

Return from exile

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You can't get much more remote than St Helena, where Napoleon spent his last days, but a new airport has brought the British territory within reach. By **Liz Gill**

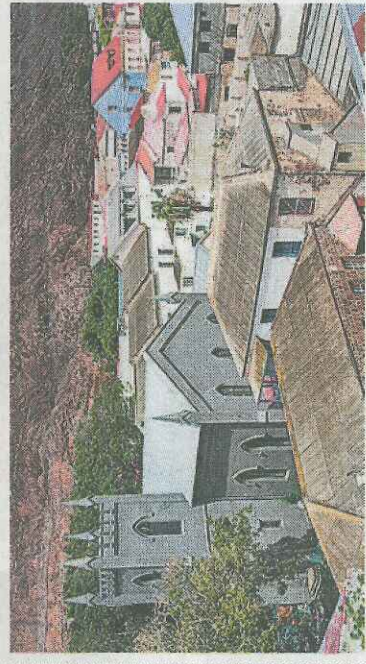
Many people fantasise about escaping to the middle of nowhere. Bill Bolton actually did it. In 1981, the Sheffield businessman bought a bungalow on St Helena, the South Atlantic island where Napoleon lived in exile after his defeat at Waterloo. Bolton saw the British overseas territory, population 4,000, as a "retreat from the madness of the world". A 47-square-mile outcrop 1,200 miles west of Angola and 1,800 miles east of Brazil, it's certainly isolated. But is it a splendid place to live?

"I'd been there on holiday and it was unspoilt, beautiful, natural," says Bolton, 74. "The climate was kind, there was no pollution, no disease — so no need for jabs — nothing poisonous. And I liked the way of life. It was like turning back time." So he sold his tungsten-reclaiming business and retired to the island with his wife, Jill, to establish the "world's remotest coffee plantation". Nearby is the "world's remotest distillery", also run by British expats, who produce a spirit made from the local prickly-pear cactus. It was set up by Paul Hickling in 2006. Hickling, 58, met his wife, Sally — a Saint, as the islanders are called — when they both

worked in the Falklands. They wanted to give their kids the roaming-free childhood he had enjoyed in Pembrokeshire. It's a long way to go for the simple life — a five-day journey from Cape Town on a Royal Mail ship. From May, however, St Helena will become a little bit closer: a £220m airport will be served by flights from Johannesburg. The aim is to make the aid-dependent territory, once a stop for ships from the East India Company, more economically viable. It draws about 900 tourists a year for diving, fishing, walking and scenery — deserts, lush cloud forests, a black-sand beach, rolling pasture and craggy peaks of up to 2,700ft.

"The opening of the airport will be a game-changer," says Christopher Pickard, the island's director of tourism, who expects 4,000 visitors in the first year after the airport opens. "You'll be able to fly overnight on Friday from London and be on the island by Saturday lunchtime. Prices should start at about £1,500, but they'll likely get cheaper. I can see retired people having second homes here. The weather is glorious, English is spoken and the currency has parity with the pound." The hope is that tourism will lure investors — to open a bar, a gallery, a shop or a B&B. Planned tax incentives for creative industries may do for St Helena what George Martin's recording studios did for Montserrat.

Boney island The trip from Cape Town to Jamestown, St Helena's bustling capital, used to take five days by Royal Mail ship. Flights from Johannesburg will boost its prospects



Thanks to British-style legal and monetary systems, property purchases are sound: there's a land registry and title is guaranteed by the government. Stamp duty is just 2.5%. Expat buyers will need entry and residency permits, which are relatively easy to obtain. The island has a governor, a legislative council, a hospital, three primary schools and one secondary, a cathedral, a police force, a prison, two newspapers and two radio stations.

There is no property market as such: Saints rarely move. Homes are advertised by word of mouth, with about five sales a year. "Preehold land costs £30,000 an acre, and it might cost £150,000 to build a three-bedroom house," says Niall O'Keefe, the island's chief executive for economic development. "You can get ruined cottages for £25,000, with restoration costs of £100,000."

Would-be buyers should contact John and Catherine Turner, British expats who run a property-finding service (properties.burghouse.com). "Everyone is sitting on properties they might sell, in the hope of a price rise after the airport opens," says John, who knows of two acres with a run-down building available for £30,000. It's in Sandy Bay, a 20-minute drive from the capital, Jamestown, where the Turners live.

They arrived in 2004 from Hertfordshire, with their sons. Andrew and Harry — then aged 8 and 6 — when John, 56, took a job as chief lending officer at a bank. He had never seen St Helena, but advises househunters to try for two months before they buy. "You have to be part of the community. People will welcome you, but you have to join in."