

The playboy prince

Prince Jefri of Brunei's unbridled appetite for luxury has landed him in trouble yet again. This time it's a strange tale of secret diamond sales in Hatton Garden and a harem of catty beauties. **Mark Hollingsworth** reports



A royal rascal, from top: Prince Jefri of Brunei at St John's Lodge, Regent's Park; former escort girl Jillian Lauren

Until Bill Gates came along, the richest man on the planet was the Sultan of Brunei. By 1992 the now 64-year-old Sandhurst-educated Sultan had amassed an alleged \$40 billion fortune from the oil

pumped from his tiny Far East fiefdom, a jungly pocket of land the size of Norfolk in the northeast corner of Borneo. And how he spent it: a 1,788-room palace, 17 private jets, including a Boeing 747 with gold-plated furniture, 2,643 high-performance luxury cars (mainly Rolls-Royces), The Dorchester hotel, a 180ft yacht, a £50 million Renoir – and he paid Michael Jackson £12 million to perform at his 50th birthday party.

The Sultan's younger brother, Prince Jefri, joined in the spending orgy with even more gusto: he bought a 170ft yacht, which he named the *SS Tits* and its two attendant speedboats *Nipple 1* and *Nipple 2*, the royal jeweller Asprey, the Dorchester Club and nearby 45 Park Lane, best known as the former venue

of the Playboy Club, 30 mansions spread around the world – notably a 149,000sq ft house in Las Vegas, and a Comanche attack helicopter. He once spent £3.5 million on ten custom-made watches that showed a couple copulating. And his party trick was to buy a Ferrari – usually a black Superamerica with a matte finish – whenever he spent more than one week in one place.

Brunei was not always so small, or so wealthy. Four centuries ago its empire included the whole of Borneo and much of Singapore, and its primary export was edible swifts' nests. But in 1929 oil was discovered, and the oil price explosion of the 1970s changed the country, then a British protectorate, forever. By the 1970s the current Sultan, Hassanal Bolkiah, had succeeded his father, Sultan Omar, and the spending had begun. 'I do enjoy fast cars,' the Sultan said. 'But there is no harm in that if you have the money. Brunei is very wealthy. When a person is rich, he does not buy a Mini, he buys a Rolls-Royce.'

Prince Jefri, 55, shares his brother's profligacy. Described as 'Prince Charming with a dash of villainy' by a former escort girl

Jillian Lauren in her recent memoirs, he barely sleeps, and loves polo and parties. He is a renowned womaniser and is married to four wives, divorced from two others and has 17 children by seven women.

Prince Jefri was also the chairman of the Brunei Investment Agency (BIA) for 13 years. But by 1998 an estimated \$13.8 billion was missing. Thanks to a collapse in oil prices and decades of spending, the country's finances were in chaos. Casting around for a villain, the Sultan accused Jefri of embezzling billions of dollars from the BIA. That started one of the world's longest-running family feuds. Officially it was resolved in 2000, when Prince Jefri agreed to disclose all his assets, transfer them back to the BIA and repay \$6 billion. But the dispute simmered on and in 2004 the BIA returned to court, accusing the Prince of not complying with the settlement agreement.

Today the dispute has been reignited. A cache of jewellery worth hundreds of millions of pounds was allegedly sold through a prominent London auction house and dealers in Hatton Garden by Prince Jefri in breach of the 2000 agreement, according to claims in documents recently filed at the High Court by lawyers for BIA. It was part of what one former adviser to Prince Jefri described in an affidavit as 'billions of dollars of hidden assets'.

The gems in question include the Star of Sierra Leone, a rare 53ct boulder in the shape of a heart. Some of these diamonds were sold last month, while last November three gem-encrusted Patek Philippe watches were dispatched for a total of £525,000.

The allegations have been backed by former advisers to Prince Jefri. 'A contact in Covent Garden told me that millions of pounds' worth of diamond-encrusted watches were being offered for sale in Hatton Garden,' said one in an affidavit. 'I was provided with colour photographs of the watches. Some of them had Prince Jefri's emblem. I took the photographs to show Prince Jefri because I was concerned that they might have been stolen from him. He told me not to worry as Imran Sheik [an aide] was selling them on his behalf.'

The former adviser also claimed that Prince Jefri removed billions of pounds' worth of art, gold and fine jewellery just before his palaces in Brunei were repossessed in June 2005. 'I saw the items being placed in containers,' he recalled. 'Among them were seven large decorative room-dividing screens made of solid gold. Each screen was over 6ft high and 6ft wide and weighed over 1,000lb.'

Valuable paintings were also being sold off in secret, alleged former associates. 'Jay Maggistro [the Prince's hairdresser] and

Claire Kelly [his fifth wife, a former model from New Zealand] had already sold millions of pounds' worth of paintings through an auction house in breach of the Brunei injunction. Prince Jefri asked me to have the illicit art collection valued as they wanted to sell it as a "job lot". I explained that nobody would buy it as it was all caught by the injunction. Prince Jefri told me that he would get around the injunction by claiming that the collection belonged to his wife.'

For his part, Prince Jefri has always maintained that the Sultan had known that he was spending this money from BIA coffers since the early 1990s, and says that during his time as chairman of BIA he 'only undertook his duties and tasks on the command of His Majesty and at all times had the authority to make the respective transactions'. And he claims that his brother also received funds in his personal accounts. In a judgment in 2007, the Privy Council (Brunei was a British protectorate until 1984, but London's Privy Council is still the country's highest court of appeal) found that the Sultan was a recipient of \$8 billion for his use from the same government oil revenue bank account (Jefri received \$14.8 billion, \$3.8 billion was used for government purposes and \$13.8 billion was untraced). The matter was further confused by an alleged verbal agreement between Jefri and the Sultan that allowed Jefri to keep a trust fund and five luxury properties such as the Beverly Hills Hotel and his Paris apartment on Place Vendôme. The BIA counters that this agreement was never finalised and court appeal judges confirmed this, concluding that this agreement had 'no substance'.

Prince Jefri became a fugitive, shuttling between luxury hotels with his Gurkha bodyguards

The fraternal acrimony is also due to a medieval-style power struggle within the ruling family. Some argue that it stems from the simmering resentment of the middle brother, the austere Islamic Prince Mohamed, towards his siblings. A pious conservative Muslim, Prince Mohamed is short on fun and long on prayer and regards Prince Jefri's extravagance with contempt.

The dispute reached a climax on 11 June 2008, when an international warrant to arrest Prince Jefri was issued by a judge after he failed to attend a High Court hearing on why he had failed to disclose secret bank accounts. The arrest warrant was never enforced in European Union countries but Prince Jefri did not risk visiting London where he owns St John's Lodge, a spectacular mansion hidden behind huge gates on the Inner Circle of Regent's Park, bought in 1994



The Borneo supremacy: the Sultan of Brunei in 2007

for £40 million. The house is now occupied by Jefri's wife Claire Kelly.

Facing a potential two-year jail term, Prince Jefri became a fugitive and spent most of the next two and a half years shuttling between luxury hotels with his Gurkha bodyguards. The Prince found a safe haven at the five-star Plaza Athénée hotel in Paris, owned, ironically, by the Sultan. He rarely ventured outside, spending all his time in his suite existing on room service and taking photographs of inanimate objects such as flowers.

But at least he kept his sense of humour. During his fugitive status, he sent out a Christmas card with an illustration of Wormwood Scrubs prison with an accompanying message: 'Season's Greetings and Best Wishes for a Happy New Year, Jefri Bolkiah,' alongside his signature.

Late last year, no doubt bored of long days spent at the Plaza Athénée, Jefri returned to Brunei and his lawyers, Simmons & Simmons, asked the BIA for criminal proceedings to be withdrawn. But the court has not yet discharged the arrest warrant and the Prince's lawyers have not applied for the required court hearing. Last month, lawyers for the BIA informed the judge that 'matters have not changed significantly since June 2008'. Technically the arrest warrant remains in place.

Meanwhile, the Prince faces other troubles. Most embarrassing is the memoir by Jillian Lauren who claims that she spent 18 months in the 'harem' of Prince Jefri. In her book *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem*, Lauren describes how she left New York 'for an opulent palace where she walked on rugs laced with gold and traded her band of artist friends for a coterie of back-stabbing beauties'. She reveals how a harem of 40 women competed for the attention of Prince Jefri, whose chosen Western name was Robin. 'When you're trapped at the same party every night and you wind up making out with the guy throwing the parties, and you magically have a handful of cash when you leave to go home, you're a hooker,' she wrote. Jefri has, as yet, not responded to the book.

But it is in the High Court that more secrets about the Brunei royal family are likely to be revealed and it is the Sultan who could be most embarrassed by the court disclosures. Jefri's former lawyers, Thomas Derbyshire and Faith Zaman, claim to be in possession of several documents containing intriguing secrets about the Sultan's personal life and his finances. Prince Jefri may have been publicly humiliated, but it is possible that he has outmanoeuvred his elder brother and is about to play his trump card.