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St Helena - small island, rich history

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An old military road in St Helena. Credit: flickr.com/David Stanley

Saint Helena's major claim to fame is as the place where the fallen French emperor Napoleon died in exile, but now the destiny of the tiny island is about to change with the opening of its first airport next year.

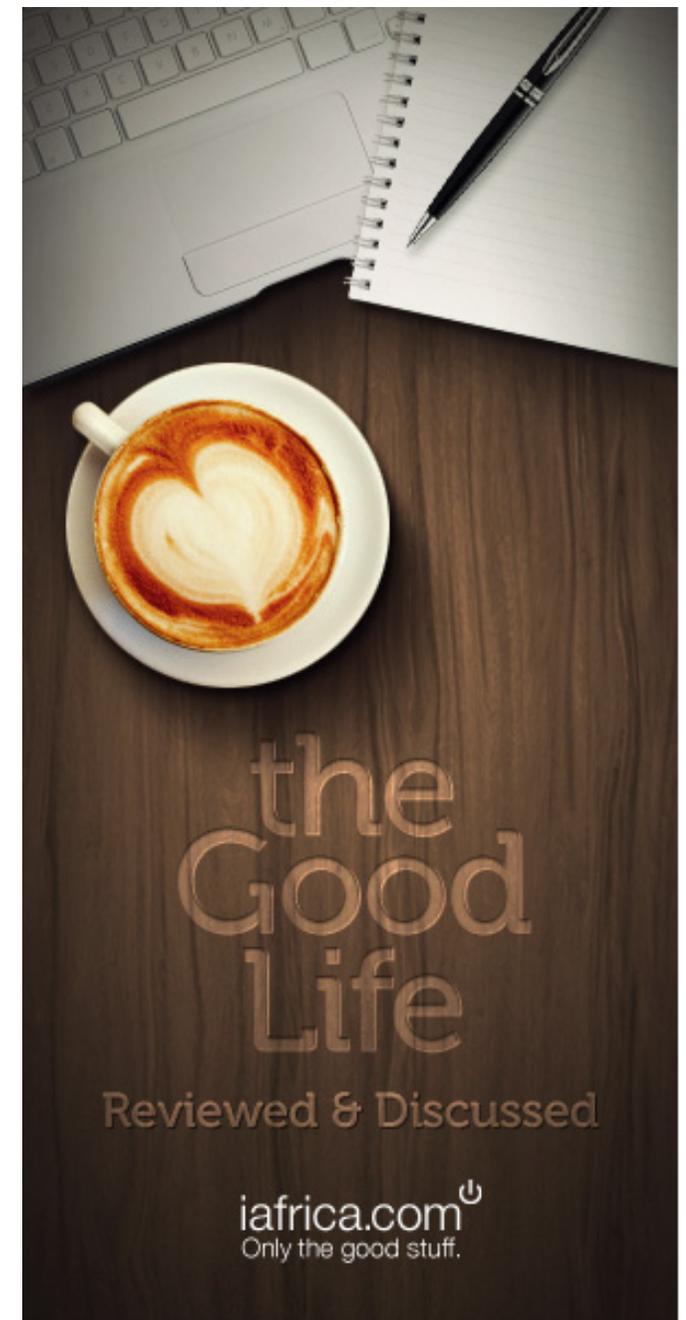
Framed by craggy volcanic cliffs soaring 800 metres above sea level, the South Atlantic island measures just 122 square kilometres - smaller than central Paris.

Uninhabited when it was discovered by the Portuguese in 1502, Saint Helena was founded under British rule in 1659.

It now has 4 200 inhabitants, about 850 living in the small capital of Jamestown, the only port, located on the island's northwestern coast.

Despite being close to the equator with a latitude of 15 degrees South, St Helena has a varied climate, with a cactus-studded dry coast and humid interior lush with eucalyptus trees and Ireland-like pastures.

Its closest neighbour is Ascension Island, another British territory 1 200 kilometres to the northwest. Angola is nearly 2 000 kilometres to the east, the Brazilian coast 2 900 kilometres to the west.



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With its steep cliffs and rocky outcrops close to the shore, the island is particularly perilous.

Its isolation and hostile terrain - the fort-like cliffs make defending the island easy - have long made St Helena a prized possession of the British who have sent their most reviled and dangerous enemies to perish there.

In 1815, Napoleon was banished to the island until his death in 1821. After him, the Zulu chief Dinizulu kaCetshwayo was sent there in 1890. A decade later, some 6 000 prisoners of the Boer war followed.

The colonial policy of island exile continued as recently as 1957, when three Bahraini princes opposing British policy in the Middle East were sent to St Helena.

Currently, the only way to get to the island is by boat - usually a five-day journey from Cape Town.

But that will change in February 2016, when St Helena starts a weekly flight service to Johannesburg.

St Helena, an overseas British territory, has its own pound notes and coins featuring images of the Queen. The currency is fixed at parity with the British pound sterling.

The island issues stamps - one of its few sources of income - and is set to introduce cell phone service by the end of 2015.

St Helenians, or "Saints" as they are known, enjoy British nationality. That privilege was revoked in 1983 by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher but restored in 2002.

The country elects an assembly of 12 members, five of who sit on local government, chaired by a governor sent from London.

Living mostly on British grants and expat income, St Helena imports almost everything it needs from Britain and South Africa.

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Its exports include fish, mostly tuna, and some coffee. Yet many hope the new airport will turn tourism into a major source of revenue.

AFP



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