



WORLD'S END IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

Wildside travelled deep into the South Atlantic Ocean on the Royal Mail Ship, St Helena from Cape Town to Jamestown, the island capital of St Helena, one of the few places in the world still not accessible by air. The RMS St Helena provides a dedicated passenger and cargo service to this little island reached since the times of sail by the south east trade winds.



From the island's central ridge there are spectacular views of Lot (foreground) and Lot's Wife (distance) exposed dykes formed millions of years ago by volcanic activity.

Above left to right: The RMS ST Helena sets sail from Cape Town with Table Mountain providing a powerful backdrop. St Helena - the last remaining Royal Mail Ship in the world. Jamestown heritage capital of St Helena lies hidden in a deep volcanic valley.



Rory Lynsky was aboard as favourable winds blew north west from the tip of Africa to tell readers about the hidden delights of this outpost of Empire.

Left – top to bottom: The writer at the site of the Boer Prisoner of War camp on Deadwood Plain home to 3000 men who were imprisoned on this windswept field from 1900 to 1902. The St Helena Salvation Army band is a mainstay of the island's musical legacy South West Point provides dramatic views of Manati Bay and Speery island. Jacob's Ladder rising 600 ft to the top of Ladder Hill provides breathtaking views of Jamestown and James Bay anchorage.



Powerful South Atlantic rollers, hastened by the south east trade winds, crashed at the cliff base and beyond stretched an endless horizon 2000 km from the nearest landfall. It seemed like a walk to world's end.

Indeed, the world was far away standing on the south west tip of St Helena, seven days after Wildside embarked on the RMS St Helena to explore the rich cultural and natural world of this tiny island. St Helena is also one of the remotest, inhabited islands in the world.

Still wobbly after the voyage, we opted for a leisurely coastal amble to South West Point through beautiful verdant sheep pastures, edged by steep slopes and cliffs. The walk is one of 21 "Post Box" walks, to places of outstanding beauty and interest. These are used to promote St Helena as a walking destination and we were delighted. On this three hour hike, we saw not a soul as the path twisted up the volcanic headlands beneath ancient pollard-ed Erythrinas in full winter flower, sunbursts of prickly gorse bushes, scattered endemic Scrubwood and creeping Small Bellflower. Finally, we reached an old signal station where we could stamp our post box walk book, confirming that we had completed the trail.

A spectacular sight awaited us 640m above the Man and Horse Cliffs. In Manati Bay rose a guano- encrusted pinnacle, Speery Island flanked by two black, jagged companions off Castle Rock Point. The backdrop was an endless horizon shimmering in the tropical winter sun.

St Helena seems to specialise in 360 degree horizons. From Diana's Peak, at 823m the highest point on the central ridge born of ancient volcanic eruptions, the island is neatly cleaved by a giant's hand into two distinct parts. The sheltered, leeward side is soft and verdant with farms tucked into peaceful pastureland, quintessentially English in name and landscape. On the windward side we discovered interesting alpine roads cutting around deep valleys scarred and torn by nine million years of lava flows from volcano shields, with soaring domes of grey phonolitic rock. The names tell all, "Lot and Lot's Wife", "The Gates of Chaos" and "The Asses Ears" marking spectacular rock formations.





Top line left to right: RSPA Field Officer Eddie Duff shows a visitor to St Helena the breeding sites of the St Helena Wirebird, the best known of the island land birds. Longwood House, Napoleon's last residence, now a museum. Owned by the French Government, Longwood has many mementoes of France's great Emperor. Sugar Loaf Point, one of the many impressive coastal headlands that ring St Helena. **Middle row left to right:** Nurseryman Chenwin Scipio tends seedlings at the Millennium Forest Project where more than 5000 endemic Gumwood trees were planted as a conservation initiative to regenerate St Helena's native forests. Mini cars on mini and winding single lane roads that criss cross the island. A cannon dating back to the time of the English East India Company's stands sentinel outside the St Helena Supreme Court on Grand Parade. **Bottom row left to right:** Georgian facades in Main Street Jamestown. Ringing a Wirebird fledgling in the ongoing effort to ensure the survival of the last surviving endemic island bird which is extremely rare in global terms. Jonathan the Tortoise is the island's oldest inhabitant. **Bottom right:** Saints at the annual United Kingdom Armed Forces parade in Jamestown.

Sustainability is a big issue on the island and ornithologists are watching the critically endangered St Helena Wirebird (*Charadrius sanctaehelena*), the only survivor of nine endemic bird species. Wildside walked with RSPB field officer Eddie Duff on Prosperous Bay Plain viewing the bird's protected nesting and breeding habits. Research is showing an increase in numbers, now standing at around 300 adult birds, in both semi desert habitat & pastureland.

St Helena's native forests, which suffered from goats, firewood cutting and clearance for plantation crops are being regenerated. Indeed the "Great Forest" that once covered the island is remembered only in place names now, for example, Longwood, Alarm Forest and Woody Ridge. Rebecca Cairn-Wicks, director of the St Helena National Trust showed us the Millennium Forest Project where 32 ha

were planted in 2000 with the endemic St Helena Gum wood (*Commidendrum robustum*). The island community is involved in the replanting as well as adopting individual trees and today 5000 trees are flourishing in what was a badly eroded landscape. Similar conservation work is being carried out on the central peaks.

Frozen in time

In many ways St Helena seems frozen in time. When you step ashore in James Bay and Jamestown, you enter the Grand Parade through the English East India Company archway and arms – two fierce flag-bearing lions flanking a shield of St George. Georgian houses line Main Street and from the tower of St James's – the oldest Anglican church in the southern hemisphere - the clock chimes out the quarters while across the parade is the Castle, the seat of government. "HM Prison," a

tiny lock up complete with grilled door, peeps from behind the church. Lanes run up the deep volcanic valley, Napoleon Street, China Lane and Maldivia Road, echoing imperial, eastern and slave associations. Jamestown's piece de resistance is the 699 step Jacob's Ladder, a staircase built in 1829 rises a dizzy 600 feet to the top of Ladder Hill. Climb it and come down again to complete the Jacob's Ladder Challenge & the museum will issue you with a certificate.

During our eight day stay we came across African connections in the grass meadows. Crossing Deadwood Plain, wind shaped causerinas planted by the Boer prisoners between their tent rows still stand sentinel. At Broad Bottom camp, perimeter lines are still visible and nearby the Boer cemetery remembers teenage "penkoppe" and 74 year old graybeards. St Helena also has memories of King Dinizulu, exiled here and the



Above: Sheep pastures high above Horse and Man Cliffs provide a dramatic threshold to guano encrusted Speery island and Black Rocks, St Helena.

1907 poll tax revolt, when Zulu prisoners were incarcerated at Ladder Hill.

The primary destinations for history buffs remain Longwood House and Briars Pavilion, where Napoleon Bonaparte, late Emperor of France was dispatched by the British in 1815 after Waterloo. Both sites are must sees, if only to enjoy the magnificent grounds surrounded by regimented ranks of kniphofia and the endemic St Helena ebony, in contrast to the somber house where the European dictator died in 1821.

Napoleon's presence left a durable legacy. The British were paranoid that republican sympathizers would spirit him away and to prevent the unthinkable thus they ringed the coastline with a cordon of signal stations, martello towers, and defensive systems. High Knoll Fort and ghost frequented Plantation House, residence of the Governor and Jonathan, the 175 year old tortoise, are also well worth visiting.

A sea encircled people

The St Helenians or "Saints" are unique, a people isolated by the south Atlantic, descendant from East India Company employees, English settlers, African and spice island slaves, Chinese

labourers, sailors and soldiers stationed here. A note in the delightful Jamestown museum says it all - "A typical saint is friendly, fun loving, unhurried, resourceful, has a strong sense of family and a deep connection to their island" - that was our overriding impression. Always ready with a friendly wave, happy to help the visitor with directions or to engage in conversation. All delivered in a soft cadence with echos of an older England. With compassion and humility, these sea encircled people, are the real treasures of the south Atlantic.

Where to stay & things to do

Jamestown and surrounds offers good accommodation, ranging from hotels, private bed and breakfasts to self catering. Restaurants include Ann's Place, a mecca for visiting yachties and cruise passengers. Wildside were guests of the St Helena Tourist Office at Rose Ellan self catering, a short distance from The Briars Pavilion.

St Helena has a wide choice of nautical pursuits, including scuba diving, snorkelling, deep-sea fishing for marlin, wahoo, barracuda and tuna. Kayaking, water skiing and sailing in the waters surrounding the island are also very popular. Several fellow passengers went on

dolphin and bird viewing trips or visited the wreck of the RFA Darkdale sunk by a German U boat. Golfers can enjoy a round at Longwood Golf Course, the remotest courses in the world. Getting around the island is easy with car hire, taxis and a regular bus service.

Wildside opted for car hire arranged through the Tourist Office. Due to its position the island is seldom visited, with less than 100 visitors a month. Access is by yacht, cruise liner or the RMS St Helena via Namibia, South Africa or the United Kingdom. However, Pamela Young, Director of Tourism, sees a future in developing the island into a sustainable tourism destination and is keen to see air access introduced, which will give a boost to the current sea lifeline to St Helena and increase visitors to 100 a week.

All too soon the RMS St Helena returned from its round trip to Ascension Island and we reluctantly re-embarked bound for the world of shopping malls, advertising hoardings, traffic lights, noise and busy highways, thankfully all absent on this little island. A school of spotted dolphin surfed alongside as the RMS St Helena ran close to the coast. Then, as we rounded South West Point into the teeth of a south Easter, cloud enveloped the island – world's end.



RMS St Helena – island lifeline

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Passengers aboard the 128 berth, purpose built, passenger cargo vessel are quickly drawn into the lives of the “Saints” by islanders returning home or visiting for family reunions. Relaxing on the mail ship’s spacious sun deck, in the lounge during the seven day outward voyage via Walvis Bay, one enjoys a warmth and inclusiveness not often found in modern travel.

The current service has indeed handsomely captured the atmosphere of the old Union Castle line and the warm relationship with St Helena and the Saints, until discontinued more than 30 years ago. The primary reason for this lies in the spirit aboard, for Captain Andrew Greentree and the ship’s company ensure all the passengers feel at home.

Leaving Table Mountain behind in fading light, we awoke to a cloudless dawn and a wind flecked horizon. Soon parties of short tailed albatrosses, sooty terns and storm petrels circled the ship. Sea conditions are ideal with a warm winter sun filtering through the bow wave. Sea birds are joined by pods of spotted dolphins surfing the aft waves before they tire and veer off into a cobalt blue sea..

We were assigned a comfortable A deck, two berth en-suite cabin. Purser

Alan Bennett through the daily “Ocean Mail” keeps us busy with talks and films on the ship’s destination and an inexhaustible diet of games. The ship has a good library, a well stocked shop and e-mail, fax and telephone facilities and a daily international news downloaded via satellite. The ship has a doctor and surgery. And yes, there are laundry facilities and a playroom for the youngsters!

Early morning tea or coffee is served by your cabin steward, followed by continental or English breakfast, Beef tea and drinks on the sun deck or in the two comfortable lounges. Formal dinners are prepared by Chef de Cuisine Karl Schulz. We enjoyed wonderful food, rounded off with a farewell dinner, which included starters of thinly sliced smoked ostrich rosettes, served with a raspberry mayonnaise and melon preserve and for the main course fillet of beef with mushroom and onion relish drizzled with a brandy gravy.

Andrew Weir Shipping Company have developed a seamless embarkation procedure for passengers at the RMS St Helena’s home base in Cape Town, at Walvis Bay and Jamestown. From arrival, through luggage dispatch, entry onto the vessel and then being shown to our cabin took less than 30 minutes.

Cruising north-west into the Atlantic we track across the north-south shipping lanes, ancient sea routes from the time of the Portuguese explorers who discovered St Helena, through the English East India Company, the Union Castle Line, to the RMS St Helena, today the last remaining mail ship in the world following the cross and polar star in the southern sky. **W**

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ST HELENA

The trip: A voyage on the RMS St Helena consists of 5 days sailing to St Helena, a week on St Helena and 5 days sailing back to Cape Town. During the voyage the Purser organizes activities and entertainment such as deck games, ‘frog racing’, and Captain’s cocktail party.

Cost: Fares range from R10,094 to R31,008 pp for the return voyage in two berth or twin bed cabins. Cabins are spacious and comfortable and all on A and B deck have en-suite facilities.

Accommodation: St Helena has hotels, B&B or self-catering. Hotel ranges from R600 pppn, self-catering from R300.

The RMS St Helena: Usually sails from Cape Town to St Helena every 3 weeks and twice a year to the UK - Portland.

Visa: No visa is required for St Helena, only a valid passport.

Currency: The St Helena currency is on par with the British currency.

To book: Andrew Weir Shipping on (021) 425-1165, e-mail sthelenaline@mweb.co.za or visit www.rms-st-helena.com

About St Helena: St Helena is an Overseas Territory of the UK and one of the world’s most remote inhabited islands, situated in the South Atlantic Ocean, at 15.56 S and 5.43 W.

The island is 1950 km from the African coast, 2900 km from South America. It is only 17 km by 10 km. It emerged from the ocean as a volcano 14 million years ago. Uninhabited until its discovery in 1502, it is remarkable for its unique history as a trading post and fortress, for a magnificent coastline, beauty of its landscape and endemic species. Jamestown, is an example of an 18th English East India Company town.

St Helena has a population of 4000. In spite of deforestation and erosion caused by human settlement, its landscape remains one of outstanding variety, contrast and beauty.