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## Rhodes wildfire forces thousands of evacuations, tourists flee

By Fedja Grulovic

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**RHODES**, Greece, July 23 (Reuters) - Thousands of tourists and residents fleeing wildfires on the Greek island of Rhodes took refuge in schools and shelters on Sunday, with many evacuated on private boats as flames threatened resorts and coastal villages.

Thousands spent the night on beaches and streets during what Greece said was its biggest safe transport of residents and tourists in emergency conditions.

Some 19,000 people were moved from homes and hotels overnight as fires burning since Wednesday gathered pace, tearing through forests until the flames reached coastal resorts on the island's south-eastern coast.

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Some holidaymakers said they walked for miles in scorching heat to reach safety. The fires left trees black and skeletal. Dead animals lay in the road near burnt-out cars.

Rhodes is a hugely popular holiday destination, particularly with visitors from Britain.

Tour operators Jet2, TUI and Correndon cancelled flights leaving for Rhodes, which lies southeast of mainland Greece and is famous for its beaches and historic sites.

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"The smoke was coming. So we all set off on foot. I walked 12 miles (19 km) in this heat yesterday. It took me four hours," said British tourist Chris Freestone.

He spoke from a sports hall alongside evacuees lying on mattresses in the island's principal city, Rhodes Town, which was unaffected by the fires further south.

TUI said its teams were doing everything they could to support customers and had sent in additional staff in what it called "a difficult and evolving situation."

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Another holidaymaker, Fay Mortimer from Cheshire in northern England, said the experience had been terrifying.

"I've never been so scared in my entire life," she said.

The Greek transport ministry said TUI and Jet2, which handle the bulk of tourism to Rhodes, planned 14 scheduled flights from Rhodes airport, transferring about 2,700 passengers until 0300 am local time (2400 GMT).

Shane and Charlie Murphy-Jones had been on Rhodes for a wedding when they received an alert to evacuate their rented villa on Saturday night. "We went from paradise to hell and it was crazy," Shane Murphy-Jones said after arriving at Gatwick airport in London late Sunday.

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### TEMPERATURE SPIKE STOKES FLAMES

Fires are common in Greece but climate change has led to more extreme heat waves across southern Europe and many parts of the world.



[1/15] Tourists line up at check-in counters as they wait for departing planes at the airport, after being evacuated following a wildfire on the island of Rhodes, Greece, July 24. REUTERS/Nicolas Economou [Acquire Licensing Rights](#)



Temperatures over the past week have exceeded 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in many parts of Greece. In addition to Rhodes, emergency services were dealing with fires on the island of Evia, east of Athens and Aigio, southwest of Athens, and on the island of Corfu where authorities ordered the precautionary evacuation of a number of small settlements.

The fire on Corfu, an island which lies west of Greece, was burning on a large front. Boats in the area had been dispatched to evacuate residents by sea, a government official said.

A fire brigade official said the wildfires on Rhodes have affected 10% of hotels in the central and southeast parts of the island. The north and western parts were not affected. The government official who spoke of Corfu said the fires on Rhodes were largely contained.

Coastguard vessels and private boats carried more than 3,000 tourists from beaches on Saturday. Many people fled hotels when huge flames reached the seaside villages of Kiotari, Gennadi, Pefki, Lindos, Lardos and Kalathos. Crowds gathered in streets under a red sky while smoke hung over deserted shorelines.

Pictures and videos posted by tourists on social media showed local residents using their own cars or bundling tourists into trucks and pick-ups to take them to safety.

In Lindos, famed for an acropolis on a massive rock within medieval walls, a blaze charred the hillside and buildings.

Nicholas Virinis, a vice mayor of Rhodes, told Mega television on Sunday that between 4,000 and 5,000 people were in temporary accommodation.

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Evacuees were taken to conference centres and school buildings, where they were given food, water and medical assistance, authorities said.

**LOCAL GENEROSITY**

British, Dutch, French and German citizens were among the tourists on Rhodes, which one hotelier said can receive 150,000 visitors at a time in peak season. The resident population of the island is around 125,000.

One British tourist thanked locals for their generosity, in an interview with Greek television, saying shops had refused payment for water and food and small boats had taken women and children to safety first, before returning for the men.

As crowds filled Rhodes airport, the Greek foreign ministry said it was setting up a helpdesk for people who had lost travel documents.

German travel association DRV said around 20,000 German tourists were on the island, but only a small proportion were affected by the evacuations.

More than 250 firefighters, assisted by 18 aircraft, set up firebreaks to shield a dense forest and more residential areas.

Nevertheless, some tourists were still arriving.

Pawel Kozlowski, from Warsaw, landed on Sunday afternoon and drove through Kiotari. "There are burnt cars, electrical lines are on the ground, we saw a broken electricity pole, still smoking. (It) looks like a war zone," he said.

Reporting by Fedja Gruolic in Rhodes, Renee Maltezou and Angeliki Koutantou in Athens; Additional reporting by Elizabeth Piper and Hollie Adams in London, Christoph Steitz in Frankfurt, Andi Kranz in Cologne, Mathieu Rosemain in Paris and Justyna Pawkak in Warsaw; Writing by Frank Jack Daniel; Editing by Barbara Lewis, Frances Kerry and Chris Reese

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