



Small island

...big history



Author **Niall Griffiths** braves the South Atlantic swells on a voyage to St Helena, one of the most isolated communities in the world

### The voyage

You're on deck, basking, with your beef tea or your lunch or coffee, comfortable and settled, and then the friendly female voice over the Tannoy tells you that your nearest point of land is over 300 miles away and that you're sitting on top of 18,000 feet of black, cold, salt water. And suddenly you don't feel so settled; you realise how tiny you are, how pathetically small and insignificant, and the minute warm core of yourself is utterly dependent on the thin skin of steel that is keeping you afloat and the unseen, marvellous people who keep that skin intact.

This is all part of the thrill, of course. The boat, *RMS St Helena*, becomes your entire world; it is where you sleep, exercise, eat, socialise and work. It is where you see your doctor, should you need to, which I did; the corkscrewing motion of the sea as we left Cape Town turned me lime-green of face and had me unable to even blink without vomiting, and for the first time I understood the saying that, on the first day of seasickness, you're scared you're going to die, and on the second day, you're scared you're going to live. I could barely walk the 10 steps from my cabin to the hospital, where the doctor, an angel in sea-rig, jabbed me with a drug which took all illness away for the rest of the voyage, which is one I'll never forget.

On such a self-contained floating world, you need good company, and there were many fellow passengers who had that special twinkle in their eyes who quickly became kindred; returning Saints (as the islanders are called); South African airport workers, on the island to construct a long-awaited airport; members of the Saint Helena government; English teachers; Zimbabwean journalists; old Australian islophiles - intriguing adventurers and personalities, all.

The deck barbecue of the final night is something almost magical; this vessel, a speck on the South Atlantic, lit up like a Blackpool Christmas, the sounds of music and laughter leaping across the waves, a cocoon of companionship in the vast, wet wilderness.

It is a huge amount of fun. True, there's not a great deal to see. I found my vision becoming fixated on the petrels which seesawed across the wake and the flying fish which leapt to avoid the prow but, for me, boredom was never an issue; the wonderful crew stave that off with talks and films and deck games and the like (including a casino evening in which I won enough money to cover my tip obligations). But give me something to read and something to write with and leave me to my own devices and I'm never bored anyway. There's a truth in the maxim that active minds know no boredom, isn't there? And besides, where's the tedium in uniqueness? Apart from the liner *Queen Mary 2*, this is the last Royal Mail ship on the planet and it's not going to last long; 2016, to be exact, when the island's new airport will necessitate decommissioning. It's a trip I'd always wanted to take. I'll be forever glad that I did.





# The island

The island of St Helena is corrugated, but from every high point you can see the sea. It's ever-present; the air itself seems to simmer, constantly, with the sunshine bounced back from the endless blue water. The isolation would be utter, were it not for the sense of communality that such remoteness confers; it's a great leveller, and every person on the island is doing what you're doing, namely clinging to a sawtoothed black rock in the middle of a colossal, swelling ocean. So you might as well nod and say hello.

Jamestown will be your base, as it is everyone's, really, being the only proper town on the island, and it's one of the strangest settlements on the planet, equal parts Cornish fishing village and steamy tropical seaport. The slopes that surround it are encased in wire mesh against tumbling rocks but the impression is of a caged wildness. After five days at sea, your legs will be jelly-like, the ground unsteady and wobbling beneath your feet, and the hallucinatory aspect of the town will add to this dreaminess. The balcony of the Consulate Hotel will echo an Antipodean mining town, and the gabbling flocks of mynahs in the peepal trees will suggest India. In a place as ineffably odd as this, the mind seeks familiarities. Yet gradually, a calmness pervades; the peaceful doves pecking at your feet, the flittering Cape canaries, the bright white fairy terns, the soothing green of the leaves, and the general laid-backness of the people; all of this induces a sense of steady relaxation.

Of course, there is the weight of busy history at your shoulder, but that's a good and connective weight to carry, in my opinion, and it has produced a unity which, in its individuality, is inclusive and welcoming. The rusting cannons that can be found all over the island, from the black beach of Sandy Bay to the high green ridges of Mount Actaeon, still seem more than symbolic; there is plenty here that requires protection. ▶

**ABOVE** Jamestown; St Helena's landscape

**RIGHT** Relaxing on deck; bird life





## 1 ISLAND



*A wildness can be found in the sea, on the demanding crags of bizarre rock formations, and at weekends, in the bars and pubs*

**ABOVE** The sheer steps of Jacob's Ladder; Napoleon's tomb, a big attraction; tropical countryside

And yet there's a wildness available, if you want it, and it can be found in the sea, in the humpback cow and calf that I saw and in the hundred-strong pod of pan-tropical dolphins that leapt and span around my boat with a kind of awesome, aggressive abandon; it can be found on the demanding crags of the bizarre rock formations; and it can be found in the bars and pubs which, of a weekend, are as full and frantic as their counterparts in any British city. St Helena knows how to enjoy itself. And it can be found in the journey to and from the island, on which you're forced into being flotsam for a while. And there's the cauldron of that history; not only centred around Napoleon, but the thousands of conscripts from places like Bedford and Wrexham who were sent to the island to guard him, or the Boer POWs, or the slaves, or the Zulu chief Dinizulu, or in the island's first human inhabitant, Fernando Lopez, who suffered terrible mutilation at the hands of his employers, the Portuguese navy, for converting to Islam, and who must be the oddest castaway the world has ever known.

A local proverb has it that 'St Helena has only one entrance and no exit'. That will change in 2016, when the airport opens; but personally I wouldn't want it any other way. ❶

### WAY TO GO

A 15-day return voyage from Cape Town on the 128-passenger *RMS St Helena* (10 days at sea and four nights on St Helena) costs from £2,526 per person, excluding flights to Cape Town. Tel. 020 7575 6480 / [rms-st-helena.com](http://rms-st-helena.com). For further information on St Helena, visit <http://sthelenatourism.com>.

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