



**HOMEWARD BOUND:** Robin Repetto, left, with his daughters Amber and Jade and wife Dawn, and Mariah Leitner (with baby Amelia) and husband Marko. The two families from Tristan da Cunha, the most isolated island in the world, boarded the SA Agulhas II research vessel to return home. *Picture: BRENTON GEACH*

## FAMILIES GLADLY RETURNING TO THEIR ISOLATED LIFE

# Remote, but Tristan is home

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GATHERED on the quay in Cape Town docks yesterday were a group of families waiting to go home to the most remote island in the world.

They were from Tristan da Cunha, a volcanic island in the Atlantic about 2 800km from South Africa and 3 300km from South America.

The families were travelling on the Department of Environment's research ship the SA Agulhas II, which will drop them off en route to taking scientists and logistics staff to South Africa's Gough Island.

"There are only 267 people on the island and the only way to get there is by boat.

"We're like one big family," said Robin Repetto.

Repetto has lived on the island all his life, descended from his Italian great-great grandfather, who settled on Tristan da Cunha in 1892.

"I've kept the surname, but I'm afraid I've lost the language, he said"

The volcanic outcrop was discovered in 1506 by the Portuguese sailor Tristão da Cunha. Rough seas prevented him from landing, but not from claiming the 98km<sup>2</sup> island in his name.

The first settler was a Jonathan Lambert from the US, who landed with two other men in 1811 and declared the island his. The UK took possession of Tristan in 1816, apparently a measure to prevent the French from using the island as a base to free Napoleon Bonaparte from prison on

**Beautiful island is totally crime free, doors are never locked: sole negative is poor weather**

St Helena Island – the nearest land 2 400km away.

Tristan is now part of the British overseas territory.

South Africa transports island residents as part of the agreement for leasing Gough Island, where South Africa has a weather station.

Standing on the quay, surrounded by suitcases and hold-

ing his daughter Amber, Repetto said he was returning from working in the UK on the Isle of Man for five months.

He is an electrician, and has done stints of work in the UK twice, in Switzerland and in Germany, but Tristan is his home and he has absolutely no desire to live anywhere else.

"Everyone knows everyone else and we all look after each other. It is completely crime free. We never lock our doors. I leave money lying on the table and it stays there. It is a beautiful place.

"The only bad part is the weather, which can be so bad you can't get off the island to get on to the ships."

With Repetto was Marko Leitner, from Germany, and his wife Mariah and baby Amelia. Leitner is a geologist who went

to Tristan 10 years ago to sample the volcanic sediments.

At a mere 120 000 years old, Tristan is regarded as a "young" island and Leitner's research was to examine the volcanic sequence to find out about the magnetic field.

When he met Mariah it was love at first sight.

"There is a pub on the island and there is a dance there every Saturday night. I saw her and it just happened."

Mariah's great-great-grandfather was one of the early settlers and she is of Dutch and English ancestry. The family now live in Munich and are travelling home to holiday with Mariah's mother.

Tristan's volcano erupted in 1961 and all the inhabitants were evacuated to Cape Town, returning in 1963.