



CENTRE: The capital and only port of St Helena, Jamestown, is set between rugged, barren hills.

PICTURE: VIVIEN HORLER

Airport will bring new life and tourism to the island of the saints

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THE island of St Helena, far out in the South Atlantic, is reachable only by sea, and unless you have a yacht you can get there only by the mail ship RMS St Helena, which sails from Cape Town twice a month. The voyage takes five days in each direction.

But this will change early in 2016 when a long-awaited airport, now being constructed, will open and scheduled services start, opening the island up for tourism. The island will have open skies but it's planned to start its own St Helena airline to provide regular scheduled services. Flights from Cape Town are expected to take three and a half hours. Tenders will be called for soon and a contract awarded early next year.

At present St Helena, which has spectacular scenery, a temperate climate, warm sea with good diving and interesting historical connections, attracts only 2 000 visitors a year, most of whom come on yachts in summer. But the opening of the airport is expected to result in a growing tourist industry and numbers are expected to reach 30 000 a year the maximum that will be allowed for the first 10 years to protect the environment.

St Helena is a British overseas territory and the currency is the St Helena pound, which is on a par with the British pound. A non-governmental agency, Enterprise St Helena, has been appointed to attract investment in high value tourism and in new industries.

It has launched a campaign to do this, and is already calling for investment in hotels, guest houses, restaurants, tours and souvenir shops.

St Helena's isolation has

caused a big fall in the population in the past few years, from 5 000 to below 4 000. But the growth of a successful tourism industry is expected to cause many of the young "saints", as people born on the island are called, to return.

In addition to tourism, St Helena has a fishing industry which is expected to grow. It also has a distillery making a spirit from prickly pears, a liqueur from locally grown coffee beans and gin.

The island was not always isolated. In the 18th century it was visited by merchant ships and whalers and later the British navy used it as a base for its activities to stop the slave trade. It has a museum with interesting historical documents.

Napoleon was exiled there after losing the battle of Waterloo, and died on the island, and Boer prisoners of war were kept there during the Anglo-Boer War.