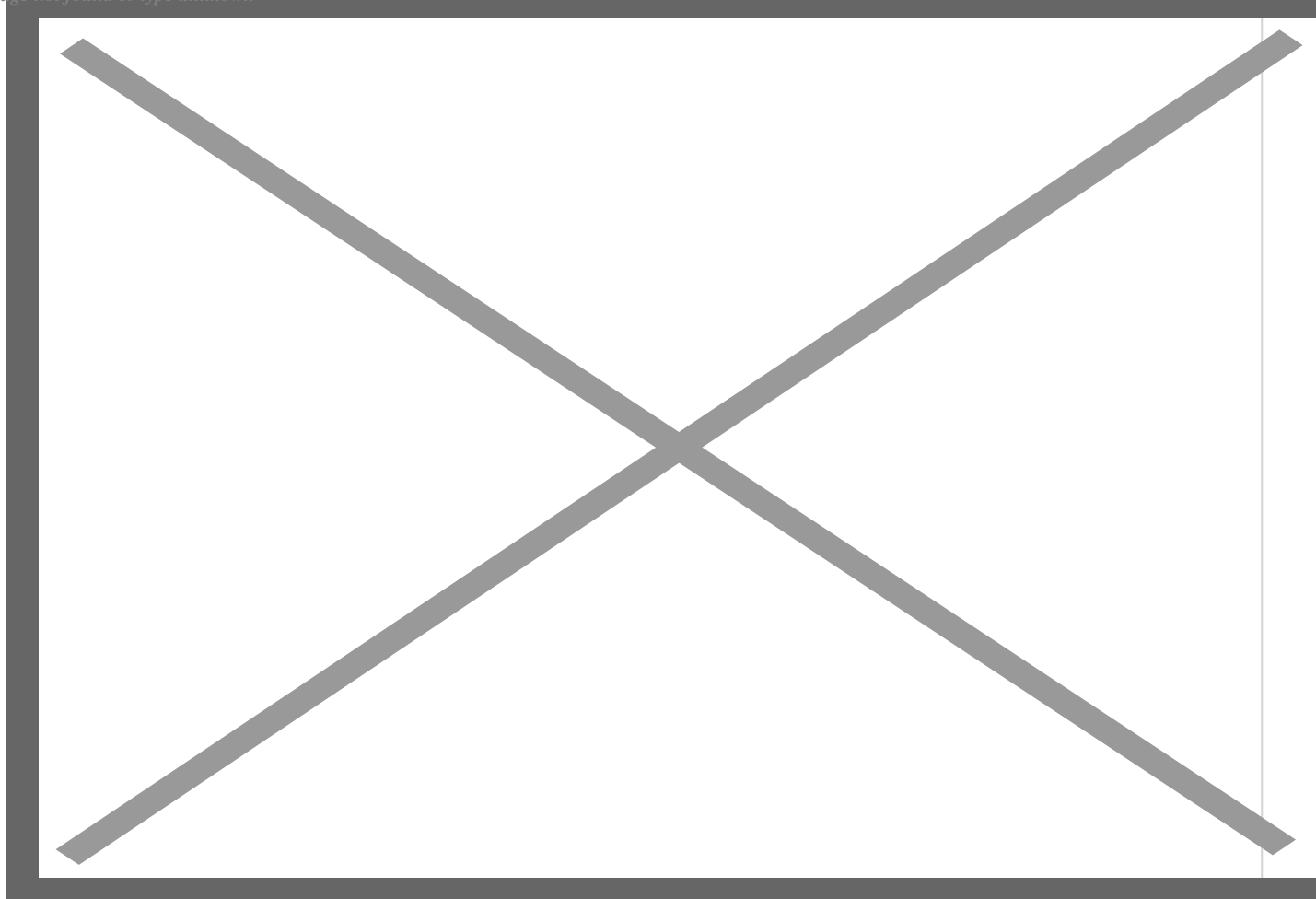


Residents and tourists flee wildfire on Greece's Rhodes island

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Tourists stand in front of an information board at the airport's departure hall as evacuations are underway due to wildfires, on the Greek island of Rhodes, July 23. [Will Vassilopoulos/ AFP]

Athens, July 23 (RHC)-- Residents and tourists have fled hot spots on the Greek island of Rhodes as firefighters, backed by water jets and helicopters, battle a blaze that sparked the country's largest-ever fire

evacuation. Wind gusts of up to 49 km/h (30 mph) were complicating efforts to bring the flames under control on Sunday.

The island of Rhodes is one of Greece's most popular vacation destinations, particularly with British, German and French tourists – many of whom were being rapidly moved out of the path of the flames. As Greece has been battered by an extended spell of extreme heat, flames have burned for nearly a week on the island. Temperatures, which reached 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit) in central Greece on Sunday, were expected to dip on Monday before the mercury rises again for another four-day heatwave.

"This is the biggest fire evacuation ever in Greece," Konstantia Dimoglidou, Greek police spokeswoman, told the AFP news agency. "We had to evacuate an area of 30,000 people."

Police said that authorities had transported some 16,000 people across land, with 3,000 evacuated by sea, and others fleeing by road or under their own transport after being told to leave the area.

Reporting from Mandra, Al Jazeera's Stefanie Dekker said that the biggest challenge was the wind pushing and reigniting flames across large areas of land. "There has been a red alert across the country for days now because the risk of fires has been so high," said Dekker.

German travel giant Tui said it was suspending all of its inbound passenger flights to Rhodes until Tuesday but would fly in empty planes to help evacuate tourists.

Spokesperson Linda Jonczyk said that Tui had some 40,000 tourists in Rhodes, of which 7,800 are affected by the fires.

The low-cost British carrier Jet2 also said it had cancelled "all flights and holidays" to the island. One German tourist told the Bild daily that they were "saved from the fire at the last moment" after returning from the beach on Saturday to a deserted hotel. "We had embers flying around our heads and no help was in sight," said 23-year-old Paul from Bielefeld.

"I had the feeling of being on my own. It was so hot and the smoke was already so thick we couldn't have survived another 10 minutes." He said buses then arrived to evacuate the tourists, but some were so panicked they were trying to find boats to escape on from the beach.

More than 260 firefighters, backed by 18 aircraft, were battling the fire on Sunday, with Croatia, France, Slovakia and Turkey having contributed equipment and personnel, officials said.

Last year Rhodes, which has a population of over 100,000, welcomed some 2.5 million tourist arrivals.

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