

One-third of the way across the South Atlantic from Africa to America, in one of the emptiest oceans in the world, lies an extraordinary sliver of Britain. And in the middle of the sliver is a micro-slice of France.

Named after the Saint's Day on which it was discovered – five centuries past – by astonished Portuguese sailors, St Helena is one of the world's most remote inhabited islands. But it doesn't always feel that way. Walk up Main Street in Jamestown, the 'capital', and you'll find much that's familiar – if a little out of time.

On the one hand you can imagine yourself in a Devon market town from the 1950s: the pace of life's easy, with people gossiping on benches outside their whitewashed houses. On the other hand young men sport shades at the wheel of their 4x4s, flush from a spell of work on the military bases on Ascension Island or the Falklands, bass-heavy music hammering out of their stereos.

The middle of nowhere

First, though, you have to get there. In 2016 St Helena's first airport will open – and the island will be tugged sharply into the 21st century. For now, unless you own a yacht, you'll spend five days and nights sailing out from Cape Town on the 'Royal Mail Ship St Helena'. Like the island, it's one of a kind. Virtually everything that travels to or from the place does so on the

'RMS': people (living and dead), fridge freezers, cars, food... It's the island's sole lifeline – and the last in a line of ships built specially for the task.

The journey is a combination of the banal and the wild, with Bovril for elevenses, quiz nights and deck cricket – all with the wide, wild immensity of the blue sea all around, unblemished from horizon to horizon. The RMS strikes out far from the nearest shipping lanes, settlements or even flight paths. A hundred, a thousand, a million years ago, the outlook beyond the rail would have been the same. This really is the middle of nowhere.

Next year the RMS will be pensioned off and the first tourists will be jetting in from Johannesburg to a spanking new airport which, the government hopes, will catalyse economic development. It's a big ask.

Napoleon and the stars

St Helena is a dependency in more than one sense of the word. Once a vital staging post on the journey east – before the Suez Canal stole its rite of passage – it's now largely a subsidy economy. Many of the 'Saints', as the islanders refer to themselves, work for the government, or in government-owned businesses. Boosting tourism is key to prospects of a more independent, sustainable economy. And there is much for tourists to see.

Napoleon's six years here – between Waterloo and his death in 1821 – already act as a tourist



Flax-covered slopes from Diana's Peak



Watering endemic plants in the nursery



St Helena Wirebird

draw. The few acres comprising his house and tomb were given to France when Britain sought favour from Paris in the mid-19th century, and there is even a French consul general in residence to keep watch over this tiniest corner of *La République*.

The isolation that made St Helena suitable for tucking away an ex-Emperor attracts another sub-species of tourist: stargazers. Far from any source of serious light pollution, the island has a quite astonishingly clear night sky. Stand in a valley sheltered even from the scattering of street lamps, and the stars seem so close you could almost pluck them by hand. Small wonder plans are afoot for it to become an official International Dark Sky Park.

As for the landscape...

For a small island, the countryside is impressively varied. Starting from the coasts, bare, wave-lapped cliffs rise to arid grassland and, in some cases, strips of rocky desert. The odd waft of sand serves as a reminder of a primeval sea floor, when the ocean was hundreds of metres higher than it is today.

This gives way to pasture – much of it bare, overgrazed and, in places, scarred with the red-earth gashes of gully erosion. There are swathes of quite English-looking countryside: hills and valleys intercut by winding, flower-banked lanes, a mix of pasture, plantation forest – pines, eucalypts – and vegetable gardens. Clinging to the ridge line of Diana's Peak and Mount Actaeon is the cloud forest – a tangle of tree ferns, bracken things and weird-looking, weirdly named spindly shrubs – 'he cabbage' and 'she cabbage'.

It's certainly cloudy, but it's hardly forest: few of the trees are as tall as a man. It was once grander and may be so again, if the sterling conservation efforts come good.

Below the cloud forest, ever threatening to overwhelm it, is a vast blanket of flax – the pervasive relic of a Victorian attempt to inject a sense of industry into island life. Like most enterprise on St Helena this was a government-backed initiative; it provided the raw material for mail bags and a (barely) living wage for the islanders. The mills shut down in the '60s but the flax remains, swallowing the ground, the big daddy of all the island's (many) invasive species. From a distance it looks like a gorgeous sea of

green, but beneath its photogenic surface it quietly smothered the native flora.

Plundering paradise

Passengers on the RMS are issued with leaflets on 'biosecurity' in an effort to keep the endemics clinging on. It's an uphill struggle. Old prints show that, by the time the landscape was first recorded, it was already stripped bare of most of its original vegetation, the tree ferns and hardwoods that had once cloaked the land. The lethal combination of man and goat had done its work.

Despite discovering the island the Portuguese never settled there themselves; instead they built a chapel, planted fruit trees and left behind goats, pigs and sick sailors who were left to recover in what must, briefly, have been a tropical paradise of clear flowing streams, fruits and forest.

The forest was raided for timber and fuel – and the goats, of course, stopped it from coming back. A typical pattern: man cuts, goat hoovers. In the face of such an onslaught, it didn't take long for the forest to fail.

When the English came in the 17th century they carried on the despoliation. One visitor wrote of seeing a thousand goats in a single field: with that strength in numbers the trees never stood a chance. The English tried to conserve the dwindling 'Great Wood' by building a wall around it. But the goats persisted, and the forest shrunk to isolated remnants, clinging on in crevices and high peaks.

Wirebirds and blushing snails

Conservationists remain optimistic that much can still be salvaged. With the support of the Department for International Development, the airport developers are restoring wetlands and helping with the creation of a 'Millennium Forest' to replace the Great Wood. Careful flax clearance is uncovering native species which, with impressive stubbornness, spring back to life. After years of retreat, the cloud forest is slowly gaining ground once again.

It's not just conservation for the sake of it, either. Eco-tourism is a key part of the island's offer, and with good reason. Dolphins, whales,

whale sharks and bright blue angelfish circle the shoreline. St Helena has 50% of the UK's endemic species, though few are of the charismatic megafauna (or flora) variety.

Instead, it's a case of watch where you tread. Many are tiny: invertebrates skulking somewhere in the grasses, the coyly named blushing snail sliming along the tree ferns and the odd unremarkable flower or two. But there are more striking specimens, including the island's unofficial emblem, the wirebird. This cute little plover, much preyed by cats (feral and pet), is now fiercely protected. Cat traps are laid to catch prowling moggies: the pets are returned to their owners, the ferals put to terminal sleep.

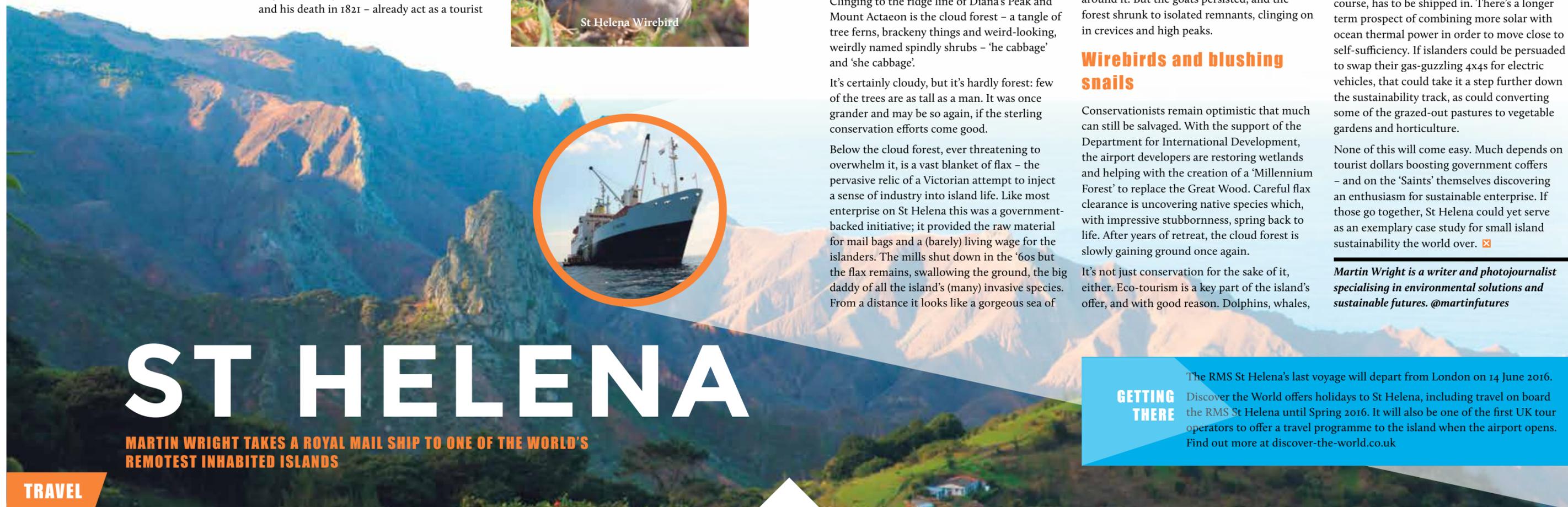
Swap ships for planes, 4x4s for EVs

Replacing a ship with a plane hardly sounds sustainable, of course – but in terms of carbon it's a close call. The environmental costs of feeding and fuelling a hundred or more people for a week at sea on a 30-year-old ship are far from negligible.

But for more decisive sustainability gains, the island needs to exploit its own resources. It's recently opened a small solar farm to take advantage of all that tropical sun. When completed, it could supply 40% of the island's power needs – replacing the diesel which, of course, has to be shipped in. There's a longer term prospect of combining more solar with ocean thermal power in order to move close to self-sufficiency. If islanders could be persuaded to swap their gas-guzzling 4x4s for electric vehicles, that could take it a step further down the sustainability track, as could converting some of the grazed-out pastures to vegetable gardens and horticulture.

None of this will come easy. Much depends on tourist dollars boosting government coffers – and on the 'Saints' themselves discovering an enthusiasm for sustainable enterprise. If those go together, St Helena could yet serve as an exemplary case study for small island sustainability the world over. ☒

Martin Wright is a writer and photojournalist specialising in environmental solutions and sustainable futures. @martinfutures



ST HELENA

MARTIN WRIGHT TAKES A ROYAL MAIL SHIP TO ONE OF THE WORLD'S REMOTEST INHABITED ISLANDS

TRAVEL

GETTING THERE

The RMS St Helena's last voyage will depart from London on 14 June 2016. Discover the World offers holidays to St Helena, including travel on board the RMS St Helena until Spring 2016. It will also be one of the first UK tour operators to offer a travel programme to the island when the airport opens. Find out more at discover-the-world.co.uk