

South Atlantic trip report – Autumn 2015

The rationale behind this most unusual holiday was to travel on the last working UK Royal Mail Ship (RMS). RMS St Helena is currently the only means of reaching, and leaving, the tiny South Atlantic island of St Helena. The ship is due to be withdrawn from service next year when a new airport opens on St Helena. For the first time, travelling to and from St Helena will be no more exciting* than flying to any other island such as Madeira or Madagascar. We wanted to experience the romance of the ship.

There were five of us on this holiday. Our party comprised Penny and me, together with Duncan, Liz and Susan (Penny's mother) – all seasoned travellers. But to be fair, this was one of our less exhausting holidays. RMS St Helena is a working ship, not a cruise ship, but she is comfortable. There are few demands on passengers' time apart from turning up to meals on time, and participating in (and in our case winning) the pub quiz.

St Helena is a minute volcanic speck in the Atlantic Ocean, one-third the size of the Isle of Wight, lying to the south of the bulge formed by West Africa and to the west of Angola. The island is a British Overseas Territory and is home to about 4,000 people. It is best known for being the place to which Napoleon was exiled after the battle of Waterloo in 1815. In fact, for outsiders, that is its only claim to fame.

Travelling to St Helena is like stepping back in time. The new airport is due to open in spring 2016. Then, assuming all goes to plan, it will be possible to fly there from Johannesburg on Saturdays, and occasionally by charter flight from the UK. But at the moment the only way of reaching St Helena is on the RMS, which sails every three weeks from Cape Town to St Helena and then on to Ascension, another minute volcanic island about 700 miles to the north-west. Ascension is also a British Overseas Territory, although it has no permanent inhabitants. But it does have direct, although unconventional, flights to the UK, as I explain below.

Why visit St Helena? A number of reasons, all relatively unconvincing. Principally to travel on the RMS before she is withdrawn from service. But also because we like to visit places – particularly islands – that are off the tourist track (St Helena scores six out of a possible five on that score). The island is bound to change significantly once the airport opens, and the ship has only four more scheduled voyages, so it was now or never. And there are some birds and land crabs to see there, of course – some of which are endemic (they live nowhere else), although most have been brought in over the last couple of centuries to keep the inhabitants company.

To Ascension

In order to reach St Helena, you have to join the RMS in either Cape Town (at the start of her northbound voyage) or Ascension (at the start of her return trip to Cape Town). We chose to travel from north to south, allowing us five days in Cape Town before returning home to the UK.

Ascension is a similar volcanic island to St Helena, although smaller and much more barren. Huge swathes of it comprise bare volcanic lava, and the Brandt guide book (accurately) admits "First impressions of Ascension are not great". It was discovered by the Portuguese in 1501 but not claimed by any country until Britain established a garrison there in 1815, to prevent Napoleon's friends using the island as a base for an attempt to spirit him off St Helena. There are now about 600 people living on the island, most of whom work for either the US military or the RAF, both of whom maintain bases there (and appear to share the airport). The BBC has a relay station there, in connection with World Service broadcasting, and there is a tracking station for rockets launched from Guyana by the European Space Agency. But there are plenty of other aeries, golf balls and dishes around the island, and the suspicion must be that there is a great deal of eavesdropping going on.

Ascension has one other function today, which is as a refuelling stop on the twice-weekly RAF flights between the UK and the Falkland Islands. These were introduced after the Falklands War in 1982, when Argentina seized the islands, and the British recovered them (a bit of history completely unknown to most Brits under the age of 40, I have discovered). There is a permanent garrison on the Falklands, and the flights – known as the "airbridge" – deliver the necessary supplies and replacement personnel. Twice a week, an anonymous grey Airbus 330 – which carries some 280 people and goodness knows what in the cargo hold beneath the seats – leaves RAF Brize Norton at 23.00 bound for Ascension, 4,200 miles, and nine hours, away. The plane stays on Ascension for a couple of hours while it is refuelled and the crew is changed, and then it sets off for the Falklands, a similar distance away to the south. The crew has their mandatory rest and then the plane starts its return journey to the UK. And of the 280 seats, ten on each flight are reserved for civilian travellers like us.

So we booked seats on this flight, three of us on a flight at the end of October and two at the start of November, after the final of the Rugby World Cup (in the optimistic, but ultimately misguided, hope that England would be featuring in it). It's an odd experience, flying on a flight run by the RAF. We are used to being told what to do at airports and on planes (Board now through Gate 42), but being told what to do by the military is entirely different ("The following passengers will now disembark: Air Vice Marshall X and Mrs X ..."). The plane is actually owned and operated by Air Tanker, a public-private partnership that supplies refuelling capability to the RAF. Two of these planes are used for the Falklands airbridge (and it was announced in the week after we returned home that another plane in the fleet is about to be fitted out as the Prime Minister's plane, at a cost of £10m). They are painted in a fetching shade of light grey, presumably to make them invisible when high in the sky on refuelling duty.

Flights to Ascension and the Falklands take off from RAF Brize Norton, 20 miles west of Oxford. The passenger terminal looks like a tiny airport, with a small shop, check-in section and departure lounge – but each evening there is just one flight. It has a flight number (RR2232) and the luggage is tagged (from BZZ to ASC) like a commercial flight – even though no commercial planes ever use either airport. The plane was meant to take off at 23.00. The advance party of Peter, Duncan and Liz was delayed for 90 minutes due to a difficulty fuelling the plane before departure, but this was nothing compared to the 14 hour delay experienced by the second party (Penny and Susan), which we think was caused by bad weather in the Falklands. If the plane will not be able to land in the Falklands, it doesn't take off from the UK, as there is no alternative place to land. Later, talking to regulars on the flight, we heard harrowing tales of multi-day delays caused by blizzards in the Falklands and civilians being turfed off flights to make way for service personnel. So we got off lightly, but it is not an experience that we ever wish to repeat. The plane is operated as a charter operation. The crew were cheery but the food on the flight was the worst I have ever tasted. The flight is also dry.

So we arrived on Ascension, and the guide book was correct. First impressions were not great. Great expanses of grey, black and brown lava are what you see first, with quite a lot of scrubby plants that have been allowed to grow, but this is a relatively recent development. This landscape is punctuated by volcanic cones exactly in the shape of cartoon volcanoes. There is a reason for this. The island is simply the top of a huge volcano two miles high, sitting on the ocean floor. The last eruptions occurred only a few thousand years ago, and I read on our return that it is not certain that the volcano is actually extinct. It may be just dormant.

The authorities used to be worried about this. Until a few years ago, the island's fuel supply was stored in a chartered oil tanker anchored offshore. Three massive oil tanks have now been constructed, to save the MOD the cost of chartering the tanker. But the tanker was also the island's emergency evacuation route in case the volcano erupted. Now evacuation would have to take place by air, so one hopes the runway remains useable, should the worst happen.

Back to our holiday. The advance party enjoyed six days on Ascension; the second party (after the delay) only 36 hours. We had originally been attracted onto the holiday by a representative of the Ascension tourist office, who thrust a brochure into our hands at the Bird Fair in August 2013. It was only when we arrived on Ascension that we realised that there is not really any tourism on the island at all. You are allowed to live there only if you have a job there, or are under 18. The island is really just a military base for the UK and the USA, with civilians running some infrastructure for the BBC and the services that keep the island running on a daily basis. Once you reach adulthood, or retire, you have to leave. Holidaymakers are accepted but there really isn't much to do there except fish, dive, watch the turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs in the sand (but we were there at the wrong time), walk amid the astonishing scenery and wait for the RMS to arrive to take you to St Helena or the airbridge to take you to the UK. And, as we saw in a couple of instances with a couple of fellow travellers, drink.

We stayed in the Obsidian hotel, the only hotel on the island, which is remarkably good given that it has a monopoly and that food supplies arrive intermittently by ship in containers that have to be craned onto motorised barges and taken to shore (fascinating to watch). The RMS is not the only ship to call: the MOD has its own container ship and a commercial ship was unloading during our stay as well. The island is about 5 miles by 7 miles in size and there are about 40 miles of roads, all leading to military structures except for the road to the highest peak on the island, Green Mountain, which leads to the place where the first barracks were built in the 19th century. We hired a car to drive to the start of various walks (drive on the left, speed limit of 30 mph, one garage on the island which is open six days a week but only for a few hours on each of those days).

The geology of the island is astonishing, with extraordinary moonscape views and lava bombs lying underfoot. Different volcanic eruptions produced many different types of lava, some like ash and others like broken crockery that cracks as you walk over it. For our first few days the weather was hot and sunny and we needed to use a lot of sun protection; we assumed this was normal but it was not. For the rest of our stay there was a lot of warm drizzle. It's not cold there because the island lies only 8 degrees south of the equator. But it was windy much of the time. Really windy – enough to blow your hat off. A permanent wind, unlike anything that we experience in the UK. The sort of wind produced by air that has travelled across thousands of miles of sea before it gets to you.

The only mammals on the island are introduced, but there are plenty of native birds. There used to be millions and millions of birds but when the island was settled, rats arrived with the ships. Cats were introduced to manage the rats, but they preferred to eat the young birds, and the colonies died out rapidly. There are miles and miles of abandoned bird colonies on the islands, recognisable by the guano residue on the lava. The birds were forced to nest on one tiny offshore island. The feral cats have now been culled and the birds are just starting to return to the main island. It's a conservation success, but there will never be as many birds as there once were. And now apparently the rat population is starting to rise again. Rat poison is being put out throughout the island.

The most numerous birds are the Sooty Terns, or "Wideawakes" as they are called (after their cries). They return from the ocean to nest every ten months in astonishing numbers. One colony hosts 250,000 pairs and another 500,000 pairs (so 1.5 million birds in all). It was the start of the breeding season when we visited, and we saw perhaps a few thousand – which was impressive enough. Then there is the endemic Ascension Frigatebird, similar to the frigatebirds that we had seen on the Galapagos. They are huge birds that force other birds to drop their catch – aerial pirates (or kleptoparasites, to use the biological term). They look like stealth bombers, cruising above your head. When they fly into the wind they are virtually stationary, hovering inquisitively as they search for food.

There is a land crab population on Ascension as well. The land crabs live in the higher parts of the island, protected by the vegetation, and apparently eating leaves (there isn't much else to

eat). They live in underground burrows, and at times (but not while we were there) move to the seashore to deposit their eggs in the sea. That must be quite a sight.

Six days proved long enough on Ascension. We did everything there was to do, mostly twice or even three times (although we never got bored). We did plenty of walking, including along the coast to see an extraordinary blowhole at Hummock Point, and up to the top of the highest peak, Green Mountain. There is no view from there, as a bamboo forest has been planted on the peak. When the island was first settled, lack of water was a real problem for the garrison. Joseph Hooker, the director of Kew Gardens at the time, visited the island and advised the governor to plant greenery, to attract moisture. This was done (some plants being sent from Kew for this purpose) and at higher levels there is tropical greenery everywhere. Green Mountain is frequently obscured by clouds, but whether the rain is attracted to the greenery, or the plants grow because it rains, is impossible to deduce. What is clear is that the imported plants grow enthusiastically whilst the seven endemic plants (mostly small ferns) are at risk of being swamped. We were lucky enough to be taken to see the net plant house (like greenhouses but with nets instead of glass) in which the conservation department staff are rearing the endemic plants in preparation for reintroducing them into the wild.

RMS St Helena

And on the sixth day, the RMS arrived. She spent a day anchored offshore (there is a pier but no harbour). We had to deliver our luggage to the pier before breakfast, where it was scanned before being taken to the ship and put in our cabins in readiness for our arrival. Then we spent the last day on the island and reported to the harbour at about 4.00 pm. We went through airport-type security and then donned lifejackets for the ten minute trip in a launch (40 of us at a time) from the pier to the ship. In the past we have boarded ships directly from rubber dinghies (zodiacs) onto stairways slung onto the side of ships. Boarding RMS St Helena was, of necessity, safer as a floating landing stage was tied onto the hull so that we had somewhere to stand when moving from the launch to the stairway in order to board the ship.

We spent three nights and two days on the ship en route to St Helena. Little of note happened, which was glorious. There were only 80 passengers on the ship on this part of the trip, mostly Saints (ie inhabitants of St Helena) going home, but also Brits going to work on St Helena including our new friends John, who trains people in engineering skills, and Ben, a barrister who had been contracted to help out the Attorney General's office for a few weeks. We had met them on our flight out and spent much time chatting with them both on Ascension and on the ship.

The sea was calm but the skies were overcast for virtually the whole of the voyage to South Africa, which was disappointing and apparently unusual (we have such power to create odd weather that we believe that we can make it rain in the Sahara). Breakfast (cooked English breakfast and lots of fresh fruit) in the morning; salads at lunchtime on the sundeck (we couldn't manage a three course lunch, but it was available if you wanted it) and a five course dinner in the dining room broke up the day nicely. At teatime sandwiches and cakes arrived, and you would have thought people had not eaten for days (I ate just a slice of swiss roll. It would have been rude not to).

St Helena

Early in the morning of the third day we anchored off St Helena and were taken ashore in a launch, taking with us just sufficient clothes to see us through the next 24 hours, and Penny's telescope to use when searching for the endemic St Helena Plover, or "Wirebird". Here the party split up, with Penny and Peter staying in the island's country house hotel (Farm Lodge) while the others stayed in the Consulate Hotel, the principal hotel in the main town, Jamestown.

Jamestown is full of Georgian buildings that have never been tampered with, so possibly it gives a more accurate representation of how Britain used to look than any town in the UK.

But even more interesting than the buildings are the people. One hears “British Overseas Territory” and envisages Guildford in the tropics. But the people are not Britons, any more than the inhabitants of Gibraltar are Britons. They are a mixture of dozens of different nationalities, from Africans to South Americans and Europeans to Asians. Skin colour varies from pale to dark; the language is English but accents vary from comprehensible to virtually impenetrable. But everyone is smiling and no-one is in a hurry. There are plenty of shops, although not much accommodation for visitors yet. At present the only visitors arrive from South Africa on the RMS, stay for a week (while the ship goes to Ascension and back) and then return to South Africa. So hotels are full only one week in three. It’s not a goldmine, which explains why there are not many of them. Possibly when the airport opens, with a flight every Saturday, the sums will start to add up and new hotels will open.

Like Ascension, the landscape is mountainous – unsurprisingly, as this is also a volcanic island, although much older than Ascension. As a result, the roads are steep, narrow and winding. There are plenty of cars, including models like cortinas that disappeared from the British roads decades ago. Unlike Ascension, the island is very green – although water is in short supply as there hasn’t been much rain over the past year or two.

On arrival in Jamestown we checked 60% of the party into the Consulate Hotel, only half a mile from the quay where we landed, and then set off on a tour of the island with James and Nigel, our two guides. Both are Englishmen whose wives are working on the island on short-term contracts. Both have part-time jobs as well, but at weekends they run a small tour company showing visitors around the island in upmarket vehicles. Particular places of note included the plain where the Wirebird is often found (we found several, including a pair on the island’s golf course), Longwood House where Napoleon lived in exile for six years until his death (for a short guided tour), the Governor’s house, complete with giant tortoises on the lawn for some reason, and Jacob’s Ladder, a steep flight of 699 steps stretching from Jamestown up to the fort high above it (which we climbed, because it was there).

In the early afternoon James and Nigel delivered us back to the quay for a two hour cruise along the coast in a chartered fishing boat to see a couple of islands where the birds nest. The highlights included plenty of seabirds but also some dolphins and the first Whale Shark of the season. It was huge!

In the evening we all ate at Farm Lodge where Penny and Peter were staying. It appears to be the place where everyone goes for a celebration meal – but early booking is recommended as the owners feed their guests in preference, and there are only two tables in the dining room. The house contains a chaise longue (on which Susan and Penny sat) and a wine cooler both said to have belonged to Napoleon. The hotel is run by Stephen, who used to be a purser on the RMS and has endless stories to tell about the island, with his partner Maureen who is a superb cook. The house is surrounded by beautiful and extensive grounds. It must be the best place on the island to stay, although the rest of the party also enjoyed their stay at the Consulate Hotel in Jamestown. This hotel is owned by a lady from Botswana who ended up running the hotel because it was the only property on the island on the market when she was trying to move there.

Back on the ship

We could happily have spent as long on St Helena as we had spent on Ascension, but the ship’s schedule did not allow us to do so, and twenty-four hours was all we had. The following morning we were back on the quay with what seemed to be a quarter of the people on the island, who turned out to see off their family and friends on the RMS. We now had a five-day journey ahead of us, and the ship was almost full, with about 140 people on board. We were a

mixture of tourists, Saints going to South Africa and South Africans who had been working on the island and were now going home. At our table at dinner was a South African named Alan who had been teaching Thai people how to build the security fence around the new airport. We also met three technicians from Siemens who had just installed the first CT scanner that St Helena has ever had. And there were numerous bulky South Africans who looked as if they had participated in building the airport in a very physical way. They all looked like prop forwards for the Springboks. (Given that building the airport had involved moving 280 million cubic feet of rock to create a flat area for the runway, this was not altogether surprising.)

This part of the voyage passed more slowly than the earlier part. The novelty had worn off, the ship was fuller and the weather was, if anything, even greyer and colder than it had been earlier. But there was plenty to read (and Peter wrote some lecture scripts for his final Falco Legal Training recordings). Some days, there was an albatross or two following the ship, so plenty of time to take hundreds of photographs to try to identify them.

On the last evening the kitchen surpassed itself and we had an elegant candlelit dinner in the dining room. This was followed by the presentation of prizes for the various games and sports events that had taken place since leaving St Helena – and we were awarded prizes for the pub quiz, for which (did we mention it?) three of us had been part of the winning team.

Cape Town

On the sixth morning we arrived in Cape Town, and sailed into Table Bay at dawn, beneath a relatively clear Table Mountain, just like travellers would have done on the steamships a century earlier. We docked at about 6.30 am but had to stay on board until about 8.30 am to allow the luggage to be taken ashore. Then we met up with our guide Otto for the remaining five days of the holiday.

Otto is a retired South African who occasionally acts as a bird guide around Cape Town. He was mildly (but very politely) surprised that we were not all avid birders, but nothing turned on that. The local nature tour company to whom we had entrusted this part of the trip had provided him with a hired minibus in which he drove us around the area, and we all stayed in an elegant modern guesthouse (Moonglow), with the most spectacular sea view imaginable, about 30 minutes south of Cape Town just outside Simons Town. This used to be a British naval base and is still used by the South African navy. It is not exactly thriving but it has some restaurants and it's on the way to Cape Point and close to Boulders beach, which was handy.

On the first morning we visited Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens, which has to be one of the most splendid sites for a garden in the world, nestling on the slopes of the back of Table Mountain. In the afternoon we visited the African Penguin colony at Boulders Beach. These are the only penguins in Africa, and they have decided to set up home in a residential area. It's now cordoned off, to protect the penguins from the visitors, and also prevent the penguins from nesting beneath the houses (they make lots of noise and don't smell very nice, according to the locals).

The following day we visited Cape Point, which is not – as people think – the most southern point of Africa (that lies a few miles to the east) but it is where the ships have to change direction when sailing around the foot of Africa. It's a bit of a tourist magnet nowadays, but it's easy to get away from the crowds in the national park and the flora is out of this world. Many of the UK's garden plants come from South Africa including Geraniums, Montbretia, Agapanthus and Helichrysum (everlasting flowers). There are also huge areas of pincushion bushes, Leucospermum, with bright yellow flowers that attract sunbirds. On one of the beaches we found a very lost Elephant seal, which should have been somewhere like the Falklands several thousand miles away. Otto said they are occasionally found here, and it would find its way home eventually. There were also some antelope – we found Bontebok and Eland. And there

were plenty of birds including Ostriches, Sunbirds, flocks of Cape Cormorants and numerous little brown jobs (LBJs).

On the third day we visited Betty's Bay, some distance from Cape Town, to visit the Howard Porter Botanical garden and another penguin colony. The day started with a (successful) search for the Cape Rockjumper (a bird on Duncan and Penny's wishlist) but the highlight of that part of the day was a family of Chacma Baboons right by the minibus with a couple of extremely young ones. The day finished up with a spectacular visit to the region's sewage works – which host an astonishing array of birds, including loads of Flamingos. But it is a bit smelly in one place. However, you can tell how good it was, as Duncan went back there later on in his trip.

On the fourth day we split into two parties. The birders visited the West Coast National park some miles up the coast north of Cape Town, and the tourists were fortunate enough to be able to get to the top of Table Mountain with a local guide to drive us around. The cable car is closed as often as it is open, due to high winds or cloud on the mountain (the so-called "tablecloth"). At breakfast time, we thought that the weather would defeat us, as the wind was gale-force at Simons Town. But around the other side of the peninsula in Cape Town, there was no wind at all and everyone was wearing T-shirts at the top of the mountain. Most strange. In the afternoon we visited two wineries where we had what can only be described as disappointing wine tasting experiences, because we didn't like the wines at all.

The birders had a great day too with views of Blue Cranes, Bee-eaters, Mousebirds plus lots of other species on Penny's wishlist. They also had a close up view of a Cape Fur Seal and a group of young Ostriches who decided to run over 100 yards down the road in front of the minibus until Otto persuaded them that the bushes at the side were safer. On such a glorious sunny day it was difficult getting really good pictures, but they did manage to get a lovely photo of Table Mountain from up the coast.

Then for our final day we returned to Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens and spent the day looking at the plants and the birds that feed on them (including trying to get some good photos). In mid-afternoon it was time to go to the airport to catch our evening flight home, other than for Duncan, who hired a car and stayed on for a further three days.

So we covered a great deal of distance simply to spend just 24 hours on St Helena. But travelling on the RMS is something few people in the world have ever done – and as she is being withdrawn in about nine months' time, there is not much time left to do it**. Flying in to St Helena will be so much easier but the world will have become just a little bit smaller.

* Actually this isn't quite correct, for several reasons. It's going to be a five hour flight from Johannesburg to St Helena on a small single-aisle jet such as an Airbus A319 or small version of a Boeing 737. That's quite a long trip on such a small plane. And the plane won't be able to carry a full complement of passengers because of the need to carry enough fuel for an emergency diversion if, on arrival at St Helena, for some reason the plane can't land. And the nearest airport for diversionary purposes is back on mainland Africa, because the authorities won't allow civilian planes to land at Ascension. But the passengers won't know anything about that, so long as the weather remains friendly.

More information about the airport is available [on Wikipedia here](#), most of which is probably accurate.

** RMS St Helena will be anchored alongside HMS Belfast in the Pool of London in the second week of June 2016, before undertaking her last voyage from London to Cape Town starting on 14 June 2016.