

St Helena opens up to tourism

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ST HELENA will target a limited number of tourists annually once its R3,3bn (£250m) airport opens in December 2015.

After centuries of being accessible only by sea, the South Atlantic island has begun constructing an airport with the first flights scheduled to arrive in early 2016. The airport is expected to transform the island's economy by stimulating tourism and investment in a wide range of supporting business sectors.

St Helena commercial representative, **Adam Kossowski**, says once the airport opens, visitor numbers will be capped at 500 to 900 visitors a week. Development will be controlled in line with a strategic development plan, which aims to preserve the unique environment, culture and heritage, and to create sustainable business opportunities for the 4 000-strong population.

Lanseria Management Company, which operates Lanseria International Airport, won the tender to manage the airport, which

will accommodate B737-800 and A320 aircraft. A principal carrier will operate weekly scheduled flights from Lanseria, increasing to four or five services weekly by 2022. Three airlines have expressed interest in serving the route.

Strong interest for charter flights has also been received from Namibia, Angola, the UK and the USA, while there has been interest from Brazil to serve the island en-route to Asia. Flights from Lanseria to St Helena are expected to cost £600 (R7 800) return in economy class and hotel accommodation will cost about £150 (R1 950) a day.

The island is looking to develop two resorts, smaller hotels, guesthouses and self-catering accommodation. Adam says the St Helena Leisure Corporation (Shelco) and the Oberoi Hotels & Resorts Group have received permission to build the flagship resort, including 88 suites, 164 self-catering units, a spa and an 18-hole golf course.

A second resort site has been earmarked and discussions are under way with boutique hotel operators. Talks are also being held for

development of a hospitality school. Adam says berthing facilities may be extended for fly-cruise opportunities, depending on demand. The *RMS St Helena* – one of the world's last Royal Mail ships, which regularly sails from Cape Town – will be retired after the airport is completed.

Enterprise St Helena, an NGO overseeing the economic development of the island, says potential tourist markets include independent adventurous travellers looking for a unique experience and who are interested in walking, fauna, flora and history; soft adventure-seekers keen on sport fishing, scuba-diving, mountain biking and rock climbing; niche tour operators focusing on walking, birds, nature and expedition cruising; small ship cruise operators; and mainstream tour operators with specialist offerings.

Tourists now should take the opportunity to see St Helena before it all changes, urges Enterprise St Helena marketing manager, **Matt Joshua**. "Be one of the few to experience the last chapter of a bygone era by spending a couple of days on the *RMS St Helena!*" ■