

The Luxury of Travel (Islands of the South Atlantic)

By Jack Searles

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searles@eznet.net



Recently, I had a convergence of thoughts. While driving along, enjoying the freedom of movement and travel, I was thinking about the purchase of stamps I recently made for 25% of catalogue value. My mind began to wander and my creative thoughts began to flow.

You know, we are lucky. If you or I want to travel to another state or city or town we simply hop in our cars and away we go. This is truly a wonderful luxury that does not occur in many parts of the world. One of those places where this luxury of travel does not occur as regularly as here in New York State, is Tristan da Cunha.

Tristan da Cunha is a remote, almost circular island in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean discovered by the Portuguese explorer Tristao da Cunha in 1506. Tristan was formally annexed by the British during August of 1816. It has a whopping population of about 300 souls.

This island is the largest island in the Tristan group, composed of a series of smaller uninhabited islands, named Nightingale, Inaccessible, Middle and Stolenhoff, respectively. So what about the freedom of movement on Tristan? Well, the Royal Mail Ship St. Helena calls at Tristan only once per year, on its January/February voyage. Of course, that's the summer season for them. According to reports, the RMS St. Helena only stays for two to three days per year, during which passengers get ashore only if the weather is obliging.

But this is not the end of my story because you see, Tristan da Cunha is a dependency of St. Helena. St. Helena was also first claimed by a Portuguese navigator. He was Juan da Nova Castella, sighting land on May 21, 1502. The island was named for Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great. After its discovery, this island was used by the Portuguese as a fresh water stop for their fleets returning from the

East Indies.

During this time, its location was a closely kept Portuguese secret, until 1588 when that the English navigator Thomas Cavendish located the island. The secret was out! From that year forward the island was intermittently used by the Portuguese, English and Dutch. In 1633, the Dutch formally annexed the island but did not occupy it. Occupation of the island had to wait until May, 1659 when the English East India Company claimed the island under a charter from Charles II. The first inhabitants of the island were company employees, English settlers and slaves from South Asia, the East Indies and Madagascar.

Still unable to place St. Helena? Well it is actually quite famous! You see, Napoleon was exiled to this land in 1815. With this famous dignitary came a large garrison of British soldiers and naval ships on constant patrol in case of a rescue attempt. When Napoleon died in 1821, almost all of the garrison was withdrawn.

But St. Helena has been visited by many other dignitaries, like Charles Darwin in 1836 on the homebound leg of his voyage on the Beagle. Dinizulu, the son of Cetwayo of Zulu War fame, and his entourage were confined on the island, as were 6,000 Boer prisoners of war during the Boer War.

With its up and downs, St. Helena survives with a current population of 5,800 individuals. The island economy has become almost totally dependent upon a single commodity, New Zealand flax, used as ropes and string. St. Helena is also serviced by the RMS St. Helena.

While this has all been interesting- to me at least- it is still not where I want to be. Rather my destination is another dependency of St. Helena located almost exactly in the middle of the South Atlantic, namely Ascension Island. Like St Helena, Ascension was first spotted in 1501 by Juan da Nova Castella, but the finding went unrecognized. The official discovery of this island had to wait for Alfonso d'Albuquerque, who in 1503 rediscovered the island on Ascension Day.

Currently, this island has a population of about 1,350 individuals, of which 850 are St. Helenians, 100 Americans and 350 are British (165 of which are members of the Royal Air Force). Both the US and British Air Forces maintain a presence on this island.

So what does this have to do with stamps? Well, it was a wonderful deal on Ascension Island stamps at 25% of catalogue value that sent me on this trek. After all, you can't own Ascension Island stamps and not know where it is located- can ya??!! Well, look for it in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean, almost exactly between South America and Africa, far off the coasts of Brazil and Angola, respectively.

Now that we have arrived at Ascension Island, what about its philatelic history? Well, the stamps of Great Britain stamps in values ranging from 1/2d to 1s were used on Ascension Island prior to 1922. In that year, Ascension Island became a dependency of St Helena, and stamps of St. Helena overprinted "Ascension Island" were used for postage. Since the end of World War II, Ascension Island has participated in all the colonial omnibus issues.

All told, my catalogue tells me that through 1994 this island has issued a total of 574 commemorative and regular issue stamps, plus 6 postage due stamps. There is only one post office on the island, located in the town of Georgetown. Flora, fauna, and historical events are common themes on these very collectable British Commonwealth stamps.

Oh- and guess what? You can visit Ascension Island via the R.M.S. St. Helena which makes its rounds annually. So much for the luxury of travel!