



By Chris Dutton

INSPIRATION IN PARADISE

The *CEO Magazine* experienced a once-in-a-lifetime entrepreneurial journey with a group of change makers and Sir Richard Branson at his home on private Necker Island.



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2015 Change Makers and Rule Breakers

When you get a phone call inviting you to the home of Sir Richard Branson for four days of networking with 30 of the world's leading entrepreneurs, it's not a call that you choose to ignore. Far from it. It's one of those calls that snaps you into a frame of mind which forces you to pay attention with clinical accuracy.

That call came through to *The CEO Magazine* headquarters, and the invitation was to attend an event on the idyllic Necker Island, home to the founder of Virgin Group.

The dyslexic Branson has had a decorated and astonishing career. He founded his first business, *Student* magazine, after dropping out of high school at the age of 15. He soon co-founded the Virgin record store, which then successfully morphed into a record label. The first artist to sign with Virgin Records was Mike Oldfield, whose album *Tubular Bells* was featured on the soundtrack of the movie *The Exorcist* and subsequently sold more than 15 million copies. Branson left his business partners dumbfounded when, after 10 years of great



Map of Necker Island

success, he declared he wanted to branch into the airline industry.

Some 50 years since his first venture, Branson is the iconic billionaire chair of the Virgin Group and has overseen approximately 500 companies—his Virgin brand is currently on more than 200 of them. He lives on the paradise that is Necker Island with his wife Joan.

When a 28-year-old Richard Branson first spotted the 74-acre piece of land, it was uninhabited. He negotiated a bargain purchase price of US\$180,000 in 1978 and transformed it into an extravagant luxury resort. Today, if you have a >



'Mr B' (as he's known on the island) welcoming the event attendees

spare US\$65,000 per night, you can rent out the 15-room property and join in the fun. Necker Island attracts a host of stars every year, and those reported to have spent their vacation time there include the late Diana, Princess of Wales; Hollywood stars Kate Winslet, Eddie Murphy, Geena Davis, and Robert De Niro; supermodel Kate Moss; as well as statesmen such as Nelson Mandela, Jimmy Carter, and Tony Blair. Google co-founder Larry Page also got married on the island in an ostentatious ceremony in 2007. It's enough to say that Necker is probably the most exclusive, high-profile resort in the world.

The event *The CEO Magazine* was invited to attend was labelled 'Change Makers and Rule Breakers', with the idea of taking some of the world's best entrepreneurial brains and whisking them off to a place that is among the most beautiful in the

world. Throw one of the most successful entrepreneurs the world has ever seen into the potent mix and this recipe starts to look extremely interesting. The concept of having raw, natural talent that could easily build empires of the future spending personal time with Richard Branson—learning from one of the best—should surely be the catalyst for the birth of many exciting ideas and innovations. It's an idea that *The CEO Magazine* wholeheartedly endorses. Suffice to say, our Sales and Digital Marketing Director Natalie Kant and I packed our bags without question.

Necker Island is located some 21 kilometres from Beef Island—a 30-minute flight from San Juan in Puerto Rico. After arriving at Beef Island, you are greeted by smiling Necker Island staff immediately offering anything one desires while you wait for one of Branson's speedboats. If the icy-cold local

Necker Island's undoubted magic inspires even inspiration itself.

beer isn't appealing enough after a gruelling trip, then Necker Island's own chilled private-label champagne made exclusively for its guests is something that should do very nicely, thank you very much.

As you sit and wait in anticipation of the boat ride to Sir Richard's home, it's hard not to be wowed by the sheer beauty of the Caribbean. Warm, crystal-clear, turquoise water defies belief and you somehow know that you're in for a treat. How wrong you would be. You are not in for a treat on Necker Island—you are in for an



indulgent, opulent experience that can't be beaten anywhere on this planet.

The speedboat ride to Necker, as it is often referred to by the 90-odd staff who work on the island, takes approximately 25 minutes as you zip past luxurious yachts, incredible boats that are home to multimillionaires, and islands owned by some of the richest people in the world. It seemed wrong not to nod the blustering cap to an island owned by Larry Page about 100 metres off to the south.

Eventually, Necker looms in front of you—an extravagant, playboy island lapped by the beautiful, flawless waves of the Caribbean Sea. Sitting perfectly positioned on top to capture the awe-inspiring views is the Great House—a Balinese-inspired property for guests—and Sir Richard's private abode. To underscore how Necker Island's undoubted magic inspires even inspiration itself, as the speedboat draws closer you can see a striking hot tub bubbling away right at the very top of the Great House. This is the spot where Branson relaxed one night admiring and bewitched by the twinkling stars and formulated the outrageous yet brilliant idea to make space travel available to humans, and the concept of Virgin Galactic was born. Necker is a true home to imagination, where ideas become reality, where ingenious thoughts are unearthed, where creativity and vision are

unleashed, and where thinking outside of the box is the norm and, indeed, expected.

The Change Makers and Rule Breakers event starts even before the first business session gets underway. Guests relax over cocktails as the sun sets over the glistening waters, and one can sense the chemistry of ingenuity already starting to work. Entrepreneurs introduce themselves to each other and share stories of success in business coupled with new ideas that seem patently ridiculous yet incredibly possible. Richard joins you for dinner—he is so very welcoming and does not shy away from mingling with his protégés one bit. Visitors come from all over the world to this exclusive invitation-only event, so once the alcohol and jet lag mix, an early night seems a good idea as everyone's thoughts are preoccupied with the main business session that will be a question-and-answer meeting at Richard's house the following day.

After an ample breakfast on the first morning on Necker Island, it's down to business and the formal meeting with 'Mr B', as he is commonly referred to on the island. However, when he walks into his lounge with an air of casual, relaxed confidence, it becomes immediately apparent that Richard is extremely passionate about nature. Necker Island is not just his home. It's not just one of the best islands to



Brian Lim, Christine Thompson Owenell, Lin Sebastian Kayser, *The CEO Magazine's* Natalie Kant, Necker Island House Manager Kathryn White

holiday on in the world. And it's not simply a place where the celebrities come to get married or to escape the public limelight for a week or two. Necker Island has been built to protect wildlife, and Branson clearly has a passion for animals and nature, as he highlights in his opening speech to the entrepreneurs.

"Welcome to Necker Island—my home," he says. "Before we move on, I want to tell you a bit about where I live. Necker is a fascinating place. There are lots of species in danger in the world, and I want Necker Island to be a utopia for animals. Wildlife plays such an important part on the island, and you'll see some incredible animals."





“The scarlet ibis, for example, is simply an amazing bird that was introduced to the island by me, and you’ll also see lots of lemurs around. The lemur is one of the most protected species in the world, and nine species roam free on Necker.”

In his opening words about the island, it is clear to see his passion and commitment to helping Mother Nature. Indeed, before any business discussion takes place, Richard is immediately explaining the importance of nature on the island; it plays a crucial role on the island and in Branson’s life.

Ring-tailed lemurs are one of the signature animals of Necker. Branson brought them to his island as a way to conserve the species that is threatened by deforestation in its native Madagascar. Indeed, Necker Island is home to some 140 different species of animals and birds, the most of any island in the world. The list includes Galapagos tortoises, macaws, and flamingos—another species that Branson brought to the island for conservation purposes. Virgin’s top man employs wildlife management experts to care for his huge array of scaly, furry, and feathered friends, and he hopes that some of the species can reproduce, increase their numbers, and be reintroduced to their native habitats. It’s clear to see from the start that alongside all of his entrepreneurial flair and business acumen, he is a

passionate, kind, and goodwilled nature lover.

But what was in store for the next few days on Necker? As one listens to Branson, it’s impossible not to be taken in by his calm, easy-going manner as he eases into what to expect on the island and general rules and protocols to be adhered to.

“Necker has fantastic staff, superb food, and a full bar. These few days will be about having a party, having fun, and sharing ideas. Hopefully, we can unearth something that can help change the world and improve the lives of others. Necker is quite possibly the most magical place in the world. I love every minute of every day I’m here, and while you stay on my island, I encourage you to misbehave outrageously.”

Enough said. *The CEO Magazine* was quite happy to oblige in all departments—after all, who is irrational enough to not follow the orders of one of the world’s great entrepreneurs?

Our session with Branson is peppered with questions from the band of business leaders and fellow entrepreneurs, and it seems that he has a strong personal campaign to change global drug laws. He is moved and driven by making things right. When asked what motivates him, it is admirable how he connects his passion for change for the better with the budding talent sitting in front of him.



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- Richard Branson

“We are trying to fight fires around the world; I enjoy the satisfaction of making a difference. But entrepreneurs are the people to solve most of the problems in the world. On a positive note, the world is getting better. By and large, conflicts every decade are becoming fewer and fewer. The number of people coming out of poverty is dramatically reducing, population will plateau soon, then start going down. More importantly, we cannot let climate change get out of control. There is a lot of hope, and I believe technology can save the world.”

Branson comes across as a caring character who accepts that his role in society is now more about effecting change in contrast to building new companies with the goal of turning huge profits. Mind you, when you are worth nearly US\$5 billion, you own your own airline, and you live on your own private island, then one can fully understand and respect that position. In a relaxed pose sitting in front of his huge library of books, Branson continues and offers some tips on starting successful businesses.

“When you’re building a business, the word ‘survival’ is really critical; you’ve really got to concentrate on making sure

that your business will survive. You need to get the boxes ticked to run a business in a way you can feel proud of—environmentally wise, looking after your people, and a few other things. Making sure you’re surviving is the most important first thing. But I do think that delegation is really important.

“In terms of competition, I suggest that you focus on what you do first. Rather than getting sucked into a bitter feud with competitors, it’s much better to let your adversaries waste their energy fighting each other. Virgin America didn’t get distracted by turf battles and name-calling; we instead focused on building a community of customers who loved Virgin’s fresh, edgy vibe.

“I learn a hell of a lot more from listening to other people talking than from myself,” continues Branson. “Having said that, it doesn’t matter what you achieve in life—I believe that you are only as good as the children you bring up. Do they have a sense of caring, understanding, and the will to carry on the positive battles?”

Branson appears as a man possessing a wealth of experience that is being channelled into the right path for a better good. However, with the style of this main session being very open, free, and conversational, the discussion naturally turns to where Branson sees the future of business.

“Space will be transformed for the better. There are extraordinary, exciting things ahead. Millions of people will have access to the internet who have never had it before—this will help with poverty.

“The world needs to be carbon neutral by 2050. Each country needs to set ambitious targets to achieve this. Anyone going into a new business, I urge you to consider clean energy.” Indeed, investing in clean energy was Branson’s number one tip to *The CEO Magazine* from the visit.

When discussing the future, Branson is also very passionate

about peace. “The world ought to be big enough to create a place with no conflicts. The UN has done a reasonably good job, but not good enough. Countries find it very easy to fall out with each other over ridiculous things. Hopefully, over the next 25 years, more and more of these conflicts can be resolved. China does not start conflicts; the US and Britain do. War should always be the last option. If you are invaded, you have every right to defend yourself, but you shouldn’t go around starting wars.”

Branson also shares some personal secrets on how he stays grounded amid everything that is going on in his life as an extremely busy

man. It was important for the group of entrepreneurs assembled in his front room to understand what he does and how he thinks straight in times of stress and business pressures.

“Health is incredibly important. Work hard and party hard in balance. As a family, we set goals every year, whether it be to climb a mountain, sail an ocean, or whatever. Then we train for that challenge. It does help to have a challenge and to train for it.

“Putting the past behind you is always important. Forgiveness is important. Befriend people—life is too important not to. >





“I went back to London that night, got to Bath after the long journey from South Africa, and it was Madiba [Mandela] on the phone and he said, ‘Richard I want you to get straight back on the next plane to South Africa. The biggest health-club chain has gone bust and 5,000 people are about to be out of work, and we want you to save it.’

“So obviously when Mandela calls, you get on the next plane back. Fortunately, I have an airline, so it wasn’t too expensive. We actually ended up taking over this health-club chain. It was a really good investment as it turned out, and we saved it from bankruptcy. It showed that here he is, president of the country, just getting down to dealing with and running the nitty-gritty things like that, saving jobs.

“He really was a great man. One of Nelson Mandela’s greatest sadnesses was that the leaders in South Africa allowed hundreds of thousands of people to be killed completely unnecessarily through HIV/AIDS. He was exceptionally angry when leaders were discouraging the use and supply of antiretroviral medicines.

“We assembled a meeting of musicians at my home, including Dave Stewart and Peter Gabriel, and it was decided to support Mandela’s effort to get the message out about AIDS by working with the Nelson Mandela Foundation to throw a big concert in Cape Town. The concert was named after the prison number that Nelson Mandela was given on Robben Island: 46664. The concert was a spectacular success.”

After that first formal meeting with Sir Richard, the next three days go swimmingly. Entrepreneurs mingle with him, the plotting chitter-chatter of active minds can be heard on the beach at night after dinner, and one gets the feeling that successful corporations will be established after such high-profile mingling on one of the most beautiful, inspiring places on our planet.

In line with the high value he places on health and fitness, Branson plays tennis twice a day. He firmly believes in a healthy body fuelling a healthy mind. Mind you, if you live and work on your own private island complete with any water sport imaginable, numerous swimming pools, two tennis courts, and multiple gyms, then maybe you can afford to exercise slightly more than the average reader of *The CEO Magazine*.

It must be said that Branson spared us an appreciable amount of time on the island. He never seemed rushed, and shared every breakfast, lunch, and dinner with the people invited to attend this groundbreaking event.

On day three, the opportunity to kayak over to his other island, Mosquito Island, presents itself. After 20 minutes or so of calmly paddling in the warm, aquamarine ocean, Richard indulges in one of his favourite pastimes—kite surfing past you at breakneck speed with his surfboard strategically positioned to soak every inch of your body.

It’s safe to say that Richard Branson is a cool, calm, collected, and caring individual. Time on the island with him was fascinating, and it seems that he is extremely passionate about the environment and genuinely making a change to people’s lives. He has the aura that nothing really fazes him, apart from the little things in life—like a cup of tea made incorrectly, for example.

Indeed, in our main session with Branson, one of the Necker Island staff brought him out a cuppa that wasn’t quite to his taste. A smiling, tea-loving Branson lowered his voice and said to the young girl who fetched his hot beverage, “Excuse me. Do you mind if I have a bit more milk—I’m fussy with tea.”

And while he is one of the nicest people you could meet, he is a true perfectionist—that is Branson to a tee. Excuse the pun. •



Seven things I learned from four days with Richard Branson at his home on Necker Island

1. Do well by doing good - a key message from Sir Richard. It's better to do well and earn money in this world by doing something that is for the greater good. Anything that can improve people's lives is a good thing. This one piece of advice has personally resulted in a shift in focus to a new app that will revolutionise how parents around the world look after their children.
2. You don't learn to walk by following rules - you learn to walk by doing. When you are learning to walk, you can't read and you don't follow rules. You learn to walk by falling over, getting back up, and trying again.
3. Investing in clean-energy companies now will produce rewards in the future. This was one of Branson's biggest tips.
4. As much as I achieve in life, I can only be judged on how well I bring my children up and whether they follow a legacy that I hand on to them. It's not about how much you achieve in life, but what you leave instilled in your children and whether they can take that forward.
5. Your next big thing in life is simply a decision to do it. Don't throw away any ideas because you think they are impossible. Just make a decision to achieve it, and do it.
6. Sitting in Branson's private hot tub gazing up at the stars where he had the idea to launch Virgin Galactic and connect people with space, I learned that you should never, ever forget the key special moments in life, no matter what happens. Take inspiration from them and always remind yourself of them.
7. You are more likely to be successful in life by surrounding yourself with successful people in life. I knew this anyway, but it was reinforced on the island by listening to and engaging with so many clever, like-minded entrepreneurs.



You don't learn to walk by following rules; you learn to walk by doing.”

Branson has always been a famous tie-loathing, anti-office kind of guy and firmly believes that working from home can be more productive.

Branson also spoke of his relationship with his long-time mentor Nelson Mandela—someone whom he considered a great friend.

“I was very lucky. I spent quite a lot of time with him. If he ever came to lunch, it was normally a very expensive lunch. I mean, I remember once he came to lunch in London and we got through the first course, the second course, the pudding, the tea, the coffee, and I thought I'd made it. And he turned to me and said, ‘Richard, yesterday I had lunch with Bill Gates and he gave me \$50 million for ...’

“I think one of my best stories with him was when he was still president. I had been in South Africa and we had funded a statue for Steve Biko. Anyway, the statue was put up in East London [South Africa] and it was a very moving day—100,000 people in the streets. Mandela gave an impassioned speech, and, anyway, I went over and took his microphone off him just when he had finished his speech and called Peter Gabriel up on stage and he sang the song ‘Biko’ to these 100,000 people. Everybody joined in, and it was a very moving thing.

“I would suggest that you could be working eight or nine hours at home rather than 10 or 11 in the office, where, excluding all the commuting to and from, you're wasting time by being in the office. Working from home, you can get just as much done. I mean, I've never worked in an office. I'll pop into the office to do something and get the business going, but then I'll go back home, and that gives me space and time to really get things done. By being in an office, so much time is occupied by the people who occupy your time. So you should have the time, as long as you work smartly. You can have children, work from home, and get just as much done. I certainly wouldn't let work get in the way of having a family. I used to take my daughter and son with me everywhere I went, and it helped. That meant they got a taste and they learned early on what it was about.”

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- Richard Branson