

COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

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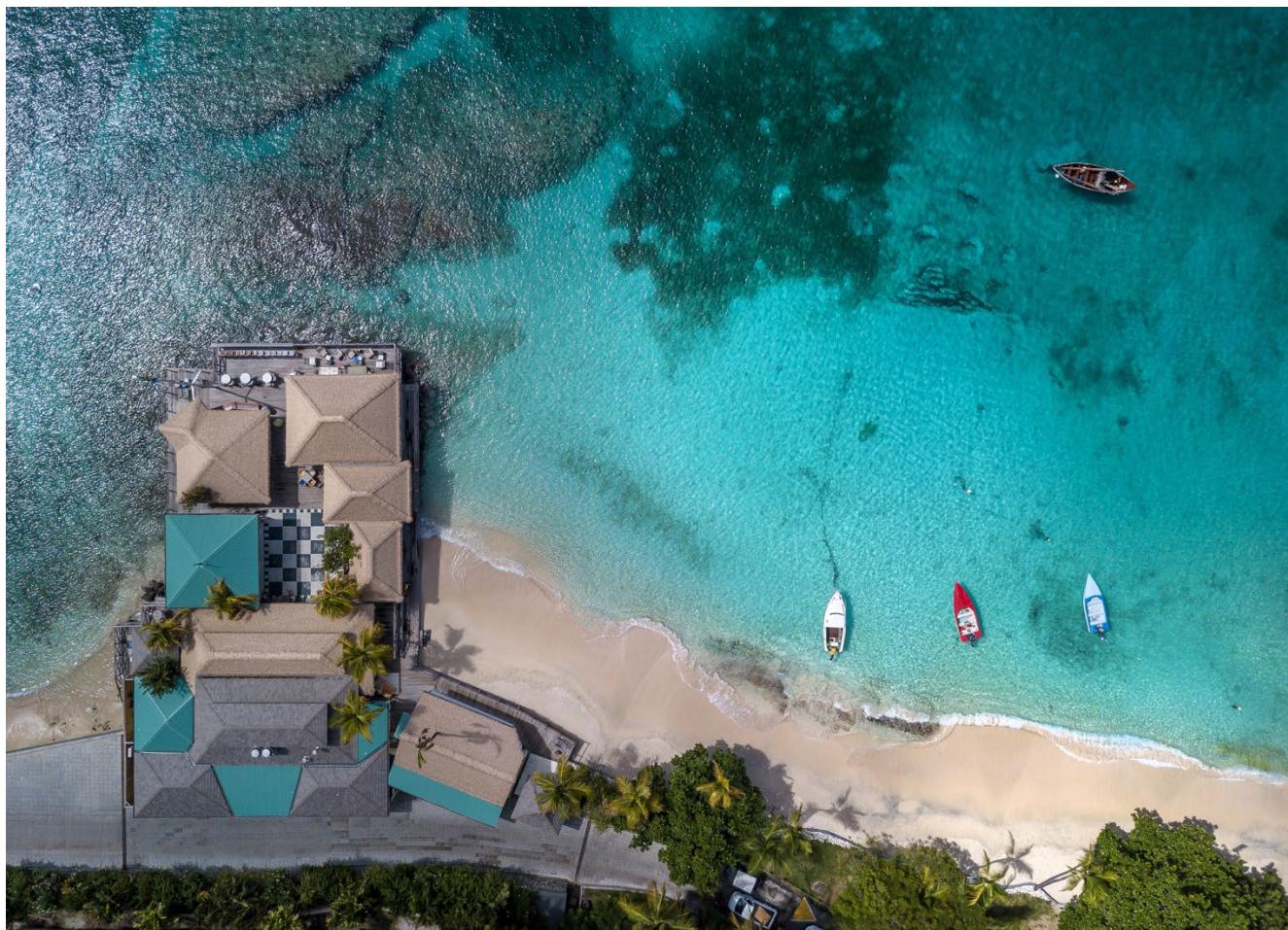
How to survive a London Christmas

Vermeer's women and celebrating winter's birds

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What does the future hold for the exclusive Caribbean island that shuns shoes, spectacle and social media

Rosie Paterson visits Mustique, the Caribbean island that has beguiled and baffled for more than half a century.



The rhythm of life at Mustique's Cotton House hotel revolves around white-sand beaches and crystal-clear water.

(Image credit: The Mustique Company)

To shoe, or not to shoe, that is the question. ‘You won’t need any shoes’, ‘don’t bother packing shoes’, ‘no one wears shoes,’ said three people, very much independently of each other, when I told them that I was going to Mustique. I didn’t believe them until I disembarked from the tin-can hopper aeroplane at Mustique Airport and bumped straight into a man waiting to collect his girlfriend. He was barefoot. Not to shoe, then.

People say a lot of things about Mustique. All of it, as it turns out — even the most fantastical of claims (including ‘you won’t need shoes’) — is true. I was told that the Caribbean island is ‘utterly unique’, that it ‘moves to its own beat’ and that I would be ‘welcomed with open arms’ (journalists are rarely welcomed anywhere with open arms). Travel journalists are plagued by press releases telling us that this hotel and that island is different from all of the others, that it was designed with ‘intention’, that it is actually exclusive. That is, of course, until Nikki Beach comes calling or someone turns up on a shiny superyacht brandishing wads of cash.



Basil Charles is the man behind Basil's Bar (below), a legendary celebrity watering hole in the Caribbean since the 1980s.

(Image credit: The Mustique Company)



(Image credit: The Mustique Company)

I was wrong on all counts. There's no Nikki Beach on Mustique; in fact, there are no beach clubs at all. There are no restaurants, either, save for the one at the single hotel on its shores; or bars, save for the legendary watering hole set up by Basil Charles — plucked, as a young man, from obscurity by Colin Tennant, 3rd Baron Glenconner.

Ah, Lord Glenconner — it's nigh on impossible to write about Mustique without mentioning him. The handsome rake whose wife, Anne, Lady Glenconner, revealed on The Graham Norton Show that he'd taken her to a brothel on their Parisian honeymoon. Lord Glenconner supposedly purchased the island in 1958 on the basis that it would be cheaper to holiday there through the winter than to heat their Scottish home.

A decade later, he formed the Mustique Company, encouraging similarly rich and titled friends to purchase plots of land and develop fancy villas on them. He famously gave a 10-acre plot to Princess Margaret, who erected an Oliver Messel-designed confection. In the late 1970s, he sold the Mustique Company to the villa owners, therefore ceding his majority stake in the island's

ownership. If you were to purchase a villa right now (there are five currently on the market), then you would become a Company shareholder.

Lord Glenconner's antics (and Mustique's past) are so well documented — including in this very magazine — that I do not need to rehash them here. What, instead, about the island's future? How does a holiday destination that shuns influencers and social media and, to a large extent, overt displays of wealth, exist in a world that revolves largely — whether we like it or not — around all three of these things?



The secluded Cactus Hill Villa offers spectacular panoramic views of the Caribbean Sea.

(Image credit: The Mustique Company)

There are 109 villas on Mustique and more than 90% of them are available to rent, including Princess Margaret's former pad, Les Jolie Eaux. The majority of these houses — each more impressive than the last, all achingly tasteful — are still owned by British families, although the Americans are fast catching up. There are Swiss, German and Canadian proprietors, too, who spend several weeks and sometimes months at a time on the island. 'It's a home primarily, more

than a holiday destination,' says financier Dr Mark Cecil. Although the island's demographic will always skew to the older because it's older people who typically have the money it takes to buy and build, the next generation is already falling under Mustique's spell.