

Notes from a very small island

As the intense summer heat starts to break down with the first of the rain I ponder on my first six months on the small rocky outcrop of Saint Helena in the South Atlantic. When I announced my intention to exile myself Napoleon style to Saint Helena the usual reaction was, “Where’s that?” usually followed with, “Why?”

For those who don’t know, just think of the Namibian/Angolan border and go west 1200 miles or so and you are there. The reason why was to take up the job of the Public Solicitor for the Island. With a leave of absence granted from 2 Harcourt Buildings, and a very understanding wife, I found myself here at the start of September last year.

The stunning beauty of the island is the first thing that you notice when you land at what has been termed the world’s most useless airport. Many rumours abound as to why the airport doesn’t work properly, some say that the runway points in the wrong direction to avoid a colony of endemic spiders, others site the desire not to disturb the wirebirds but most people simply shrug their shoulders and say, “Well that’s Saint Helena for you.”

The airport is not useless, at least at this time of year it tends to work ok. The weekly flight arrives on time and leaves on time. It may be half empty (or full depending on your viewpoint) but at least it is here. In the winter months it is not so reliable due to low clouds and what they call wind shear. The island has many micro climates, the capital Jamestown is hot and arid, the airport is in an area beset with wind and low cloud. It is a touch unnerving when the pilot makes a number of abortive attempts to land, and the stop over from Johannesburg at Windhoek to refuel in case you can’t touch down hardly instils confidence in the whole process.

The airport has had an unusual impact on the island which is not immediately apparent. Far from opening up the islanders to the world, it was designed to open up the world to St Helena allowing easier access than before in support of a nascent tourist industry. The RMS St Helena, which plied from St Helena to Cape Town, was the link to the outside world before the airport. For a population with an average annual salary of £8000 the cost of the £800 round trip to Johannesburg by air is prohibitively expensive, whereas the ‘RMS,’ as it was affectionately known, could get you to Cape Town and back for half the price.

The boat is now gone and with it the ability for many to travel and see friends and relatives in Cape Town and to avail themselves of the cheap airfares to the UK from there. On the opening of the airport many local businesses, excited at the prospect of endless tourists to service, expanded rapidly, taking on debt and investing in staff, only now to lay employees off unpaid when the tourists didn’t come in the numbers they expected. Only the lack of any proper bankruptcy laws and a desire not to see good people go under means that they can carry on. The few tourists that there are stay mainly at a hotel built to coincide with the airport. The Mantis Hotel is part-owned by the government which is able to support it financially, something the other businesses do not have the benefit of.

But all is not doom and gloom. Good advertising abroad has meant that tourist numbers are increasing, albeit slowly. The winter months, although warm by European standards on this sub tropical island, bring uncertainty with the flights, meaning a short tourist season of November to April. However any tourist prepared to come this far off the beaten track is usually well-heeled, it’s just a shame there is little to spend their money on.

So returning to where I started and the beauty of this place. Those of us lucky enough to be here live on an island of staggering beauty with a local population that is incredibly friendly and giving. Everywhere you go people say hello and chat to you, just walking down one of the few streets is a slow affair. Bananas and eggs are left on your doorstep and fishcakes are delivered by neighbours who want nothing more than a thank you. The clock has little meaning, the telecommunications are so poor and expensive the outside world hardly intrudes (Brexit, what Brexit?) and children play instead of looking at mobile phones. With a population of 4500 this is a large village where everyone knows of each other. A population descended from a mishmash of many different nationalities watched over by a benevolent government is a recipe for a contented life, so long as your personal horizons are not high.

- Duncan Cooke




TWO HARCOURT
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