

# The Magic of Mustique

Despite its sprawling compounds and celebrity homeowners, the three-mile-long caribbean utopia is startlingly unpretentious and, better yet, under the radar

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Photographed by Douglas Friedman



If you listen close enough—never mind the clinking glasses of rosé and ubiquitous steel-drum soundtrack—you can make out the sound of waves rolling lazily against the dock. It's after dusk in Mustique, and the entire island has converged on The Cotton House for the hotel's Tuesday-night cocktail party, the paradisiacal equivalent of a weekly town-hall meeting.

Two elderly gentlemen are wrapped in a warm embrace beneath a thatched-roof tiki bar outside of the hotel—they'd attended university together and just crossed paths for the first time in 54 years. A boisterous group of Brits is swilling martinis beside a fire pit in the sand; dinner-party invitations and double-cheek air kisses are being handed out

faster than highballs of rum punch. It's a decidedly swanky crowd—there are business titans, architects, fashion industry executives—and yet there are no dinner jackets, no lavish gowns and, perhaps most surprising of all, not many shoes.

Welcome to Mustique, a locale that burnished a reputation as the epicenter of barefoot luxury in the '70s and hasn't changed since. On the three-mile-long private island in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, you won't find a single traffic light, street sign or ATM.

There's just one quaint hotel (the aforementioned Cotton House) and a tiny bed-and-breakfast. Most visitors prefer to take advantage of Mustique's villa culture—and rightfully so. Of the 105 homes on the island, 81 are available for rent on a weekly basis. They come fully staffed (think chefs, butlers, gardeners, property managers and housekeeping) and represent a portfolio as eclectic as their owners. Toucan Hill, for instance, is a sprawling four-bedroom home designed to look like a Moroccan palace, with domed pavilions, lush gardens and 360-degree views. It's a stark contrast to Palm Beach, the six-acre British Colonial-style oceanfront estate owned by Tommy Hilfiger.

The fashion mogul recalls being enamored with the island when he first visited 30 years ago. "There's something so exotic and primitive about Mustique," he says. "It's truly the most beautiful, relaxing place on earth." The American designer spent several years as a renter before purchasing a fixer-upper beach house in 1990. A contractor advised that the property couldn't withstand renovations, so Hilfiger conceived of a new design that stayed true to the aesthetic of the island. "I wanted an Oliver Messel British Colonial home made of coral stone," he says, citing the English designer who developed Mustique's first villas.

Hilfiger is just one of the island's many A-list homeowners—a group that also includes Shania Twain, Bryan Adams and Mick Jagger. The list of renters (Bill Gates, Jennifer Lopez, Denzel Washington and Prince William and Kate Middleton) is arguably even more impressive. For high-profile visitors, the allure of Mustique goes beyond its pristine beaches and watercolor sunsets: The island is virtually impenetrable to paparazzi. Its coastline is monitored by on- and off-shore security, and each guest arriving by air must be preapproved by The Mustique Company, an enterprise that functions like a co-op, managing all facets of life on the island.

Things have more or less operated that way since the company was formed in 1968 by Scottish aristocrat Colin Tennant, who'd purchased Mustique for £45,000 some 10 years earlier. Tennant, a man-about-town known for throwing extravagant society parties, decided to transform the undeveloped island into an exclusive destination. He gifted a plot of land to his friend Princess Margaret after she married; she went on to build one of the island's first homes, Les Jolies Eaux. (The renovated 10-acre villa is still available for rent.)

Mustique soon became recognized as a celeb-studded refuge, and a building boom ensued. Jagger's Japanese-inspired mansion Stargroves was completed in 1983, followed by David Bowie's whimsical Indonesian pavilion six years later, and so on. In an effort to curb overdevelopment, The Mustique Company capped the total number of homes on the island at 130—a decision that remains unchanged, making ownership opportunities on Mustique scarce. Just a handful of villas are on the market (through Douglas Elliman Fine Homes and Knight Frank Residential), and of the two empty plots left for the taking, one has a \$9 million price tag.

"There weren't many people here [when I first bought my home]," says Hilfiger. "And there's not really very many now." It's true. Mustique is the kind of place where everyone knows everyone; you'd be hard-pressed to find a similarly intimate vacation destination anywhere else in the world. At its busiest—the week between Christmas and New Year's—the entire island's population amounts to fewer than 1,300 people.

"Even if you've only been here once, you feel like you belong," says Jeannette Cadet, who is hailed by homeowners as The Queen of the Island. For the past 28 years, Cadet has served as manager of The Mustique Company—but unofficially, she is Mustique's social chair and welcoming committee. She greets nearly every arriving passenger at the island's 2,000-square-foot bamboo airport terminal, introducing newcomers to regulars and homeowners to hotel guests. Cadet, a native of nearby St. Vincent, says that the island's warm, laissez-faire nature is simply the "Vincentian" way.

For all of Mustique's utopian charm, it's admittedly not for everyone. There are no resorts, no shopping malls, no casinos and no Arnold Palmer–designed golf courses (or any golf courses, for that matter). There are only three restaurants—no-frills joints that serve burgers and fries—and beyond the Tuesday night cocktail party, the only out-of-home evening entertainment is sunset jazz at Basil's, a beloved watering hole on the beach that appears as though it hasn't been updated since opening in 1976. There's

an oft-shared tale about a real estate tycoon who, visiting for the first time, rented the priciest home on the island for two weeks but was so bored he left after two days. Still, those who appreciate the luxury of villa life—and the simplicity outside of it—never fail to return.

“The ones that fall in love fall hard,” says Patricia Medford, Toucan Hill’s property manager, who left a job in the fashion industry and moved to Mustique from New York City about 15 years ago. Medford acts as a liaison between the guests and staff, executing special requests no matter how outlandish or complex. “We’ve hosted a 200-person Moroccan feast with belly dancers, fire-breathers and men on stilts,” she says. “We even flew in exotic pastries. I always say that with a little bit of money and a little bit of time, anything is possible.”

It’s not unusual for guests to spend an entire week without leaving the property, she says. And why bother? Especially when an affable in-house chef is at your disposal, preparing chilled carrot and passion fruit soup, fresh grilled fish with Caribbean spices and homemade ginger sorbet. “Our butler moves guests throughout the whole property. One day they’ll dine in the Mirador, and the next they’ll be in the dining pavilion,” says Medford. “Between the location, the tablecloths, the napkins, the glassware and the cuisine, it’s a new table-scape for every meal. We have 21 different sets of dishes.” When visitors do leave their homes, be it for a gourmet picnic at Lagoon Beach or a game of backgammon at Basil’s, they travel via “mule”—a jerky golf cart–ATV hybrid. Even the most uptight New Yorkers quickly adopt the tradition of waving to passersby, or stopping to offer a lift to a stranger on foot. “Nobody locks their doors on this island—nobody. I keep my car keys in my car. I’m not supposed to say that, but that’s the way it is,” says Cadet. “I guess we live in LaLa Land here. I hope it never changes.”