



# Mike Harker



## Christmas in Saint Helena



**W**hen the French invaded Russia in 1812 and Napoleon was defeated, he was interned on the small island of Elba, situated between his native Corsica and the Italian coast. Elba has since become a cruising sailor's dream but in Napoleon's day it was just a fishing village and a great walled fortress from which he escaped, with help from some of his loyal soldiers and Corsicans. Less than a year later, he returned to France, only to be defeated by the British army, headed up by Duke of Wellington, at the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815. Napoleon spent the last six years

of his life under British supervision on the island of St Helena, where he died in 1821.

In trying to find somewhere secure to exile Napoleon, the Brits looked for the absolute most remote place they could find. St Helena is a rock of volcanic origin stuck out in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean and more than a thousand miles from land. The territory consists of the island of Saint Helena, and the dependencies of Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha.

Since the uninhabited island of St Helena was first discovered by the Portuguese in 1502, it is claimed to be Britain's second oldest colony and is renowned for being one of the most isolated islands in the world. But it is of vital strategic importance to ships sailing to Europe from Asia and South Africa. It has a long and interesting history and, once discovered, it became an important provisioning stop for vessels en route to and from the Far East. For over 300 years it provided sailors with fresh water, fruit, fish and wood, until the advent of steam-powered vessels and the opening of the Suez Canal cut the once arduous three-month voyage to just a few weeks.

Napoleon lived in Longwood house, which is preserved exactly as it was in his day. Plantation House, built in 1792, is an imposing mansion set in beautiful grounds where six Giant Tortoises, sent as gifts from the Seychelles, roam the



lawn – one of them is believed to be about 170 years old. The roads are single track and tortuous, winding into steep valleys in sharp hairpin bends and clinging to the hillsides. Every turn reveals a new panorama, always with the blue of the sea in the distance. Only from the very top of the island, where there is a 360-degree view, do you realise just how small it is. A little over ten miles long by six-and-a-half wide it is 1,200 miles from Africa and 1,800 miles from South America. It is a remote and special outpost in the South Atlantic.

On leaving Cape Town, this British outpost is where I was headed and, after a week at sea, I arrived at this tiny remote island. As I dropped anchor, I was grateful that I had timed my voyage just right, with strong favourable winds and smooth sailing. It is a hard sail and a nasty ride most of the time.

The shoreline is so steep and rocky that there is no safe harbour or even a breakwater. The main town on St Helena is Jamestown and it lies cradled at the bottom of a steep-sided valley. Small boat landings are only possible at the beach end of a small river delta formed at the end of this long valley. Even today there is only just this one place to anchor, and a treacherous dinghy landing at the end of a small concrete wall. The ever-present swell surges against the concrete pier and there is nowhere to secure the dinghy other than haul it out of the water onto the jetty. As a disembarkation aid, the locals have placed monkey ropes on a bar above the concrete steps, and the aim is to grab the rope as the tide is coming up, jump out of the boat onto the slimy and slippery steps and hopefully maintain safe footing as the tide lowers the boat out of reach. It is all in the timing, riding a surge in, grabbing the rope and scrambling out with the dinghy painter, letting the sea suck the boat back

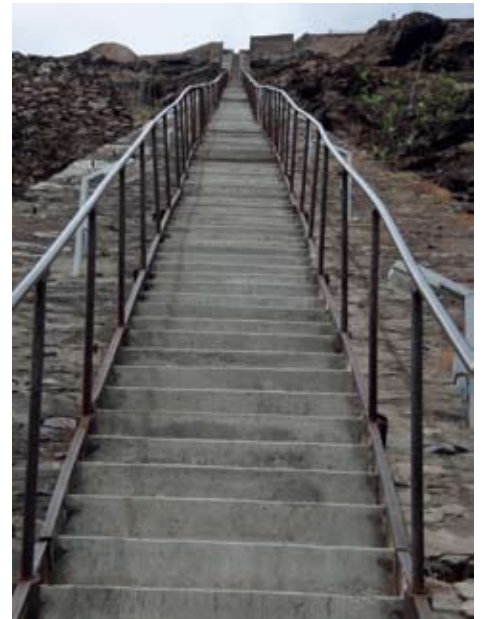
ABOVE

Mike's first sighting of the south-east corner of St Helena, an island whose coastline is so steep to that there is only one place to land a boat.

RIGHT

Jamestown, St Helena with WanderLust in the foreground (top) and upper right (bottom)





Jacobs Ladder



out then pulling it back on the next wave so the other person can jump out; then both drag the dinghy up onto the jetty. The inhabitants are well practised, and a pastime of the locals is to come a watch the antics of unsuspecting sailors who have just sailed 1,200 miles to their island, trying to get ashore! Many people fall back into the boat or even in the water.

Once I had made it safely ashore, I went to check in with Customs and Immigration, just a few steps along the dock. Very nice and courteous officials welcomed me. No problem.

I had made it to Jamestown with two days to spare until Christmas Day, having heard from other yachtsman encountered along the way that there is something special for cruising sailors headed to St Helena on their way north or south to celebrate Christmas – and a visit to Anne’s restaurant for Christmas dinner, was not to be missed. To stretch my legs I hiked up the 699 steps of Jacobs Ladder – an amazing staircase up the steep, rocky side of the valley spanning six hundred feet between Jamestown at the bottom and the village of Half-tree Hollow at the top. Built in 1829 it was originally an “inclined plane”, with tracks on either side of the steps upon which wagons could be hauled, carrying manure up and goods down. Nowadays it is a fitness challenge for islanders and visitors alike with the record ascent made by a marathon runner in something like five minutes. The view from the top is spectacular; with the entire bay stretched out before



you, you can get a feel of how incredibly steep the whole island is. Most homes must have special foundations and the roads and walkways are all built upon walls to keep them level. Even the highlands are steep, so much so that it has not been possible to build an airport runway even with today's technology. Everything and everybody must arrive and leave by boat. The main street is lined on both sides by picturesque and colourful buildings, many of them several hundred years old. There is a strong sense of welcome from the friendly people and everyone greets each other as they pass in the street. A few cruise ships stop here for a day at a time and around 100 yachts sail in each season but the only other visitors must come on the supply ship from Cape Town or Ascension. Thanks in part to this remoteness, the locals have a charming innocence, a deep pride in their island and a fun-loving, unhurried lifestyle making this island and its inhabitants very helpful and truly delightful. There are beautiful gardens and almost every shade tree has a bench to rest upon. The numerous walkways and narrow one-way roads are very clean and each home has its own special character. It is a thoroughly unique and enjoyable experience that only a very few have the remotest possibility to discover for themselves. I am privileged and thankful to have made it here, especially for Christmas.

On Christmas day, the Sim family close their restaurant and throw an invitation out to all foreign sailors to come and join them for free Christmas dinner. Anne had started this invitation in the mid-50s and her son and daughter-in-law have continued this well-known tradition. "Anne's Place" is in an old navy mess hall converted to a beautiful open sided restaurant overlooking the immaculate "Castle Gardens". Great pride is exhibited in maintaining the uniqueness and beauty of these gardens and the history surrounding the castle. It has been a haven for yachtsmen since 1975, offering a warm atmosphere, great food, a laundry service and the only public internet access on the island. Anne, the bubbling and fun-loving character who first opened it as a one-room restaurant in her own home, is still a dominant central figure, although the much expanded premises is now run by her son, Richard, and his wife, Jane. Flags from all over the world adorn the ceiling and visitor's books with entries right back to the early days fill a cupboard in one corner. I brought my USA national flag into the restaurant from the back of my boat. Tradition dictates that you write something on your flag and hang it in the rafters above the restaurant. You can while away a good hour or so looking at fifty years of nation's flags hanging over the tables. I even discovered a small plaque honoring Joshua Slocum as he made a stop here on the first ever single-handed around-the-world voyage at the end of the last century. I arrived just in time to introduce myself and help with putting up decorations



for the big party the next day. A few of my fellow cruisers and delivery skippers, also helped out with rearranging the tables and preparing the food.

Christmas Day 2 pm. The variety of delicious smells wafting down from the Castle Gardens greeted me as I arrived with my offering: a gallon jug of aged Panamanian rum that my buddy Tom left onboard when he visited me and the two Danish models aboard *WanderLust* in the Las Perlas Islands just a few months ago. Over twenty sailors had joined the party and a great time was had by all. Someone started singing Christmas carols and then even some "Olde English" sailor tunes I didn't understand. Many British, Australian and South African sailors were there; I was the only American.

The party continued long into the night but because I do not drink alcohol at these kinds of events, I made an early evening retreat to my boat. I heard the next morning that some of the party guests had to be fished out of the water below the concrete steps when they didn't make the swing out on the rope into the waiting dinghies.

The following day was "Boxing Day" in Jamestown. I don't know what it means nor why they celebrate, but it was fun to listen to the two competing live bands at either end of town and the fun and games had by all, especially the well-dressed kids. Later that afternoon, I met up with some of the cruisers that had attended the big Anne's Place party and they testified to the great time I missed, even though nobody missed me!

I was off the next day after the offices and stores opened and I could complete my provisioning for the next leg. I still had over 7,700 miles to go to get back to Miami. But I was in the same ocean I left from, the great Atlantic Ocean, southern half. ■

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Next time: Heading north towards the Equator – "My God, I'm sinking!?!"