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The Mystique of Mustique

A Look at the Island's History

Mustique offers guests that rare combination of elegance and informality. This, combined with its natural beauty, warm trade winds, rolling landscape and deserted beaches, bring together the necessary elements to ensure complete privacy and tranquility. In short, Mustique is the epitome of a true international retreat.

It was these unique attributes that drew Lord Glenconner (the Honorable Colin Tennant) to visit the northern tip of the Grenadines and buy the island over forty years ago. Colin Tennant first came to the West Indies in 1953 to look after the family estates and in 1958, returned to sell the family's remaining estate in Trinidad for \$66,000. Tennant had heard that Mustique was for sale and after inspection of the island, purchased it for \$67,500. This was a risky and venturesome decision as the land provided no water and there were no roads or a jetty for sea access. The landscape was just a mass of dense scrub with a few cattle and sheep tended by the 100 or so people living in the antiquated village of Cheltenham. In the years that followed, painstaking time and effort was invested to create a working infrastructure for the island.

As part of St. Vincent & The Grenadines, Mustique's first inhabitants during the 16th and 17th centuries were Arawaks and then later, the Caribs. Europeans came to Mustique in the 1740's when they discovered sugar could be grown easily there. Once a favorite hiding place for pirates, Mustique was heavily defended against the French in the 18th century, and the remains of three strategic forts can still be seen. At one time, Mustique had seven sugar plantations. Today, only the sugar mill at the Cotton House Hotel remains.

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Tennant's arrival brought great improvements to Mustique and in 1964 he created a new village for the workers called Lovell. By 1968, islanders were producing sea island cotton on a plantation as a means of employment for most people. Tennant also initiated the planting of coconut groves and cultivated limes, oranges, grapefruits and vegetables. Wild livestock were controlled and the local fishing industry began to prosper. These and many other improvements turned life around in Mustique and, with a proper working infrastructure and services, the island moved closer to becoming self-sufficient. At this time, Tennant formed The Mustique Company to look after the interests of the island and to oversee the planning of its future development.

As work successfully progressed, Tennant's close circle of friends and associates began to hear more about the beautiful island. Its new development and the wider accessibility of air travel brought more frequent visitors to the island. The sailing of the Royal Yacht Britannia to Mustique, and Tennant's wedding present to Princess Margaret of a 10-acre plot of land in 1960, heralded a wind of change for the island as word quickly spread and worldwide interest was raised on Mustique.

The original villas and Cotton House were designed by the late British theatrical designer, Oliver Messel, who later collaborated with architect Arne Hasselquist. Oliver Messel was known to draw reference to the Shakespearean quotation, which said that "all the world was a stage." This was certainly true of Mustique in the international playground of the 1960's and 70's, which drew royalty and the famous to the island. Princess Margaret was well-known for hosting house parties at her villa "Les Jolies Eaux." Mustique became the exclusive hideaway, the place to see and be seen. That, combined with the island's rare beauty, convinced visitors, several of whom were celebrities from the world of film, fashion and entertainment looking for a place to escape to and relax with the guarantee of privacy, to purchase villas on the island.

In 1968, an agreement (Mustique Company Limited Act) was entered into between the government of St. Vincent and The Mustique Company to develop the island, while preserving its original character. The agreement encompassed a charter of fiscal and social plans including strategies to encourage responsible tourism and the building of private villas, which could number no more than 110. The second Mustique Company Limited Act came into effect in 1989. This carried on the goals of the original act to ensure that the maintenance and preservation of Mustique would be upheld during its transitory development period and for future generations.

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The tiny airstrip and airport were opened in 1969 and the first new villas and the Cotton House, which accommodated guests, were constructed. Gradually, further improvements to the island's infrastructure progressed including regular air services, a complete road network, dependable electricity and telecommunications, a desalinization plant for the supply of fresh water, and a medical clinic. One of the most remarkable engineering achievements is the underground concealment of all electrical cabling and water pipelines.

In 1976, Tennant sold The Mustique Company to a consortium controlled by Hans Neumann, a resident of Venezuela. In 1988, the company was sold to 55 homeowners on the island, the high percentage of who participate in the rental program. There are currently 100 privately owned villas on the island (70) of which are available for weekly rental) and housing for all 1,000 employees in Mustique and the Britannia Bay fishermen.

Mustique has come a long way since the day Colin Tennant arrived in 1958 and made the decision to undertake the changes necessary to make the island properly habitable. Currently the homeowners on Mustique represent 17 countries, primarily from North and South America, the UK, Canada and Europe. The gradually evolving development has not harmed or detracted from the serene beauty of Mustique. Its privacy, tranquility, natural environment and peaceful mode of life are undeniably intact. Provisions have been made to ensure their continuation for decades to come.

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