

SPLENDID ISOLATION

Having an island to yourself is a perfect solution for those in need of real privacy, but you need to choose the right one. Julian Alason investigates



TIt is the dream destination, a secluded, secret world, populated only by those we love. The private island is as close to paradise on earth as most of us can aspire – but it is a fantasy in need of discernment. For islands are not created equal in climate, size, comfort or accessibility. A few weeks ago I was shown a private islet in the making: the location off the coast of Cambodia is sublime, the design harmonious, the weather enticing – and rare hornbills land on your balcony. However, getting to Song Saa Private Island from Europe or North America is no small undertaking, other than by private jet into Sihanoukville, from which it is an exhilarating 30-minute boat ride. And there is the rub.

Today complete privacy demands that you be hidden from paparazzi, or just the casual tourist with camera and video. No accident then that the most perfectly private islands have their own landing strips. Visiting Little Whale Cay in the Bahamas I was amused to see animals grazing the airstrip. Not only does it keep the grass down but acts as a deterrent to unexpected guests dropping in. Other wildlife includes peacocks and flamingos – nature at its most ostentatious. The cay also has its own chapel, the most romantic venue imaginable for a wedding.

However one does not have to be a Marlon Brando or Malcolm Forbes and actually buy a speck in the ocean to enjoy the private joys of island life. Even so, prospective renters must beware. Not every website offering private island rental has a direct affiliation to the owners. Some operators are unlikely to have even visited most of their properties. Better then to rely upon one of the handful of experts who know the strengths and weaknesses of these little parcels of paradise. 'It is very much about matching client to island,' says John Steinle of specialists Sanctuare. 'On some we can lay on the most spectacular services, on others simplicity is the whole point.'

At Musha Cay, another private haven in the

Exumas chain, 85 miles south east of Nassau, simplicity is achieved by a largely invisible staff of 30. With 150 immaculately tended tropical acres surrounded by blue, blue sea, Musha is one of the rare places where the famous can escape constant public scrutiny and truly relax without having to retreat to the wilderness. When I stayed, the last signatures in the guest book read 'Bill & Melinda'. Who needs surnames?

The owner, star magician David Copperfield, has chosen to rename the small surrounding cays (on one of which is the landing strip) after himself, though this has yet to make it onto official maps. But there is the glory of it: when you are king of the castle your word is law. One might command the entertainment of a party of 24 in colonial comfort in the hilltop plantation house and five charming Bahamian cottages. Sea-Doos and ski boats await, though I was as happy walking the mile-long crescent of white sand revealed at low water. Almost anything can be arranged, including fireworks and lobster barbecues on the beach. One renter demanded a submarine to explore the reefs.

If Musha represents the tropical art of the impossible then the rawness of nature is its polar opposite, and on offer in the southern hemisphere at Great Mercury, off the coast of New Zealand's North Island. With 5,000 acres of forest and meadows, and 50 miles of coastline including 12 long beaches of white sand, the point of this ravishing island is exploration and sport. Its owner is banker and America's Cup challenger Sir Michael Fay. Like the others described here, the island is for sole rental for a party of up to 16 guests. Once the home of 5,000 Maori tribesmen, Great Mercury was abandoned two centuries ago; now it has two comfortable guesthouses built of driftwood and rock by a radical Sardinian architect. Some of the roofs are planted over, allowing the buildings to vanish into the landscape. From here, deep sea fishing and, between October and April when the sea is

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Little White Cay, Bahamas offers privacy alongside great amenities and service; two aspects of Great Mercury Island, New Zealand – still lovely but more temperate; an aerial view of Song Saa, Cambodia, which is being developed into an island paradise





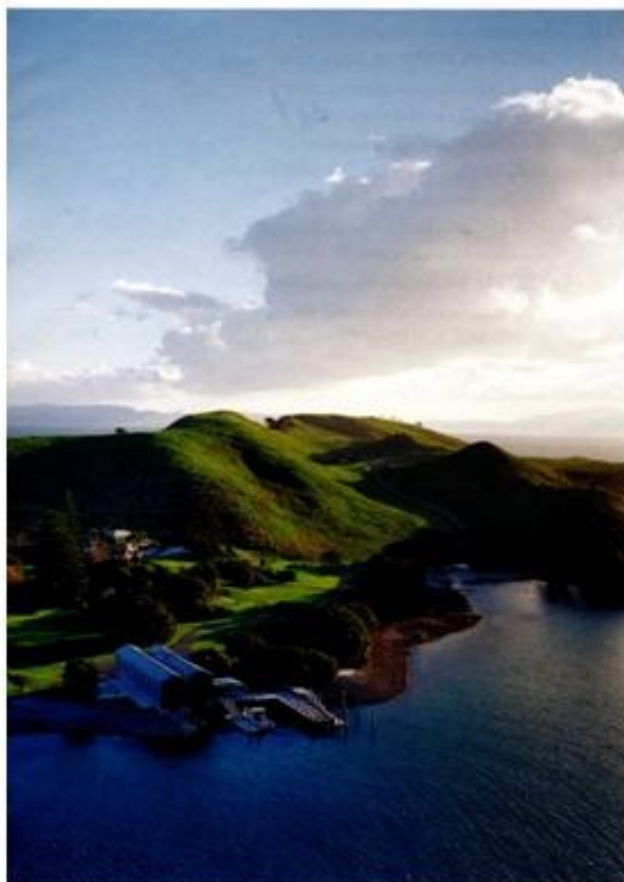
islands and some 2,000 beaches. Football hero Ronaldo and supermodel Gisele Bündchen own private islets here. The bay is beautiful, the architecture uninhibited and guests sing for their supper – sometimes literally as when the Rolling Stones' yacht mysteriously caught fire off the island of pioneering plastic surgeon Ivo Pitanguy. Many of the islands and promontories, like the whimsically enchanting Toc Toc, are for rent – through the right channels, notably Cazenove+Loyd in London. 'Rich Brazilians view their beach houses very much as they do their mistresses,' remarks my friend Stephen. 'They are for all the world to admire, regularly rebuilt, occasionally abandoned and sometimes lent to friends when the owners are away.'

No one does private island relaxation better than the Greeks, though. After all, they have had 3,000 years' practice, and the distillation of white walls and sunny terraces against the shading blues of sea and sky offers true balm to the soul. Among the most special is Pegasus, commanding the approach to the Cycladic islands. Its beauty, serenity and proximity to Athens were cherished by Pericles. Today the calm, clear waters of the Inland Sea still lap sandy beaches fringed with acacias, inviting snorkelling and boating. An engaging alternative is to ride bareback along the beaches and through shallow bays.

The villa was built by a shipping magnate in the 1920s and has now been sensitively restored in the local style but with subtle updating, each bedroom enjoying en suite facilities and fast internet connections. Such is the tradition of island hospitality that the family built a taverna close to the dock, entertaining such guests as Onassis and Maria Callas, Garbo and von Karajan. It is still one of four atmospheric houses – and a chapel – with a history dating back to the 18th century.

Today terrace living on Pegasus offers a sense of timelessness – and the opportunity for up to 14 guests to explore the treasures of Attica and the Cyclades at a tranquil pace. Not bad for a very private island less than 25 minutes by helicopter from Athens international airport.

Needless to say, extras are on call in all the islands described, from painting tutors to masseurs, with every sort of adventurous expedition available upon request, often with special access to sites. Candlelit dinner at a ruined temple anyone? The most



warm, scuba and waterskiing are on the menu. John Dory, tuna, snapper, crayfish, scallops and mussels abound, and a talented chef prepares the catch in the open kitchen. Food and drink is included with only the cost of the helicopter tours to be added to the bill. 'This is Treasure Island,' one client wrote in her blog. And for children it is just that, with adventure trails and a large heated swimming pool should the sea fail to invite.

Perhaps surprisingly, island brokers report an increase in enquiries for temperate zones like New Zealand and even Scotland. So familiar are jetsetters with the Maldives, Mauritius and increasingly with the Seychelles that it is the non-tropical alternative that now piques client taste. Hence the burgeoning interest in the financial industry in Ronay in the middle of Scotland's Outer Hebrides. Simpler and more remote than this it hardly gets on this, one of the very smallest British Isles. It offers a taste of how life once was.

Were one in search of sophisticated island partying, Angra dos Reis – Bay of the Kings – in Brazil is the place, with 365



RIGHT: rush hour on the sand bar at Masha Cay, Bahamas.
BELOW: the villa on the Greek island of Pegasus has been sensitively restored in the local style but with subtle updating



popular requests are for motor yachts and outdoor cinema screens. One island renter regularly orders an entire spa. Others specify rare vintages or import live entertainment.

For the most luxurious private islands the ceiling is between 10 and 24 guests. For celebration on a larger scale, party-givers like retail king Sir Philip Green take over small island resorts in their entirety. For example North Island in the Seychelles, Banyan Tree Madivaru and its six tented villas in the Maldives, and for really big events, Peter Island in the British Virgin Islands can all be hired for exclusive use through Elegant Resorts, along with carefully coordinated party planning.

Sometimes, though, less truly is more. My own choice would be Kia Ora Sauvage on remote Rangiroa atoll in French Polynesia. Islands do not get much smaller or deserted than this *motu*. Just five traditional Polynesian cabins in the shade of cocoa palms, cooled by trade winds with the distant roar of waves breaking on the reef. Dress code? Sarong and a straw hat. Menu? Freshly caught lobster and fish from the lagoon barbecued against a backdrop of primary yellow, green and blue. In fact you can find a private dream island to take over almost anywhere in the world and have it to yourself to enjoy in peace. **

ISLAND ESSENTIALS

MUSHA CAY, Exumas, Bahamas, marina@carpediemtravel.co.uk
 LITTLE WHALE CAY, Bahamas, www.littlewhalecay.com
 GREAT MERCURY ISLAND, North Island, New Zealand, www.seasonz.co.nz
 RONAY, Outer Hebrides, UK, www.privateislandsonline.com
 ANGRA DOS REIS, Brazil, Islands including Toc Toc, www.cazloyd.com
 PEGASUS, Cycladic Islands, Greece, www.fivestargreece.com
 KIA ORA SAUVAGE, Rangiroa, French Polynesia, www.hotelkiaora.com
 SONG SAA, Koh Rong, Cambodia, www.songsaa.com
 SANCTUARE ISLAND ADVICE, www.sanctuare.com
 ELEGANT RESORTS. Private rental of resort islands, www.elegantresorts.co.uk