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Caribbean



You don't have to be royal (or Mick Jagger) to come here

A-listers love it. So does **Daniel Finkelstein**, who finds that the island of Mustique is more accessible than you might think

I remember, years ago, perhaps when I was a teenager and Mick was between Bianca and Jerry, reading about Princess Margaret and Mustique. And laughing. The paper said that this beautiful Caribbean island was the one place where she could kick off her shoes and just be her.

The mirth wasn't induced by the article's pictures of her male friends and strong hints that her shoes weren't the only thing she was kicking off. No, I laughed at the idea that someone could only really be themselves with white sand and swimming pools, cocktails and David Bowie.

I still laugh at that, actually. I am only really myself when I am trying to shop for broccoli with my six-year-old son and realise with a half-full trolley that I haven't put any money in the parking meter. But my laughter no longer has a bitter tone. I've

been to Mustique and now I know. It's impossible to say anything about having been there without sounding obnoxious.

Ridiculous though this sounds, we almost didn't go. The way the flights worked, we knew that we would have to drive the children straight to school from the airport when we got back, after an overnight flight. And we worried about our six-year-old waking us up every morning of the holiday, jet lagged. It takes more than eight hours to get to Barbados, with another 45-minute flight after that to get to Mustique. A bit of a shlep. Was it really worth it for seven days?

Then I tried explaining all this to a couple of friends in Pinner while we were queuing to get into the school play. I reached the word "Barbados" and realised how absurd my objection sounded. The next day, we booked.

The great Jewish journalist Chaim Bermant once

provided this definition of a shlep – a journey from Birmingham to London is a trip, while a journey from London to Birmingham is a shlep. A journey from anywhere to Barbados is a trip.

Mustique is only sort of a private island. It feels like a private island, it has the luxury, the class, the style of a private island. And it is privately owned. But you don't have to be Mick Jagger to go there. You can rent, and with prices not too far north of £100pp, it's not too different from the cost of a classy hotel in Europe.

Lord Glenconner bought it in 1958 and started building what was, at first, a family hideaway. A couple of years later he gave a plot to Princess Margaret as a wedding present and she built there too. Gradually other plots were developed for private homes, with owners encouraged to "build their dreams". The island became famous as a haven for celebrities and the aristocracy. Basil's Bar, on the coastline, became internationally renowned, although it is simply a wooden construct that sells burgers and beer and the like.

Then, in 1979, the island became a limited company with the home owners as shareholders. And now it is possible to rent a home – even, I believe, the one that used to belong to Princess Margaret – and live as if you were a celebrity or an aristocrat. (Yes, yes, or a lord, very funny.)

So it was that we came to wake up one

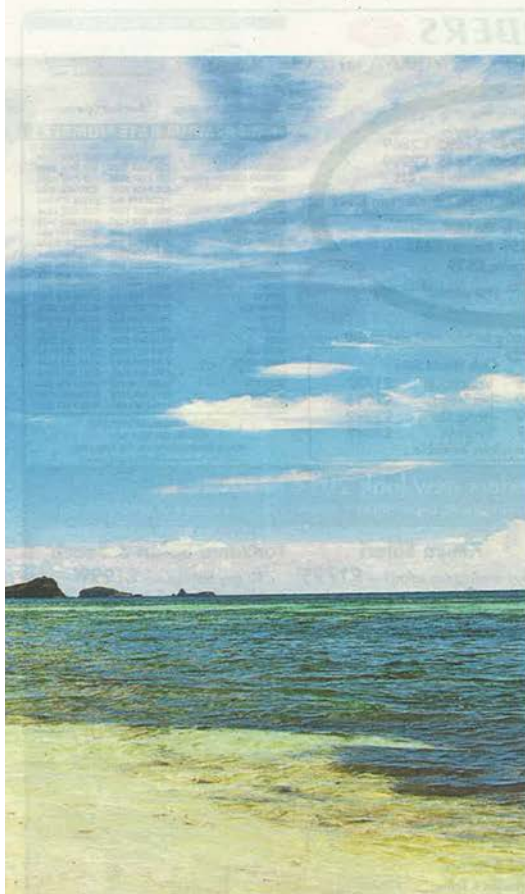


early, early Caribbean morning (we weren't wrong about the jet lag, though fortunately it didn't last) in Seascapes, a beautiful villa of our own by the sea.

From our bedroom we could see over perfect blue water, the sun was shining and the children were in a high state of excitement, having spotted a crab in the pool and had it fished out by the gardener.

Seascapes had, in fact, two pools, a private beach, lawns, a play room and five members of staff. Funnily enough, we found that we could rub along quite nicely. Five members of staff for five members of the Finkelstein family was a reasonable ratio, although naturally it would have





From left: island transport and boutiques; a royal visit; and Seascape villa

been preferable to be outnumbered.

The idea is that at the beginning of the week, you let the staff know the sort of thing that you like to eat and they lay in provisions. We let the staff choose and ate very well indeed. The service was, as you might imagine, exceptional. It was also very friendly and relaxed, never becoming, as it easily might have, uncomfortable.

I will give you a small example, a little thing that speaks volumes. You get around Mustique on Kawasaki Mules, sort of souped-up golf carts. The villa came with one for our use, once we had paid \$25 for a driving licence. They are great fun, giving you a feeling of freedom. Right out of the villa, right again at the junction, past Tommy Hilfiger's huge residence, then left to the beach just before Mick Jagger's house.

At the end of the day you park the Mule back in the drive. When we left the next morning, we invariably found that one of the staff had turned it around for us, so that we could drive straight out without doing



a three-point turn. At least I think that it was good service. Perhaps they'd been watching me drive. Maybe it was self-preservation.

Anyway, my favourite destination with the Mule was Endeavour Bay Beach. It is almost joke beautiful; the sea blue, the sand fine, white and no one much there. This despite its attachment to the only hotel on the island, the Cotton House. If you are coming as a pair and don't want to rent an entire villa, the 17 rooms in the hotel provide a sort of Mustique entry level.

We also took the Mule up to Basil's Bar one night. You sort of feel you have to. And that you might bump into Mustique regulars such as, I don't know, the Middletons or someone. Basil's was a bit deserted, no Pippa, no Carole, nobody actually. But it was relaxed and nice and you can't beat the sea lapping while you eat. And you can say that you've been and that you've met Basil.

There aren't many people in Mustique, even at its busiest. There are 105 proper-

“Basil's Bar was a bit deserted. No Pippa, no Carole, but it was relaxed and nice.”

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ties, 74 of them for rent, the entire island being effectively a 376-room resort. But May half-term was very much not its busiest. It probably shouldn't have taken me by surprise, but this was low season. It's a good time to seek a (relative, obviously) bargain. The downside is that there can be rain. There were a couple of torrential downpours during our week, but I only remember them because I wrote them down in my notebook. Which I don't suppose you'll do.

There was one other, this time rather spectacular, advantage of low season. It came when we took a trip that the staff had scheduled for us to Macaroni Beach. We were absolutely alone on a vast, incredible shore. And there our butler and his assistant served us a picnic at a table, under a tree, looking out to sea. We sipped lime soda, we ate barbecue chicken and salads, and we watched the waves come in. My wife Nicky — who fell in love with Macaroni Beach — described the picnic as Downton on Sea. It was. Without the snobbery and the unexpected deaths. And with chicken. And sand.

Mustique isn't the place you go to if you want lots to do and lots to see. It is more where you go when you feel you want to be away from all the things in the world that you have to see and to do. I could see someone who likes to keep active getting bored after a while. Even though I couldn't ever imagine getting bored there myself.

In high season there are some informal activities, but even in May there were movie nights at the Cotton House and a very nice party in the piano bar. In keeping with the decor, the atmosphere was discreet and relaxed.

Look, this isn't a cheap holiday. The people I met at the Cotton House party ran hedge funds and donated money to the Conservative Party, if you see what I mean. One of them had bid for a week in Mustique at a charity auction and flown in on his own jet. But on a special occasion, it is just about possible to do. The trick is to share your villa with a large party of friends or family. Do that and you can bring the price down to about the level of a high-end hotel.

And if you can do it, well, Mustique doesn't disappoint. It's what you imagine it is when you read about it. Sublime.

Need to know

Daniel Finkelstein was a guest of The Mustique Company (020-7201 6831, mustique-island.com). Its villas include Bali Hai, which sleeps four, from £133pp per night, Moana (sleeps four) from £154pp per night and Seascape (sleeps six) from £206pp per night. Flights from London to Barbados start from £520 return, with transfers to Mustique from £350 per adult return and £270 per child.



Great Caribbean deals

If you can't afford Mustique but still have a yen for the Caribbean, try these island destinations

Barbados

Coconut Court Beach Hotel has a white sand beach lined with palm trees, a pool with a hot tub, and 112 simple but comfortable rooms with balconies, many with sea views. It's great for a budget break: DialAFlight (0844 5566060, dialaflight.com) has seven nights, room-only, from £829pp for departures in November, a saving of £150pp. The hotel is in the Hastings area, ten minutes outside Bridgetown, the capital. Virgin Atlantic flights are included.

Leominster, Leominster

For seven nights in a big all-inclusive hotel with pools, a beach and all-you-can-eat buffets, try the five-star Now Larimar Punta Cana. Hayes & Jarvis (01293 735831, hayesandjarvis.co.uk) is offering a week's all-inclusive stay with return British Airways flights and transfers from £899pp, departing on November 20. The hotel has a swim-up bar, a barbecue grill, and Italian, Asian, French and Mexican restaurants.

Jamaica

Watersports include sailing and kayaking at the three-star Jolly Beach Resort and Spa, which faces the Atlantic Ocean. This large hotel (464 rooms) is set in more than 40 acres of tropical gardens, and has two big pools. Virgin Holidays (0844 5573870, virginholidays.co.uk) has seven nights, all-inclusive, from £1,059pp leaving on November 12, a saving of £296pp. This includes Virgin Atlantic flights.

Grenada

Late November is a great time to visit Grenada as the fourth annual Caribbean Beer & Rum Festival (rumandbeerfestival.com) will be held on November 21-22. Kenwood Travel (020-7749 9245, kenwoodtravel.co.uk) is offering breaks at a series of hotels on the island covering the festival. Of these, the child-friendly, three-star Flamboyant, which overlooks Grenada's Grand Anse Beach, is among the best value — from £869pp for seven nights.

room only. Rooms are elegant (if compact) and there's a spa, a pretty terrace with a pool, and the chance to learn to dive.

Tobago

This is one of the quieter islands with rainforests, wonderful birdlife, and long, white sand beaches where sea turtles lay their eggs. Ten nights, room-only, at the three-star Grafton Beach Resort costs from £882pp departing on November 23 with Expedia (0800 7832384, expedia.co.uk), flights included. Each room has a terrace, most of them overlooking the sea. The hotel offers diving, snorkelling and windsurfing — and Tobago's only two squash courts.



St Lucia

Plan next summer's break well in advance and take advantage of savings of £500pp when booking a week at the five-star The Landings Hotel with Destinology (0808 2314618, destinology.co.uk). This 40 per cent saving works out at £1,399pp, with flights and transfers (you must book by the end of November for travel between May 5 and July 10). All the rooms in the all-suite hotel have plunge pools. There's also a spa, tennis courts, pools and a watersports centre.

Jamaica

On Runaway Bay, in the centre of north coast between Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, the three-star Royal Decameron Club is a family-friendly hotel with pools, a kids' club, a disco and the chance to take part in "reggae dancing lessons". Loveholidays.com has an 11-night all-inclusive package departing on November 28 from Gatwick for £899pp — a 21 per cent saving on the brochure rate. Transfers are included.

Tom Chesshyre