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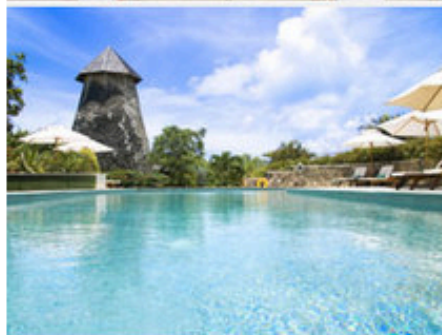
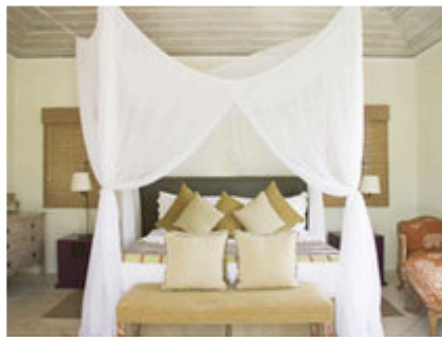
Must-See Mustique

This winter, prepare to get your island on.

As I close the door on the languid days of summer and head back to the daily grind, my mind immediately turns to where I might escape to for winter vacation. Despite a sluggish economy, one Caribbean hot spot in particular has gotten a facelift and is creating quite a buzz for the upcoming holiday season.

Arguably one of the most exclusive and private retreats in the world, the island of **Mustique** is a tiny (three-and-a-half-mile-long) jewel in the Grenadines, 40 minutes from Barbados and just north of Venezuela. A group of international jetsetters owns the mere 100 villas on the island—blue bloods like Prince Rupert and Princess Josephine Loewenstein, music royalty Mick Jagger and Shania Twain, and fashion heavy hitter Tommy Hilfger.

The island has quite a colorful history. British aristocrat Sir Colin Tennant (who became Lord Glenconner) purchased the largely abandoned island in 1958 while visiting family estates in Trinidad. He then famously gifted good friend Princess Margaret with a prime 10-acre parcel in 1960 (she subsequently hired theatrical set designer Oliver Messel to build her home, *Les Jolies Eaux*). Tennant spent the next 50 years luring the rich and famous to Mustique and creating a veritable Caribbean Shangri-la.



Villas on the island are rented by the week and competition for the swankiest properties is fierce during high season. All are under the control of the island's management group, The Mustique Company, run by the charismatic Scot Pippa Ona. (The MC is, interestingly, owned by the group of villa owners, much like a New York City co-op.) Luxury is of the highest order in these custom-designed homes (compounds, really) that dot the island's hills and gorgeous shoreline. The newest tend to be the most over-the-top, such as the recently completed thatched-roof Sheherazade that can accommodate 14; the largely open-air homage to Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin; and Sunrise, with its own private beach and coconut grove. For more intimate groups (with a more modest budget), the company recently started offering a package in which some of the great homes let out their guest cottages or portions of the estate. And the best news? All the villas come with a full staff to look after your every need and desire, and a funky souped-up six-seater golf cart called a "mule" (everyone drives them—even France's first lady, Carla Bruni, could be seen tooling around in one during her stay).

On the intimate island you also have two hotels to choose from: the petite five-room **Firefly Inn** and the only real resort on Mustique, the 13-acre, 20-room **Cotton House** (PICTURED AT RIGHT), which is a converted 18th-century warehouse. The latter property sports a spa, private beach, two restaurants, complimentary unpack/pack/press service and comfortable yet sophisticated rooms—many recently renovated and half of which feature their own plunge pools.

The more casual of the restaurants, the Beach Café, has stellar water views and is utterly charming. On any given day you'll see diners playfully squirting pesky birds (who are trying to steal food) with water guns and Mick Jagger's dog, Star, begging for scraps at someone's feet. The menu at the elegant, upscale Veranda restaurant has been a focus of new general manager Andreas Pade (a very handsome Dane), who took over about a year ago. "My first mission was to improve the food," said Pade. "Food in most Caribbean resorts is an afterthought to the gorgeous views. Not at the Cotton House. I've hired both the chef and sous chef from the One & Only Maldives and have added 150 new wines to the already extensive cellar." Indeed, cuisine running the gamut from black bean soup to foie gras has been taken to a truly gourmet level, paired with an impressive international wine list.

The main draw in town, though, is a little beachside bar simply referred to as Basil's. It's where Prince William and Kate Middleton danced the night away barefoot during their stay and where, for 30 years, legions of high-profile revelers have sipped piña colodas. Owner Basil Charles—the man they call "The King of Mustique"—began as a barman at the Cotton House in 1969 and soon thereafter was set up by Tennant at his own establishment. But don't expect anything fancy. Basil's Bar is an open-sided Balinese pavilion-type spot set on stilts over the water in Britannia Bay with wood benches, a makeshift dance floor and an unwavering ban on paparazzi.

Make your reservations now to visit this enchanting, star-studded Caribbean island paradise... just leave your camera at home.

