



Necker Island, the British Virgin Islands

Vacation on Sir Richard Branson's private getaway, where you can experience a bit of Bali-inspired heaven on earth

The list of celebrities who are rumored to own a private island is impressive — Mel Gibson, Johnny Depp, Nicolas Cage, Julia Roberts, Robin Williams, Ted Turner — it goes on and on. But one island is unique in that you can invite yourself for a visit. Meet Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands, owned by Virgin über-entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson.

Visitors have included Princess Diana, Harrison Ford, Mariah Carey, Eddie Murphy, Jimmy Carter, Desmond Tutu and Oprah Winfrey, who have returned with stories of the island's inimitable virtues. Branson, who bought this private escape when he was a mere lad of 28, spent millions on turning the 74 uninhabited acres into one of the world's ultimate destinations.

First came a 10-bedroom Balinese-style villa, the Great House, made of local stone and Brazilian hardwoods, with antiques, art pieces and fabrics, and bamboo furniture from Bali. Each bedroom has open walls, giving a 360-degree view and cooling winds from any direction in the house. Next came the addition of six Balinese-style houses, intended for a more private island experience.

Necker Island can accommodate groups as large as 28 people, served by a staff of more than 60 people. The Great House is equipped with a state-of-the-art kitchen, from which resident chefs prepare a multitude of famous dishes. Every great house has a great room, and while you wait here for your meal, you can strut your stuff at the snooker table or at the piano, or simply relax in any number of hammocks or chaises that surround you on the outdoor terrace. The island is also stocked with a fine range of international wines, top-quality spirits, international beers and special house champagne.

Because your stay is all-inclusive, guests are encouraged to help themselves to anything they want, at anytime.

You can walk the perimeter of the island along its private beaches in less than two hours. There's also a world-class collection of water-sport equipment, including sailboats, kayaks, kite surfers, surfboards and snorkeling gear. Take one of the speedboats for waterskiing and wakeboarding or simply sit in the middle of the ocean with a glass of bubbly and watch the sun go down. Scuba diving, bone fishing and deep-sea fishing are available upon request.

When it comes time to dry off, Necker Island boasts two floodlit tennis courts, complete with racquets, balls and even a resident tennis pro. There's also a world-class gymnasium with uninterrupted views of the Caribbean Sea.

Not surprisingly, Necker Island has a spa, the Bali Leha, a Balinese word meaning peace and relaxation. Guests enjoy a number of specialized, holistic treatments, including a four-handed massage delivered by two therapists simultaneously. The Bali Leha Spa is built into a cliff and commands an expansive view of the ocean.

Meals are remarkable. A beautiful wooden table carved into the shape of a crocodile is the most popular place for lunch. In the beach pool, there are floating sushi bars — canoes filled with ice and flowers and fresh local fishes. Peking duck rolls are available for meat-eaters. Wash them down with a splash of chilled sake.

Dinners can be formal and festive or casual but complete. White Night describes the evening's dress code for a formal six-course meal that ends with a fireworks display. Guests are also supplied with a selection of pirate costumes for a lighthearted Pirates of the Caribbean



night in sync with the calypso rhythms of an island band. The Bali Hi Beach Dinner is served on the beach under the glow of tiki torches and a bright tropical moon.

Necker Island is available for \$53,000 per night, with a five-

night minimum stay. For reservations and complete information, go to NeckerIsland.Virgin.com or make reservations by calling 877.577.8777. Arrivals: Virgin Gorda (VIJ) (expect a 10-minute boat ride to Necker; the island also receives guests by helicopter). 