



# Following Napoleon

For a voyage that gets completely off the beaten track, it's hard to beat the unique offerings of the *RMS St Helena*, says **Simon Veness**

## The Journeys of the RMS St Helena

**W**hen it comes to the more far-flung parts of the world, they don't come much more remote than the island of St Helena in the South Atlantic.

Not only is it not on the map for many of the mainstream cruise lines, it receives only a handful of ship visits each year. Which is pretty significant when you discover this distant outpost – a British Overseas Territory 1,500 miles north-west of Cape Town in South Africa – can ONLY be accessed by sea.

There is no airport on the rocky island, hence St Helena luxuriates in an air of isolation that is hard to find anywhere else in the world, a far-off destination best known for the exile of Napoleon in 1815.

At just 47 square miles – the same size as Walt Disney World in Florida – the island is both small and genuinely serene, a former volcanic outcrop discovered by the Portuguese and settled by the British in 1659. It is also one of the most fascinating places you can visit by ship.

Which is where the *RMS St Helena*





comes in. One of the world's last working Royal Mail Ships, she is the island's life-line, a regular visitor from Cape Town with twice-yearly visits to the UK via Ascension Island and Tenerife.

The 128-berth vessel is a true original, a unique blend of passenger ship and cargo vessel, being the sole source of supply of all goods to her island namesake as well as an experience of travel from a bygone era.

Passengers are made up of tourists and St Helenians – or 'Saints' as they are known locally – travelling home, with a range of popular themed voyages throughout the year, featuring specialist guest speakers on music, ornithology and history.

**T**he full voyage begins in Portland in Dorset and takes a month to complete, with two calls at Ascension Island and two at St Helena, including a two or three-night stopover to explore. However, the voyage can also be taken in 13, 18 and 24-day versions from Cape Town, providing more time at each of the south Atlantic ports of call and including Tristan da Cunha on one itinerary.

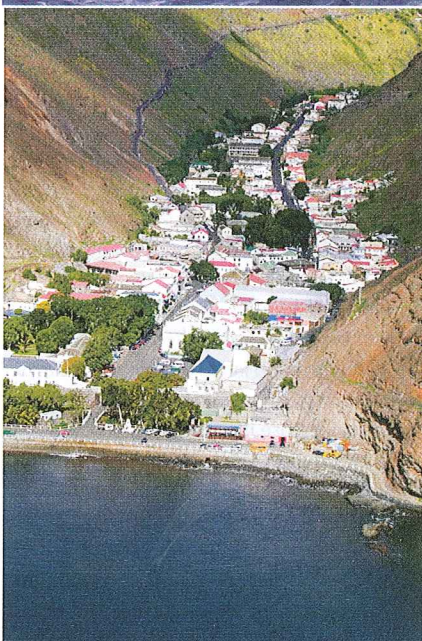
The nature of the ship's schedule also allows for a variety of holiday combinations and the ability to 'hop on' and 'hop off' at some of the ports, staying longer at some destinations or connecting with international flights for onward travel.

But those basics do not do justice to the experience that is *RMS St Helena*. Built in 1989 purposely to serve the island of her name, she weighs in at a scant 6,767 tons – barely a lifeboat by today's mega-ship standards. But she carries 128 passengers in great style and affords the kind of travel adventure that is almost extinct these days.

Of course, there are no casinos, show-lounges, fancy spas, golf courses, shopping malls and water parks. Instead, what you find is a relaxed, refined and thoroughly convivial mode of travel that is geared around social occasions like meal-times, lectures, film nights and cocktail parties.

Good conversation replaces high-energy shows; a good-natured game of bingo becomes the daily pre-occupation; afternoon tea is more of a high point than the queue for the buffet; and the day's events unfurl at a leisurely pace that allow for proper enjoyment of one's surroundings, in the company of like-minded passengers and officers and crew who add a real human dimension to the voyage.

That isn't to say the *RMS* doesn't possess high-quality creature comforts. Passengers (and yes, they do still refer to them as such, not the ubiquitous 'guests' you find



"There is an **UNDENIABLE AMBIENCE** of **NOSTALGIA** on board, harking back to a more **GENTEEL AGE** of **CRUISING**"

### SAILING WITH THE SAINTS

1. HRH Princess Anne travelled on the *RMS* to St Helena in 2002.
2. The officers write, choreograph and perform the cabaret show.
3. Both captains of the *RMS* are from St Helena.
4. The most unusual passengers have been two *crocodiles* that travelled from Cape Town to Tenerife.
5. On the last voyage to St Helena from the UK, there was a fire engine onboard, donated by Dorset Fire and Rescue service.

elsewhere) are still looked after around the clock, with two bars, the full-service dining room, sun deck, shop, swimming pool, gymnasium and library to keep everyone entertained.

There is also an undeniable atmosphere of nostalgia, as the range of informative talks, quizzes, films and other low-key entertainments hark back to a more genteel age of maritime excursions. You eat in the 'dining saloon,' not a restaurant; traditional deck games are on offer instead of basketball; beef tea is served in the sun lounge; and the Crossing The Line ceremony still exits for all those traversing the equator by sea for the first time.

In fact, once ensconced inside the surprisingly capacious interior, the *RMS* displays more of the characteristics of a distinguished hotel than a sea-going artisan. The Purser's office provides banking facilities, acts as a post office and publishes a daily newspaper, *The Ocean Mail*. The shop sells souvenirs and essentials for the voyage. There is an efficient laundry service for washing and ironing but, should you wish to use it, there is also a personal, fully-equipped laundrette. ➤



## FACT FILE

## RMS St Helena

Built:	1989
Tonnage:	6,767
Length:	344ft
Beam:	63ft
Draft:	19.7ft
Speed:	14.5 knots
Passengers:	128
Crew:	56
Passenger decks:	5
Registry:	UK

**More Info:** For more information on RMS St Helena, plus a full list of scheduled tours and special offers, visit [www.rms-st-helena.com](http://www.rms-st-helena.com) or call 020 7575 6480. For more information on the island of St Helena, visit [www.sthelenatourism.com](http://www.sthelenatourism.com).

**Price & Itineraries:** Fares start from £2,521 per person, based on two people sharing a T2H cabin on A deck (subject to change and availability), including 2 nights' accommodation in Cape Town (one pre- and one post-voyage), the voyage on the RMS, all meals onboard and accommodation on St Helena. Return flights to Cape Town are excluded.

**The Explorer Itinerary**

DAY 1: One night pre-voyage included in Cape Town.

DAY 2-7: Board the RMS in Cape Town and sail to St Helena.

DAY 7-16: Explore the island.

DAY 16-21: Leave the island for return journey to Cape Town.

DAY 21: Arrive Cape Town; one night post voyage is included.

DAY 22: Tour Ends.

**St Helena Factfile**

Time Zone: GMT. Population: 4,000 approx. Climate: The climate is influenced by the South Atlantic High Pressure Cell and Equatorial Trough. Despite the Island's locality within the tropics, its climate is kept mild and equable by the South East trade winds. Because of its position, the weather is warm all year round, varying between 32°C (89°F) in Apr-May, to 21°C (70°F) Oct-Nov.



Steward service is available but, should you get the hankering for a cup of tea in the middle of the night, you are welcome to make use of the facilities in the steward's pantry. And, while daily life remains largely informal and casual, some evening meals are more of an occasion, with an element of dress code that demands more than polo shirts and slacks.

The sea days roll by with an element of indulgent insouciance, highlighted by an attentive staff who soon get to know their charges and seemingly anticipate their every need. Port calls increase the tempo significantly and provide that extra element of meaningful intrigue and excitement which the everyday cruise ships have long since lost.

**Y**our cabin comfort is also important given the extra sea-going aspect of every voyage, and the RMS is well-equipped on this score, too. Accommodations range from snug inside cabins (some without en suite facilities, it should be pointed out), to expansive 4-berth cabins with fridge, kettle and armchairs.

Good cupboard and drawer space is more important here than flat-screen TVs; there are portholes instead of picture windows and balconies; and many berths are of the fold-away kind, providing extra space during the day (and more echoes of yesteryear). And then you reach St Helena itself and discover a whole new realm of individuality and adventure.

The tropical climate ensures a wonderfully clement environment year-round (varying from 21-32°C), rarely too hot or cold. Spectacular terrain unfolds in almost every direction, with the volcanic outer rim giving way to a lush interior boasting amazing cloud forests, with seabirds seemingly ever-

present, including the endemic wirebird.

**Diana's Peak National Park** encapsulates the island's rugged charms, as well as its flora and fauna, while numerous walking trails await the eager modern-day explorer.

**Jamestown** is the capital and port, a narrow limpet of a town, little more than a single street that grew to fill the slim crevice that it occupies between two substantial bluffs (part of the original fortifications). Its original 17th century roots can still be traced, along with 300 years of gradual accumulation and slow existence.

The more energetic will want to try **Jacob's Ladder**, the 699-step inclined plane that serves the Old Garrison on Ladder Hill. Napoleonic history can be enjoyed at **Briars Pavilion**, **Longwood House** and his official **Tomb**, while other notable highlights include **High Knoll Fort** and the **Castle**, plus **Jonathan the tortoise**, the island's oldest inhabitant, who resides at **Plantation House** (also the governor's residence!)

Anyone who has visited the Shetlands or Outer Hebrides will appreciate the sense of epic isolation you get from spending time in these far-flung island outposts, but St Helena adds more – much more – to that winsome ambience. With barely 4,000 inhabitants and the nearest mainland 1,100 miles away, it is a rare combination of the inimitable and the beguiling.

Couple it with a journey on her namesake vessel and you have an experience that embodies the very essence of the wide world of cruising. 