

St Helena

St Helena, a remote jewel of the South Atlantic

Airlink – the thread that connects St Helena to the world

Some accommodation options on the island

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St Helena is a tiny dot in the middle of the Atlantic. *Travel News* was invited by St Helena Tourism on an educational trip to the island. **Rachael Penaluna** found that, although it measures only 16km x 8km, it punches way above its weight in terms of natural beauty, historic importance and unique cultural offering. Photos and text by **Rachael Penaluna**

St Helena, a remote jewel of the South Atlantic

ST HELENA is one of the remotest islands on Earth. Situated mid-Atlantic, 1 900km from the West coast of Africa and 1 900km from the South American coast, the island truly is an undiscovered, off-the-beaten-track destination.

A trip there is an adventure like no other, with a surprise around every corner. The traditional British roast dinner and St Helena Plo (a delicious local dish of curried rice, meat and vegetables) are served side by side for Sunday lunches.

Cellphones were only introduced to the island in 2015 and the only airport was built in 2017. Until 2018, the only practicable method of reaching St Helena was on the *RMS St Helena*, a cargo and mail vessel that also ferried visitors on a six-day trip from Cape Town. Airlink now provides the sole scheduled services to the island.

There are so many different experiences to relish. The adventurous traveller can hike

over stark volcanic landscapes, through Jurassic-style forests, picnic in rolling hills that feel like middle England and then swim in the South Atlantic.

Watery adventures

The waters around the island are populated with endemic and seasonal marine life, and are perfect for snorkelling and diving. The water temperature is generally 19-26°C and underwater visibility is generally 15-25m.



Swimming with a Whale Shark off St Helena.

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Swimming enthusiasts can have an experience like no other – swimming in a Category VI Marine Protected Area along with Whale Sharks, Green turtles, Chilean Devil Rays, Pantropical, Bottlenose and Rough-toothed dolphins. There's a swimming spot off the wharf in Jamestown, ideal for jumping in and cooling off

in the blue waters of the South Atlantic.

The Jamestown public pool (30m) is beautiful and very clean. Visitors pay £2,50 (R59) entrance fee for an unusual dip with echoes of history– the pool is enclosed by historic fort walls and high rocky cliffs.

Cuisine

The island's cuisine demonstrates its melting pot of people and cultures, and home-hosted cooking classes and meals are an ideal way for travellers to get hands-on experience with the cuisine and its history.

St Helena coffee is world-renowned – 250g costs around £100 (R2 360) on the international market and the supply is limited. But on-island, clients can buy the coffee at very affordable prices, and even get hands-on by helping to harvest the green-tipped Bourbon Arabica beans (which have been disease-free and free from crossbreeding since their introduction to the island in the 1700s).

Culture

The British settled the uninhabited island in 1659 and a town was created, later named Jamestown in 1660.

St Helena's most famous inhabitant was Napoleon Bonaparte, who was exiled there by the British in 1815. Longwood House was converted into living accommodation for Napoleon and it is now famous as the place where he spent his final



Visitors can swim with Whale Sharks. Photo: Simon Pierce

years. The house is a close representation of Napoleon's former residence and it has a large collection of artifacts and original furniture.

During the second Boer War in South Africa, about 5 000 Boer prisoners of war were interned on the island. 180 of them died in 1902 when they suffered an outbreak of enteric fever and they were buried with headstones at a special cemetery at Knollcombes Baptist Church on the island. Most Boers returned to Cape Town when the peace was signed in 1902, but a few had married local women and opted to stay.

Walking and hiking

Walking and hiking are two of the island's most popular activities, due to an incredible

diversity of landscapes, elevations and microclimates.

A series of 21 nature trails called 'Post Box Walks' show off the diversity of the island. Each trail ends with a 'Post Box' containing a signature book and a stamp to prove that the walker had been there. Walking guides are available for hikes and they are knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

Getting there

Airlink is the only provider of scheduled services between South Africa and St Helena.

South African passport holders do not need a visa. Passports need a validity of at least six months from the proposed date of entry to the island and a fee of £20 (R472) is payable on arrival.



Swimming off the wharf.



Longwood House, the final residence of Napoleon Bonaparte.

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SAINT Helena is more than 2 000 kilometres from the nearest major landmass, and prior to the opening of the airport in 2017, the island was only reachable by sea. St Helena Airport (HLE) is now the vital link connecting the remote island to the outside world.

Airlink is the sole service provider that flies to the island, using an Embraer 190. Flights operate on Saturdays between

Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport and the island.

St Helena airport is unlike most major airports, it falls under Category C classification, which means it presents some unique considerations for pilots. Taxiing for take off is a thrill. The beginning of the runway teeters close to a steep cliff and the runway is short. This means the aircraft thrusters are engaged immediately,

pilot skill is evident as the aircraft shoots off the end of the runway which ends abruptly at the edge of a steep cliff!

Pilots flying into Category C airports typically require additional training and certification beyond a standard commercial pilot's licence. This training equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge to handle the specific challenges presented by



Airlink is the only airline flying to the island.

the airport's approach procedures and surrounding environment.

St Helena Airport has one terminal building which accommodates arriving and departing passengers. The airport has all the necessary

amenities, including an airside café, a landside café, airline ticketing office, Bank of St Helena Ltd – banking and currency exchange, luggage wrapping service, a duty-free shop in arrivals, and another in departures.

Some accommodation options on the island

TRAVEL St Helena, a local company, has a website for travel agents to explore and book various accommodation options across the island.

The company brings together island hotels, B&Bs and self-catering properties on one online platform, facilitating a fast, simple and secure booking process for agents and their clients.

Travel St Helena has close working relationships with each supplier on its listings and agents

can reach out to the company for special requests and unusual arrangements on behalf of their clients. Using its local expertise and connections it will endeavour to fulfil any reasonable request.

The company will also arrange car hire, airport transfers, tours and anything else agents may need help with, at no extra charge. www.travelsthelena.com

Travel News visited some accommodation establishments on the island.



Mantis St Helena – Main Street, Jamestown

From £150 (R3 521) single, £190 (R4 460) double occupancy. Mantis St Helena is a 30-bedroom boutique hotel in the capital, Jamestown, which includes an intimate restaurant, cocktail bar, guest lounge and two spacious outdoor terraces.



Consulate Boutique Hotel – Main Street, Jamestown

From £150 (R3 521) single, £200 (R4 695) double occupancy. A mid-18th century building with old colonial wrought iron balconies. Guest rooms include five double and 13 twin rooms. The double rooms are spacious and en suite with shower.



Harkate Cottages – High Knoll

Starting: £82 (R1 900) per night. Harkate comprises two, self-catering, semi-detached, new and modern cottages just 3 km from Jamestown. Each house includes two double bedrooms (one can be configured to twin beds), free unlimited WiFi, airport transfers.



Bertrand's Cottage – Flagstaff, Deadwood Plain

Cost: £94 (R2 200) single, £111 (R2 600) double occupancy, per night. Bertrand's Cottage is a café and bed & breakfast holiday accommodation, in Longwood, offering three large bedrooms. Guests here are staying across the road from Napoleon's historic residence.



Farm Lodge Country House Hotel – Mount Eternity

Starting: £176 (R4 125) single, £281 (R6 583) double occupancy, per night. Set in the peaceful countryside six miles from Jamestown, the house offers five charming, en suite

rooms; two ground floor, three first floor. All rooms are spacious and decorated sympathetic to the Georgian-style hotel. The main house consists of a veranda, entrance hall, lounge and dining room. There is wheelchair access for ground floor rooms.



Wranghams Cottage – Sandy Bay

Cost: £82 (R1 921) per night for a double room. A beautifully restored cottage at Wranghams coffee farm in Sandy Bay, this charming self-catering

property is a superb location for a relaxing break in the countryside. Comfortably furnished throughout with a double-bedroom, bathroom, lounge, fitted kitchen and a patio with a view of the majestic cloud forest of The Peaks National Park. ■





Discover the remote beauty of St Helena, one of the world's most extraordinary destinations in the South Atlantic, with direct flights from Cape Town and Johannesburg from December 2024 to March 2025.

sthelenatourism.com