

NEWS

St Helena gets ready for tourists

HILKA BIRNS

TICKETS for the historic first commercial flight to St Helena are expected to go on sale by the end of November, as soon as final certification of the new airport has been completed, says Comair ceo, **Erik Venter**. The first flight is scheduled for mid to late February, he says.

The St Helena government and Comair are in the process of determining the final pricing structures of the service.

Comair is contracted to provide flights for an initial three years, with potential for up to two extensions of two years each. The Comair service will operate once a week under the British Airways brand with a new B737-800 to be delivered in December, Erik says. The aircraft will carry 120 passengers: 28 in business class and 92 in economy class.

It will depart on Saturdays at 08h20 from Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport and arrive at 11h30 at St Helena Airport. The return flight will depart St Helena at 12h30 and arrive in Johannesburg at 18h30. Departure and arrival times at OR Tambo have been timed to

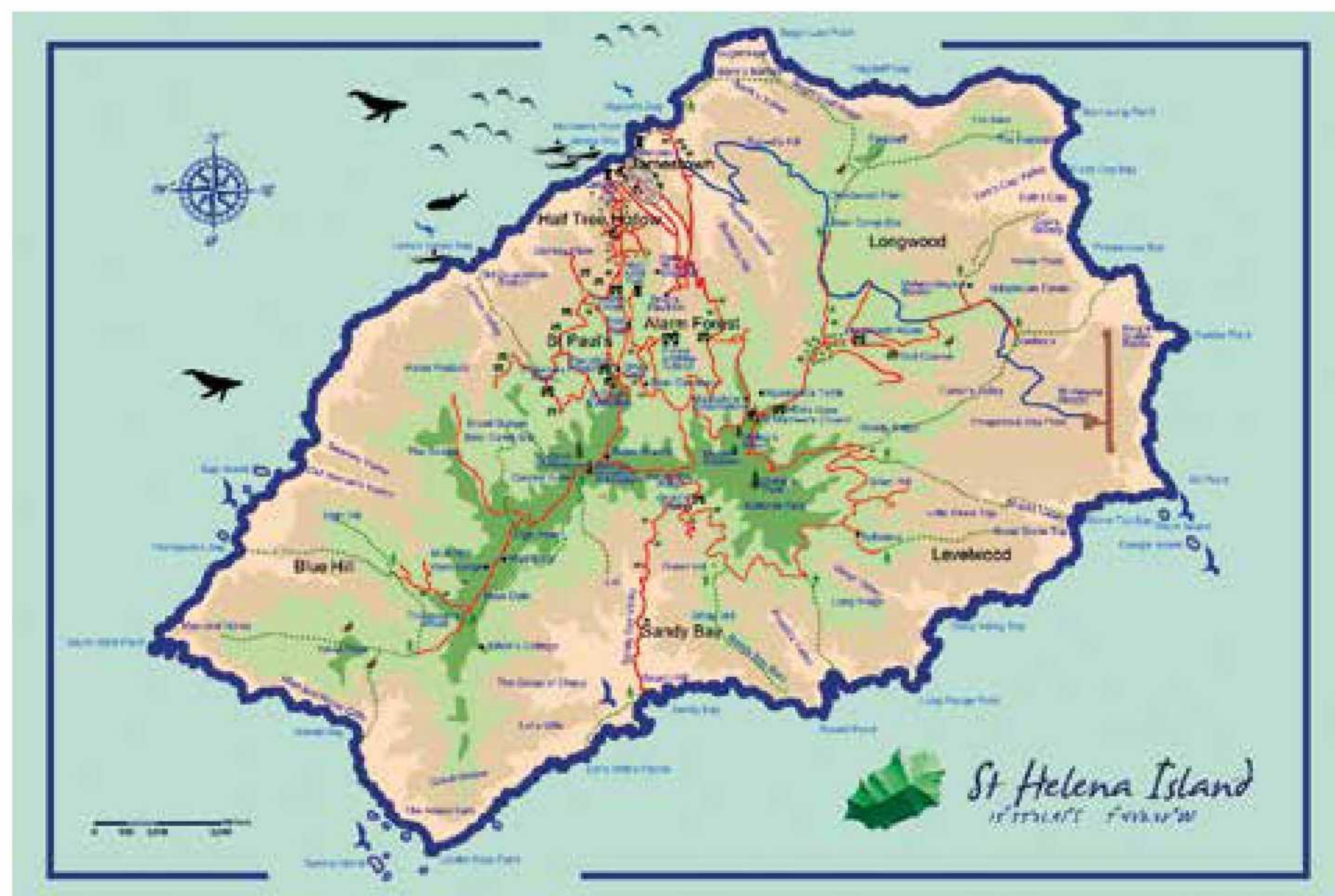
connect with British Airways flights to and from Heathrow.

The flight time from Johannesburg to St Helena is five and a half hours and from St Helena to Johannesburg is four hours and 45 minutes, the difference caused by the prevailing winds.

Once a month, the service will carry on from St Helena to Ascension Island. This flight will take about two hours, with an overnight stay on Ascension Island. The flight will return on Sunday morning to St Helena and then to Johannesburg.

St Helena Airport has been given the IATA airport code HLE. According to the St Helena government information service, the terminal building is scheduled to be functional by November but final completion of all infrastructure is not expected until February. The official opening date of the airport is May 21, 2016.

SA construction firm, Basil Read, is building the £250m (R5bn) airport. It has subcontracted Lanseria International Airport to operate the airport for the next 10 years in terms of a £35m (R713m) contract. Lanseria ceo, **Gavin Sayce**,



St Helena tourist map. Photo: St Helena Island Tourist Office

says Lanseria's management team has been closely involved, from the design of the terminal to developing flight procedures, search and rescue manuals and emergency procedures, to training the staff and assisting with certification requirements.

Meanwhile, the development of a new four-star Mantis hotel in a heritage building in Lower Jamestown is due to begin early next year, with completion scheduled towards the end of the year, says Mantis Development md, **Craig Erasmus**. The hotel will have 32 bedrooms, a restaurant and bar.

At the moment, the island has 150 tourist beds (a small hotel, guesthouses and

self-catering, all of varying standards), of which 80 beds are serviced with en-suite facilities, says **Susan O'Bey**, Enterprise St Helena (ESH) deputy ceo for economic development.

"It is expected that passenger numbers will be somewhere around 5 000 during the first full year of air service. Assuming that 60% of these visitors will be tourists or business visitors, then around 54 people would potentially be seeking hotel accommodation on a weekly basis." To meet the shortfall, a gradual expansion of rooms is planned, including another accommodation/leisure development scheduled to open in Longwood in 2016. Susan says ESH is also

promoting uptake of a Local Accommodation Enhancement Scheme, exploring ways to increase self-catering options and targeting potential investors to develop tourist accommodation.

ESH, for the past year, has been working with local accommodation providers to implement accommodation quality standards. "To date, 20 of the 33 establishments listed with the tourist office are participating. These establishments are being assessed with a view to them implementing changes, which will ensure that they meet the minimum criteria in 2016/17. A similar programme is being rolled out to include food and beverage establishments and taxis," she says. ■