

St Helena out to woo investors

By **PHILANI NOMBEMBE**

SOUTH Africa's history and its links to St Helena will soon be accessible to the rest of the world as the island invests billions of rands in tourism and opens itself up to investors.

Enterprise St Helena, an agency tasked with promoting and developing the island's economy, is in the country to attract local investors.

The island, which has only been accessible by ship since its discovery in 1502, will soon have an airport – opening it up for a whole new market – as well as the “greenest luxury hotel in the world”.

The agency's tourism manager, Merrill Joshua, says South Africa makes up almost half of the island's tourism market. He has also revealed that R2.5-billion has been budgeted for the envisioned

airport and growing tourism. In the past, the island was controlled by different nations including the Portuguese, Dutch and British. St Helena was a “place of exile” and political prisoners – including French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, Prince Dinizulu during the Zulu War and 6 000 Boer prisoners during the Boer War – were sent there. Recent excavations have also linked the island to the slavery era.

“A lot of [people] have come back to pay tribute,” said Joshua. He says 49% of the island's tourism flow comes from South Africa and stresses the need to cater for their core market.

“And also now, because it is important St Helena gets on the map as a tourism destination, a lot more money and resources will be ploughed into the historical ties with Cape Town and South Africa,” he

added.

St Helena's tourism industry is paltry, with about 2 100 visitors annually. But that figure is expected to grow to 30 000 with the arrival of air access.

Joshua could not be drawn to reveal what set the island's planned “greenest luxury hotel” apart.

“They are using new technology, our climate allows it and we've got land. This will be a model for future hotels who want to go the same route. A lot of research and investment has already gone into it,” Joshua said.

Stuart Planner, the agency's property director, has urged business to invest in the island.

He said: “This is a crucial time for investors and developers to make themselves known. We have assets and a business environment and legislative framework we believe to be attractive.”