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Inside Moskito Island, Richard Branson's new Caribbean hideaway that's even posher than Necker

Branson kite-surfed over from Necker to greet our journalist for the exclusive first stay on the retreat that took 14 years to create

By Annabel Fenwick Elliott

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Why would Sir Richard Branson, who lives perfectly happily on Necker, his legendary island in the Caribbean, have need for another whopping great estate on an atoll a mere two miles away? That's the first question I have for the man himself, who has kitesurfed from Necker to meet me here at his second home, on Moskito Island.

More than 14 years in the making, Moskito, in the British Virgin Islands, is the Caribbean's newest private island retreat; a lavish 125-acre hideaway of 10 private estates, three of which are now

available for holiday rental for the first time.

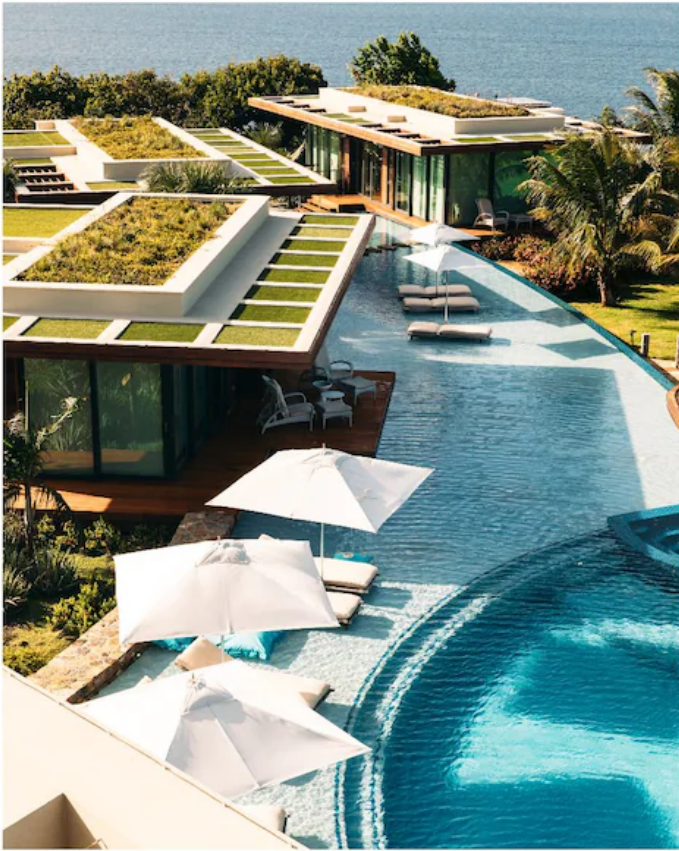
I'm the first journalist to see the island, and will be spending the next few days in the company of Branson, fresh from shooting into space aboard his Virgin Galactic rocket, and his sizeable entourage of family, colleagues and friends.



Sir Richard Branson, characteristically barefoot | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskito Island

The bearded mogul, now 71, greets me in swimming trunks, his white, ocean-tousled hair still dripping, and ushers me into his home, the Branson Estate, where we sink into two enormous cream sofas and get chatting.

This expansive, Bali-inspired complex was the first to be built on the island and comprises three villas - one for himself and his wife Joan, one for his son Sam, wife Isabella and their two children, and one for his daughter Holly, her husband Freddie and their three children, all connected by elevated wooden walkways. And it's all now available for rent (when the family isn't there).



Moskito Island is emblematic of Branson's love of barefoot luxury, and is speckled with swimming pools | CREDIT: Christopher Simpson

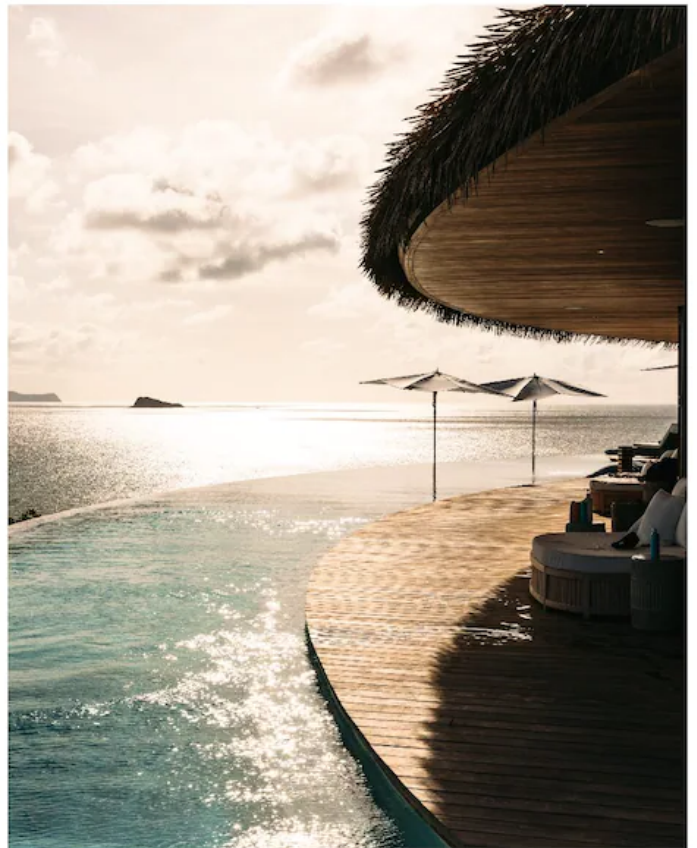
To answer my original question, Branson bought Moskito, clearly visible from Necker, to avoid it becoming an eyesore. 'I heard rumours back in 2007 that someone was thinking of turning it into a big chain hotel,' Branson tells me, 'so I talked to the owner and said "please don't do that". This area of the Caribbean is so exquisitely unspoiled; it would have been a great shame. Fortunately, he was happy for me to take it off his hands.'

The result, after more than a decade of construction, has nothing in common with a big hotel, nor a resort, nor a conventional island for hire. Each of its 10 privately owned properties, some still under construction, occupies its own secluded enclave, but only three proprietors are currently renting out their homes when not in use: Branson and the owners of the just-completed Oasis and Point Estates, whose identities - and even nationalities - are a closely guarded secret.



The Branson Estate | CREDIT: Courtesy of Mosquito Island

I get to stay in both Oasis and Point, one entirely different from the other but equally luxurious and each micro-managed down to the tiniest detail by a dedicated expert supervisor - both, as it happens, warm Englishwomen with big personalities.



Scuba divers will delight in the wreck of the Kodiak Queen, one of Pearl Harbor's last surviving boats, which Branson had sunk to form an artificial coral base | CREDIT: Christopher Simpson

The Oasis Estate, a modern, gleaming, multi-level, nine-bedroom home, designed to resemble a yacht, stands tall amid tropical gardens on the highest point of the island and lords it over a winding network of pools, walkways, firepits and a swim-up bar. In addition to a generous gift hamper brimming with bottles of Scotch, BVI gin, branded luggage tags and so on, there are especially nice touches in the giant 812 sq ft master bedroom, including Alexa-controlled lights, a huge, Tempur-Pedic bed, a nine-nozzle shower and an outdoor standalone bath.



Headland House on the Branson Estate | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskitto Island

The Point Estate can fit in up to 22 guests across several thatch-roofed cottages that cling to the cliffside, blending vaguely rustic African and Asian influences with the latest technology. It boasts a gasp-inducing infinity pool with circular windows in its floor that peer into the children's games room below, and a dining pavilion that offers arguably the best lookout platform for sunsets across the whole of the British Virgin Islands. My favourite extras in this master bedroom, which sits below the dining pavilion and thus nabs the same unrivalled ocean views? A Dyson hairdryer and a welcome bottle of Dom Pérignon 2010.



Moskito Island, showing the Point Estate barely disturbing the treeline | CREDIT: Christopher Simpson

While seclusion and privacy go without saying within the grounds of every estate, and each is equipped as a luxury home, there's a communal element to this island that sets it apart. There are several spaces, including the Beach Pavilion, in which to dine and mingle (and party, hard, as I discover) with other households, should you wish.

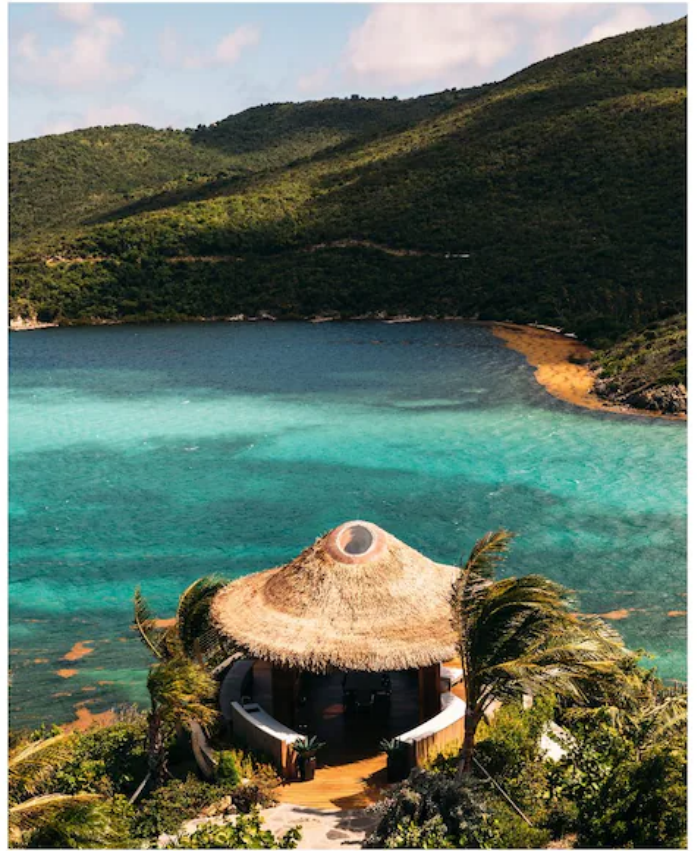
'All the owners get on well and their families spend time together here,' Branson says, as a gaggle of blonde grandchildren cannonball back and forth across his vast living room, frolicking under the sun that pours in through the glass ceiling. Literally no one will disclose the identities of the island's other homeowners, but one from a nearby estate is particularly jumpy about me, a reporter, being in their midst. She quickly drops her guard as we all gather for a lively, champagne-fuelled Sunday roast in the Beach Pavilion.



A bedroom on the Oasis Estate | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskito Island

Seated opposite the Virgin tycoon, amid his closest friends and family - debating everything from Brexit and the pandemic to Afghanistan and space travel - it's hard not to be baffled. Here is a man in his 70s who has just kitesurfed ('my favourite way to commute') several miles on an empty stomach ('a fasting fad I'm trying out') and is still chatting with the effervescence of a teenager. It's only noon and I, on the other hand, am already ready for an afternoon nap. Perhaps it's the heat and the jet lag. Or the champagne.

There is a lot of this, served at all times of the day by stealthy, eagle-eyed staff who ensure that no guest's flute is at any point less than half full. Every meal, cooked by each estate's dedicated chef - based on a detailed pre-arrival preference questionnaire, some served indoors, others at various beauty spots - is delivered as a celebration, worthy of a decent tippie. I can't so much as dip my toe into a pool without being offered a cocktail. Subsequently, I'd say I'm mildly to moderately drunk for the whole of my five-night stay.



Moskito Island is a lavish 125-acre hideaway of 10 private estates | CREDIT: Christopher Simpson

This sort of frivolity is a hallmark of every place I've visited in Virgin Limited Edition's eight-property portfolio - where the service is always impeccable, but without a sniff of rigid formality. Moskito is billed as 'a mecca of grand design, marrying barefoot luxury'. As with suits and ties, Branson has never been fond of shoes. In this spirit, I took mine off on the first day, kicked them under the bed and forgot about them for the rest of the week. The only surfaces my soles touched were sand, smooth stone steps, swept wooden walkways and the floor of golf buggies.

So what else does Branson do on Moskito? 'We gather the wealthiest people in the world here to put our heads together on new ideas,' he says. 'Everyone works really hard in the morning but we make sure people let their hair down and play hard in the afternoon and evenings. That's often actually when we make breakthroughs.'



The Oasis Estate | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskito Island

Case in point: the idea behind his philanthropic Audacious Project, which launched in 2018, struck Branson as he was dancing on the bar at the Beach Pavilion on New Year's Eve, with chums including Google's Larry Page, who owns a nearby island, and Jeff Skoll, eBay's first president. The plan, which in short aims to 'solve eight of the world's biggest problems', was finessed three days clear of their hangover, as they sailed around Moskito in a catamaran.

Are guests of the island's new estates likely to bump into the likes of Richard, Larry and Jeff during their stay? It's entirely feasible, and this is certainly a selling point. One does get the sense that, aside from the many Virgin devotees out there, the estates will often be booked by friends and associates of Branson and the other owners.

The Beach Pavilion is open to all, with its well-trodden bar, a pool table, chess sets, movie areas and a glimmering wraparound pool. The island's two floodlit artificial-grass tennis courts, designed to mimic those on Necker, are also communal; as is Manchioneel Beach whose fine white sand spills out into the unfathomably warm ocean and towards a vibrant reef, home to some of the most pristine coral in the world.

An outspoken eco-warrior (though he does get flak for this, given he owns an airline and a rocket ship), Branson has always been insistent on environmentally friendly solutions when it comes to his retreats. You won't find a scrap of single-use plastic on Moskito, and there are bamboo straws aplenty, and well-placed baskets of reef-safe sunscreen at every turn. The island's latest addition is a machine that turns glass back into sand. How gratifying to think that all those (many) champagne bottles are returning to whence they came.



A dining table at the Point Estate | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskito Island

Branson is earnest, too, in his wildlife pursuits. Necker is teeming with lemurs - which I sincerely hope will make their way over to Moskito too someday - as well as with endangered tortoises and a flock of flamingos; some of which already do pop over to Moskito from time to time. The fuchsia-hued birds died out in this region a century ago, but Branson introduced 40 in the Noughties and they now number 2,000. Flamingos can fly great distances, I'm informed, but quite understandably, they choose to stay put, just as Branson mostly does, between this pair of islands.

Elsewhere on the fringes of Moskito, scuba divers will delight in the wreck of the *Kodiak Queen*, one of Pearl Harbor's last surviving boats, which was, at Branson's request, wrapped in a giant octopus-shaped artwork and sunk in 2017 to form an artificial coral base. Add a multitude of dolphins, rays, green turtles and humpback whales to Moskito's oceanic back garden and you've got yourself a high-definition, Technicolor wonderland in which to bob around at leisure.



Relaxation areas abound at the Point Estate | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskito Island

During my time on Moskito, an expedition that flies by all too quickly, Branson challenges me to two aquatic endeavours. The first is a kitesurfing lesson, with three-time World Wave champion Kirsty Jones, who works here now.

'My son often tries to get me into meditation and it's not for me; I just end up ruminating on business ideas,' Branson explains over lunch. 'Kitesurfing is really the only time I forget the world and stop thinking about anything else.' Following my lesson, I can quite see why - it is all consuming and, for a beginner, comically difficult.



The Point Estate in full | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskito Island

The second challenge, at the end of a day trip I take to Necker (guests can request this but it's not a given) to brush shoulders with the lemurs, is to skip the boat and swim the two-hour stretch back to Moskito. I last all of 20 minutes before being stung on the bottom by a jellyfish and scramble with great haste aboard the boat that has been accompanying me.

That is the only stressful thing that happens to me on Moskito. Dena, manager of the Oasis Estate, is so acutely tuned into my every mood that she suggests help before I even know I need it. If I look tired, she subtly shuffles my itinerary. If I scratch an itch, she zooms in with mosquito repellent. Courtney, manager of the Point Estate, is similarly intuitive. Clocking me as likely to be habitually late, she adjusts my schedule so it tells me to be everywhere 15 minutes earlier than I'm actually due. As a result, I'm always on time.



A beach villa on the Branson Estate | CREDIT: Courtesy of Moskito Island

So accustomed do I become to this barefoot luxury, that only near the end of the sad boat ride back to Tortola airport do I realise I don't know where my shoes are. My last moments before rejoining civilisation are spent frantically fishing around in my suitcase to see if I've remembered to pack my only pair. *Dena or Courtney will have some!* is my knee-jerk assumption, but they are far away, out of sight in my wake. I have left Moskito shoeless and thoroughly spoiled. As far as Branson is concerned: mission accomplished.

Rates for Moskito Island start from \$17,500 (£12,700) per night during low-season, based on a four-night minimum stay at the Point Estate for up to 16 guests. Rates include a dedicated estate manager, private chef and a dedicated team of staff, as well as all meals, drinks, watersports and a personalised itinerary from start to finish. moskitoisland.virgin.com

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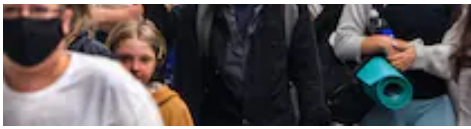
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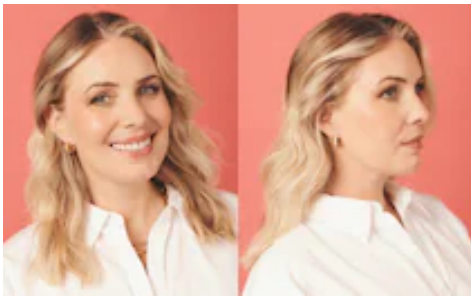
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