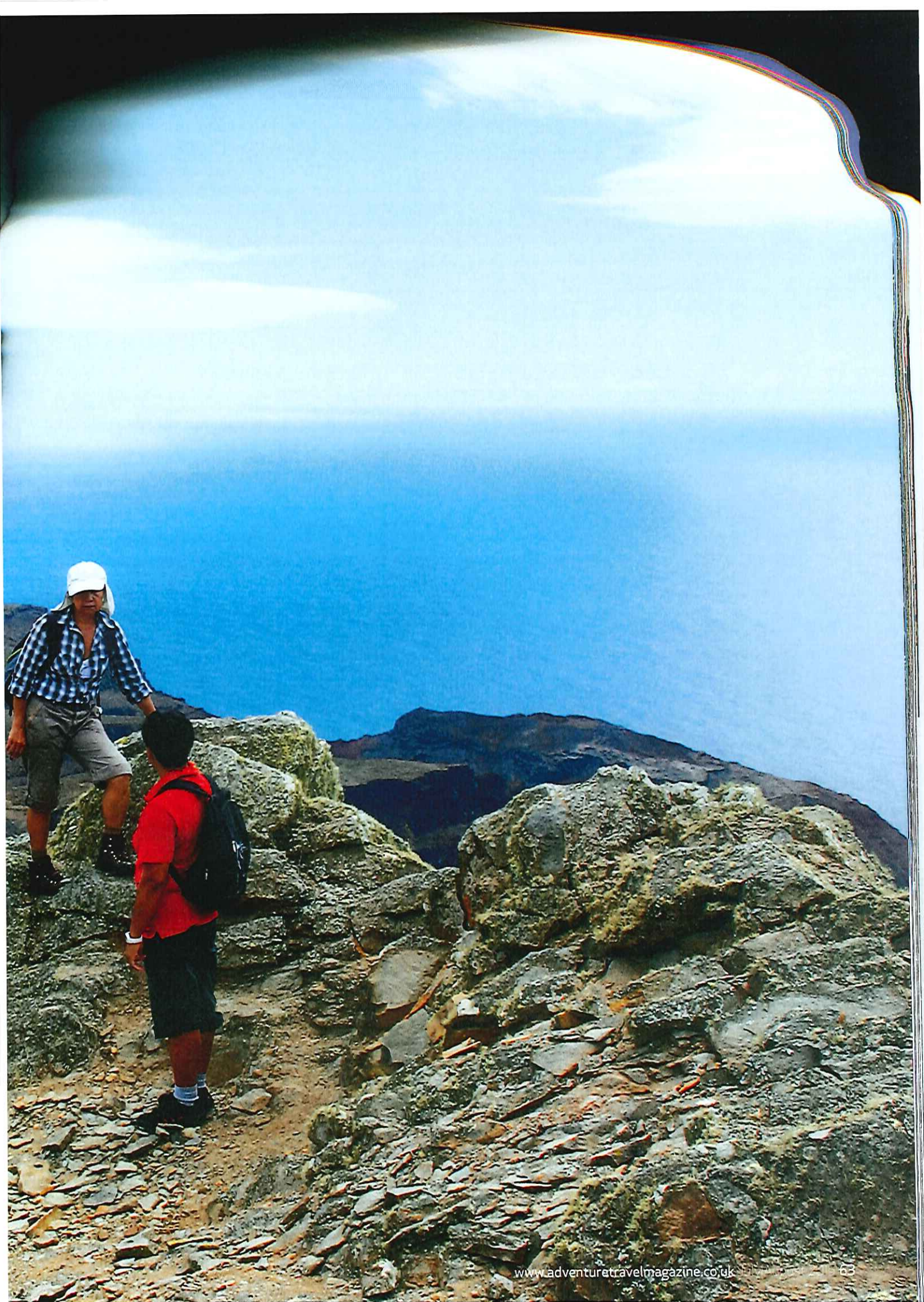


A forgotten *island*

In the South Atlantic, Saint Helena is one of the most remote islands in the world – it takes five days by boat to get there. **Tricia Hayne** thinks it's worth the journey





“You can look now.” For the last five minutes of our climb, David, the self-styled ‘Bug Man’ of St Helena, has put us on our honour to look only straight ahead. Now we’re standing at the tip of this tiny volcanic island, 823m above the sea on Diana’s Peak. At my feet are some of the rarest plants in the world, throwbacks to the time before man discovered this remote hideaway, only 500 years ago. Around us, the land falls away in rolling green folds of ridges and gulleys. Then for miles in any one direction there is nothing but sea. We are, effectively, marooned.

The mist comes and goes, a soft curtain that chooses to showcase here the odd bay, there a lone Norfolk pine, or perhaps a uniformly green hillside, the bane of environmentalists who fight a constant battle against the invasive New Zealand flax. But for us, in our mountain-top cocoon, it’s all about the views, and I’m impatient for the next dramatic landscape to unfurl.

Only three days before, my husband Bob and I had watched as our link with the outside world, the RMS *St Helena*, sailed out of sight towards Ascension Island. Setting off from Cape Town we’d spent five days on the boat to get here, and it would sail another three before it reached Ascension. I’d expected to feel unnerved, but it was strangely liberating to know that there was no

escape. But then, unlike Napoleon who was exiled here in 1815, we weren’t here for keeps. And while we were free to explore, he was confined to the barren rocks of the northeast, which are the island at its most forbidding.

First up was exploration by 4x4, along St Helena’s steep, winding, narrow roads. With an enthusiasm for off-road driving tempered only by that for his island, St Helenian Aaron Legg was set on showing off every hidden gully, or ‘gut.’ We drove up hills so steep that second gear was an achievement. Down tracks lined with towering forests of eucalyptus. Across the Artist’s Palette, a subtly blended series of brown, cream and rusty-red rocks. Each time we turned a corner, it was as if we were turning the page of an enchanted book,



Volcanic views: on the island's highest point



so different was the terrain.

At Deadwood Plain, Aaron stopped to point out a field that over a century ago had been home to several thousand Boer prisoners of war. I didn't expect to see today's inhabitant, the wirebird, but there it was, serenely hopping across clumps of rough grass, one of just 400 of these small, unassuming plovers that live nowhere else in the world.

It was with reluctance that we tore ourselves away, even though it was to tackle the first of our 'postbox' walks. These 21 walks are graded from one to nine, or they would be if there were any at number one. Flagstaff is probably the easiest, awarded a two for difficulty and terrain. Short but steep, a bit slippery on pine needles, a slight diversion around rocks at the top to avoid getting ➤

NAPOLÉON BONAPARTE



As St Helena's most famous resident, Napoleon leaves a lot to be desired in tourism terms. Exiled to the island 200 years

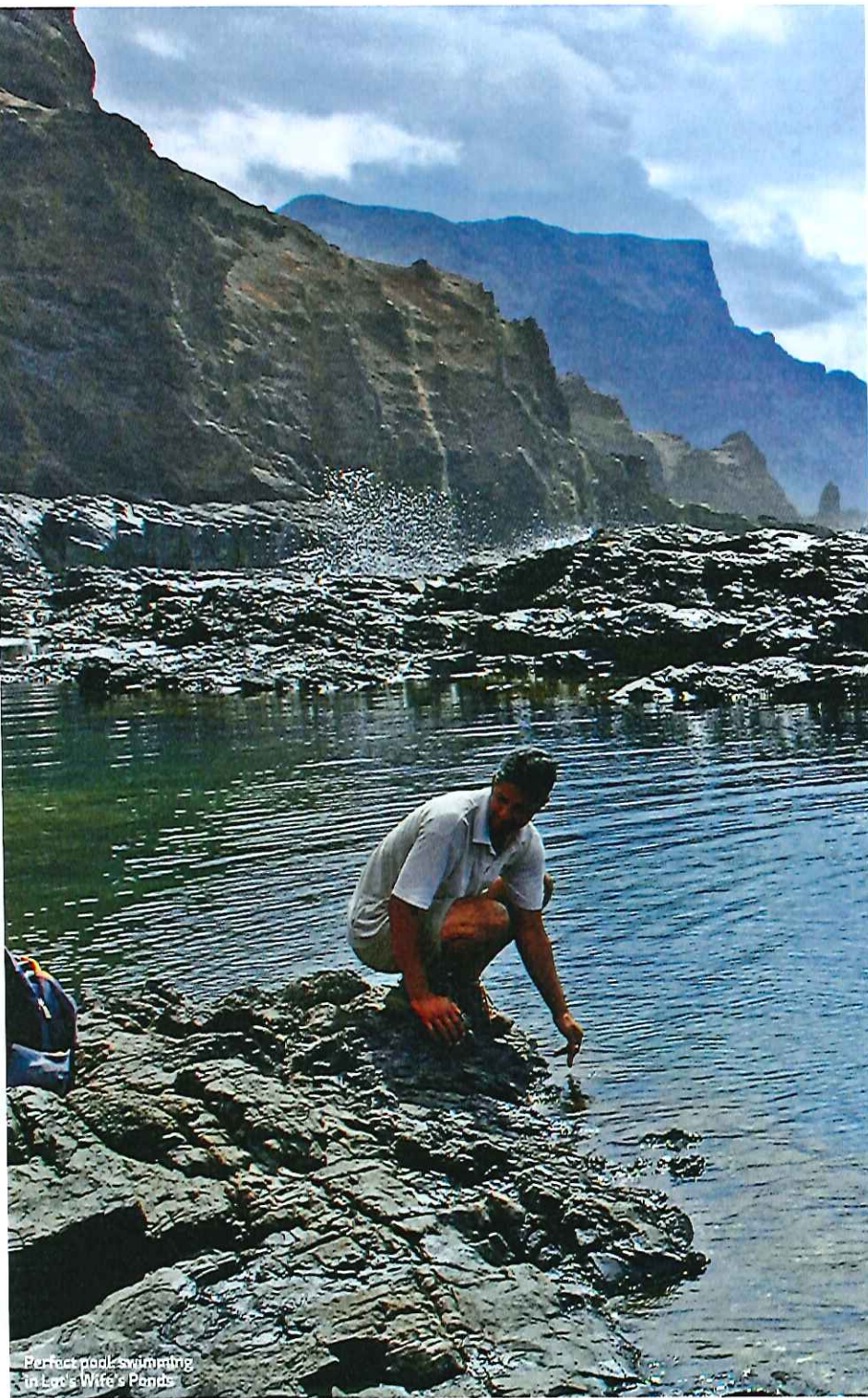
ago, following the Battle of Waterloo, he was in no mood to be beguiled by a place that he found deeply depressing. Billeted at Longwood House, he found himself in the bleakest part of the island, cold, wet and windy in winter, and frequently enshrouded by drenching mists. His house was damp and cramped; his jailers seemingly bent on making his life a misery.

If there were compensations, they were few. He insisted on lavish formal meals with expensive wines, but wouldn't grace the dinner table for longer than was absolutely necessary. Dictating his memoirs became an obsession, one that caused mounting jealousy among members of his entourage. As time went on, long hot baths in his deep copper tub became an increasingly important solace. Even his garden, a brief source of joy, soon lost its allure.

It's slightly extraordinary, then, that the cult of Napoleon still holds fast. He may not be the reason why most people visit St Helena, but he's frequently the only reason they've heard of it, and few set foot on St Helenian soil without paying their respects at Longwood House, or his tomb. Mind you, that tomb has long been empty – Napoleon's body was shipped back to France with full ceremonial honours almost 20 years after his death. If you want to pay your respects, you really only have to go to Paris.

too close to a sheer drop and then a postbox at the end concealing a rubber stamp. If that was a grade 2/2, I was raring to try something tougher.

Challenge set, and the walks also helped us get a sense of place on the 10-mile by five-mile island which, like Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands, is a British Overseas Territory. The stroll to Southwest Point was glorious, across open pasture to the westernmost point of St Helena. Cox's Battery took us out to the ruins of a military site, and views down on to a volcanic arrangement of rock known as the Turk's Cap. The Heart-Shaped Waterfall joined the dots between the capital Jamestown and The Briars, where Napoleon spent the early



months of his exile. And as we toiled up the barren slopes of Great Stone Top, we were rewarded with cliffs so sheer that it was like being handed a rocky certificate of achievement. Yet all the while, there was one hanging over me: Lot's Wife's Ponds, graded 6/8.

I'd heard the hype – the one walk that everyone should do. I'd been fed the bait – sea ponds at the bottom where you could swim. And I'd seen the pictures – rough ropes tied to rocks. Aaron didn't think I should do it. David the Bug Man thought I'd probably cope – just.

I was so fired up I forgot my swimming costume. Unlike our other walks, this one started on the coast, at Sandy Bay. With black sand and water

that's unsafe for swimming, St Helena's only beach doesn't have that lie-back-with-a-drink appeal. On the path, though, overseen by the pillar of stone that is Lot's Wife, there was drama in store. Narrow and rocky, it hugged the striated volcanic hillside as we wound up on to a ridge, where a masked booby was keeping one eye on her large, fluffy chick, and the other on us. Looking down was less appealing, a jumble of rocks that tumbled to the sea. One slip and I'd have joined them, but for a rope to cling on to at the stickiest point.

We passed an outcrop of cutely named babies' toes, one of the success stories among St Helena's 45 endemic plants. Far above the waves, patches of the



'Each time we turned a corner, it was as if we were turning the page of an enchanted book'

Who's writing?



Formerly editorial director of Bradt Travel Guides, Tricia Hayne is now a freelance writer who specialises in walking and out-of-the-way places, researching guidebooks along the way. They don't come much more out-of-the way than St Helena, but Tricia and her husband Bob have found themselves variously hiking Namibia's Fish River Canyon, diving in the Turks and Caicos Islands and exploring the wilderness of northern Botswana on foot. Next stop: Zambia's Zambezi Valley.

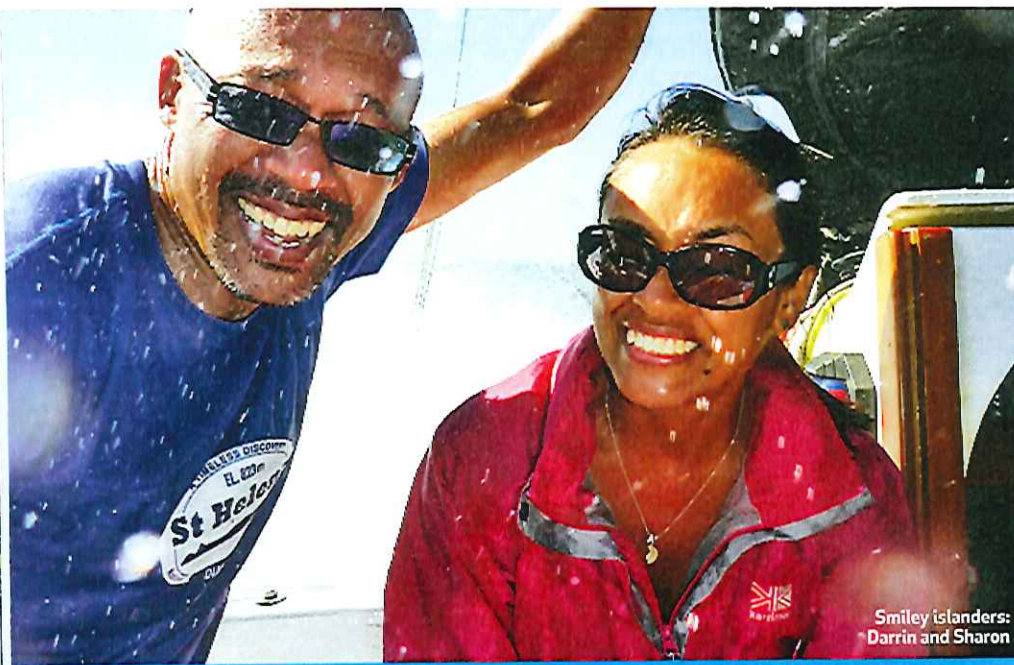
purest white sand softened our way. And down below, those tantalising ponds came into view. As I scanned the ground for a way to scramble down, I found a tightly knotted rope. Part jumping, part abseiling, I made it to the bottom, and a vast natural pond protected by natural rock from the Atlantic rollers. Cool, deep and dotted with shimmering fish, the crystal-clear water was invitation enough.

St Helena may be remote, but the Saints are far from inward looking. Many of them leave the island to study or work – in fact almost everyone we spoke to had either lived or studied overseas, usually in the UK, or had friends or family living there. Aaron

had spent five years on the RMS *St Helena*, as had his girlfriend who has since set up a B&B; it's a great way to learn about the tourist industry.

Most water activities on St Helena start from the tiny capital of Jamestown. Nestled at the foot of dramatic cliffs, its main street is lined with beautiful 18th-century houses. Everywhere you walk there's a nod of greeting, a friendly hello, a quick chat. The town gate opens through an arch on to the harbour wall, where fishing boats bob in the harbour, joined at regulated intervals by the RMS *St Helena*, along with the odd disproportionate cruise ship and a handful of yachts.

Slipping into the water by the wharf ➤



Smiley islanders:
Darrin and Sharon

Meet the locals

What's it like to live somewhere where mainland is five days away by boat? We find out from St Helenian **Darrin Henry**, who blogs at www.whattthesaintsdidnext.com

What's it like to grow up somewhere that's five days to the nearest mainland?

Growing up it wasn't an issue; we didn't know anything else so it was normal. As an adult, especially after travelling abroad, you become more aware of the isolation, but again, it's a way of life so everyone plans ahead, allowing long lead times for everything.

What are the advantages?

The freedom and safety. The crime rate is very low, and it's like a big family where everyone looks out for everyone else. After school my brother and I would play outdoors until dark. Our biggest danger was falling out of a tree or off our bikes.

And the disadvantages?

You can't get away and be anonymous for a day or two. Knowing everyone else also means everyone knowing your business! And the isolation means enforced delays on urgent items such as car parts, and clothing may turn out to be the wrong size after waiting for two months.

How often do you leave?

We try to get away at least once every two years, but it can be expensive. If you

don't book early enough, a return trip for two to Cape Town can cost £4,500. But we've lived and worked in the UK and on Ascension Island, so we have lived away for a bit.

Ever wish you could pop into town for a Starbucks?

All the time! The anonymity of chilling in a coffee shop, reading a magazine or surfing the free wi-fi is something we love about the big world.

'We try to get away at least once every two years, but it can be very expensive'

Do you know all of the people on St Helena?

Perhaps not all. If I don't know their names I tend to know their faces and who they're related to or what part of the island they're from. And people just ask outright who you are if they don't know. It can be unsettling if you're not used to it.

What happens in a medical emergency?

We have quite a good hospital with expatriate doctors.

For specialist treatment patients are medevaced to Cape Town or to the UK. If the ship isn't nearby at the time then patients have to wait which can cause problems when the issues are urgent.

What do people do for work on the island?

Various things but similar to elsewhere: the island is a microcosm of a town in the UK. There is more and more of a push to develop the private sector and encourage entrepreneurship. Next year the airport opens and then we hope tourism will become the economic driver for the island with the supporting businesses.

How do you feel about commercial flights running to St Helena as of next year?

Can't wait. Our access time to the outside world becomes four hours instead of 124 hours and also cheaper. It opens up all sorts of business and educational opportunities for Saints. As a photographer this will help me immensely. It also means our family overseas are suddenly a lot closer and an extended bank holiday weekend holiday becomes a possibility for the first time. I'm looking forward to it.



with a mask and snorkel, we were instantly surrounded by a mass of tiny gold-edged butterflyfish, as if in some fishy snowdome. Known locally as cunningfish, they are found nowhere else in the world except here and around Ascension Island. And yet, like the babies' toes and the wirebird, they are easily spotted. St Helena may have her treasures, but she's happy to share.

Jutting out of the water across the bay, a crude piece of metal beckoned: the rudder of the SS *Papanui*. A passenger ship that caught fire and sank in 1911, she has since become part of the island's rich maritime history. Dodging between the mooring lines, we were there in no time, hovering with our snorkels over the boat's sinister superstructure.

We got to go back again, this time with scuba kit. Joined by a shoal of silvery jacks, we peered into cabins and beneath the hull, where moray eels lurked and spiny lobsters waved their spindly antennae. Further along the



Not a problem: a steep island path

coast, we finned over rocks burnished red in the sunshine. Squeezing beneath a narrow ledge roofed by orange cup coral, I emerged face to face with a wide-eyed squirrelfish.

Back on land, we hired kayaks and paddled lazily down to Lemon Valley, a cove accessible only on foot or by boat. A turtle passed, seemingly oblivious to my bright-blue craft. Above us the cliffs were flecked white with nesting fairy terns, and at sea level a brown booby swooped low, searching for fish. We swam, we snorkelled, we scoured the rocks, sending unsuspecting crabs scuttling into crevices shiny with algae. Paddling back against the current was more of a work out.

Our final adventure was fishing. Local fisherman Keith Yon made it clear that we weren't going to see whale sharks. It hadn't crossed my mind that we would. It was March, the end of the season, and they hadn't been seen for days. Camera at the ready, I focused on the

birds, the cliffs, the dolphins cavorting in the bay, the play of light on water. I watched with mixed feelings as Bob reeled in a huge wahoo, blue stripes against silver as it thrashed on the floor of the small boat. When it was my turn, sentimentality went overboard as I wrestled with a second wahoo, hopelessly uncoordinated.

"You're in luck!" For a moment I had no idea what Keith was excited about, but then I saw it. Like the tip of an iceberg, a black fin hinted at the presence of a whale shark. Dappled spots broke the surface, arranging themselves into the shape of this, the largest known fish. Camera off, sunglasses ditto, I slipped into the water to swim alongside it. How could I take in its beauty, its grace, its sheer size in so fleeting a moment? You can't, of course. But that image is stored in my memory. And next time I go to St Helena, maybe I'll add another – of humpback whales. **AT**

ST HELENA – in numbers

- **4,255** people living on the island
- **4,000** kilometres east of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil
- **3,130** kilometres west of Cape Town
- **1,300** kilometres away (three days by boat) from Ascension Island
- **513** years since St Helena was discovered, uninhabited, by the Portuguese (in 1502, to save you doing the maths)
- **400** endemic bird and plant species on the island
- **47** square miles, the total area of the island – a little bit bigger than Guernsey, or about the size of Coll in Scotland's Inner Hebrides
- **6** years Napoleon Bonaparte spent on St Helena in exile (from 1815 until his death in 1821, although his body remained on the island for almost another 20 years)



All aboard: searching for whale sharks



LET'S GO

Want to do what Tricia did? Here's how you can...



How to get there

Right now, St Helena is accessible only by the RMS *St Helena* (www.rms-st-helena.com), which shuttles every three weeks between Cape Town, St Helena and Ascension Island. Typically, the voyage takes five nights from Cape Town, or three from Ascension, and it's surprisingly enjoyable. Cabins, all with air-con, vary from small two-bunk affairs sharing bathrooms to relatively smart en-suite ones; prices vary too, from £462 to £2,069 one way.

For those in a hurry, there are RAF flights from Brize Norton in Oxfordshire to Ascension, costing about £500 one way, but seats for civilians are very limited.

In 2016, St Helena will for the first time be accessible by air. Flights will be every Saturday from Johannesburg with Comair, a subsidiary of British Airways.



When to go

Summer on St Helena is November to March. It's the best time for walking, as there's less chance of rain, though from that point of view, September and October might be better than March. Diving and fishing are all-year activities, but the water is warmest between October and April. Your best chance of seeing whale sharks is in January. Humpback whales are more predictable, usually between July and December.



Where to stay

Accommodation is limited, so you must have a place to stay before you arrive. The best bargain is self-catering, with options both in Jamestown and 'in the country' from £35 a night for two. These are simply furnished flats or bungalows but have all the necessities. Further up the scale are a mix of guesthouses and B&Bs, some with modern en-suite rooms, others very traditional, all exceptionally welcoming. Prices range from £90 a night for a double with breakfast. At the top of the pile are two hotels, each with an entirely different style, at £200 B&B.



Food and drink

St Helenian food is all about fish, specifically tuna: tuna pilau (pronounced 'plo'), tuna curry, tuna fishcakes, tuna pie. There's also plenty of frozen meat to back up the local pork and beef. Fruit and vegetable supplies are erratic, more easily found in restaurants than in shops, but then shopping is all part of the fun. St Helenian coffee is worth seeking out, as is the local spirit, Tungi – distilled from the prickly pear.



What to take

Medical insurance is a priority; without it you won't be allowed on to the island. Beyond that, all the obvious items for an active holiday: daysack, hat, sunscreen, walking shoes,

possibly walking poles, swimwear. Divers will need certificates and logbooks, and any easily portable kit, but you can hire excellent equipment for a reasonable rate.



Getting around

Hire cars are in short supply, so it's essential to organise one in advance. Cars are usually pretty basic, but cost from just £12 a day.



Tour operators and tourist info

UK operators include Island Holidays (www.islandholidays.co.uk), Voyages Jules Verne (www.vjv.com), Discover the World (www.discover-the-world.co.uk) and Halcyon Collections (www.halcyon-collections.com), as well as the shipping agent AW Ship Management (www.rms-st-helena.com), but there's nothing to stop you going it alone.

On the island, 4x4 trips are run by Aaron Legg (aat@helanta.co.sh) who is also a good walking guide. For fishing and diving, contact Into the Blue (keith.michielle@helanta.co.sh) or Sub-Tropic Adventures (www.stsa.co.sh). Botanical and wirebird trips are organised through the St Helena National Trust (www.nationaltrust.org.sh).

But your first port of call should be St Helena Tourism (www.sthelenatourism.com). There's details of most accommodation on its website, and it will book these, car hire and pretty well any activities on your behalf.