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St Helena

First ever plane lands on remote St Helena island

A new era arrives for the south Atlantic island of St Helena, one of the remotest places in the world, as it waves goodbye to the mail ship and welcomes its first flight





📷 Jamestown, the capital of St Helena, viewed from James Bay. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Emma Weaver

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The first plane to land on one of the most remote inhabited islands in the world – so remote even Napoleon Bonaparte could not escape from it – touched down earlier this week.

After taking off from Johannesburg, the Beechcraft King Air 2000 travelled nearly 2,000km north-west to a dark speck of land that rises out of the Atlantic. Nothing but

clouds normally pass above [St Helena](#) – which measures 17km by 10 and has a population of around 5,000 – but on 15 September a twin-engine plane descended upon the tiny landmass. It was an unusual flight, to an unusual airport, in an unusual place.

St Helena is a British Overseas Territory that until now has been accessible only by the [Royal Mail Ship St Helena](#) (which offers journeys of between five days and nearly two months on its voyages between Cape Town, Ascension Island and the UK, among others). The recent test flight precedes the opening of St Helena airport in February 2016, one of the most significant developments in the island's history.





📷 The Beechcraft King Air 2000 plane lands at St Helena. Photograph: Damien O'Bey, Sams



The company contracted to construct the airport had never worked on a project of this scale, or of this type, before.

“The set-up and mobilisation took a whole year,” said Charles Schwarz, human relations manager for the [Basil Read St Helena Airport Project](#). “The isolation of the island and the logistics of getting every nut and bolt transported to the island by ship was challenging.”

Transportation of materials was not the only obstacle to the construction. The geology of the island – which, as Charles Darwin put it “rises abruptly like a huge black castle from the ocean” – did not provide an obvious location for a runway, requiring 7.6 million cubic metres of mountain to be blasted out and then land-filled in a neighbouring valley.





📷 The RMS St Helena was built in 1989 specifically to supply the island. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo



Most islanders are excited at the opportunities the airport will bring: quicker access to medical care, and quicker transportation for overseas islanders who take holiday time from work to journey home.

However, there is also disappointment at the loss of their ship, which will be decommissioned when the airport opens. The [St Helena](#) is the last working Royal Mail Ship and carries on a maritime tradition the island has had since its discovery in 1502.

Marlene Harris, assistant purser on the ship, has worked on board for 13 years. “This ship is one-of-a-kind and will definitely be a loss to the island,” she said. “For some people, the ship is the holiday. They get on board and they experience St Helena through the workers, and through the food – including “Saint” dishes such as stuffed tuna steaks, goat meat curry, and “bread and dance” (or tomato paste sandwiches). They don’t want to fly; they want to do something special.”



📷 View of Half Tree Hollow from High Knoll Fort on St Helena. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo



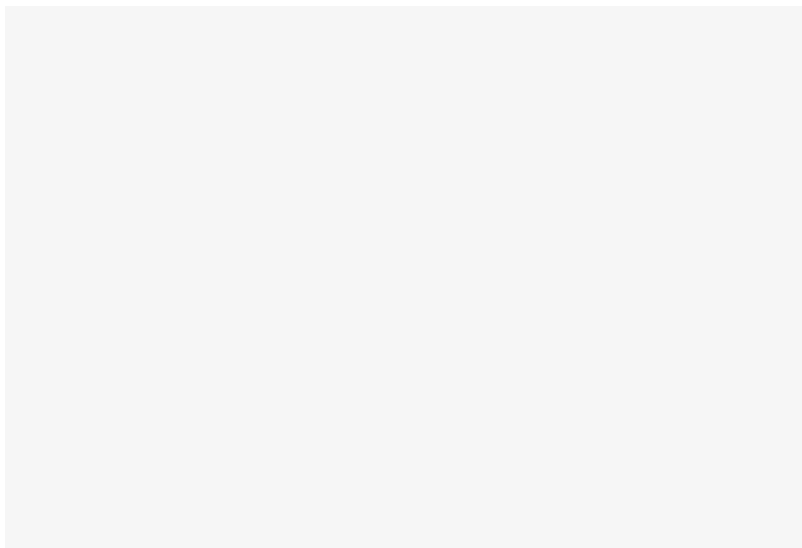
Pamela Ward Pearce, a St Helenian and [recently-elected member](#) of the island's executive council, said the island has a lot to offer. "The walking here provides some of the most starkly beautiful and spectacular landscapes," she says. And during certain months it's possible to swim with whale sharks in the bay.

Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb – in the Alarm Forest district – and his final residence, [Longwood House](#), offer tours, while the lack of light pollution allows for

stunning views of the night sky.

With one flight successfully on the ground, St Helena will now prepare for the airport's opening – and an expected increase in tourism. A 32-room hotel is planned (at the moment there are just a handful of guesthouses and B&Bs) but no company has been contracted to build it yet.

So far, British Airways Comair is the only airline set to operate the five-hour flight to St Helena from Johannesburg (at an estimated £600 return) on a Boeing 737-800. It will carry about 120 passengers and a small amount of cargo to and from the island every Saturday. In doing so, the little island in the middle of the South Atlantic will become a little less remote.



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