

LUXURY



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Peak time Adventures in Egypt, Mustique, Norway and Oz

The first thing visitors do when they touch down on Mustique is head to Basil's Bar. The man behind the world's most famous drinking den, celebrates 50 years of parties, rum punch and tipsy princesses

By Laura POWELL

Desert island drinks



Basil Charles first hitched a lift to Mustique in 1970 on the back of a mail boat. He was 24. No one was expecting him.

He remembers the mosquitoes most – and how undeveloped it was: no roads, no signposts, the storm lamps were broken. By the time he pulled up at Cotton House, the island's small hotel, it was pitch-dark.

Inside he found the manager Billy Mitchell – an heiress with a Texan drawl and risqué humour – and explained that he was from the nearby island of St Vincent, had worked as a mechanic and in a nightclub, and was looking for a job. Secretly, though, Charles had travelled to the barely populated island, a dot in the archipelago of St Vincent and the Grenadines, in search of adventure. 'My grandmother used to read me books about Greek mythology, the Roman empire. I always thought I'd travel, see new places,' he explains.

Charles struck a deal with the reluctant Mitchell. 'Just pay me for a week,' he said. 'Then when the mail boat comes back, I'll leave if you don't want to employ me.' It was that entrepreneurial spirit that gave him his break – and set him on the path to becoming owner of the world's most famous bar.

Today Basil's Bar sits on the edge of a sheltered bay. It's near the island's main village of Lovell, which has two boutiques (Pink House and Purple House), a bakery and a vegetable stall flanked by locals playing backgammon. The bar is larger than it was back then, with a dance floor and tables overlooking the turquoise waters of Britannia Bay. It's as famous for its potent rum punch as it is for its clientele. Anyone who turns up on Mustique, no matter how reclusive they might be, always ends up at Basil's. Paul Newman, Mick Jagger, Kate Moss, David Bowie, the Gallagher brothers and the new Prince and Princess of Wales have all hung out here. Princess Margaret was a regular – her tippie of choice was a gin and tonic, but, according to Charles, 'she always had a man to carry her Scotch' as well.

Charles is now 75 and his eponymous bar will soon turn 50. Life, which was never exactly frenetic, has slowed down. 'I'm more of a mascot,' he muses, sitting at one of the tables in the middle of Basil's, his voice slow, thoughtful, punctured by bursts of laughter. This role involves sitting at the bar, eating quesadillas, chatting to diners and generally making his guests feel special. Later he will dance along to the live blues band and play a little backgammon.

It's a dream life, but it all started with Mitchell's one-week gamble on Charles. When the mail boat returned, Mitchell declared Charles indispensable. 'I told her the boat was coming and she said, "Oh my God, no, you can't leave." I said, "I've no clean clothes," and she said, "We'll fix that!"' He leans back and laughs heartily. Suddenly he leaps to his feet. 'Look, sea turtles! I swim with those every morning.'

It sounds simple and idyllic but Charles's life isn't all bare-foot dancing to live music and splashing about. He has three children (his two sons live in the US and his daughter is in St Vincent) and three grandchildren. He talks about various girlfriends over the years – various business ventures too, including a bar in St Vincent and a general store and wine cellar here on Mustique. Charles has two houses on the island, spends summer in the Hamptons or on Martha's Vineyard and is a regular in the Royal Box at Ascot. He plans to go to Morocco and Paris next, and maybe on to Bali.

'David Bowie introduced me to Bali,' Charles says. 'We were having lunch at his villa and he told me he got all his shirts made there.' He pauses. 'He was a great friend.'

I was told that Charles is fabulously indiscreet about famous guests – and he *does* reel off stories about becoming 'quite friendly' with Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman, playing tennis with Pippa Middleton ('a strong player') and picnicking with Princess Margaret. But there's clearly a lot that went on that he's not telling – the real draw of Basil's Bar, and Mustique, is the culture of discretion.

Colin Tennant, later Lord Glenconner, bought the 2.2 square miles of Caribbean island from a Vincentian family in 1958 for £45,000 and planned to develop it into a

cotton farm. His wife, Lady Anne, was a lady-in-waiting to Princess Margaret and Tennant's genius idea was to give the Princess a small plot on the unpromising mosquito-ridden little island as a wedding present. She built Les Jolies Eaux, a five-bedroom villa. And where Margaret went, rock stars, movie stars and tycoons soon followed.

Charles can remember the day he first met the famously erratic and irascible Lord Glenconner, who died in 2010. 'I was at the bar and a gentleman in a white suit said, "Do you know how to make rum and Coke?" I said, "No." And he said, "Then what are you doing behind my bar?" I told him there are all different glasses and eight types of rum. "Unless you tell me how you like it, I won't know how to make it," I said. And he said, "Nobody's ever asked me that before."'

Tennant's instructions were precise: two pieces of ice, white Bacardi, a dash of Coca-Cola and a twist of lime. Soon Charles began working directly for Tennant. 'He loved to scream and shout,' Charles recalls. '[Lady] Anne still doesn't understand how I survived. But I would not let him scream at me.'

Tennant had sold off much of the island by 1972, but retained the bar and installed Charles to run it. 'Colin said, "Every famous bar is named after the person running it," and I said, "OK, let's call it Colin's Bar." But he said, "No, I'm not going to run it, it's Basil's Bar." I was very happy with that.' Charles was paid a salary, plus 25 per cent of profits. 'The only reason they made such a generous offer was because nobody had made a profit before.'

At first it was a simple shack in which Basil played records and served toasties. 'Mick Jagger was always there with Bianca,' he says. The parties, mostly held on beaches around the island, were soon the stuff of legend; Charles, as Tennant's man, planned them all. There were Hawaiian nights ('Princess Margaret looked amazing'); a 'golden ball' for Tennant's 50th birthday; even a costume party themed around Bowie's film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Once Charles wore a full suit of armour: 'It was so hot, I must have lost 10 pounds.'

He continues, 'We always served rum punch. I'll give you the basic ratio: one sour [lime], two sweet [sugar], three strong [rum] and four weak [fruit juice].' He adds Angostura bitters for a kick and occasionally garnishes the brew with nutmeg 'to bring out the flavour'. Charles invested in a stove and fashioned basket chairs from bamboo. It was all very hands-on: 'I used to take over the cooking sometimes. I'd cut open a fresh lobster and grill it in front of everyone.'

'Now he just tastes the food,' jokes Luke Ferguson, a Gordon Ramsay-trained chef and Basil's Bar's current head chef and manager. Architect Philippe Starck spent two years redesigning the bar without sacrificing the original charm. It relaunched in 2018, the year Ferguson took the helm. Today, tables are long and sociable with upholstered benches, colourful cushions, oversized rattan lampshades and minimal decoration so as not to detract from the ocean view. A gift shop has opened that sells 'Basil's' logoed T-shirts. But otherwise not much has changed.

The menu is still casual - flatbreads, grilled fish burgers, rum punch served in tiki mugs (surprisingly reasonable at \$13). And the five-piece band that Charles started almost 30 years ago, when the DJ booth was occupied by A-listers and 'that guy from Studio 54', still plays weekly. Famous guests were known to - and still do - spontaneously perform. 'Mick [Jagger] played twice,' says Charles. 'Someone could have stolen the bar because even the bartenders were watching.'

Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason played too, as did Ronnie Wood. Bryan Adams 'promised but never did', Charles shakes his head. 'And when Jon Bon Jovi was here, I said, "It's your turn now," And he said, "Please, Basil, don't make me go up there!"'

'But he did play for a private party here - with Foreigner. There was Dom Pérignon and Cristal...' Charles is about to continue but stops himself. 'Yes, it was quite the party!'



'Mick Jagger played twice... I said to Jon Bon Jovi, "It's your turn now," and he said, "Please, Basil, don't make me go up there!"'



OPPOSITE Princess Margaret with friends on Mustique in February 1973. Front row, left to right: Liz Paget, the McGillycuddy of the Reeks, Princess Josephine Lowenstein, Prince Rupert Lowenstein, Colin Tennant, Renata Adler, Princess Margaret, Lady Anne and the Honorable Charles Tennant. Basil Charles is in the background, standing on the Jeep. TOP Lady Anne and Bianca Jagger with Colin at his 50th birthday party. ABOVE Charles at Basil's Bar recently

Villas start from £10,000 a week. For reservations speak to the Mustique Company UK office on 020-7201 6831 or visit mustique-island.com