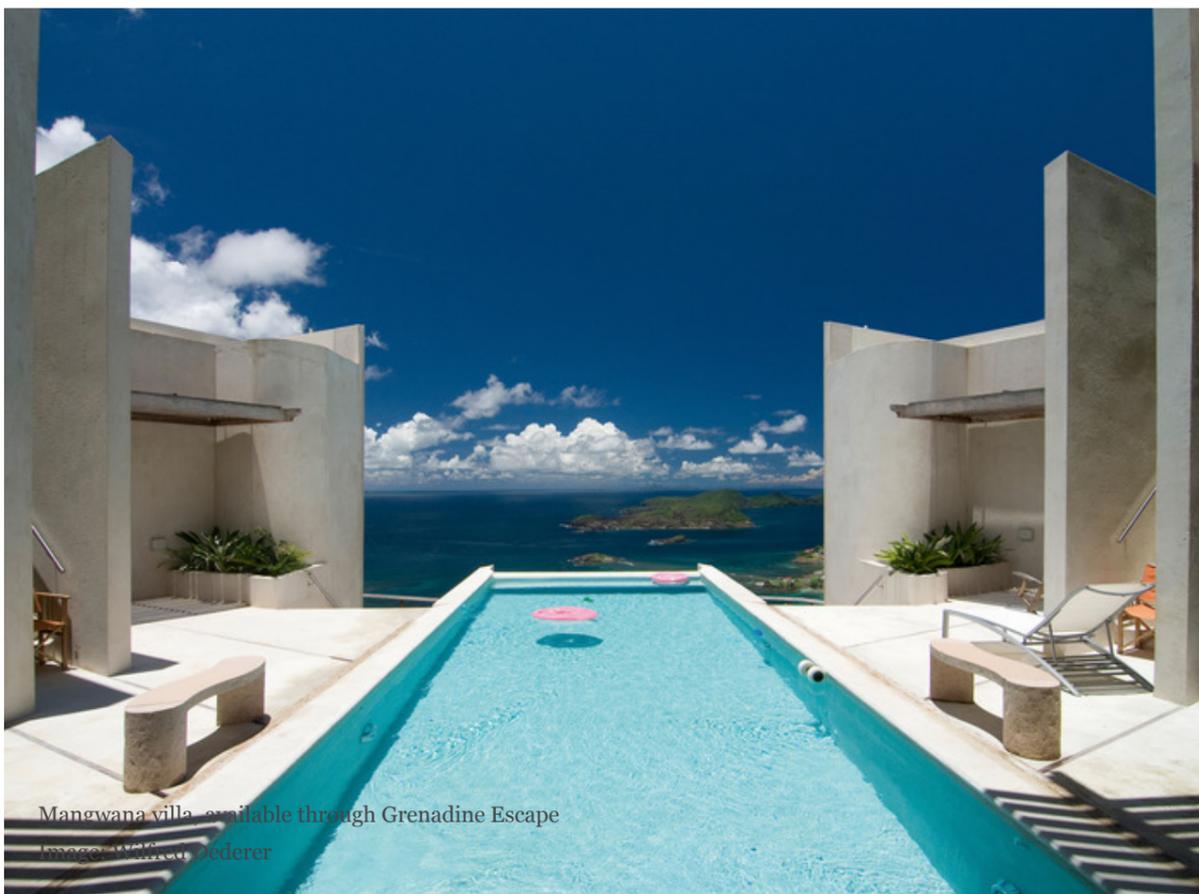


how to spend it

St Vincent and The Grenadines

SVG, as habitués know it, has upped its game, from chic stays at Sugar Reef Bequia, Cotton House and Bequia Beach Hotel, and The Mustique Company's exclusive villas – to one no-holds-barred redoubt, The Pink Sands Club. Nigel Tisdall checks in



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St Vincent and the Grenadines sounds like the sort of colourfully shirted band that played in the days when a party meant taffeta frocks, tombolas and gin and it. In fact, it's a sprinkling of 32 islands that runs south between St Lucia and Grenada, which for the past half century has been one of those bit-of-a-slog-but-worth-it spots to which the Caribbean cognoscenti like to slip away. Royalty and rock stars, hippies and done-okay chippies, beachcombers and old salts – plus a winning mix of hairdryer-hot breezes, terrific sailing, ridiculously turquoise waters and friendly “Vincys” – have made SVG, as its habitués know it, a magnet for escapists and eccentrics.

This year, though, this former British colony, home to just 103,220 islanders, is certain to draw the eyes of many more sun-loving luxury travellers. Leading the way is Canouan, in the centre of the chain. Only 13sq km in size with a thickly forested peak that rises to 267m, the island is flanked by a vast coral reef as bewitching as anything in the Indian Ocean or South Pacific. Here, for the past three years, without fanfare, the Irish billionaire Dermot Desmond has been creating a superlative island retreat: The Pink Sands Club.

“This is a James Bond island for our times,” an employee suggests as I check in – I am The Pink Sands Club's very first guest. It's easy to see why Canouan was chosen as a place to gather together everything you'd want – complete privacy, impeccable comforts, outstanding activities, astonishing natural beauty – to create a perfect storm of holiday happiness. Extended twice, the island's runway can now welcome large private jets and 737s. Guests can also arrive on packages

that automatically include transfers in a Citation CJ3 from Barbados – a journey that will be even more glamorous from December, when Abu Dhabi-based Royal Jet starts flying 18-seater Boeing Business Jets from London Heathrow to Bridgetown.

Alongside this, a formidable marina is taking shape. Also slated for a December launch, it will be run by Camper & Nicholson and include berths for 15 superyachts between 40m and 100m. This will create a tantalising new jet-in/sail-away gateway in the heart of the Grenadines, about 6km north of the Tobago Cays, its most treasured marine reserve, where the sea radiates with colourful fish and you can snorkel with turtles as big as coffee tables.

Meanwhile, facing the bright white sands of Godahl Beach, a palatial all-suite hotel has risen, with only 24 suites and two penthouses. The property also includes six four-bedroom villas, and in the hills beyond lie another 14 magnificent, privately owned villas with two to six bedrooms, that are all available to rent.

There is just one entrance to the 1,200-acre estate (it comprises two-thirds of the island). A third of this is protected, including the forested slopes of Mount Royal, which make for a scenic 45-minute climb. On the north coast, the sands of Mahault Bay fulfil that eternal Caribbean fantasy: the utterly deserted beach. Draped over the hills, a Jim Fazio-designed golf course presents tough challenges, including tortoises patiently crossing the greens. With less than 5,000 rounds played a year, you'll most likely have it to yourself. At sunset the views from the 13th hole – at 180m, with most of the Grenadines laid out before you – is pure master-of-the-universe.

All this has been assembled to a degree of perfection that only an open cheque book can achieve. A 16.5m Pershing cruiser waits at the jetty for fresh adventures. Staff have been cherry-picked with a precision reminiscent of the opening sequences of *Ocean's Eleven*. The open kitchen of the Romeo restaurant features a handcrafted Molteni stove, and the Pirates of Pink Sands kids' club has its own two pools. The nine spa suites, set on a hill with lagoon views, are linked by a mini-funicular railway, with another two built over the water with glass floors.

Desmond's dream hotel has a precursor: Sandy Lane, the beyond-five-star Barbados resort that he and his co-owners rebuilt in 2001. While The Pink Sands Club has obvious affinities – the grand pillars, the coral stonework, the swirling typography – it has benefited from a decade of technological advance. In the bedrooms, the *coup de théâtre* is a floor-to-ceiling mirror at the end of your bed. Press a button and a TV appears inside. Push again and it silently slides back to reveal that mesmerising lagoon.

Another similarity: the conspicuous absence of palm trees. "Mr Desmond doesn't like them," I'm told. So much so that when the designers ordered historic wallpapers from Zuber for the Juliet restaurant, they cropped out the offending trees. On the flip side, Desmond loves pink. It is there, bordering the uniforms of the exhaustively trained club concierges (aka butlers). It sings out gleefully from the cushions in the lobby and the Trowbridge prints of shells that enliven the corridors. There's even a "Tickled Pink" spa treatment that features a full-body massage using pink mud.

And it's not any old shade of pink. "We like Pantone 226," says Elena Korach, the Italian COO who made all this happen. Resident for 17 years, Korach is Desmond's co-creator and unofficial Queen of Canouan. Equally glamorous in a tiara or construction worker's hat, she was also behind the super-villas in the hills, along with the Raffles Resort, now bulldozed, that once stood nearby.

Korach has chosen everything with the care a sniper affords the selection of a prize bullet. The patterned floor of the main terrace is modelled on one created in 1739 for the Scuola Grande della Misericordia in Venice. Mosaics of turtles and seahorses echo the seaside whimsy of Oliver Messel. Playfully decorated with coloured shells and starfish in Murano glass, the 9m lights in the stairwells are recollective (one assumes unintentionally) of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*.

While the whole ensemble will be too overblown for some, there is plenty to enjoy in the fruits of a three-year project that will eventually cost in excess of \$120m. The Roman emperors who partied on Capri would be very content at Pink Sands, and its arrival is good news for the Caribbean – although this isn't the first time a charismatic rich-lister has spent a fortune creating a paradise island in the Grenadines. In 1958, Colin Tennant, Lord Glenconner, sailed round Mustique – 21km northeast of Canouan – then bought it for close to £45,000 without so much as stepping ashore. (The story is well told in Nicholas Courtney's biography, *Lord of the Isle* – essential sun-lounger reading for anyone travelling these waters.)

Tennant's masterstroke was to give Princess Margaret a plot of land as a wedding gift. Mustique's star has risen again in recent years thanks to frequent visits from what the residents refer to as "the new royals". Today there are 105 villas (when Glenconner left in 1990 there were about 40) and of those, 80 are available to rent, in all manner of tastes. I couldn't bear a minute in pseudo-classical Sienna, but would happily be imprisoned for life in minimalist Mimosa, with its 18m pebble-dotted infinity pool. Newest to market is Tommy Hilfiger's magisterial Palm Beach, the largest beachfront property on the island, with eight bedrooms, 10 staff and six acres of tropical grandeur.

Properties can be booked through The Mustique Company, which last year took over the 17-room Cotton House hotel, set beside a sheltered beach and expansive lawns adorned with lily ponds. Just add a fête and Pimm's, and you really are home from home. The highlight of a stay here is the Tuesday-night cocktail party, when the entire island flocks in by "mule" (four-wheel-drive buggy) for a frenzied uniting that has an intoxicating, end-of-exams euphoria.

While Mustique is known for its social whirl, most forget to mention its core value: this is one supremely beautiful island. Here, palm trees are permitted, in abundance, and the beaches – wild and windy Pasture, soft and shady Lagoon – are easy to love. New walking trails are being created, while Tristan Welch, formerly of Pétrus and Launceston Place, arrived last October and is cooking up impressive delights at the refurbished Beach Café.

If holidaying on Mustique is like dining at a private members' club, the mood on nearby Bequia is more bring-a-bottle. Not that it's all plonk – there are some very fine villas hidden away in its steep-sided hills. Quite a few have British owners. "Well, we first came here on a sailing yacht," is the usual explanation of how they fell for a Grenadine notable for its sense of community and inclusiveness. This isn't an island that money and ego built – 18sq km in size, it's probably as near to the old live/work/lime Caribbean you'll get these days. The Bequians still maintain a small-scale whaling industry that dates back to the 1870s, and a tradition of boat-building that produced the beautiful 29.3m schooner *Friendship Rose* – once the local ferry, now running dreamy sailing trips.

Returning after six years, I'm pleased to find little change. (Look, there's that dog still sleeping in the road by the rum shack.) The only difference is the explosion of choice in places to stay. Up by Crescent Beach is Sugar Reef Bequia where eight rooms are split between two properties on the same estate. The calm white interiors of the Beach House are set alight by the dynamic driftwood art of Ben Forgey. The other is a finish-that-novel hillside retreat, French House. Both are small, quiet and relatively isolated. For something more connected, the 62-unit Bequia Beach Hotel in Friendship Bay, renovated last November, has a gently nostalgic style with colourful wooden cabanas by the pool and vintage travel posters in the rooms.

The most luxurious living, though, is found in the prime properties available through the Bequia- and London-based estate agent, Grenadine Escape. Top of the class is six-bedroom Mangwana (from £15,000 for a fortnight), set on a 45-degree slope and designed with a let's-drink-in-those-views gusto by award-winning British architect Jake Edgley, a Foster alum who is known for creating splendid homes in tricky locations. If privacy and space are crucial, Côte d'Azur (from

£25,000 for a fortnight), which opened two years ago, is set above the surf of Hope Beach with six suites and a clubhouse decorated in neutral tones enlivened by airy verandas with polished mahogany floors.

Perhaps the best thing about Bequia is it allows you to take a day trip north to St Vincent, the SVG mothership. You can sail across, or join the locals on the hour-long ferry ride, both of which afford captivating views of this colossal and tremendously attractive island, which sadly lacks the perfect place to stay. Its capital, Kingstown, is an engagingly raffish port with arcaded streets, bountiful tropical gardens and white-gloved traffic police trying to impart a sense of urgency. Out in the topsy-turvy countryside, there are faded Anglican churches, pretty villages with breadfruits roasting on coconut fires, and bananas, bananas, bananas. The look is piratical, with black-sand beaches and thundering waterfalls – if you need a workout, take a guided hike to the summit of La Soufrière, the 1,220m volcano that last erupted in 1979.

All the roads on St Vincent twist and jive like a Zumba instructor, with the exception of one conspicuous stretch of tarmac in the southeast that runs dead straight for 2,700m. After many years of waiting, an international airport is due to open here at the end of this year, with a capacity for an annual 1.4m visitors. The airlines that will fly in from Europe and North America have yet to be announced, but the terminal is almost finished. That can only be good news for travellers drawn to the warm breezes and aquamarine waters of SVG, for whom the acronym might as easily stand for So Very Good.

Nigel Tisdall travelled as a guest of **The Mustique Company** (020-7201 6831; www.mustique-island.com) and **St Vincent and the Grenadines Tourism Authority** (www.discoversvg.com). He was also a guest of **Elegant Resorts** (01244-897 515; www.elegantresorts.co.uk), which offers seven nights at The Pink Sands Club from £9,995 per person, including Club World flights to Barbados with British Airways, private jet transfers to Canouan and a catamaran excursion to Tobago Cays; and seven nights at Cotton House, from £2,325 per person, including all flights and transfers. He also travelled with **Essential Hotel Collection** (020-8614 0077; www.essentialhotelcollection.co.uk), which offers seven nights at Bequia Beach Hotel from £1,503, including transfers. **Beach Café**, see Cotton House. **Bequia Beach Hotel**, Friendship Bay, Bequia (+1784-458 1600; www.bequiabeach.com), from \$350. **Cotton House**, +1784-456 4777; www.cottonhouse.net, from £192.50. **Grenadine Escape International Realty**, 020-3468 5592; www.grenadine-escape.com. **The Pink Sands Club**, Carenage Bay, Canouan (+1784-458 8000; www.pinksandsclub.com), from \$3,938 for a one-bedroom suite. **Sugar Reef Bequia**, Crescent Beach, Bequia (+1784-458 3400; www.sugarreefbeatquia.com), from \$209.