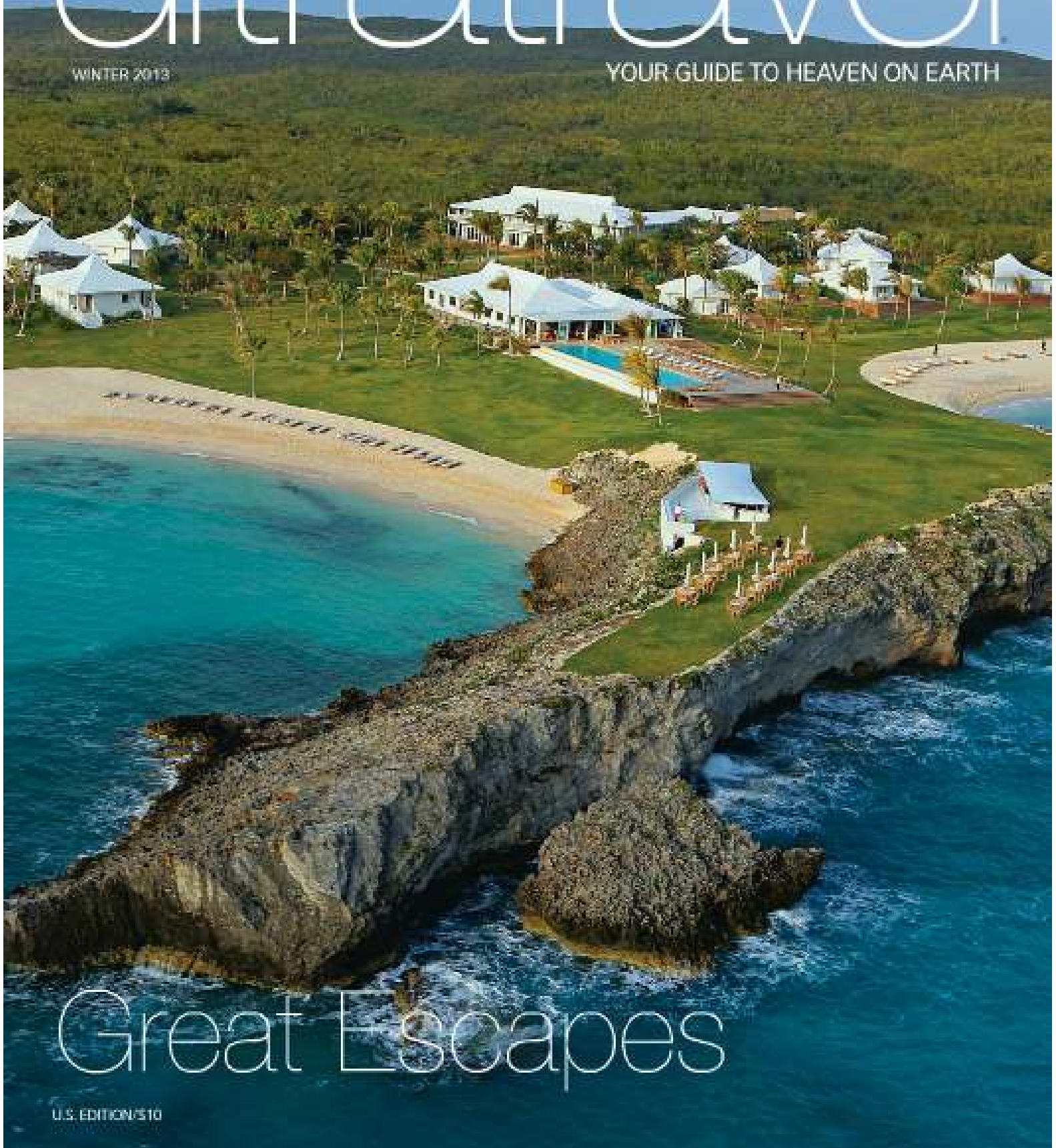


ELEUTHERA NECKER ISLAND LOS ANGELES ANDERMATT COPENHAGEN

# ultratravel

WINTER 2013

YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH



# Great Escapes

U.S. EDITION/510



Zoom in

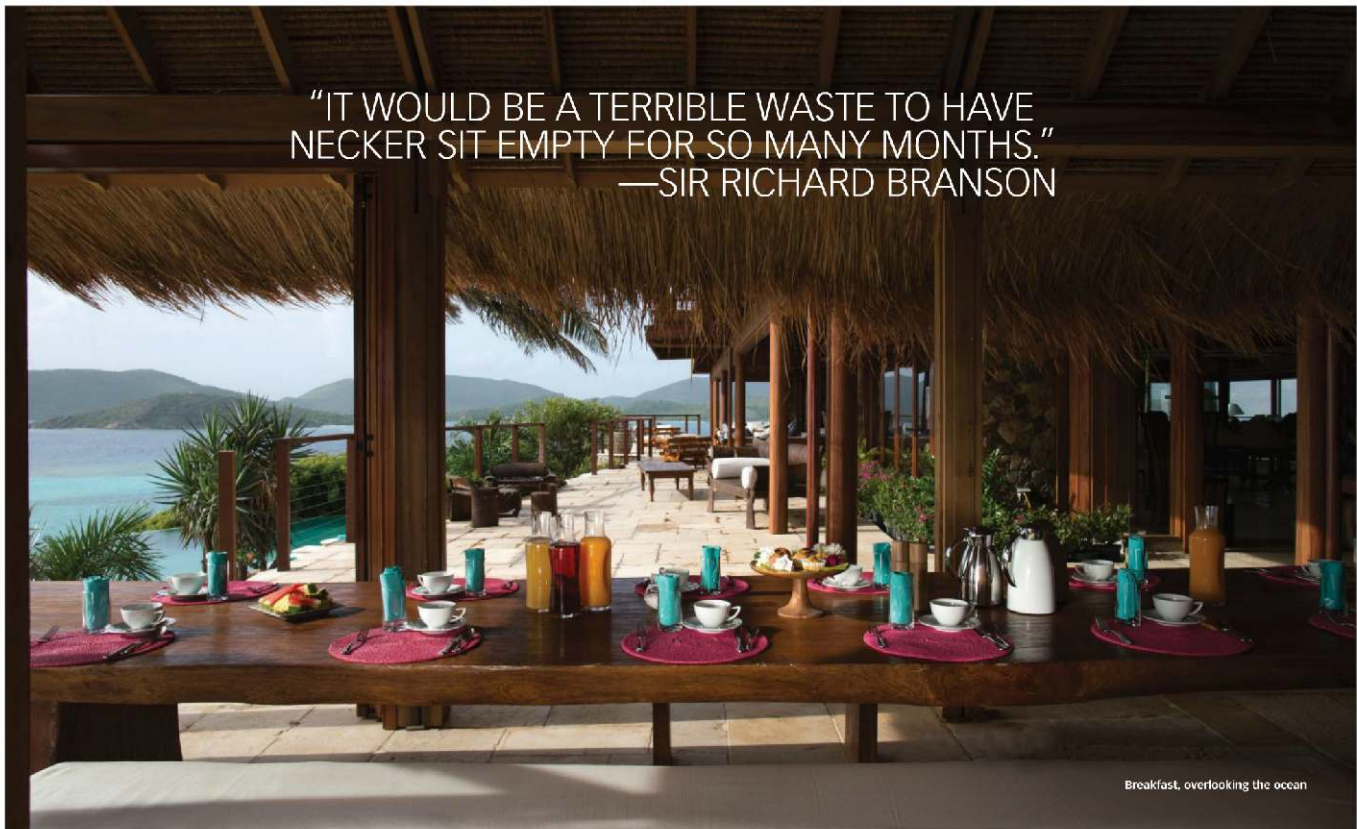
# ISLAND IN THE SUN

SIR RICHARD BRANSON TAKES US ON A TOUR OF HIS EXCLUSIVE OASIS IN THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS.

By Margie Goldsmith



"IT WOULD BE A TERRIBLE WASTE TO HAVE NECKER SIT EMPTY FOR SO MANY MONTHS."  
—SIR RICHARD BRANSON



Sunlight splashes down through the soaring skylights, sliding glass doors and onto the plush Balinese couches of the new Great House, the heart of Sir Richard Branson's private BVI retreat, Necker Island. Branson bought the 74-acre island in 1979 for £180,000 (just under \$300,000), a few years after founding the Virgin Group. He planned to build a home for himself and his girlfriend Joan (whom he later married) and to entertain Virgin Records rock stars. Today, Necker is a private island luxury resort along with six other Virgin Limited Edition properties around the globe.

One would think that Branson, who is worth close to an estimated five billion dollars, wouldn't want to share his family home with paying guests. "I think it would be a terrible waste to have Necker sit empty for so many months of the year," says Branson. "We meet some absolutely fascinating people here. We use Necker to relax, but it's also the place where I sit in my hammock and work, and hopefully conceive big, good ideas."

A couple years ago, the Great House was burnt to the ground, the result of a lightning strike. (During the fire, all guests escaped, including Kate Winslet who carried Branson's mother downstairs to safety). Now, like the mythical phoenix, it has risen from the ashes, doubled in size to 22,000 square feet, with architecture by Kenneth Kao and interiors recreated in Balinese style by California-based designer June Scott (a family friend). Why Balinese style? Well, both Branson and his wife love Bali. "One day, I'd love to get something in Bali," he admits.

The Great House has a gargantuan living room filled with plushy furniture and Balinese art objects, including a gong to announce dinner. There's a well-stocked bar (pour your own or the bartender will mix your favorite libation), snooker table, piano, interior rainforest garden complete with several turtles, dining table seating 40 and terraces on three sides with hammocks and swinging daybeds. New additions include a romantic "crow's nest" roof terrace (with a Jacuzzi and private dining alcove) and a wooden platform leading to a 700-foot-long zip-line above the powdery white-sand Turtle Beach.

Branson and his family live in Temple House, a home opposite the Great House named after his wife Joan's maiden name, but they often dine with guests including everyone from Google's Larry Page and Twitter's Jack Dorsey to Bill Gates.

Groups of 30 can rent the island exclusively, or singles and couples can rent individual rooms during "Celebration Weeks" on a non-exclusive basis. All guests are housed in six one-bedroom Bali Houses and eight spacious Great House accommodations with ensuites, balconies and outdoor showers. The Great House bunkroom sleeps eight children (or six kids plus a nanny) and the palatial upper level Master Suite offers three sun-filled, sea-facing terraces, private outdoor Jacuzzi and outdoor bath, wet bar, mini bar and a gauzy canopied four-poster king bed, which, like all the Necker beds, has a double pillow-top mattress for the ultimate in softness.

Necker is a haven for wildlife, and Branson has reintroduced species that long ago disappeared in this area of the Caribbean. "Everywhere you turn, there's a red-footed tortoise walking across the road or a giant iguana, or a scarlet ibis, or a white ibis, or flamingos flying overhead, or a lemur screeching," he says. "This year, we've had leatherback, green, and hawksbill sea turtles nesting. The waters are full of dolphins and eagle rays, and we get humpback whales coming around the island once a year. That's special."

Also special are the endless activities, such as a ride in the Necker Nymph, an underwater "aircraft" in which scuba-certified passengers can descend to about 100 feet. Necker also offers sailing, waterskiing, kayaking, power boating and stand-up paddle boarding with equipment and instructors included. "I'm just incredibly lucky to live here," says Branson. "I wake up every morning at 5:30 a.m. I'd never do that in Europe. I play tennis in the morning and in the evening, I go kitesurfing when the wind's right. I go sailing, surfing and swimming. You don't get caught watching TV because you don't need to. Life is richer and more fun here."

Moving forward, Branson plans to open other exclusive properties. "I was in South Africa last week," he says, "and I looked at a beautiful vineyard. I love creating and enjoying these kinds of places, so we definitely will continue to make them a reality."

Contact your travel agent to plan your Necker Island escape.



The main room at the Great House



An oceanfront chess setup

"WE GET HUMPBACK  
WHALES COMING AROUND  
THE ISLAND ONCE A YEAR.  
THAT'S SPECIAL."  
—SIR RICHARD BRANSON



Zoom in

The master bedroom of the Small House