

Saint Helena Island: flying future for lonely rock

by

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Saint Helena Island – a small dot in the South Atlantic Ocean – is known as the place where Napoleon was finally exiled. It also used to be one of the hardest-to-reach places on earth. Until late 2017, when the long-awaited airport opened. What are the first signs of change on the island?

In December 2017 we received an invitation to speak at the very first scientific conference organized on Saint Helena. We thought this would be a great opportunity to revisit the island, where we spent three months in 2002 doing research for our Master's thesis (see boxed text 'research project in 2002'). We then asked the 'Saints', as citizens of Saint Helena call themselves, about their identity and their thoughts on the future of the island. During this new visit, we aimed to collect some first signs of the impact of the new flights between the island and Johannesburg (South Africa).

Air access

The topic of air access for Saint Helena had been on the agenda for decades, on the island itself and in Great Britain, of which it is an overseas territory. For a long time, building an airport did not seem feasible due to the volcanic character of the island and the resulting lack of sufficient flat land. A short runway would be the only option. But suitable planes for the extraordinary circumstances of flying to the island were the next problem. A plane might not be able to land in adverse wind conditions and should then be able to divert to another airport far away. Solving this puzzle proved too complex for a long time (see [our thesis](#)). With new developments in airplane and airport technologies, it finally turned out to be possible to overcome the technical difficulties, but only to very high costs. After

Research project in 2002

Our first visit to Saint Helena was in 2002. Back then, we travelled to the island on the RMS St Helena from the UK; a trip lasting two weeks. On the island we did research for our Master's thesis which focused on the spatial identities of the citizens of Saint Helena. The islanders soon called us 'the Dutchies'. We think we were considered a bit strange, but harmless. Generally, Saints welcomed our interest in their island and were happy to talk to us. Back then, there were already plans for an airport, which should be finished by 2009 or 2010. Saints were worried about the impact the airport might have on the social life and security on the island. 'Will we need to lock our houses and cars in the future?' There was enthusiasm about the economic opportunities the airport could bring. 'It is the only chance for the island', we often heard. We reported on our research in [our thesis](#) and in a journal article titled '[Saint Helena: Citizenship and Spatial Identities on a Remote Island](#)'.

years of making plans, reconsiderations, delays and then the actual building, Saint Helena now has a functioning airport. Air access was and is seen by many researchers and policy makers as the only way to revitalise the island's economy. It could trigger more tourism, and more visits of Saints living overseas to their 'home'.

First impression

In late January we landed on the – slightly terrifyingly short – runway on Prosperous Bay Plain. At first sight our positive expectations were met when we were driven to the capital Jamestown. We immediately saw changes compared to 2002. The streets were relatively busy with more tourists, more cars, more restaurants and new harbour facilities in Rupert's Bay.

During our week on the island, we tried to get a picture of how the citizens of Saint Helena themselves see their future with air access. We visited the conference and spoke to many Saints, tourists and researchers. We also interviewed Governor Lisa Honan, the highest placed Saint in the local administration Chief Secretary Susan O'Bey, Director of Tourism Helena Bennett, returning Saint Stewart George and a group of pupils at the local secondary school.

Economic impact

Our positive first feelings were shared by many Saints. The governor confirms this: 'There is a buzz on the island. [...] There are more people.' The local and British governments hope that air access eventually leads to economic growth and less dependency upon British aid. Building the airport has provided many Saints with temporary jobs. In addition, it has led to a number of reforms. It has become easier for Brits to buy land, invest on the island or move to the island.

However, economic development will mainly need to come from tourism. In the past, a journey to the island would take at least five days on the ship, while now it is only a few hours of flying. Susan O'Bey thinks this will attract a different kind of tourists. 'In the past, it was people who were time-rich and had the financial means as well. Whereas now, it's also possible to come for people who don't have as much time'. It is difficult to see the effects, as the airport has only been open for commercial flights for just over a year. However, there is a clear increase in tourism. In October 2018 Saint Helena Government [released statistics](#) on the first year of operation of the airport. This showed that 'around 1,650 passengers arrived by air for a holiday. This is an increase of 725 compared to the 925 passengers arriving for a holiday on the RMS in the same period the year before'.

Vulnerable

Still, after our week on the island we also need to conclude that much was still the same. And a lot is still unclear about the impact of air access and the future of the island. The relatively busy feeling at the time could partly be explained by the fact that the RMS St Helena (see boxed text Travel to the island) was also anchored in James Bay, for one of her last voyages. The economic development of the island is definitely vulnerable. With only one flight per week in the first year of operation, carrying a maximum of 76 passengers per trip, the ambition of financial independence is unreachable for the foreseeable future. In addition, many visitors are Saints living and working overseas. When they visit the island, they often stay with family and only make limited use of facilities like restaurants. In any

case, the tourist infrastructure on the island is still in development and the number of beds is only growing slowly.

There has been little investment from outside the island and the possibilities for Saints themselves to invest are also limited, partly because it is hard to get a loan from the Bank of St Helena. The island economy therefore remains dependent on British aid for now.

State aid and investment

The scenario of limited economic growth in the short term might be seen as bad news in the British government, which wants to reduce the annual grant-in-aid to St Helena (24.5 million pounds in 2017). The investment in the island was seen as a *spend to save* initiative. But in the short term, a significant reduction of the grant-in-aid does not seem realistic. According to islander Stewart George, it would lead to a poverty trap. Some Saints even plead for a higher grant in the short term, to guide the island through a period of tourist infrastructure build-up.

The airport has provided Saint Helena with a positive economic impulse, but the development is vulnerable and slow. A key to further economic development lies with Saints currently living and working overseas. The attachment to the island felt by the 'diaspora' is still strong. Better physical links to their 'home' could lead to their return to the island, or increase their willingness to invest.

Departure and return

It is unclear how many Saints live overseas. But everyone on the island has family members elsewhere. 'We should not focus on preventing our young people to leave, but make sure they have something to return to', our informants already said in 2002. The number of inhabitants of Saint Helena is now around 4,500 and is slowly on the rise again, after a long period of decline (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Inhabitants of Saint Helena (1911-2016)

Year	Inhabitants
1911	3520
1921	3747
1931	3995
1946	4748
1956	4642
1966	4649
1976	5147
1987	5644
1998	5008
2008	4077
2016	4534

Source: [Statistics Saint Helena](#) (census numbers)

The decline in population from the late 1980s was related to a sharp decline in the birth rate, as well as large-scale emigration. Many Saints went off to work on army bases on Ascension Island and the Falklands, two other British territories in the South Atlantic. The dip early this

century was related to the British Citizenship Act of 2002, which gave Saints the opportunity to travel to the British 'mainland' to work there, without restrictions. This had not been possible in the two decades before.

In the last few years, the population is growing again. This is wholly due to immigration, as there have been more burials than babies on the island for years. The immigrants are partly returning Saints, but also people coming to work on the island for a number of years. The local secondary school for example employs a number of teachers from Britain and from South Africa, because of a lack of sufficient qualified Saints to do the job.

Tight social fabric

The lack of qualified people is a structural problem on the island. Many young people with ambitions leave the island and seek education and work elsewhere. It is hard to find suitable qualified people, also for jobs requiring less education. Many Saints are not used to working outside regular hours. The weekend is traditionally reserved for family and social activities. On the one hand, the tight social fabric is a strength of the island. Everyone knows everyone. On the other hand, it could also present problems for the development of tourism. Tourists arriving on the island on Saturday, will need to buy a simcard and change money immediately at the airport. Down in Jamestown, this is not possible until Monday. It is also advisable to book a spot in a restaurant for Sunday night, because otherwise it might be hard to get something to eat. However, this culture is slowly changing now the airport is open: a few shops have started to open for a few hours on Sundays.

New faces

How do Saints experience the changes in the social structure? In the stories they tell us, the constant presence of new faces is a recurring feature. 'We used to know who everyone was', Susan O'Bey recounts. 'You would get to know soon enough whether they're tourists, coming to work, or whatever. But now you see people and you have no idea who they are. For a small community, where you have grown up with the idea that you know everyone, that is quite an unusual feeling.' The pupils we talk to at the school confirm this. 'What I like about living here is the sense of freedom and security', a pupil explains. 'Now with the new airport you see lots of people you don't know.'

The new people also seem a bit more stressed. On the ship, the trip to the island took several days, enough time for tourists to enter the peaceful 'Saint Helena mode'. Now you can have breakfast in Johannesburg and lunch on Saint Helena.

This also leads to different expectations among tourists, Helena Bennett explains. 'The visitors who came on the ship accepted that tourism on the island is still in development, but the new tourists expect all facilities to be present.' The difference in speed is illustrated by the slow internet connection on-island. Mobile phones were only introduced in 2015. However, development is quick: in 2020 Saint Helena is planned to be connected to high-speed internet through a new cable.

New focus point

Opening the airport has also led to a shift in the focus point of the island. Traditionally, the Saints were focused on the sea. The Governor's office overlooks James Bay, where the RMS St Helena used to anchor. 'The ship has always been so central to everything that happens on the island', Susan O'Bey explains. 'You could not escape the fact that the ship was in. You heard it, saw it and then saw people walking around. Now with the airport, unless you're

physically going out there to meet somebody or to drop somebody off, you don't hear or see anything generally. And then all of a sudden you see new faces around.' The new freight ship MV Helena (see boxed text Travel to the island) does not anchor in James Bay, but in the next one: Rupert's Bay. In this way, a lot of activity disappears from the capital's harbour. Still, on land Jamestown has gained some liveliness. In the centre of the small town the luxurious Mantis Hotel has opened, aiming at tourists and visitors on official business. At the same time, this hotel is a symbol of the problems the island experiences in trying to attract investors. For lack of other interested parties, the local government is the main investor in the hotel.

Medical evacuations

There is one aspect connected to air access that everyone is positive about: the improved possibilities for medical care. Saint Helena has a small hospital, but in complicated situations patients need to be evacuated to South Africa. Before the airport opened, every now and then oil tankers were diverted to the island to pick up patients. Then it was still a minimum of four days of sailing before the patient reached a hospital. After certification of the airport (and even before commercial flights started) it was possible to send Medevac flights to the island. From June 2016 to May 2017 seven medical evacuation flights were carried out, saving several lives.

Home

An opportunity for further development of the island is the involvement of Saints living overseas. They often still feel very strong connections to the island. During the conference, one session focused on the island as home. This turned out to be a very emotional meeting, moving some participants to tears. 'I cannot live here permanently, it is too suffocating for me. But

Travel to the island

Saint Helena is connected to the outside world through a weekly flight with Airlink to Johannesburg. This flight has a stopover in Windhoek (Namibia), but it is not (yet) possible to board there. Once a month the plane shuttles to Ascension Island, around 1,300 kilometres northwest, which has a large American army base which employs a lot of Saints. Prices for a return ticket Johannesburg - Saint-Helena start at around 800 pounds. For the period December – March a second weekly flight is scheduled. Over the last few decades, the RMS St Helena, a combined passenger and freight ship, was the sole connection to the outside world. In the last few years, the RMS shuttled from Cape Town (five days sailing) to the island, and on to Ascension (two days sailing). In February this year the RMS was decommissioned and now there is no longer a scheduled passenger service to Saint Helena by ship. The MV Helena, which brings freight to the island from South Africa on a monthly basis, does not take passenger bookings. The island is visited by cruise ships and by yachties sailing around the world. On the island, there are no ATMs and the use of creditcards is very limited. Accommodation is available at the new (but expensive) Mantis Hotel, the traditional Consulate Hotel, some bed and breakfasts and by renting self-catering accommodations. The Tourist Office has all the details. Jamestown has a few restaurants. Public transport is very limited and not geared towards tourists. Taxis are available and it is possible to rent a car, although the offer is limited: you get the car that is available. Some roadmanship is needed to handle the beautiful but narrow and steep island roads. More info on the [Saint Helena Tourism](#) website.

I cannot do without the island', one returned Saint described her mixed feelings. 'If you grow up on an isolated island, you have to do it with the people who are there', Susan O'Bey explains. 'You become resourceful and resilient and develop very strong ties.' She sees a possible paradox in the involvement of Saints living overseas. 'On the one hand, there is this very strong desire of St. Helenians abroad to be involved in what's happening here and because this is their home. They feel that they want to be able to help things develop. But there's also a strong element of: "We don't want St. Helena to change too much because it always needs to be there for when we want to go back home and we want it to be as we remember it".'

Realistic

Building the airport was certainly necessary to generate economic opportunities for the island. However, it is not realistic to see this lead to financial independence in the short term. Developing the tourism sector is a slow process. It will also take more time to become clear what social changes are related to the opening of the airport.

Governor Honan and local official Susan O'Bey are optimistic, but also realistic. 'In my perception Saint Helena does remarkably well, given its isolated location', Honan says. 'We can now start to profit from increased accessibility and better healthcare facilities', O'Bey adds. 'But in the end, we will always be isolated. We will always be an island in the middle of the ocean with no other land in sight.'