



Messel magic in Barbados

The designer's most theatrical Caribbean home is 'something out of a dream'

TODAY sees the launch in *COUNTRY LIFE* of one of the Caribbean's most remarkable properties, idyllic Fustic House in the parish of St Lucy, the northernmost of Barbados's 11 parishes and the most unspoilt. Set in 10 acres of lush tropical gardens on a ridge overlooking the fabled west coast of the island, the classic, pale coralstone plantation house, built in about 1740, was remodelled in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the inspirational theatre designer Oliver Messel, who moved to Barbados for health reasons in 1966. Here, until his death in 1978, and despite having no formal architectural training, Messel established a flourishing new career as the architect of choice of the wealthy international set, designing and creating nine signature houses on Barbados and 18 on Mustique, including Les Jolies Eaux, Mustique, for Princess Margaret, who was married to Messel's nephew, Lord Snowdon.

In his book *Fustic House & Estate—A Messel Masterpiece*, the broadcaster, historian and former *COUNTRY LIFE* Architectural Editor Jeremy Musson (who is not normally given to flights of fancy) evokes the history, charm and sensuality of this private paradise, which for him



At Fustic House, tranquil indoor and outdoor spaces flow seamlessly into each other. \$15.75m

is 'something out of a dream... one of those rare places, which once seen, is never forgotten' (*COUNTRY LIFE*, January 26, 2011). For the Barbados National Trust, Fustic House, said to have been Messel's favourite out of all the houses he designed, is, quite simply, 'one of the jewels of the Caribbean'. Another major advantage in today's context, says owner William Gordon, is that, thanks to its unique

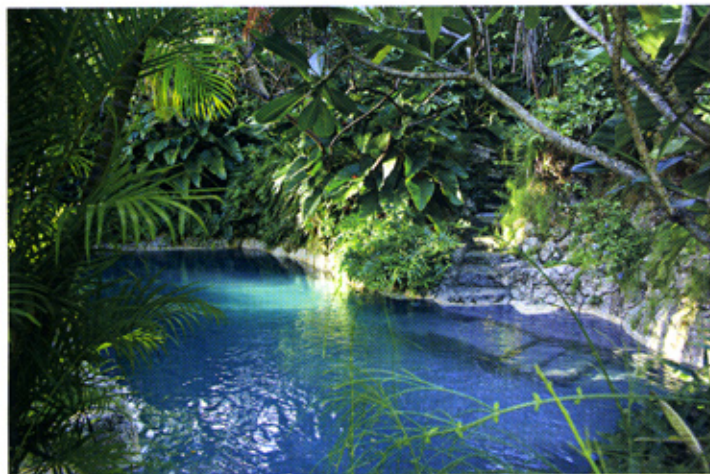
setting, the property is virtually 'paparazzi-proof', with outsiders unable to see in, and only insiders able to see out.

Previously known as Sea View, the old plantation house was renamed Fustic House in the early 1960s after an old fustic tree (one of few still left on the island) that still stands in the tropical ravine just below the house. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the plantation was owned by a black farmer, Alexander Simmons, who continued to grow sugar cane and made rum, although, by now, tourism had taken over as the island's main source of income. In Simmons' day, the property ran down to the beach, but over time, he sold off plots of land for building, as the nearby village of Moontown expanded.

In the late 1950s, Simmons sold Fustic House to an Englishwoman, Charmian Fane, who developed the land, but left the Great House largely untouched. In 1968, she, in turn, sold the property to Vivien and Charles

Graves, the brother of the poet Robert Graves. They immediately engaged Oliver Messel to remodel and embellish the house, although his transformation of the gardens and grounds was done mainly for their English successors, Malcolm and Jan Watts, who bought the property following Charles's death in 1971. Fortunately for the integrity of Fustic House, subsequent owners, including Swedish philanthropist Sigrid Rausing and her first husband, Dennis Hotz, and William and Usha Gordon, who bought Fustic House in 2004, have faithfully carried on where Messel left off.

Fustic House is approached from inland, through lush parkland and ancient groves of mahogany and flamboyant and bearded fig trees. The entrance to the house is pure theatre, with separate gateways leading to the various estate buildings, and a central footpath leading to an open loggia, where wide arches frame the visitor's first



The secluded lagoon pool is sheltered by luxuriant greenery



Above The elegant Pavilion was built in 2009 to accommodate guests. **Left** The sitting room enjoys mesmerising sea views and a cooling breeze

dramatic view of the bright turquoise Caribbean.

The Great House at the heart of the estate is long and shaded by deep verandahs and balconies. The ground floor, which would have housed the kitchen and staff quarters in the 18th-century house, has been transformed into an elegant dining room overlooking the terrace towards the sea. The sitting room—the original entrance hall—at the southern end of the house opens onto another wide verandah. Most of the first-floor rooms of the Great House, including the library, salon, and two bedroom suites, have been left more or less unchanged, apart from general decoration, much of it in the designer's signature 'Messel green'.

Messel also designed a two-storey guest wing with trademark shutters, an external

‘It's one of those rare places, which once seen, is never forgotten’

staircase and a large sun terrace. The two-bedroom Plantation wing, designed by the Italian architect Giuseppe Soffietti, was added in 2000 by Miss Rausing and her husband, who also engaged garden designer Todd Longstaffe-Gowan to revive the gardens and park. A third guest lodge, known as the Pavilion, was built by Mr and Mrs Gordon to the designs of English architect Malcolm Ness in 2009.

But perhaps Messel's most remarkable legacy is the truly

spectacular lagoon pool, blasted out of the coralstone and surrounded by lush overhanging vegetation. The Gordons have completed the exotic picture by adding a huge timber poop-deck that overhangs the tropical ravine, with breathtaking views of the Caribbean. They have also bought a slice of land to safeguard the estate's access to Half Moon Fort beach and planted extensively in the garden and parkland, working with Messel's original landscaping plan and the designs of Mr Longstaffe-Gowan.

It was serendipity that led the Gordons to buy Fustic House following a chance encounter during their honeymoon in Barbados in September 2004. Since then, they have divided their time between their Barbados estate and another in Provence, successfully renting out both

properties during their periods of absence (weekly rentals of \$28,000–\$49,000 are the norm at Fustic House during the peak winter months).

But with family commitments in Europe now taking their toll, they have decided to call time on their Caribbean adventure, and Fustic House has been put on the market through Knight Frank (020-7629 8171) and Bajan Services (0800 097 1753) at a guide price of \$15.75 million. With the exception of some personal items and the garden statuary, the contents of the house are included in the sale, notably some original furniture designed by Messel. Also standing by is the estate's resident team of 16 friendly staff, whose impeccable service and unfailing good humour have made Fustic House a byword for the ultimate in Caribbean hospitality. 🐠

Paradise is a plantation house

'Plantation houses represent the linkage of Barbados to its past, and are an important point of reference in defining the island's vernacular architecture,' comments veteran estate agent Paul Altman, Savills' associate in Barbados, and a past-president of the Barbados National Trust. Savills (020-7016 3740) and Altman quote a guide price of \$19.5 million for the Great House at Turtle Beach (right), near Speightstown, in the chic west-coast parish of St Peter.

Previously owned by Sir Evelyn de Rothschild, the elegant eight-bedroom villa, built of local coralstone and set in 1½ acres of magnificent gardens, was designed by the talented local architect Ian Morrison. The four traditional chattel houses, historically built to house plantation workers, were added later. The pool area is the focal point of the property, and comprises a large main pool, a children's pool, a Jacuzzi, a poolside bar and ample seating on the coralstone-flagged deck, with the gleaming, platinum-sand beach mere footsteps away.

