



Five months after Hurricane Maria led them to flee Puerto Rico for New York, Enrique and Emma López returned recently to their home in Aguadilla, a small beach side town on the northwest corner of the island.

A Bittersweet Journey Back to Puerto Rico After Maria

The Times joined a family on their return to Puerto Rico months after fleeing Hurricane Maria's fury. The homecoming was not what they expected.

By Luis Ferré-Sadurní Photographs by Christopher Gregory
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Enrique López's leg had gone numb again. Unable to stand, Enrique remained slouched on the couch while his children scrambled to pack his belongings and clean the hotel room as the checkout hour drew near.

“Should we give Dad his passport now or at the airport?” José López, 55, asked his sister, Magaly López.

“No, he’ll lose it,” Magaly, 56, said. “And make sure there are no liquids! Did we pack *Mami’s* medicine?”

Their mother, Emma López, gobbled rice and beans from a plastic container, her last meal at the all-suite motel in Queens. Enrique, 81, and Emma, 75, weren’t just checking out of a hotel. The couple was about to embark on a daunting and, to their children, frightening journey — they were boarding a plane to Puerto Rico, five months after Hurricane Maria’s devastating fury had forced them to abandon their home.

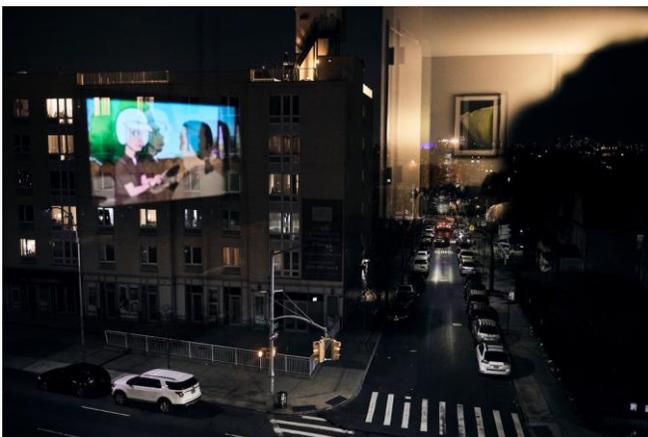
On the floor, Omaira López, the younger daughter, sat on her parents’ only suitcase as she struggled to zip it shut. Omaira, 44, was quieter than usual. She worried about her mother’s ongoing struggle with Alzheimer’s and the severe stroke her father had suffered two weeks earlier.

Omaira and her three siblings, who live in New York, had been dreading this day, fearful of how their parents would fare alone on an island that is still reeling. But the couple had been anticipating their return since they fled the island in October.

As Enrique put it before leaving the hotel for the last time, “I’m in heaven here, but I’m going back to paradise.”



Emma, who struggles with Alzheimer's disease, helped Enrique at the hotel in Queens where they lived for several months. Enrique suffered a stroke while he was in New York and has a hard time walking, which makes it challenging and risky to climb the stairs to his home in Aguadilla.



A view from the hotel room where Emma spent long hours staring out the window. Enrique said, "I want to die over there, not here."



The couple packed all their belongings in one suitcase for the trip home.

A Return From Exile

More than [135,000 Puerto Ricans have left for the mainland](#) in the six months since Hurricane Maria pummeled the island in September. Families permanently changed their home addresses and enrolled their children in schools in Florida and Texas and New York.

Yet many Puerto Ricans fled with plans to return. For them, the leap north was a respite from the immediate chaos after the hurricane: the lack of electricity, unreliable hospitals and long lines for gas and food. It is too early to determine how many may return, but there is little doubt that Puerto Ricans have begun trickling back to the island.

For many, it is a joyous return to the motherland after months in exile. But the homecoming is still bittersweet. Those returning must come to terms with an island that is still crippled, where power outages are frequent, businesses remain shuttered and hillsides are pocked with blue roof tarps.

Older people like Enrique and Emma are especially vulnerable to this instability. [More than 23 percent of the population](#) in Puerto Rico is over 60, higher than anywhere else in Latin America. And that number is growing as young people abandon the island and leave elders to fend for themselves. By returning, Enrique and Emma were taking a precarious leap of faith, given their age and fragile health. They were trading away access to world-class

medical care in New York City for the unpredictable conditions on an island they yearned for even though it was ill-equipped to tend to their needs.



"I'm in heaven here, but I'm going back to paradise," Enrique said as he got ready to head to Kennedy Airport.

Fears for Parents' Safety

As Omaira neared Kennedy Airport on a rainy night in March, her parents, riding with her, became ecstatic.

In the car behind them, Magaly and José were debating in raised voices why they were allowing their parents to step on a plane.

Magaly wanted her parents to stay in New York, where their children could keep a close eye on them. But José had given in to his parents' wishes and booked their flights back home.

“I see it as a safety issue,” Magaly said from behind the wheel. “I don't care about my father's will. He's going to fall.”

“He falls here,” José answered.

“But we're here to rescue him and keep him safe,” she said.

“They're sitting in that hotel room crying, wanting to be home,” he said. Magaly fired back: “So we're just dumping them in Puerto Rico?”

One of the biggest threats Enrique and Emma faced right after the hurricane was the collapse of the health system. [Hospitals lacked power](#) and the sweltering heat could be deadly to the sick and the elderly. Concerned for her parents' poor health, Omaira, who lived with them in Puerto Rico, flew with them on [one of the many humanitarian flights ferrying Puerto Ricans to the mainland](#).

During the first few months, Enrique and Emma shuffled between their children's apartments, sleeping on their beds while the children slept on couches. Then, in November, Enrique and Emma qualified for a federal program that provides hurricane victims with [temporary housing at hotels](#). They moved to the SpringHill Suites hotel in Queens, but they never really acclimated and soon begged their children to fly them back to Puerto Rico.



Emma on the ride to the airport. She and her husband insisted on returning to Puerto Rico, causing tension among their children.

Emma, soft-spoken and typically quiet, began complaining about the bitter cold and the endless days she spent staring out the hotel window at the 7 train that rattled by.

“I don’t want this. I want to leave now,” Emma told Omaira on a recent evening in February. “But you want me kidnapped here. I’m blaming you.”

“When I was little, you protected me,” Omaira, a special-education teacher, told her mother patiently. “Now, I’m protecting you.”

But even in New York, Omaira's worst nightmares came true.

Enrique fell on a busy street in Manhattan one day, and two strangers had to help him up. In February, he was hospitalized for four days with the flu and later he had a severe brain hemorrhage that left his legs wobbly. Enrique, who loves to talk and can trap anyone within earshot to listen to one of his running monologues, now slurs most of his words.

“I want to die over there, not here,” said Enrique, lying on the hotel bed, a scar from one of his many surgeries visible on his stomach. “New York City is for young people.”

Even though Enrique was more debilitated than before the hurricane, he would not yield on his insistence on returning home. José decided it made no sense to defy his father — he would accompany his parents back to Puerto Rico.

“I said, ‘That’s it. We’re going to buy tickets, go down there, and work it out,’” he explained.



Enrique and Emma said they were too excited to sleep on the red-eye flight to Aguadilla.

‘Counting Down the Hours’

At **Kennedy Airport**, handlers placed Enrique and Emma in blue wheelchairs. Omaira and Magaly looked on tearfully as José and their parents disappeared through security.

“I’m counting down the hours to be back,” Emma said at the JetBlue gate, clasping her hands. It was 11:30 p.m. and the gate was bustling with the Spanish chatter of other Puerto Ricans on the red-eye flight.

Enrique and Emma stayed up the entire flight, too excited to asleep. The first time Enrique had boarded a plane it was also a red-eye. He was 17, coming to New York, where he lived and worked for four decades. Now he was going home to stay.

At 4:10 a.m., the plane glided onto a dark runway at the two-gate airport in Aguadilla, a small beach town on the island’s northwest corner. Passengers erupted in clapping and cheers — a typical tradition when Puerto Ricans land on their *Isla del Encanto*.

“It felt like I was in New York for three years,” Emma said as she was wheeled onto the tarmac on a cool morning. Enrique, the last passenger off the plane, gave a thumbs up. “Time to eat some fried eggs because Maria swept away our food, coffee, and everything,” a giddy Enrique told his son.

At the airport in Aguadilla, Enrique and Emma both needed help to get off the plane.



The last time Enrique and Emma were at the Rafael Hernández Airport, the lights were out, A.T.M.s were down and stragglers were trying to escape the island. Now, the terminal was lit and the windows were damp from the air-conditioning.

But as the sun began to rise behind the tattered Puerto Rican flags on the winding road to their home, the lingering effects of the hurricane became clear. An airplane hangar was still missing part of its roof. A gas station was closed, its giant metal sign still on the ground. Tarps were strung over dozens

of homes. On an island where about 100,000 households remain without power, progress is painfully slow.

Engineers were still repairing a crucial dam near Aguadilla that had cracked during the hurricane. As part of the repairs, water service in the area would be rationed, but Enrique and Emma didn't know that yet.

Their two-story home sits just off the island's longest highway, nestled in an unassuming neighborhood where dog barks and chicken clucks fill the air. The concrete house had been largely spared by the hurricane, but the wooden front door was still split in half.

At around 6 a.m., they were received by Omaira's husband, Alex Martínez, 43, who stayed behind and lives on the first floor. Enrique and Emma live on the second floor, which can only be reached by climbing a winding staircase on the outside of the house.



Enrique and Emma arrived back at their home where they were greeted by their son-in-law, Alex Martínez. "I thought I was never going to come back here," Emma said.

They were home again, 148 days after they had left.

"I thought I was never going to come back here," said Emma after hugging her half-asleep son-in-law. "I was kidnapped."

Eager to go inside, Enrique wobbled toward the winding staircase in his beige Crocs. He grabbed the rusty railing with his left hand and lifted his right foot, nearly missing the first step. He caught his breath, then took another sluggish step. He swayed slightly, like a Jenga tower about to collapse, before regaining his balance.

Emma shrieked and turned to José for help.

“Let him do it alone,” José told his mother. “I’m not going to be here to help him in a couple of days.”

When he built the house two decades ago after retiring, Enrique didn’t foresee that the stairs would one day become a hazard. His children have begged him to move to the first floor, but he has stubbornly refused.

After finally reaching the landing, Enrique inspected his home. Some window screens had holes from the rats that had briefly taken over. The water pump was broken and the stove burner had to be fixed.

Enrique flicked on the light switch. At least there was power.



Emma Lopez, 75, prepared the bed she and her husband, Enrique, 81, would share on the second floor of their home in Aguadilla. The couple are in frail health, and their children, who live in New York, worry about how they will cope in Puerto Rico, which is still struggling to provide basic services.



In Aguadilla, as in most of Puerto Rico, signs of the hurricane's wrath are still visible. About 100,000 households remain without power on the island.



Enrique stood next to his sister, Carmen, during a visit with her in Río Grande. He learned that Carmen's husband had died shortly after the hurricane.

Warm Welcome From Neighbors

The following day, news had spread that Enrique and Emma, the inseparable couple who had been married for 56 years, were back.

Neighbors began crowding their spacious backyard, a gathering spot that used to offer fresh star fruit and plantains. But now, the plot of land was a wreck of uprooted avocado and mango trees. The hurricane had destroyed the chicken coop, killing most of Enrique's 40 chickens.

"It's so good to finally see you and welcome you back," said Carmen Escobar, who lives down the street. "Every time I needed fresh eggs, I'd come for Quique's chickens," she added, calling Enrique by his nickname.

"I didn't think Puerto Rico would see a phenomenon like Maria," Enrique said. "It was a phenomenon, but who cares. We're alive, we're alive."



Enrique with his niece Massiel Bozán, who went to visit them one day after his return.

Ms. Escobar, 61, was readjusting to the island, too. She had spent three months in Colorado with her daughters and returned on Dec. 31, when her house regained electricity. Other neighbors had recently returned from Miami, Dallas and even the Poconos in Pennsylvania.

Ms. Escobar's hair styling business had been slow, she said, and the part of her house that she rents to tourists wasn't bringing in much money as the island's tourism industry [struggles to come back](#).

"The government has done nothing to advertise tourism," Ms. Escobar complained to Enrique. "People need to know we have electricity and water here."

Before leaving, she reminded Enrique and Emma to fill their water tank. The government would be rationing water next week.



Emma at her home in Agudilla where she forgot to turn off a water faucet, leaving the home without water for days.

A Death in the Family

The next day, José drove his parents across the island to the town of Río Grande to visit Carmen López, Enrique's sister.

Carmen, 75, lives in the same teal house where her brother grew up before leaving for New York as a teenager in 1954, several years after their father's death.

In New York, Enrique became a bartender at the Pierre hotel in Manhattan and sent most of his money to his mother and siblings in Río Grande. He met Emma, a young seamstress who had also migrated from Puerto Rico. Enrique wore a white jacket and black tie at The Pierre for almost 40 years until he had pancreatitis, a near-death experience that led him to retire in 1991 and return to Puerto Rico.

“I've been battered by 20,000 storms, but I've survived them all,” Enrique likes to say.



A photo of a young Enrique and Emma. The couple have been married for 56 years.

He hadn't seen his sister in almost two years.

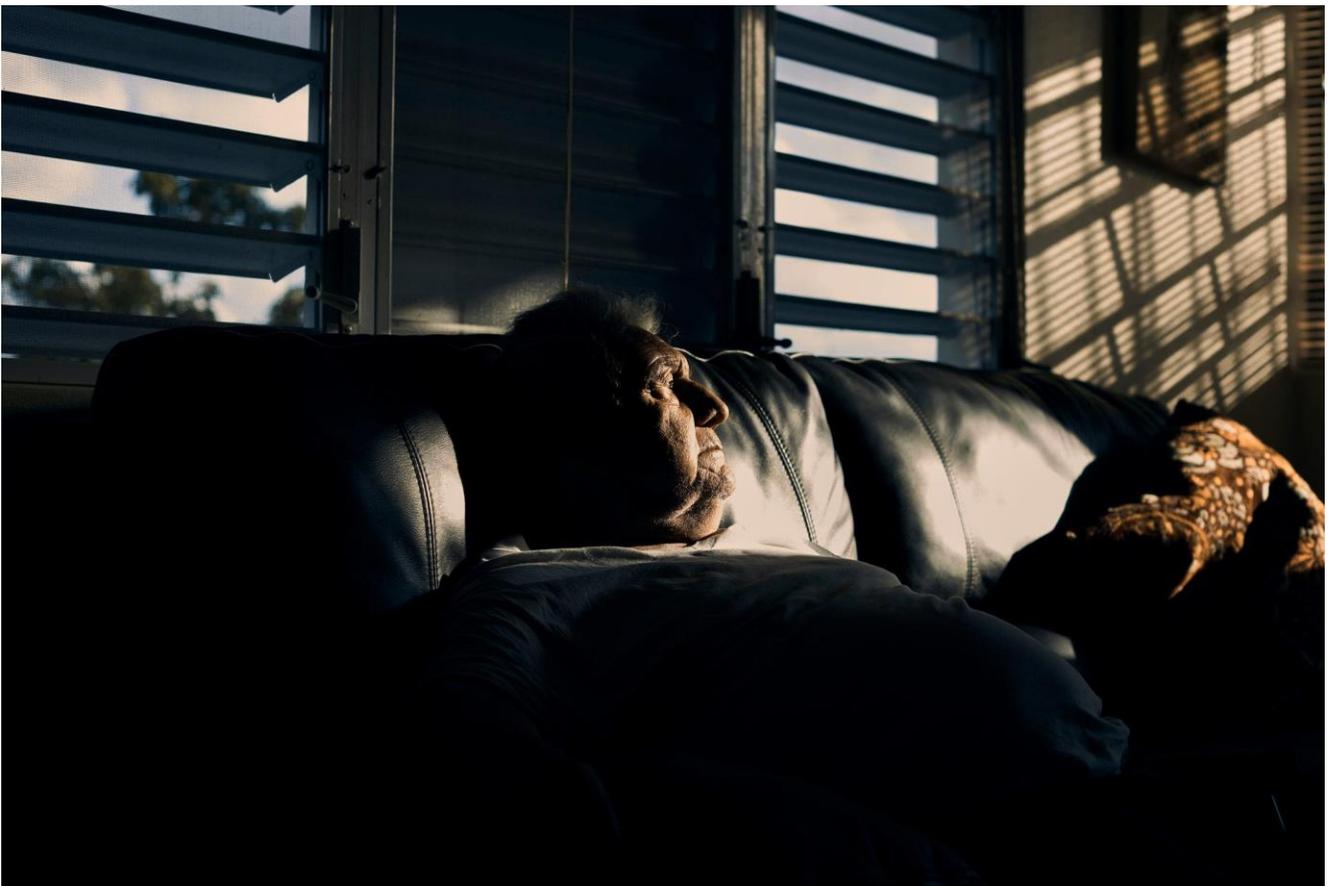
While Emma looked at family photos and tried to recall the names of relatives, Enrique and his sister reminisced and exchanged hurricane stories in the spartan living room.

“We spent five months without electricity in Mameyes,” said Carmen, referring to her neighborhood. “I still remember — it came back on January 14 at 3 p.m. and it still comes and goes.”

Enrique listened closely when Carmen told him that an older neighbor had died. Then Carmen broke even worse news. Her husband, Ramón Ramirez,

had also died a week after Hurricane Maria. Ramón, who was diabetic, died of a heart attack after several sweltering days in a nursing home with no power. He was 74.

Enrique stared at the tiles. He remained silent — the quietest he'd been since his return to Puerto Rico.



“I’ve been battered by 20,000 storms, but I’ve survived them all,” Enrique said.

Still Climbing the Stairs to Home

About two weeks after Enrique and Emma's homecoming and several days after José had come back to New York, I got a call from Omaira Lopez.

Enrique had been taken to the hospital, she said.

"I got a call from him and he was slurring his words more than usual," Omaira said. "He told me, 'My chest feels tight, like I can't breathe.'"

She called her husband in Puerto Rico and he rushed Enrique to the emergency room, where Enrique spent six hours. His respiratory problems had apparently worsened after a rough transition in Puerto Rico.

Without anyone to keep an eye on her, Emma had left a water faucet running, which depleted their backup water tank and left them without water for days. Then their refrigerator broke down, probably because of the power outages. Enrique was also struggling with the stairs. She suspected all this had made her father anxious to the point that it complicated his breathing.

“I think he had a nervous breakdown,” said Omaira, who flew to Puerto Rico with her sister for a few days. “He’s very emotional right now. I’ve never seen him cry. Yesterday, he was sobbing.”

Still, every day, Enrique insists on climbing the 16 steps to his doorstep.

Luis Ferré-Sadurní is a general assignment reporter for the Metro desk originally from San Juan, Puerto Rico. [@luisferre](#)

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