

“THERE is hardly such another ragged, steepy, stony, high, cragged, rocky, barren, desolate and comfortless coast to be seen,” said Peter Mundy in 1638 when he first sighted the island of St Helena.

Not much has changed. Born of volcanoes and isolated by the Atlantic Ocean, this fearsome exterior cradles a lush secret.

The Dutch merchant Jan Huyghen van Linschoten described the island as “an earthly paradise, miraculously discovered for the refreshing and service of ships”.

Situated on the return voyage from distant oriental markets, St Helena was a sultry siren beckoning to seamen. And they answered her call. In her prime, over 1 000 vessels visited annually, which averages out at two and a bitty ships every day. In an age of press gangs, salt beef and hard tack, a pint of rum a day and good luck if you had any teeth left, St Helena was a haven for homesick and scurvyed sailors.

Five hundred years on, and her restorative alms are still invigorating weary travellers. Step ashore and the pressure pot of life is popped, stress and hassle hiss away into the balmy air. Each encounter on the street is met by a smile and a cheery hello.

“Where’s you from luvvie?”
“You’s enjoying the island darlin’? Been into the country?”

The questions are asked with genuine interest, in sing-song patois that sounds something like a West Country burr married to a Caribbean lilt. Accustomed as we are to travelling under the tourist cloak of anonymity, it’s impossible to disappear into the island’s 4 000-strong population. But who would want to when chance greetings are exchanged with such warmth and welcome?

The capital, Jamestown, is a scorching seaside hamlet, snuggled in a valley that snakes up into the cool interior. Along the seafront, the wharf bristles with the importance of offloading the island’s supplies. Fishermen deliver fat tuna and dorado, which are turned into spicy fish cakes and fish fry. Children swing off the gantry ropes at the landing steps into the warm water of the cove. Ties and high heels are swapped for wetsuits and weight belts, as folks knock off work for an evening dive. A green turtle pops up into the mélé. Fairy terns circle overhead and roost on the rocky perches below Munden’s Battery.

Down the wharf and past the crisp customs house, splashes from the public pool ricochet off the fort’s wall. It barricades James



FERN-FILLED: Higher up on St Helena, in the moist belt, cloud forest sustains unique and delicate fauna and flora

Pictures: GISELLE HAZELL

Jurassic jungle style

Inside St Helena’s fearsome exterior lies a lush secret, writes **Giselle Hazell**

Valley, built to bar the advances of pirates, privateers and all manner of invasive intents. These days, the fort’s sea-fed moat is dry but silver oaks and hibiscus grow in the canal and the prestigious Rifle Club uses it as a practice range. Entry to the island is by way of the Arch with its double hardwood doors. The East India Company’s twin-lion motif scrutinises all who dare enter here. Every seed, sailor, soldier, slave and settler who has ever touched the island would have passed through this portal, including Europe’s most wanted man.

“It was Napoleon Bonaparte who put us on the map,” says Joyce, a retired schoolteacher and now guide at Longwood House. “But most people don’t know that the island was also a prison camp for 6 000 Boer prisoners of war and Zulu Chief Dimizulu Cetshwayo.” Thanks to its impenetrable

coastal ramparts and a few well-placed forts, this “earthly paradise” was transformed into an Atlantic Alcatraz. The fortifications were built along the bottom of valleys and defended by rolling rocks downhill. The engineering is impressive. The ghostly silences

and isolation are deliciously spooky and the hard treks to reach these ruins are rich rewards for the intrepid hiker.

Be sure to pack a sturdy pair of walking shoes, as the best way to see the sights is by foot. Measuring 8km across, the island may be

IF YOU GO . . .

GETTING THERE

Airport construction is under way, with completion due in July 2016. Comair has been awarded the tender for once-weekly flights from Johannesburg. Until then, passage is on the mailship RMS St Helena, which will be retired when the airport opens. All the remaining voyages are currently fully booked but you might get lucky with a cancellation. Return fares start at R15 015. E-mail sthelenaline@mwweb.co.za, visit rms-st-helena.com or call 021 425 1165.

WHERE TO STAY

Self-catering units costing from £25-£40 (R480-R770) per night offer the best value.

● Fowlers Town House (Main Street, £40 per night) is

central and child-friendly with braai facilities. The house sleeps three people. E-mail peter.jean@helenta.co.sh.

● The Chalet (Maldivia Road, from £25) keeps guests fed on home-grown garden produce. It is a cool, green retreat in the upper part of Jamestown. E-mail audrey.constantine@helenta.co.sh.

● The Forge and Coach House (from £210 per week) is quaint and central. E-mail cliffhuxtable@helenta.co.sh.

INFORMATION

Visas are issued on arrival and cost £1750 (about R340). Accommodation, health and travel insurance must be booked prior to the visit. A list of accommodation, tours and car rental is available from the Tourist Office. See sthelenatourism.com or e-mail enquiries@tourism.co.sh.