

M+ EXCLUSIVE Dark secrets of island paradise beloved by the Bezoses: Drug smuggling, gay liaisons... and explosive details of X-rated debauchery behind closed doors

By MICHAEL GROSS FOR DAILY MAIL
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It's the paradise island beloved by the privileged, pretty and plutocratically inclined – a celebrity playground where Alix Earle flirts with **Tom Brady**, **Leonardo DiCaprio** parties with **Jeff Bezos** and **Heidi Klum** strips off to sunbathe topless in the Caribbean sun.

It's all just an average day on Saint Barthélemy - best known to Americans as St Barts and, to islanders, St Barth.

And if a single property can capture the epic saga of this fabled island where Christie Brinkley met **Billy Joel** and the Kardashians regularly frolic, then Autour du Rocher (in English, Around the Rock) is it.

This is all the more remarkable because Autour - set on an 8.5-acre oceanfront parcel of land on the north of the island - has been a ruin since it burned down under suspicious circumstances just before **Christmas** 1991.

It is nonetheless still a prized property, changing hands several times since it was bought first by the television talk show icon David Letterman, through the corporate entity FWI [as in French West Indies] Atomic Waste and Leisure Inc (FWIAWL Inc).

Letterman's company acquired it in April 1995 from the tropical rock singer Jimmy Buffett. But that, as I discovered while researching the book **Treasured Island**, isn't quite true.

FWIAWL Inc then allegedly sold it to a wealthy Frenchman in 2015. But that sale, too, is questionable.

All evidence suggests the real buyer was Andry Akimov, a Russian oligarch who was sanctioned in 2018 and who still, according to in-the-know islanders, owns Autour.



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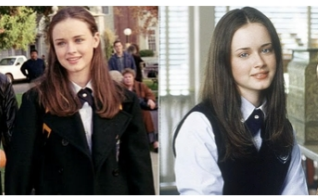


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Son of a Soviet military engineer, Akimov was born in St Petersburg when it was still Leningrad, worked as a banker and also, reportedly, for the Communist regime's KGB secret service. With another former KGB man, Vladimir Putin, he helped privatize Soviet industry in the newborn Russian Federation.

Putin rewarded him with the lucrative chairmanship of Russia's third largest bank, Gazprombank, and with his newfound wealth Akimov began buying trophy real estate, often obscuring ownership behind family and associates.

Among his purchases was a dacha-style house on St Barth's wild southern coast once owned by the ballet star and Soviet defector Rudolph Nureyev.

In 2018, a twenty-something French entrepreneur living on the island, Paco Chanseau, took formal control of Villa Nureyev.

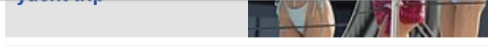
He's married to a woman a dozen years older, whose father owned a real estate company and a popular beachfront club-restaurant in Biarritz. So, theoretically, Chanseau might have had the €25 million Letterman's company was paid for Autour du Rocher.

But informed island gossip claims Chanseau was fronting for Akimov when he filed plans to build a 24-cottage hotel on the land.

Those and later proposals, including a massive villa that resembled a St Tropez beach club, were killed by local protests. And in the meantime, public records indicate, a prospective sale to Merck Pharmaceutical heir Frank Binder, a Swiss-born resident of Monte Carlo and trophy real estate collector, fell through.

But all that pales beside Autour du Rocher's sordid past.

It was conceived by two improbably conservative men for louché St Barth



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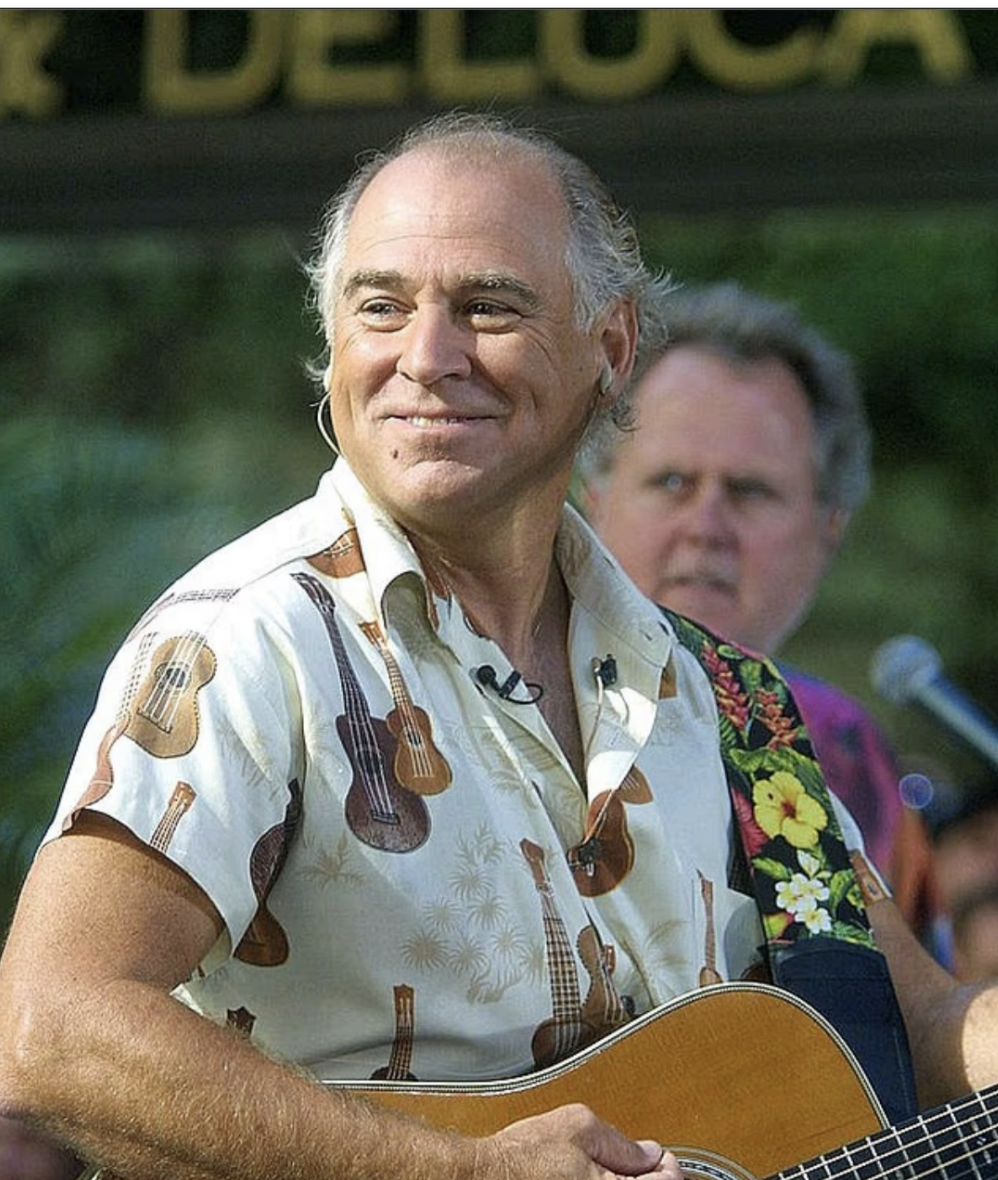
It was conceived by two improbably conservative men for louche St Barth.



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For all its sordid past, Autour du Rocher was conceived by two improbably conservative men for louche St Barth



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Tropical rock singer Jimmy Buffett was a onetime owner of Autour du Rocher, and even wrote a song about it

'Hal' Haskell had served in the Coast Guard, worked for Nelson Rockefeller and, in 1956, was about to run for Congress from Delaware when he and a fellow Republican sailor Rodney Mustard Layton, a corporate lawyer married to a duPont heiress, discovered the island.

They bought property above the bay of Lorient and built a vacation house of stone, mahogany and terracotta around the rocky outcrop that inspired its name. When they weren't on the island, they rented out rooms.

A local citizen managed Autour du Rocher and, around 1960, added a restaurant where the specialty was sea turtle steak.

In 1969, Haskell won a term as mayor of Wilmington and the hotel, under that manager, grew squalid, Layton's daughter says.

Out of office in 1976, Haskell took over Abercrombie & Fitch, and the manager took over the property, though the transfer was so irregular, it would be decades before legal title was clearly established.

Obscured ownership is a St Barth tradition.

Into that limbo strode a womanizing American ne'er-do-well, Bill Bove, who owned a surf-and-turf restaurant at the Mullet Bay resort on nearby Saint Maarten island.

Bove's partner and financial backer was surely the most notorious character ever to own a Caribbean hotel. A predicate felon, sneak thief, self-styled revolutionary and wholesale drug smuggler, distributor and user - he bragged about his 90 LSD trips - he called himself chic (with a lower case c) Eder: 'chic's the name and smoke's my game.'



photo... can YOU guess who he is?



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David Letterman's company acquired the property from Buffett in April 1995



Autour has been a ruin since it burned down under suspicious circumstances just before Christmas 1991



It remains a prized property, however, changing hands several times since the fire

Eder had been in and out of prison since the 1940s, when he was 12. His crimes spanned the American continent and included a federal rap for incitement to riot and possession of both a firebomb and marijuana at a 1970 antiwar protest.

He was best known as a druggie buddy of the 'sick' comedian Lenny Bruce, and

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He was best known as a druggie buddy of the 'sick' comedian Lenny Bruce, and was notorious in underground circles, suspected of snitching on everyone including High Times magazine founder Tom Forcade, who'd smuggled weed with him.

In 1979, Eder was arrested for smuggling 16.5 tons of weed into North Carolina, pled guilty and was sentenced to four more years in federal prison. His lawyer showed up at Autour du Rocher and convinced Bove to sell. Presumably, without Eder's backing, he couldn't afford to keep it.

Casual observers of St Barth thought the new owner was the tropical rock singer Jimmy Buffett, who'd discovered the island a few months before. But behind him was at least one more smuggler, albeit a minor-leaguer compared to Eder.

'Groovy' Gray, son of a naval fighter pilot and Buffett's yacht captain, had once sailed across the Atlantic solo with a boat full of hashish. He and JJ Walsh, another counter-culturally inclined sailor Gray and Buffett knew in Florida, were the majority partners. Buffett, owner of a small piece of Autour du Rocher, was just its figurehead.

In the 1980s, fashion discovered St Barth's beauty and the island swarmed with models and photographers through the decade that ended with a Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue shoot in 1989.

Everyone from the cast of Saturday Night Live, to Nureyev, Ed Bradley of 60 Minutes, Lauren Hutton, Fleetwood Mac, Paul Simon and The Rolling Stones were drawn to the island like moths to a flame.

Photographer Marco Glaviano recalled how Calvin and Kelly Klein honeymooned at Taiwana, another notorious celebrity hotel, 'Calvin with four or five boys on one side of the pool and his wife alone on the other side.'

At Autour du Rocher, the bartender, Dylan Doherty, was dubbed Thrillin' Drillin' Dylan for his sexual exploits.

'I was always taking models down to the bathroom,' he told me. 'Want to do some coke? They wanted the lines and then they wanted to do me.'

The sex was so energetic, he claimed, three women broke the sink off the club bathroom's walls.

'I got a good rep. I was actually referred from one woman to the next.'

Due to the noisy up-all-night action, the hotel withered as the club became the site of what Buffett described as 'the worst behavior I have ever seen.'

'Nobody paid attention,' Doherty continued. 'The gendarmes were always drunk.'

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Everyone from model Lauren Hutton (photographed) to Fleetwood Mac, Paul Simon and The Rolling Stones were drawn to St Barth like moths to a flame



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Fashion discovered St Barth's beauty and the island swarmed with models and photographers through the 1980s

Though substance abuse was less blatant after Ronald Reagan was elected president and declared war on drugs, forcing St Barth smugglers into the wind, the party never stopped and the island's reputation grew.

Autour du Rocher rocked on with more hired managers, until that fire ended its run.

No one died, but rumors flourished. Was it a grease fire in the kitchen? Faulty wiring in the DJ booth? Arson by neighbors who hated the sordid scene? Or something even more sinister?

'People are fighting and suddenly, there's a fire?' scoffed self-confessed smuggler and Autour patron Brett McKee, who dismissed the 'official' faulty wiring story with a snort.

'Yeah, sure, and I never smoked a joint in my life.'

Four years later, Letterman's company bought the property. An intimate, authorized to speak for the TV host, called him a secret real estate savant, who'd amassed a portfolio of trophy properties in Montana, Martha's Vineyard and Westchester.

His permit to build on the site was issued in 2008 and extended through 2015, when he decided to stay in another home he owned on the island. The intimate stopped answering questions when asked if Letterman knew who he sold it to.

Bill Bove died broke and a broken man and his partner chic Eder died during yet another imprisonment.

Groovy Gray ran a one-plane charter service on St Barth for years before he was killed in a plane crash in 2003.

Buffett died 20 years later after a four-year battle with skin cancer, leaving behind a musical legacy that includes a song called 'Autour du Rocher.'

...Welsh lives on, though he has admitted issues that he claimed prevented him from

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JJ Walsh lives on, though he has cognitive issues that he claimed prevented him from explaining his former property's tangled chain of ownership.

Paco Chanseau, his plans to develop it foiled, is said to have moved to Dubai.

Gazprombank's Akimov was sanctioned by the US, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the EU.

Villa Nureyev is still available for rental, though, and it's likely he'd entertain an offer for Autour du Rocher.

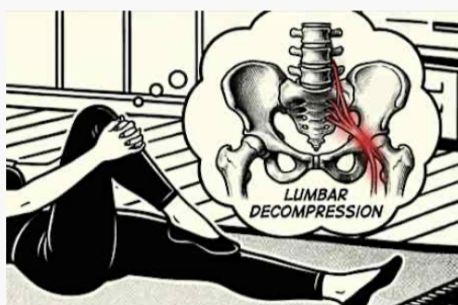
Until then, it will remain, as an anti-development protester described it, 'a site that has come to symbolize the battles being waged against investment companies that have no regard for the island or its inhabitants.'

Treasured Island - The Story of St. Barth... and Its Barbarians, Billionaires, and Beauties by Michael Gross is published by Harper, June 16.

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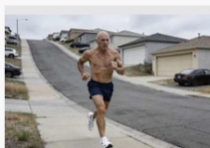
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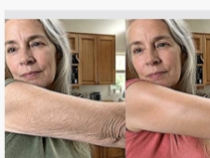
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