

Quiet glamour

He has been the unrivaled king of American casual-chic for 25 years. But to recharge his batteries Tommy Hilfiger turns to British luxury.

In Mustique, a tiny, exclusive, tropical paradise. In a villa designed by Oliver Messel, set designer for the English Royal Ballet, and furnished with the original furniture of the Dukes of Windsor.

by Lulu Berton
photos by Tim Street-Porter

The time he said no to Calvin Klein has turned out all right for Thomas «Tommy» Jacob Hilfiger, born in 1951: he knew what he wanted when, barely thirty years old, he turned down a job as designer for the iconic brand of casual-chic fashions and founded his own renowned brand, in 1985, that celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. His parents wanted him to study engineering, but he chose, wisely and farsightedly, a career in fashion. «It worked out», he attempts a cool shrug, but can't hide a satisfied grin when we meet him, a graying gentleman of almost sixty. Who now enjoys the well-deserved comfort of a life divided between his city apartment at the Plaza Hotel in New York, his country house in Greenwich, Connecticut (which he put up for sale in 2009), and his splendid seaside villa on the island of Mustique. It is in the pearl of the Caribbean that the designer spends all his holidays «with my wife, Dee Ocleppo (former top model and ex-wife of the Italian tennis champion Gianni Ocleppo, ed.note) and my seven children, four from my first marriage to Susie, Dee's two with Gianni, and Sebastian, thirteen months, who's mine with Dee» explains Mr. Hilfiger. «We're a big, modern family: Gianni is Sebastian's godfather, and my ex-wife is the godmother of Dee children». The splendid residence in British colonial style in Mustique faces majestically on the ocean; the original layout is by Oliver Messel, who used to design



the sets for the Royal Ballet in England and is one of the top architects on the island (he designed «Les Jolies Eaux», for princess Margaret, Queen Elizabeth's younger sister). «Although he had already died when I came to the island» says the stylist, «I bought some of the original drawings from a builder who worked for him and who then built my villa». What sort of neighbors do you have? «Mick Jagger lives next door and often comes to lunch and dinner: his kids are friends of my kids. Bryan Adams and Shania Twain live just down the street».

Mr. Hilfiger, can you tell us what is so special about Mustique?

It's a very quiet island, perfect for privacy, with very little tourism. There is only one hotel, a couple of restaurants and shops; and no golf courses.

It looks rather primitive but elegant, with a vaguely British air. Years ago I bought a small house on the beach and had it torn down to build a bigger one. Then I decided to buy the neighboring property, which became my guest house.

What choices did you make for restructuring?

I wanted it to have a British colonial look, with old-world charm and simple colors,

like dark mahogany. To get this effect the help of the designer, Wendy Nichol, was fundamental.

Does every room in the villa have a specific character?

Yes, the library has an amplified safari imprint, even to the khaki colored curtains, like the boys' room, the master bedroom is in nautical style, just the opposite of the girls' room, more in classical English style.

What do you like to collect?

Modern art. Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Richard Prince, although the house in Mustique, because of the humidity, isn't the best place to keep my paintings; I keep them at my houses in New York and Connecticut. I love antiques too:

Dee and I are always in search of rare pieces.

In your own words, the house of your dreams is...

Synonymous with comfort. And then it is also the place of privacy and serenity with my family.

Any anecdotes about Mustique?

I have lots of wonderful memories, but also some bad scares due to hurricanes. Not too long ago it really looked bad, but then, luckily, the storm veered away.

How do you spend your days on the island?

I play tennis a lot, especially when Gianni (Ocleppo, eds) comes to visit. He doesn't play tournaments any more and now he trains.

We play volleyball on the beach too, and go bike riding and scuba diving.

What are your favorite sports?

Skiing and driving race cars.

Are there any objects here in the villa that you are particularly fond of?

Two years ago, at the auction at Sotheby's I bought several pieces that belonged to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

The light blue dressers, wardrobes and tables were theirs. And I especially like architecture:

I've got several black and white prints here of classical floor plans, like those in the living room.

What elements did you choose to give the house an extra touch of class?

The corals, and all the objects made with shells.



With a house like this facing the sea, you probably live outdoors a lot, right?

We use all the verandas and the garden with its coconut palms. We spend a lot of time in the two pools as well: the one at the main house faces the ocean and the other, smaller one, is in the garden of the guest house.

Do you like to have friends visit?

Yes. At Christmas we'll have my Italian stepchildren, Alexander and Julian, Dee and Gianni's boys (he'll be here too) with my New York family: there will be about 24 guest that I'll accommodate in the 12 rooms of the main house, the guest house and four cottages overlooking the sea.

Would you say that style is something you learn or something you're born with?

I think it is a quality that derives from how you face life, what you wear, where you go, what your interests are, how you furnish your home, what you eat and how you receive your friends. You don't have to be rich to have style: it is an elegance you

time, sometimes it seems ready to eat you alive; that's why I used to go hide out in Greenwich from time to time.

Right, your other «nest» in Connecticut...

It's a country house overlooking a lake that has a lot of «old-world charm», with the French taste of Normandy. It also looks a lot like a hunting lodge.

What do you find most difficult about being a parent?

I learn day by day how to act with my kids, but the hardest thing is to say no; I always try to support them, to listen to them, to talk to them about my feelings.

The Tommy Hilfiger trademark is 25 years old and is considered one of the top brands on the market. How does that make you feel?

I'm very proud and happy, though I think it's important to keep a good portion of humility. I'm very close to my family and my old schoolmates.

With my wife's support I have decided to set up a foundation to combat poverty in Africa. That way, part of my earnings go for charity: it's my way to give thanks for all I have.

Your parents wanted you to be an engineer but you, who've always done things your way, chose fashion...

Actually, I became a designer almost by accident.

When I was 18 I dressed to resemble a rockstar: at that time having the right “look” was a real obsession for teenagers, and that all the other kids at my high school tried to imitate me and my friends.

So I opened a clothing store and began to design the clothes, discovering that I had a knack for expressing creativity through fashion.

And that's when you said no to Calvin Klein.

Well, actually, I accepted his proposal at first, but just before I was to start I met the investor Muhammad Murjani, who offered to finance my line. So instead of going to work for Calvin Klein, I decided to become his direct competitor. Nothing personal: just a business decision.

What's your motto?

Keep your grip and take care of others as you would of yourself.