

A family treat fit for royalty: Mustique may be pricey but its laid-back glamour, sublime beaches and royal connections give it an unrivalled kudos

TV presenter Kate Silverton stayed at The Cotton House, the island's main hotel 'With just 17 rooms, it felt like being at a house party,' she writes

There are two essential questions to ask yourself before booking a holiday to the Caribbean island of Mustique. Am I rich enough? And, am I beautiful enough?

At least, that's the general perception. Which is a pity because, as I found out on a family trip, not everyone was an oligarch and not every woman was beach-body ready. For all its reputation as a playground of privilege, where rock stars and royals come together, the island turned out to be more affordable than I thought, albeit more in a blow-the-budget rather than budget-friendly way.

Yet, with two-bedroom houses available from £12,000 a week, rents compared favourably with top-end villas in the Mediterranean in peak season.

Our trip was a much-anticipated treat. My husband and I were exhausted after a busy year and this, our break with our children Clemency, seven, and Wilbur, four, felt well-deserved. And besides, I had a significant birthday to celebrate.

We stayed at The Cotton House, the island's main hotel. With just 17 rooms, it felt like being at a house party. That's the point. Mustique is famously relaxed. I didn't wear shoes for three days.



Kate stayed at The Cotton House (pictured), the island's main hotel. 'With just 17 rooms, it felt like being at a house party,' she says.

Like all buildings on the island, The Cotton House was developed by the late Colin Tennant, later Lord Glenconner. He bought the 1,400-acre island, just 3 miles long, in 1958 for £45,000. The story goes that he told his wife, Lady Anne, that it would be cheaper to winter there rather than heat his country house in Scotland. Since the land had no running water, jetty or airstrip, he thought he might grow cotton. All that changed two years later when he gave his friend, Princess Margaret, a plot of land on her wedding to Antony Armstrong-Jones. She hired Oliver Messel, the stage designer, to build a villa, Les Jolies Eaux, and with that the future of Mustique was transformed. Out went cotton and in came celebrities.

From then on, Tennant's fiefdom would become among the most exclusive holiday destinations in the world. It's not easy to get there. We flew to St Lucia before boarding an 18-seater Twin Otter for the final leg. Not for the faint-hearted; we felt as if we were sitting in the pilot's lap.

To develop the island, Tennant set up The Mustique Company, inviting investors to buy land and build their houses, resulting in more than 100 being constructed. Privacy — and the lack of paparazzi — was the big draw for the rich and famous and over the years their numbers swelled and included Bryan Adams, Mick Jagger, Tommy Hilfiger and David Bowie.

The Prince and Princess of Wales are regulars, as are Robbie Williams, Tom Ford, Bryan Ferry, Paul McCartney, Bill Gates and the Beckhams. It's the kind of place where if you turn up at its tennis club, you find Tim Henman or Greg Rusedski coaching on the court next door.



Kate with her husband and children.



Above : the island's Pink House shop.

Currently, Mustique has a population of a few hundred, which rises to more than a thousand during peak season.

One estate, The Terraces, a nine-bedroom hilltop villa with extensive grounds and outbuildings, is on the market for \$200 million (the most expensive home in the Caribbean). If you can't stretch to that, it's available to rent for £150,000 a week.

None of this starry history was of any interest to our children, of course. All they wanted was sand between their toes and a never-ending supply of ice cream.

Our days fell into a slow rhythm. Lazy breakfasts of mango and papaya, beach walks and dips in the hotel pool. I wasn't so sure about the ocean. What about sharks? It was only when Grant arrived, an affable Australian whose job is to help guests discover the marine life, that I set out to swim around the island with him.

Below me, in clear waters, I spotted grouper, angel and parrot fish. Yet I couldn't stop scanning the waves for fins.

Grant reminded me that I would never see a predator coming: 'Too fast.' We struck out with steady strokes and soon were passing a Balinese-style pavilion, perched over the water. This was the legendary Basil's Bar, the social hub of the island which dates from 1976 and where its original owner, Basil Charles, still charms customers. We got to know it well.



Legendary : above is Basils Bar ‘the social hub of the island which dates from 1976.’

Grant pointed out a blue manta ray, then five hawksbill turtles placidly chewing on sea grass. My eyes had been opened to the ocean. Finishing our swim, nearly two hours later, I spotted my husband and children on the jetty to welcome me home. A moment of utter elation.

Island life turned out to be a simple affair. In the day it revolved around our favourite beaches, Macaroni and Gelliceaux Bay. With no cars allowed, everyone either walks or takes a golf buggy, known as a mule, to reach them. Our children were both safe and happy.

Gathering at The Cotton House jetty, they soon ganged up with other youngsters to swim or snorkel, trying to spot angel fish and eels. Then there were the picnic invitations from other guests on the island. Cricket on the beach for the young ones; kicking back with rum punch for us.

Nightlife was just as simple. Tuesdays saw cocktails at The Cotton House; Wednesdays ‘Jump Up’ (barbecue and live music) at Basil’s Bar. And everywhere, the laid-back come-in-a-kaftan vibe.

Basil loved to explain how the island has gone from jungle and scrub to, well, this side of paradise. He believes that its basic harbour and landing strip will keep the mega-yachts and private jets away.

Hooray to all that. If your aim is to remind yourself what family really means, Mustique merits that once-in-a-lifetime trip. Though, in our case, we will do all we can to make it a twice-in-a-lifetime trip.

TRAVEL FACTS

Stay at The Cotton House from £2,100 per person for seven nights, based on two sharing on a B&B basis. For further information and reservations, call The Mustique Company UK Office on 020 7201 6831 or go to [mustique-island.com](https://www.mustique-island.com).