

sharing our dining table with a German doctor, a

retired clergyman, a young Finnish ornithologist, and

a gap year student intending to read marine biology. We were well-fed (some British cuisine, some local – good

fish and coffee, and an excellent choice of fruit), the two

looked after. We sent our compliments to the chef for a

particularly good soup and he promptly wrote the recipe

lounges had well-stocked bars, and we were extremely well

out for us, and when we couldn't close the washing machine

door in the laundry room the first man we saw in uniform







FACT FILE

WHO TRAVELS?

Long or short voyages are offered and travellers tend to be Saints (locals) going home or to the UK, or adventurous souls who love remote islands.

CLIMATE

A gentle sub-tropical climate, rarely above 30°C or below 10°C, all year round.

offered to fix it, even though he was the ship's doctor! SCURRENCY Life on board consisted of watching films and On board: UK pound videos about St Helena, listening to talks about life sterling, St Helena on the island, booking tours for our arrival and pound, US dollar and South African And in the midst of all these rand. There are some activities there was time, glorious time, just to watch the boundless

> ocean in sunshine or moonlight becoming addicted to a fiendishly difficult jigsaw puzzle. We played deck games (quiet ones), took part

in entertaining quiz teams, and particularly enjoyed

the barbecue and punch parties that were held on deck. The well-stocked library encouraged passengers to read uninterrupted for hours in the sunshine, and every day I swam in the pool. And in the midst of all these activities there was time, glorious time, just to watch the boundless ocean in sunshine or moonlight, and look for dolphins.

And then St Helena rose like a huge, bronze, volcanic, wind-eroded rock, bounded by South Atlantic rollers. Piling into a launch we sped across to the quay at Jamestown, the capital. Here the main street, lined with 18th-century houses, looks like it belongs in an English Wiltshire market town, and the red letter boxes and yellow lines on the road serve as a reminder that St Helena is a British dependency.

The island is a true naturalist's paradise. We landed at the end of February, and although the white arum lilies (the Island's emblem) were finishing, the hibiscus hedges, plumbago, pink and white ginger and a white bell-like flower called Ladies' Petticoats were in full flower.

The excursions we'd booked were both rewarding and varied. Napoleon was imprisoned here from 1815-1821, and from Longwood, the house where he lived (now restored), to the site of his original tomb down a beautiful lane, are popular tourist attractions. An endemic plant search by coach, and a walking tour of Jamestown and its history were fascinating, but the most hilarious excursion was a day out in a 1929 charabanc. Don't worry, the engine had been replaced and the vehicle was capable, if noisy. I even swam every day in the huge open-air, fresh-water swimming pool built for the island by Royal Engineers in 1972.

St Helena is not only practically crime free but also deeply committed to conservation and a Millennium Forest of native gumwood trees, started to mark

Cruising the lonely South Atlantic Ocean with no stops for sightseeing is undoubtedly a different sort of voyage. But until the proposed airstrip is built, the only way to reach the remote island of St Helena is by sea, aboard the Royal Mail Ship St Helena, a cargo passenger liner that carries just 128 passengers.

The RMS St Helena sails twice a year from Portland Port in Dorset, calling at Tenerife, Cape Town, St Helena and Ascension Island, eventually returning to Portland via Tenerife. Sadly we couldn't justify the time needed to start from Portland, so instead flew to Cape Town (a regular schedule operates from here throughout the year) – where we stayed the night and even had time to take an excursion bus around the city – before joining the ship the next day.

The next six sea days were a delight, and without any shore interruptions, we revelled in the life on board – and there was plenty of that. We started with the Captain's cocktail party. This formal occasion (the daily Ocean Mail gives details of the dress code) offered a chance to enjoy good wine, and, being only a small group, the opportunity to talk, rather than just exchange platitudes, with the Captain. We even found we had a mutual acquaintance – a man from the same Dorset village as me.

Whether you're a first-time cruiser or a seasoned traveller, RMS St Helena is an excellent choice, and passengers are generally a mixed crowd. Many were Saints (St Helenians) going home with their families - the children were absorbed and happy with the play area and children's clubs – but we found ourselves



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP Rocks and islets found off the coast of St Helena include Speery Island and the Black Rocks; RMS St Helena at sea; the dramatic landscape seen on the way to Sandy Bay Barn; Sandy Bay has very fertile soil at the foot of the ridge. This is where most of the island's fruit and vegetables are grown; Turk's Cap is a distinctive landmark on this volcanic island.

CRUISE INTERNATIONAL 81 80 CRUISE INTERNATIONAL www.cruise-international.com www.cruise-international.com



LEFT, FROM TOP St Helena is a landscape of dramatic contrasts; RMS *St Helena* docked at Jamestown.

FACT FILE

ACCOMMODATION

RMS St Helena is the only remaining Royal Mail Ship. She carries 128 passengers and 1,500 tons of cargo. The 48 cabins include family cabins (for up to five people), a honeymoon suite, some ensuite cabins, two, three or four birth cabins and budget accommodation.

GETTING AROUND

St Helena is found 1,500 miles north west of Cape Town, 1,200 miles west of Angola on the African coast and 1,800 miles from Brazil. In addition to walking tours and boat trips, cars can be hired (there are good roads with a speed limit of 30 miles per hour) or taxis booked.

SHOPPING

I bought a canvas bag with the island's moto 'Loyal and Unshakeable' on it. Also of note is the St Helena coffee.

DEATING OUT

Restaurants tend to be attached to the hotels. My favourite was Mrs Harris' Guest House on the main street of Jamestown. Mrs Harris is a professional cook and her husband is a baker.



It was like an incredible industrial ballet, danced by professionals, as bags of cement, a quad bike and goodness knows what else were lowered from cranes

the new millennium on the late Queen Mother's 100th birthday, is being planted over 32 acres. Individual walks are well signed and others can be organized by the Nature Conservation Group of the St Helena National Trust.

There aren't any five-star hotels on the island, but the three hotels in Jamestown and some of the guesthouses more than compensate. We stayed at the 18th-century Consulate Hotel for bed and breakfast and either dined there or elsewhere. After eight lovely days we were almost sorry to return to the ship, but as we weren't sailing till the next day we found ourselves enjoying watching the workings of this vessel. It was like an incredible skilled and dangerous industrial ballet, danced by professionals, as bags of what looked like cement, a quad bike and goodness knows what else were expertly lowered from cranes, before other containers were loaded. This, we realised, is a bonus of travelling on a liner carrying essential supplies.

We enjoyed two further nights on board with old friends until we saw a line of dark, barren stone. Then, over a swelling sea we set off in a launch for the quay at Georgetown, Ascension Island's capital.

This island is tropical and, with one shop, one hotel and a few cafes, the capital has the feel of a garrison town. A taxi tour revealed the barren landscape, dotted with clumps of trailing mauve bell-like flowers by the roadside, before we arrived at Green Mountain – the

highest point offering lush green vegetation, lovely walks and great views. There's even a tunnel which takes you from one side of the mountain to the other.

The highlight of our brief visit was a night excursion organised by the Conservation Office to watch a giant turtle laying eggs on a beach (they can lay up to 90). She dug a hole, laid the eggs, covered them by flapping her flippers, and then waddled off to the sea to swim back to Brazil. And so we also took our leave, flying from the island the next day, courtesy of the Royal Air Force, to Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. The only way out if you sadly can't cruise on.

WE SAILED WITH

RMS ST HELENA
DURATION 13-day
tour from Cape Town.
INCLUDED Meals
and activities on board
and accommodation.
TO BOOK Visit www.
rms-st-helena.com
and www.discover
oursecret.co.sh

THE ISLANDER
ITINERARY
DAY 1 Cape Town
Included pre-voyage stay.
DAY 2-7 At sea
Revel in life on board
or simply relax and
watch the ocean.
DAY 8 St Helena
Land on the island.

Accommodation for two nights is arranged. DAY 10 At sea DAY 13 Ascension Island One night's accommodation is included. DAY 14 Fly to the UK Return flight from Ascension Island operated by the RAF.