

Honey, they shrunk the world

THIS week a small aircraft — a specially modified twin-prop Beechcraft King Air 200, to be specific, flying from Johannesburg and refuelling in Angola — landed for the first time on a tiny island in the south Atlantic, and the world became vastly smaller and less interesting.

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When Napoleon Bonaparte was defeated at Waterloo he was like a super-villain in the setup for a Marvel movie: the Allied powers needed to send him somewhere so remote and godforsaken, so fortress-like and impenetrable that he could never again escape and unleash General Zod-like terror upon the cowering world, so they banished him to St Helena, a tiny volcanic speck in the endless ocean, green hills and valleys ringed with sheer, copper-coloured cliffs, a splinter of emerald mounted on a smudge of bronze and pinned on an infinite tunic of blue serge.

There were numerous schemes and plans to rescue him, including spectacular plots involving a South American slave-army and a prototype of a submarine, but Napoleon never made it off St Helena alive, because the English had chosen well.

Even today, or at least until this week, the fastest way on or off the island was five or six days on the last working British mail ship, the RMS St Helena. She was strong but not especially stable — she pitched and bobbed in the Cape rollers like a yellow-smokestacked barrel going over Niagara Falls; she could make a barnacle seasick or a whelk unsteady on its feet. I'm neither a barnacle nor a whelk and I've visited St Helena several times, so I've spent about a month of days cursing Poseidon and praying for death, but I still loved that voyage and now that the airport is built and the ship almost decommissioned, I mourn her passing.

The ship was a time machine: she took you somewhere that has long since ceased to exist. The first time I visited it, the island had just started receiving television and there were grave concerns about social changes. Already there was a startling case of theft: Mrs Benjamin left her jumper on the seat of her car and when she returned from buying eggs it was gone. Had they broken the window to get at it, I wondered? My informant looked at me as though I was mad. Why would anyone need to break a window?

When the wheels touched down part of my heart broke

They probably just opened the door or reached in through the open window.

By the time I departed the case had been solved — Mrs Benjamin had actually left her jumper at home that day, and it had slipped down behind the sofa — but the fears remained.

The island was like a Devonshire village in the 1800s: people were polite, wary of strangers, slightly incurious. I met a woman in her seventies who had never left the island but also never visited Blue Hill or the Gates of Chaos in the southern part of the island. Why would she want to go all the way over there? Those weren't her people over there. (The island is 16km long and 8km wide.)

I met a man on the porch of the bar of the Consulate Hotel who pointed to the hill-line of Half-Tree Hollow and told me about the time 27 years earlier that he saw a dinosaur up there — a stegosaurus, to judge by his description. His friends confirmed the story: he's been telling them about that dinosaur every night for 27 years.

St Helena is windblown and far and each time I watched the ship sail away — hours and hours of its stern receding until it vanished into blue haze — I panicked a little knowing there was no escape until it returned, but I also loved the abandonment and the low, persistent note of keening sadness. I guess that's what makes me a tourist — loving a place for the same things that make me not want to live there.

Ten years ago there was a referendum on the island about building an airport. I was opposed. It would tear apart the unique fabric of a unique community, I declared, but really what I feared was it would change the world I lived in from one that had space for a time-travelling ship to one that didn't. Those who voted for the airport — they narrowly won — voted to be a part of the world, to join a modern global community, and I can't begrudge them that, even if I suspect they might not find the modern global community all it's cracked up to be.

If the Saints are happy about the airport, I'm glad, because they deserve to be happy, and I hope they don't mind that when those wheels touched down on Tuesday afternoon, a small part of my heart silently broke.