



# FIT FOR AN EMPEROR

THE DEFINITION OF REMOTE, THE ISLAND OF ST HELENA FAMOUSLY PLAYED HOST TO NAPOLEON, BUT THE RECENTLY OPENED FLIGHTS FROM JOBURG MEAN THAT TODAY'S TRAVELLER CAN ENJOY HIKING, DIVING AND EXPLORING ITS HISTORICAL SIGHTS WITHOUT GOING INTO EXILE

BY JAMES BAINBRIDGE

If you thought Graaff-Reinet and the Kgalagadi were remote, then meet St Helena, one of the world's most far-flung islands. The nearest island neighbours of this 17 km-by-10 km outpost in the South Atlantic are Ascension Island (more than 1 000 km to the north) and Tristan da Cunha (more than 2 000 km south). The closest proper pieces of dry land are Namibia's Skeleton Coast, 2 000 km east, and Brazil, more than 3 500 km west. Feeling lonely yet? Well, don't, because the 120 km<sup>2</sup> island houses a population of 4 500 'Saints', a fascinating history, a subtropical climate and activities from hiking to boat tours. It has also been considerably easier to reach since October 2017, when flights from Joburg to the island's new airport superseded the five-night ocean voyage from Cape Town.

There was no such luck for the Portuguese, who discovered St Helena in the early 16th century and kept it secret from their maritime rivals, although the Dutch and British East India Companies eventually found out. With the Dutch refuelling their scurvy-ridden sailors in Cape Town, the Brits took control, naming Jamestown, the island's capital in a canyon, after King James II. English heritage predominates in this British Overseas Territory, but Saints have their own English dialect and, much like many South Africans, can trace their roots to mainland Africa, India and Madagascar.

## THE EMPEROR'S SWEET WINE

Apart from its remoteness, St Helena is most infamous as the isolated spot chosen by the British for the exile of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815, following the flamboyant French emperor's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo. Napoleon spent

## WHERE TO STAY

### ► Mantis St Helena

Part of the five-star Mantis Collection, this chic hotel near the Jamestown seafront occupies a contemporary building and historic barracks, offering modern and heritage rooms, a restaurant and bar. [mantisstheleena.com](http://mantisstheleena.com)

### ► Richards Travel Lodge

In the hills above Jamestown, this no-frills B&B offers comfortable rooms with a patio and a flat-screen TV. The restaurant is also popular. [islandimages.co.sh](http://islandimages.co.sh)

his last five years in Longwood House, reflecting on his military campaigns and consoling himself with Vin de Constance, his beloved sweet wine made in Constantia. Indeed, proving that the French do everything in style, the Napoleon camp had a daily allowance of 50 bottles of wine, champagne and spirits, supplemented by a monthly allowance of 34 bottles, including 14 of Constantia's celebrated amber nectar.

You can take an audio tour of Longwood House, which was chosen for the exposed position that made it easy to guard the wily general, and converted from its previous incarnation as the island governor's summer residence. Inside, wander through the billiard room,



Street scene in Jamestown

the drawing room and Napoleon's private suite, where he was often found reading or eating in his favourite place, the lead bath. The bath took a return trip to France following his demise in 1821, while a farmer filled the house with sheep and horses, but the property has been restored and is now a piece of French soil, along with Napoleon's unmarked tomb in nearby Sane Valley, a peaceful glade he was fond of visiting, and where he lay until his body was repatriated in 1840.

Completists can also visit the Briars Pavilion, where Napoleon spent his first few months on St Helena, coincidentally following in the footsteps of his foe at Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington. Make sure you take along a bottle of Vin de

The view towards Sandy Bay and some of St Helena's striking volcanic features



The famous Jacob's Ladder

Constance in honour of the great Frenchman; the varietal was wiped out by the 19th-century *Phylloxera* aphid plague, but has been reintroduced by four Constantia wineries.

## OP DIE EILAND

Another South African connection on St Helena is marked by the last resting place of some of the 5 000-odd Boers shipped here in 1900. General Piet Cronjé and his wife got a cottage, but most prisoners were interned in two camps, digging roads and playing cricket against the Brits until news of the Anglo-Boer War's end reached the island. One enterprising escapee hid in a crate marked 'Boer Curios' and got as far as Ascension, but most of the South Africans remembered St Helena fondly, and a few stayed on the island. If you take a Magma Way historic walking tour, your guide will be Basil George, a direct descendant of Boer prisoner Charles Smid, who married a local and became known island-wide as 'Boer Smith'.

## SEVEN WONDERS

The island's historical sights also include the punishing stone staircase known as Jacob's Ladder, the southern hemisphere's oldest Anglican church, dating to 1774, and the

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Napoleon's unmarked tomb in the Sane Valley

## KNOW THIS

### ▶ Getting there

Airlink flies from OR Tambo to Jamestown (6¼ hours) on Saturday morning, stopping in Windhoek to refuel, and returns the same day. Extra midweek flights will be offered between December and April 2019.

### ▶ Getting around

There are several taxi services and car-rental outfits listed at [sthelenatourism.com](http://sthelenatourism.com). You can hire a car with your South African driving licence for about R280 a day – book well ahead. Visit [sainthelena.gov.sh/visitors](http://sainthelena.gov.sh/visitors) for details of the island's five bus routes and airport shuttle.

### ▶ Visas

South Africans can buy a visitor visa on arrival for £20 (R380). Bring proof of your medical travel insurance.

### ▶ Money

St Helena has limited credit and debit card facilities, and no ATMs. There is a bank in Jamestown and an airport kiosk where you can obtain cash advances and exchange cash and travellers' cheques for St Helena Pounds, which are fixed to the British pound.



A hiker admiring the view over St Helena

18th-century High Knoll Fort; all are on the list of the Seven Wonders of St Helena. Don't forget your walking shoes to catch the sunset from the fort and tick off a few of the 21 Postbox Walks, which take in landmarks such as the Heart-Shaped Waterfall and the island's highest point, Diana's Peak (823 m).

The tip of an extinct volcano, St Helena's extraordinary environment includes mountain ridges, lava flows, rock formations, cloud forest and at least 45 unique endemic plant species, while you can see whale sharks, dolphins and shipwrecks beneath the waves. There's certainly more than enough to keep you busy for a week before catching that flight back across many miles of blue to Joburg. ✈