The 2008 hurricane season has arrived. The tropical vacation destinations known as the Antilles are particularly vulnerable to these tropical storms and often bear the brunt of hurricanes that enter the Caribbean Sea.

The Caribbean islands contain some of the Western Hemisphere’s most expensive vacation destinations. The region also has some of the world’s worst poverty. Hurricanes are a threat to all who live and vacation there from June through December.

The Caribbean region consists of the islands and mainland surrounding the Caribbean geologic plate and the Caribbean Sea. This is one of the earth’s most active tectonic and volcanic regions. It formed more than 7,000 islands and islets in the Caribbean archipelago arc known as the Greater and Lesser Antilles.

The Greater Antilles include Cuba, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica and Puerto Rico on the northern margins of the Caribbean. The Lesser Antilles consist of the smaller islands located along the eastern side of the Caribbean Sea and are further divided into two groups. The Lesser Antilles consist of the smaller islands located along the eastern side of the Caribbean Sea and are further divided into the Windward and Leeward Islands.

The topography of the islands varies greatly, from volcanic peaks on St. Kitts and Montserrat to relatively flat terrain on Aruba. There are 13 sovereign states, 12 dependent territories and two overseas departments (similar to states) in the Antilles.

All of the Antilles are tropical, situated at latitudes where the trade winds blow almost continuously from the northeast, bringing warm, moist air to the windward sides of the islands. Mountainous terrain regularly experiences high rainfall amounts, providing fresh water and resulting in tropical rainforests growing on steep windward slopes.

The name Caribbean derives from the Amerindian ethnic group called Caribs that occupied the Lesser Antilles and parts of the coastal mainland when the Europeans first arrived in 1492. The initial European explorers tried to force the Caribs to work in fields and mines. However, the original islanders were too independent and the majority of population was wiped out as European settlers seized their islands and brought African slaves to provide labor and grow sugarcane.

Hurricane Wrath on the Caribbean Islands

SOURCES: Personal interviews with St. Kitts residents, June 2008.