



# ENGLAND'S FOREIGN FIELD

More than 60 years after British aristocrat Colin Tennant bought the island of Mustique and made it one of the must-visit hotspots of the Seventies and Eighties, it continues to bear his mark. *Alec Marsh* pays a visit

The 19-seat twin-engine de Havilland Otter gets a lot smaller as you climb the steps to board it. Inside, the drone of the engines is immediate (if not quite deafening), and my son, aged three, looks nervously over from his seat as his little hand grips the windowsill. I suggest he opens the small round vent. It doesn't help.

As we take off along the wet runway, the sky is grey and sea gunmetal, but then the sun breaks through and the water is copper sulphate crystals to the end, with fluffy white trade winds clouds beneath us.

Our plane skirts the island of St Vincent, rustic in creamy afternoon light, as we fly south-west. 'You'll see Mustique up on the left,' says a passenger in the seat behind. Suddenly, through the port-side windows, a volcanic-looking island juts from the sea, with a larger one immediately behind. It's like the opening of a King Kong film.

The plane banks to the left and arcs round towards a tiny runway fringed with palms. On our steep approach, all we can see through the windscreen is grey tarmac... we pull up, and landing is mercifully gentle. The plane slows to a halt beside a timber airport terminal that looks like Robinson Crusoe was the principal contractor.

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Discovered by the Spanish in the 1400s, the island of Mustique is 12.8 degrees North of the equator - roughly 900 miles - and 61 degrees West of Greenwich. It is 30 miles due south of the island of St Vincent - the largest landmass of the St Vincent and the Grenadines - and covers just 2.2 square miles. The islands fell into British hands after the Seven Years War in 1763, where they remained until independence in 1979. But, by that time, the history of the island had taken a turn for the better.

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We are greeted at the airport, and our luggage conveyed to a waiting car. After about 30 seconds of formality we are presented with a refreshing drink by the manager of the house we are staying at - Zahara - and then handed the keys to our vehicle for the duration of our stay, a Kawasaki golf buggy, known locally as a 'Mule'. We ask how far it is to the house. 'You can get everywhere in Mustique in 10 minutes,' laughs our driver, showing us the offices of the Mustique Company, which owns the island. Then we pass the Cotton House, the first hotel on the island, where they hold a cocktail party every Tuesday for island guests and residents. Set among sprawling lawns, palms and tropical trees, it looks out on to Endeavour Bay. It's soon abundantly clear that there is nothing 'retail' about Mustique. 'Bryan Adams' house is over there, Mick Jagger's is over there, and that's Tommy Hilfinger's,' I'm told.

Our accommodation for the week, Zahara, has comfortable, chic interiors. I say, 'interiors', but there is no front door to speak of - instead we ascend several



From top left: Princess Margaret and Colin Tennant; Jeanette Cadet and daughter; Tatiana Copeland; The Queen visiting Mustique in '77 with Princess Margaret

white boat bobs on her moorings. Her livery is in the Mustique Company turquoise and her name is the Lady Anne.

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The Lady Anne is named in honour of one-time chatelaine of Mustique, Lady Anne Glenconner, whose memoir, *Lady in Waiting*, raised eyebrows last year. A former lady-in-waiting to Princess Margaret, Glenconner was married to Colin Tennant, a friend and former squeeze of the princess. In 1958 he went to see the island with a view to buying it from a Creole family from St Vincent, who had owned it since the 1860s. Tennant viewed the island from a chartered schooner, and, according to biographer Nicholas Courtney, 'admired the succession of sandy beaches, but he never landed.' He didn't need to know that he wanted to buy it.

On return to St Vincent, Tennant telegraphed his father who authorised the purchase, 'so long as there was running water'. There wasn't a drop, as one local told me. But it didn't stop Tennant, who offered £45,000. 'There were no proper roads; the fencing and stockades had long since perished, and only about 11 acres (out of 1,385) were under cultivation,' wrote Courtney. 'There were herds of feral cattle and goats rampaging around the island, damaging what little crops there were.' When he returned to London Anne told him he was mad. 'You mark my words,' he replied. 'I will make Mustique into a household name.' By the mid-Eighties, when Tennant sold up his remaining 40 per cent share of the island to Venezuelan chemicals magnate Hans Neumann, he had achieved precisely that.

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On our first evening we are invited to drinks by a New Yorker, Melissa Fleming, whose palatial home (named Obsidian) we find thanks to Mustique's own app, which my wife has cleverly downloaded. Here we meet Roger Pritchard, chief executive of the Mustique Company, as well as Dr Michael Bunbury, the island's doctor, and his fashion designer wife Lotty, who both came here more than

steps to a veranda, with an open-plan seating area and two of the house's four bedrooms leading off. Up another flight of stairs are the other bedrooms, a dining area, bar and two seating areas - one of which looks out over the pool and is large enough to host 20 friends amid the palm leaves, breeze and birdsong. After the tour, we are introduced to the staff - including the cook Daffodil - and turn in after a fine welcome feast.

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At 5.30am I wake up to the sound of crashing waves and the sight of a burning orange sky. I am inspired to go for a run past the coconut trees and grass-chewing tortoises down to the beach. It is beautiful. After breakfast, we drive in the Mule to the Cotton House beach club, to have coffee, look at the aquamarine sea and introduce the children to the tropics. My God it's good. People going on dive tours to see the turtles in the nearby reef walk out along a jetty where a gleaming

Left to right: The stunning coastline; The Cotton House; Alec Marsh meets barkeeper Basil Charles; Princess Margaret at her Mustique home, Les Jolies Eaux

20 years ago and never went back. Over a beer, Bunbury says all but 10 of the 100 houses on the island are rented out – those that aren't belong to people so rich they don't need the dosh. The remaining 90 owners try to get 10 weeks a year – the magic number to cover costs and keep staff keen.

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Colin Tennant's masterstroke came in 1960, when he gave Princess Margaret a 10 acre plot on the island as a wedding present. She visited the island on her honeymoon, arriving by the Royal Yacht. Princess Margaret recalled: 'The whole island looked like Kenya. Burnt to a frazzle. We drove down a path, the only road, and sat in the brush whacking mosquitos.' It was an inauspicious start to her association with Mustique, but the island would soon become one of the most special places in her life – and in the lives of her society set.

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The next day, while my family enjoy our pool, I take a ride in a golden Suzuki van with Jeanette Cadet, who has been on the island for 33 years and handles property sales for the Mustique Company. We soon arrive at the first house she wants to show me: Toucan Hills, an exotic, Ottoman-design inspired property with four bedrooms and a master, on a hilltop. Look one way there's the Atlantic; look the other, the Caribbean Sea. It's magnificent. Cadet introduces the owner, Tatiana Copeland, who shows me round and explains that the stunning property took 10 years to build, on virgin ground. 'We had to crawl up here on our hands and knees,' she recalls, leading me into another remarkable room, with yet more breathtaking views.

Copeland first came to Mustique in the early 1980s and went with a letter of introduction to the Great House where a butler greeted them. 'It was very proper,' recalls Copeland of meeting Tennant and the Princess Margaret set. The Princess would visit for the month of February, and Tennant would arrange a series of parties to entertain her. Lady Glenconner described him as the 'ring-master in paradise.' 'It was magical,' recalls Copeland. 'It wasn't over the top. It was just fun, and that's the most important thing.'

Sitting outside her master suite – where she has installed a vast golden bed – Copeland describes Mustique as 'the most extraordinary island in the world.' What's so special? 'A feeling of security,' she begins. 'I can't overstate that. It's very protected – you can leave your door open. The beaches are deserted,' she adds. 'And of course, if you want to party, you party.' Then she notes: 'There are no shops, no museums, no churches to visit...' She gazes out across her garden. 'Everybody needs a place like this to come to.' If Tennant could see it now, she says: 'He would be immensely proud of what he created.'

Jeanette's tour of island houses continues, and we pass a statue erected a few years back to Tennant, just up the hill. He came for the unveiling, Cadet recalls. 'He gave a brilliant speech, about three princesses – Princess

Josephine Loewenstein, Princess Margaret, and a lady in the village called Princess,' she laughs. 'That was Colin. He embraced the village – and that was one of his legacies. He's given the island this sense of community because that's what we have here – we're not a resort. We are a community.'

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The following morning we drive over to Britannia Bay, named in honour of the Royal Yacht Britannia, which anchored in the bay for visits including that made by the Queen in 1977. It also happens to be the location of Basil's Bar, which juts out over the water and has recently been refurbished with input from Philippe Starck. Here I meet Basil Charles himself, a fixture of Mustique life since 1971, when there were only three houses on the island. Basil has mixed cocktails – including his own trademark creation, Hurricane David – for anybody who's anybody. 'HRH came here,' he says, 'and so did everybody else. Mick was here...' He means Jagger, of course. Did Princess Margaret like the rum punch? 'English people drink gin and tonic for God's sake,' he declares.

'I loved the old days,' he says with emphasis. 'But the future is also great. In 1971, the mosquitos... shit! There was hardly any running water – we would have to bring it over from St Vincent – and the electricity would go off one day at 7pm and a week later you would get it back.' Basil's is still where people come for a sun-downer, where yachties come ashore. 'I hang out here all the time,' adds Charles.

To what degree does he credit this place to Colin Tennant, I ask. He sighs. 'You like the man or you don't like the man. It was his vision. He took a desert island and made it into one of the most amazing islands on the planet. People come here because it's safe: I don't lock my door.'

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On the final day of our visit we enjoy some last laps of the pool at Zahara before dropping in to a small museum by The Cotton House. I discover that Mustique emerged from the water 30 million years ago. Mangroves and coral reefs would have come first, attracting birds and plants, flying or floating from nearby islands, all uninterrupted by mammals, allowing a tropical canopy some 20 metres high across the island. The land turtles and lizards possibly arrived on driftwood from Africa.

It only took another few more million years for the Brits to turn up, with their gins and tonic, and their parties.

Today, Mustique is said to contribute \$100 million to the economy of St Vincent and the Grenadines; the contract of the Mustique Company has been extended for another 20 years, with a promise to offer another extension after that. Tennant's legacy endures. And you can't help but marvel at what he and his successors have done here – creating a rare, beautiful and rather British enclave. A piece of Knightsbridge, somehow floating off the coast of South America, where the Atlantic meets the Caribbean.

Web [mustique-island.com](http://mustique-island.com)

Top: Paraiba villa. Below: The splendour of Toucan Hills

