

# Just the ticket

Seeing how the other half lives can be a chastening experience. I was propping up the poolside bar, chatting to a middle-aged woman from Florida, when we were joined by a young man in a white tuxedo. "This is Raoul," said the woman. "My hairdresser." I nearly choked on my dry martini.

"I have a wedding on Saturday," she continued. "Raoul is the only one I trust. He really knows about roots." And this time I did choke on my martini, spilling nearly 20 dollars' worth down my chinos. These playgrounds of the super-rich can play hell with your trousers. Even in a region rich in such playgrounds, the new Raffles resort on Canouan Island in the Grenadines is a Rolls-Royce destination.

We had to share the resort with 80-odd New Yorkers, getting ready for the said wedding, and the whiff of Manhattan money quite overpowered the hibiscus. I have never seen so many thin Americans before. It was standing room only in the gym as they went through their pre-nuptial tone-ups.

The resort is very new. When I visited earlier this winter the palm trees beside the pool still needed wooden struts to support them. And the imported sand on the beach was so pristine that, if you saw a footprint on it, you would recoil in amazement-like Robinson Crusoe. But the place is also hugely impressive, a Caribbean star in the making.

Simply getting to Canouan was a romantic experience. Our little six-seater plane took off from Barbados and headed west into the setting sun. An eyeful of dark-blue sea, a glimpse of Mustique to our right, and we began our long, graceful descent into Canouan. The runway was no longer than a football pitch. The terminal building was just a thatched hut, with a lone immigration official who looked irritated that we had disturbed his sleep. Then a 10-minute taxi ride – past a rum shop, past a rickety church, past a few smiling villagers, past a cemetery overrun with goats – and we



HEIGHT OF LUXURY The poolside and beach on Canouan

were there.

First impressions were of mild eccentricity. There were all the usual things you would expect in an upmarket beach resort – a swimming-pool, a golf course, a scattering of villas, a row of luxury boutiques – plus, centre stage, a 19th-century church. It dominated the whole place and had, we were told, been shipped stone by stone from Canterbury in the Victorian era. Weird.

But beyond the eccentricity, there was something else: real, unostentatious luxury. The brainchild of a Swiss-Italian millionaire, who has teamed up with the Raffles organisation, in what is their first resort development in the western hemisphere, Canouan abounds in those little touches that make even non-millionaires feel as if they own the world. My villa, perched on a hillside overlooking the sea, was so

large and luxuriously appointed that I could have hosted a wedding reception in it. Every detail was spot-on, from the super-soft sheets to the Italian tiles in the bathroom. An English newspaper was waiting on my doorstep every morning. Guests had their own golf carts in which to drive around the resort. No nonsense about risking a hernia by walking.

The service was some of the best I have enjoyed anywhere. Every time I drained my glass, a flunkey raced forward to replenish it. Every time a bead of sweat appeared on my forehead, I was handed a cool towel. Mosquitoes? There were no mosquitoes. Armies of sprayers and swatters and insect-control wallahs had sent them packing.

For food, we were spoiled for choice. One night, it was Champagne and foie gras in

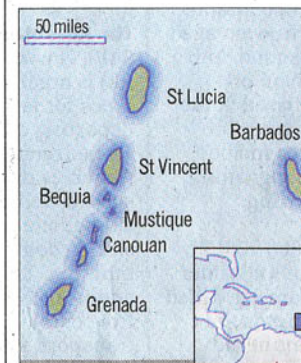
the French restaurant next to the casino; another night, it was beer and lobster on the beach; a third night, it was the best Thai food I have eaten outside Thailand. High standards have been set, and other Caribbean resorts where food is taken seriously are going to have to look to their laurels.

Perhaps what most convinces me that Canouan will prove a big success is that it possesses, in spades, the two prerequisites of a luxury his-and-hers resort: a top-notch spa and a top-notch golf course.

The spa premises – individual thatch-covered suites on the side of a cliff – were the most seductive I had ever seen. The golf course was a terrific test of a player's ability, with cunningly designed fairways leading to immaculately kept greens. I have played on five continents, but never found a course to match Canouan for physical beauty. Lizards snaked across the fairways. Butterflies floated above the bunkers. Speckled turtles popped their heads out of the bushes. I took five putts on one green, but could not have cared less. The sense of playing golf in paradise, a tropical Eden that had been around longer than the Royal and Ancient, was overwhelming.

On our last afternoon, we took a catamaran across to the Tobago Cays, had a picnic lunch, did a little post-prandial snorkelling. Phil, the boat-owner, turned out to be the biggest eccentric yet. A south Londoner, with a risqué line in small-talk, he did not actually say, "I had that Pierce Brosnan in the back of my boat once," but he came within a whisker of it.

The afternoon dwindled into a happy haze of rum punches and spicy chicken and celebrity gossip. How long before the celebrities and their hangers-on have done to Canouan what they have done to Mustique and Barbados and St Barths? How long before luxury has been tainted by over-familiarity? It does not bear thinking about. So go there while it is still new and fresh and comparatively unspoilt. And take your hairdresser.



## essentials

### Getting there

Abercrombie & Kent (0845 070 0614; [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)) offers seven nights at Raffles Resort Canouan from £1,709 per person, based on two sharing, including flights to Barbados from Gatwick, transfers and b&b in an Orchestra Garden View Room.