

Airport to drive St Helena's plan to grow tourism

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■ Remote island calls for investors ahead of 2016 opening ■ Five-star hotel on the cards

THE ISLAND of St Helena, a British overseas territory far out in the Atlantic and reachable by sea from Cape Town, is one of the most remote places in the world.

But this is due to change at the beginning of 2016 when an airport, now being constructed by JSE-listed company Basil Read, is due to open.

This is expected to transform the island into an accessible tourist destination reached by air from Cape Town, Johannesburg and Windhoek and a campaign has already begun to attract investment in accommodation, restaurants, souvenir shops and possible new industries. The currency used is the St Helena pound, which is on par with the British pound.

But to preserve the unique character and fragile environment of the island with its spectacular scenery and 400 species of plants and wildlife found nowhere else, the number of visitors will be limited to 30 000 a year. At present it is visited by about 2 000 people a year, mostly arriving in private yachts during the summer, and a number of cruise ships that call briefly during the year.

Starlight Cruises operating from Cape Town and Durban during the summer will be among them this year. It will offer a cruise from Cape Town with a one day call at the island in January, which it expects to

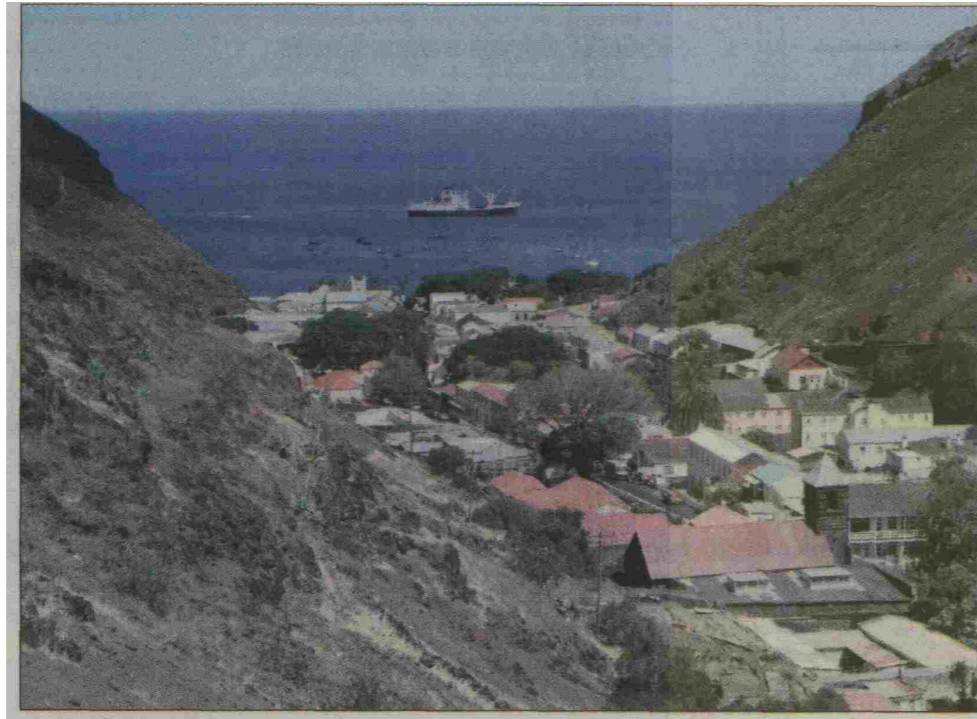
attract French passengers wanting to see the house where Napoleon was imprisoned after losing the battle of Waterloo.

Otherwise, St Helena's connection with the outside world is limited to visits twice a month by the mail ship RMS St Helena, which takes five days to reach the island from Cape Town by way of Ascension Island. It carries goods and 200 passengers and crew.

In addition to making the island financially independent – at present it is subsidised by the British taxpayer – it is hoped that the growth of high-end tourism, business and job opportunities will bring back young people who have emigrated, reducing the population to less than 4 000.

Their departure has left some houses vacant, but the sale of these is regulated, with preference given to the local population. There is a high demand for these from young "saints", as those born on the island are known, who want to leave their parents' homes to set up their own, and many who have emigrated are expected to return when there are job opportunities available or to start their own tourism businesses.

Adam Kossowski, the commercial representative of St Helena, said that the population was expected to double when these opportunities became available. "Almost



With a warm, subtropical climate, St Helena hopes it will soon be a sought-after holiday destination.

every saint I have met is looking forward to coming back."

When the airport is opened the island will have an "open skies" policy, but a tender will be put out soon for its own airline to provide scheduled flights, flying in the livery of St Helena. But it is possible that, instead of being owned by the

island, its government may take a share in an existing airline.

The runway will be big enough to handle only Airbus A320s or Boeing 737s from Cape Town or Windhoek, with an expected flying time of between 3.5 and 3.75 hours. But it will be possible to fly some private planes from Europe or

America. The runway is likely to be extended later.

Meanwhile, Enterprise St Helena (ESH), the non-governmental agency responsible for promoting and developing the island's economy, has published two brochures explaining the range of opportunities available. Stuart Planner, its

property developer, advises potential investors to be among the first to take advantage of the available opportunities.

"With only 43 months to go before the first plane arrives, and a cap on visitor numbers during the early years, this is a crucial time for investors and developers to make themselves known to us if they wish to take part in this exciting project. We have assets available and a business environment and legislative framework we believe to be attractive for investment."

In addition to tourism it is hoped to start new industries and extend the island's fishing industry. At present, only the waters within 15 nautical miles of the coast are fished legally, leaving most of the exclusive economic zone unexploited, and extending this is a priority.

The island has a distillery producing a spirit made from prickly pears, a spiced rum, a coffee liqueur using locally produced coffee beans, and a gin flavoured with Bermuda juniper, giving it a smooth flavour.

Kossowski said the first priority would be "to secure suitable investment in the hospitality and accommodation sector".

"Every investment will need to be aligned to the principles of the island's strategic economic and development plan: that of enabling the local community, providing for a green economy and ensuring the con-

servation and preservation of St Helena's heritage.

"The real balance of opportunity for the island will be to find the right business partnerships with the right investments that will create and contribute to the island's economic success. St Helena's offering is simply unique. Its potential to become the destination of choice off the west coast of Africa is clear.

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A warm, subtropical climate, the privilege of safe living, a welcoming community, advanced investment policy framework, recently modernised government and a strong financial and strategic commitment from the UK government to the island's new path for growth truly make St Helena an extraordinary place in the world today."

There are no restrictions on who can buy or rent land, but a licence may be needed depending on the area and size. This is managed under immigration rules and a land disposal policy.

A consortium registered in the UK, the St Helena Leisure Company, obtained planning permission last month to build an eco-friendly luxury hotel which, according to Kossowski, will be of five-star standard or above, with 88 suites and 165 free-standing villas in addition to staff accommodation and conference facilities. Amenities will include an 18-hole golf course, outdoor pool and tennis courts. It is due to open with 44 suites in time for the airport to come into use, and to add the remaining accommodation later.

A site is available for a second flagship hotel at a location known as the Devil's Punchbowl, which Kossowski said was a beautiful site with splendid views.

St Helena was not always an inaccessible place. It was a way station for merchant ships sailing between Europe and the Far East, and played a part in the creation of the British Empire. Hundreds of merchant ships called there every year in the 18th century. Later it was used by the British navy as a base for activities to stamp out the transatlantic slave trade.

Its remoteness caused it to be used as a place of exile for political prisoners – not only Napoleon, but also Zulu chiefs. And hundreds of Afrikaner prisoners of war were held there during the South African War. Some South Africans still visit the island for that reason. The archives kept on the island include documents dating from the 17th century.