cargo carriers and parking garages don't mix. You'd think it wouldn't take a psychic to realize that.

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