

# Distant Islands

From the mid-Atlantic British outpost of St Helena and the sub-Arctic archipelago of the Faroe Islands, to the far-flung Indian Ocean idyll of Rodrigues and the bleak yet wildlife-rich Falklands, we bring you castaway tales that uncover the realities of life on a remote island hideaway





## St Helena



**A**fter four days ploughing the Atlantic, St Helena appears. My legs are stir-crazy despite a zillion laps around deck and I'm experiencing déjà vu. Napoleon Bonaparte, Britain's pain in the derriere, was exiled to St Helena in 1815 after his defeat at Waterloo. The instant he saw St Helena, he loathed it.

Fast forward 200 years and I'm getting his angst. The *RMS St Helena*, the last Royal Mail passenger ship operating weekly, delivers me 1,181 miles west of Africa from Cape Town to a brooding volcanic lump little bigger than the Isle of Wight. It's obscured by an unwelcoming drizzle.

Little Britain. The teeny-weeny capital, Jamestown, is a right royal throwback to Blighty, circa 1950. It charms with its blooming jacarandas, Georgian main drag, scattered cannons, and age-defying jalopies with single-digit licence plates. There's a tiny prison whose two inmates are allowed

out to the shops... why not? Later, I ascend a 700-stepped stone stairway called Jacob's Ladder to watch *RMS St Helena* steam off to Ascension Island. Adios, outside world.

My stay is at the 18th-century Wellington House where Napoleon's nemesis, the Iron Duke, stayed some years before his exile. St Helena is drenched in a history that seems like it happened yesterday. You can see centuries of turbulent false dawns in the locals' DNA: garrisoned soldiers, imprisoned Boers, forced Chinese labourers, African slaves and privateers.

On my first night, I sit on James Bay's seawall fending off glutinous gulls eating takeaway tuna fishcakes (the island's signature dish) and chips. Chips come with everything. The salt-of-the-earth pubs begin to fill. I drink prickly pear liquor and make friends with the gregarious locals known by quirky nicknames. I meet up with Polar Bear one evening. He's really dark-skinned. "I think my nickname's ironic," he laughs.

My week disappears with indecent haste. St Helena's facade of austere cliffs may possess the joie de vivre of Dartmoor Prison in a thunderstorm, yet it masks the interior's fabulous fecundity: not least an unadulterated 17th-century Arabica coffee Napoleon apparently loved. I follow a dramatic sea-facing path of lava features to Lot's Pools and later ascend Diana's Peak lost in foliage and mist. Another day, a boat takes me searching for humpback whales but they're outshone by a pod of 400 dolphins surfing like synchronised swimmers.

But it's Napoleon's exile that best captures St Helena. Sprightly septuagenarian, Robert 'Water Rat' Peters, takes me to Longwood House, where Napoleon lived under house arrest. Ooh-la-la, it's cold. Yet inside, my skin prickles with his presence: his great coat laid out on an original chaise-longue; the copper bath into which he latterly sank into depression; framed images of 'not tonight' Josephine.

Nineteen years after his death in 1821, Napoleon's remains were removed to Paris for a hero's burial. They say his exhumed cadaver was near-perfectly preserved — it seems holding back time is a speciality of this engaging little outpost. [sthenatourism.com](http://sthenatourism.com) Words: Mark Stratton

**How to do it:** Napoleon Bicentennial to St Helena, a 24-night, all-inclusive package, departing 30 October, including full-board and excursions, from £7,985 per person. [islandholidays.co.uk](http://islandholidays.co.uk) ☐