

There's a reason desert islands are deserted. With this one I'm on, there are lots of reasons, but they boil down to one: it's an utter dump. Completely ringed by mangrove, no part of this place is more than 18 inches above sea level. Put your foot down anywhere and fartly brown swamp water bubbles over your Birkenstock. Decades of plastic flotsam – bottles, toys, flip-flops, garden furniture – slop back and forth between the tree roots. There is no high ground, no view, no breeze, no respite from flies, humidity, boredom, discomfort.

There are no coconuts or conches either, which are supposed to form my staple diet for the next day and a bit. Well, there are coconuts, but they look about 500 years old, desiccated long before Captain Jack Sparrow was a boy. And there may be conches lurking in the shallows offshore, but I'm damned if I'm going to wade through centuries of rotting leaf-fall, not to mention the possibility of stingrays and electric eels, to find them. I try it once, casting my hand net as Papa Joe showed me the previous day, hauling in a weighty catch of dripping green slime, giving up.

I took this job for obvious reasons. I thought it'd be a free holiday in the Caribbean disguised as work. I'd do a bit of fishing and reading and a lot of nudey sunbathing. I imagined a proper desert island – palms, bone-white sand, crystal lagoon. In fact, I didn't need to imagine it, because I'd been to a desert island off the coast of Belize before, on an adventure holiday in 1989, and it was just like that. Paradise.

In the intervening 22 years, however, Belize has got richer and trendier, particularly among eco types, who come to see the world's second-longest coral reef. Thus, most of the nice desert islands among the 1,000-plus cays, the Hollywood desert islands, have been bought up, either by wealthy locals or by very wealthy outsiders. Leonardo DiCaprio acquired a particularly scenic specimen a few years ago. What's left is the rubbish, the rants of the desert-island litter. Like mine.

The weather didn't help either. During my stay, it rained more or less constantly.

Alone in the Wild. That's the title of the television programme this is all about. On another island (a much nicer island, I might add) at this moment, Dancing on Ice judge Jason Gardiner is beginning his second of seven days' isolation, having moved in after Aron Ralston moved out. Ralston is the chap who sawed his own arm off when trapped by rocks on a hiking trip up a canyon in Utah, an episode immortalised in the film *127 Hours*.

My stay on my island, pretty much 27 rather than 127 hours in duration, is designed



Above and right: Robert tests his fire-making and conch-catching

skills. Below right: enjoying coconut on Billy Hawk Caye

to give me a taste of Ralston and Gardiner's stay on theirs. Unlike them, however, I have cheated, and brought with me some extra supplies: water, three edible coconuts, two bags of trail mix and six boxes of raisins. And a few sachets of Nescafé, because the last time I went a day without coffee I got a blinding headache. And two miniatures of vodka saved from the flight in from Miami. So I've got the advantage over the celebs. Then again, my island is s***.

We arrive at 7am. Terence the boatman finding a channel in the mangrove just wide enough to beach his narrow craft. I say "beach", that's misleading, because what we have here, is a narrow, gritty strip covered in trash, roots and puddles. Twenty feet inland from this shoreline, the ground falls away and the swamp starts, a stinking, scary expanse emanating nameless screeches and scuttlings.

I pitch my tent on a marginally elevated patch of marginally less damp grit. My companions start sorting out the photo gear, then torrential rain renders photography not

only difficult but dangerous, given the lights and batteries. The photo on the opening spread is thus not of me on my island; it is of me on the very different Billy Hawk Caye, where the film crew and support staff were based. Billy Hawk Caye, incidentally, drained and sanitised, is nuked twice a year with chemicals to kill the mosquitoes.

My island, needless to say, is crawling with all manner of insects. And yet, it is worth noting, of the two, mine is the "unspoilt" one, untouched by the hand of man. If I didn't know it before, I know it now: a little bit of human improvement to a place is a fine thing. I remember reading once in a biography of Admiral Nelson that, in his day, a naval posting to the Caribbean was considered a punishment. Hard to understand why... until you've seen what most of the Caribbean must have been like 200-plus years ago.

I try to light a fire. I'd been shown how to light a fire the day before by Marc, a French survival-type hired to train celebrities (and me) in such arts. Marc's carefully constructed pyramid of wood shavings and coconut husks hadn't ignited yesterday, and neither does mine now. Not until I ask Terence for a can of petrol from his boat. That does the trick. Shortly afterwards, the boat withdraws and,