

Island style - with a twist

St Helena in the South Atlantic is not your typical postcard island of white beaches and palm trees. It's much more interesting than that! Here's your guide to a holiday full of adventure and discovery.

WORDS & PICTURES **SOPHIA VAN TAAK**

The charm of St Helena isn't obvious. When you see the volcanic island from the aeroplane for the first time, you do a double take. Where are the people, the beaches, the coast lined with hotels?

That's because St Helena isn't your average island. There are no deck chairs or waiters serving cocktails; no bikini-clad tourists riding jet skis or calypso music in the background. St Helena is different. It has a raw beauty that makes it so attractive.

For five centuries, Portugal, the British East India Company, the British Royal Navy and the Netherlands were locked in a tug of war over the island. In the early 1800s it had a large Chinese workforce. Half a century later, when slavery was abolished, many slaves from Africa, Madagascar, Malaysia and India were sent there. This mix of influences makes St Helena unlike anywhere else on earth.

I'd recommend that you start saving for a plane ticket right now. I'm actually begging you to do it! St Helena still has loads of character, but who knows how long it will stay that way? The best time to visit is now. Use our guide to help plan your trip of a lifetime.

GORGEOUS. Jamestown, the capital of St Helena, is situated in a narrow valley on the northern side of the island. Climb up the mountain for a view of the town centre, James Bay and Jacob's Ladder (on the far left).

THINGS TO DO



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3



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Learn about Napoleon

Many historical figures spent time on St Helena, including captain James Cook, astronomer Edmond Halley, Charles Darwin and Napoleon Bonaparte, who is possibly the most famous exile in history.

For two months after he arrived on the island in 1815, Napoleon lived in a small house above Jamestown called Briars Pavilion. Interestingly, Briars Pavilion had also been home to the Duke of Wellington 10 years previously – the same duke that Napoleon fought during the Battle of Waterloo!

Napoleon was later moved to **Longwood House** 1 where he lived until he passed away in 1821. Longwood House is filled with wooden furniture, crystal chandeliers and gilded wallpaper – it's hard to imagine this place as "dank and musty" as Napoleon described it.

You'll learn all this and more on an audio tour. You'll also get to see the general's camp stretcher, his lead bath, his signature and the globe he must have studied many a night while sipping a glass of Vin de Constance and wondering what Louis the XVIII was up to in France. **Cost:** A combo ticket to Longwood House and Briars Pavilion is R255 per person; the audio tour costs an extra R35. It will take about two hours to see everything. If you keep your ticket, you can return a few days later.

Opening times: Longwood House: Monday to Friday from 11 am to 1 pm. Briars Pavilion: Wednesday and Friday from 10 am to 11 am.

WHAT ELSE? Napoleon's remains were returned to Paris in 1840, where he was laid to rest in the Les Invalides cathedral after a state funeral. For two decades, however, he had been buried in **a tomb on St Helena** 2, under a stone with no inscription. This is because British governor Hudson Lowe insisted that the grave be marked with Napoleon's name and surname, whereas France wanted only his imperial title "Napoleon" on the

stone. Unable to resolve the dispute, the stone remained anonymous. Napoleon was buried in four coffins stacked one inside the other – one made of tin, one of lead and two of mahogany.

His tomb is a short drive from Longwood House, in the Sane Valley. It's about a 500 m walk from the parking area to a terrace, from where you can see the grave.

Have a drink

Prickly pears grow on uncultivated mountain slopes called the Crown Waste. It's no easy task to harvest the fruit, but that's exactly what Paul and Sally Hickling did with their friends a few years ago: They harvested and distilled 15 tonnes of prickly pears to make a delicious drink called Tungi Spirit. (Tungi is the local word for prickly pear.)

At the **St Helena Distillery** 3, the Hicklings also produce a first-class gin, a coffee liqueur called Midnight Mist and a rum called White Lion, named after the *Witte Leeuw* shipwreck in James Bay. (Island slang for a rum and Coke is a "shipwreck".)

Brush up on your Boer history

There are two memorials outside a small church in the Knollcombes district: a faded Vierkleur flag flies next to one memorial and the flag of the former Republic of the Orange Free State is next to the other. On a slope in this narrow valley you'll find **the graves of Boer prisoners of war** 4 who died on St Helena.

The first Boer prisoners – including general Piet Cronjé and his wife Hester – arrived on the island in 1900. More ships arrived over the course of that year, bringing the number of Boer prisoners to about 4 500. They were kept in two concentration camps: Deadwood Plain in the east and Broadbottom in the west. Some prisoners were allowed to work in the plantations, chop wood, dig ditches for pipelines

and to do renovation work and construction. However, many had fallen ill during the exhausting sea voyage. Diseases like typhoid and tuberculosis eventually caused about 180 deaths.

There were children among the prisoners – about 300 boys received an education on the island. The adults made pipes, kieres, brooches, whips and toys using whatever they could lay their hands on. There were small cafés in the camps, as well as a bakery. An Afrikaans newspaper was even published! Sports events would be held occasionally – the cricket match between Boers and Brits was always a favourite.

As many as 40 000 letters were sent to England, South Africa and other countries every month during the war, yet the people of St Helena were so isolated that when a telegraph arrived on 1 June 1902 to announce that the war was over, both parties celebrated, convinced of their victory.

Because St Helena was a British territory, the prisoners were forced to swear allegiance to the King. Only seven Boer prisoners refused and they were sent back to Cape Town for a court hearing. Five prisoners stayed behind on the island and married local women, the rest returned to South Africa.

In an open letter to the people of St Helena, the Boer prisoners wrote: "We find it impossible to leave St Helena unless we contribute our share of thankfulness to His Majesty's Officers... for what they have done to make us take courage to fight the future... the conclusion has been made that the prisoners of war have been squarely and gentlemanly treated... Their general attitude towards us prisoners of war will always be recounted with pleasure – an attitude at once firm and manly and worthy of admiration – and why? Because 'politeness' was evinced in all their actions and doings."

Park near the gate at the church and walk down the jeep track. There's no space at the end of the track to turn your vehicle around and it can get quite muddy after rain.

Meet Jonathan

The official residence of the governor of St Helena is called **Plantation House** 5. You can take a walk around the ground floor to see the dining room and library, and photo galleries of former governors and members of the royal family who have visited the island. Afterwards, you'll gain access to the lawn for about half an hour where you'll meet some overgrown lawnmowers: Jonathan – the oldest Aldabra giant tortoise in the world – and a few of his friends.

As well as being the oldest tortoise, Jonathan is also the oldest terrestrial animal in the world. He is estimated to be about 186 years old and was brought to St Helena in 1882 from the Seychelles. He is starting to look his age – his right eye has cataracts, which makes it easy to distinguish him from the other tortoises.

The hour-long tour of Plantation House takes place on weekdays from 8 am to 4 pm. Book beforehand via the tourism office.



4



5



Drink local coffee

The first arabica coffee plants were brought to St Helena from Yemen in 1732 by the British East India Company. Napoleon is said to have enjoyed a few cups a day. He described the coffee as “the only good thing about St Helena”.

At **Rosemary Gate farm 6**, owners Bill and Jill Bolton grow their own coffee. Bill will talk you through the whole process: His 1 800 plants flower twice a year and they harvest 2,5 tonnes of fruit by hand.

It’s great fun to watch Bill leaning over the coffee roaster, waiting for the first bean to crack open like a popcorn kernel. When he hears a second pop, the beans are ready and the colour and flavour will be perfect.

Bags of beans and ground coffee are sold at the Boltons’ coffee shop in the harbour (pictured left). Except for Harrods in London, this is the only place in the world where you can buy their coffee.

Cost: A coffee tour costs R170 per person. Make arrangements via the tourism office.



IN JAMESTOWN

Let Basil be your guide

Basil George (above) is the grandson of Alfred Smith, one of the Boer prisoners of war who remained on the island. During a **historical town walk 8** around the harbour and past some of the oldest buildings in Jamestown, Basil will tell you how the island, which rises more than 5 000 m from the sea floor, was formed 15 million years ago by a series of volcanic eruptions. He’ll also tell you how Portuguese admiral João da Nova discovered the island in 1502 and kept it a secret for decades until the Dutch and British fleets came upon it.

As you wander from one historical building to the next, you’ll learn about the island’s economic deterioration over the centuries and how the economy has been recovering steadily since the 1970s. St Helena still faces many challenges: It has no labour market or property developers (job opportunities are limited to education, healthcare and government posts). Once young residents leave the island to study in South Africa or England, there’s not much to entice them to move back.

Basil also tells stories about the whalers of the 1800s and that the cathedral – built in 1774 – is the oldest Anglican church in the southern hemisphere.

He’s passionate about St Helena and his tour will teach you more about the island than a book or a brochure ever can.

Cost: A tour costs R170 per person and includes a cup of coffee and a snack. The tourism office will arrange the tour with Basil.

Tea time at the Consulate

The **Consulate Hotel 9** will take you back a century or two to a time when high tea was still an institution. If rainy weather ruins your plans for the day, this is a great place to while away a few hours.

Sit on the veranda or in a comfy chair and admire the collection of paintings and sketches of Napoleon on the walls. Order a mug of hot chocolate (about R20) and a slice of cake (about R35 – they usually have carrot cake, chocolate fudge cake, scones, quiche and milk tart). Someone might play a tune on the baby grand and if you’re lucky farmer Peter Mott (pictured below) and his duckling Donald will drop by.



Climb Jacob’s Ladder

This staircase will haunt you until you’ve climbed to the top. Between 1829 and 1871, **Jacob’s Ladder 10** was a funicular between the town at the bottom and the fort at the top. Cargo cars were pulled up iron rails at a 40-degree angle, by three donkeys at the top rotating a capstan.

The cars and rails have since been removed and all that remains are the stone steps. Jacob’s Ladder is a must-do on the island. If you manage all 699 steps you’ll have good reason to boast – and you’ll earn the respect of the Saints!

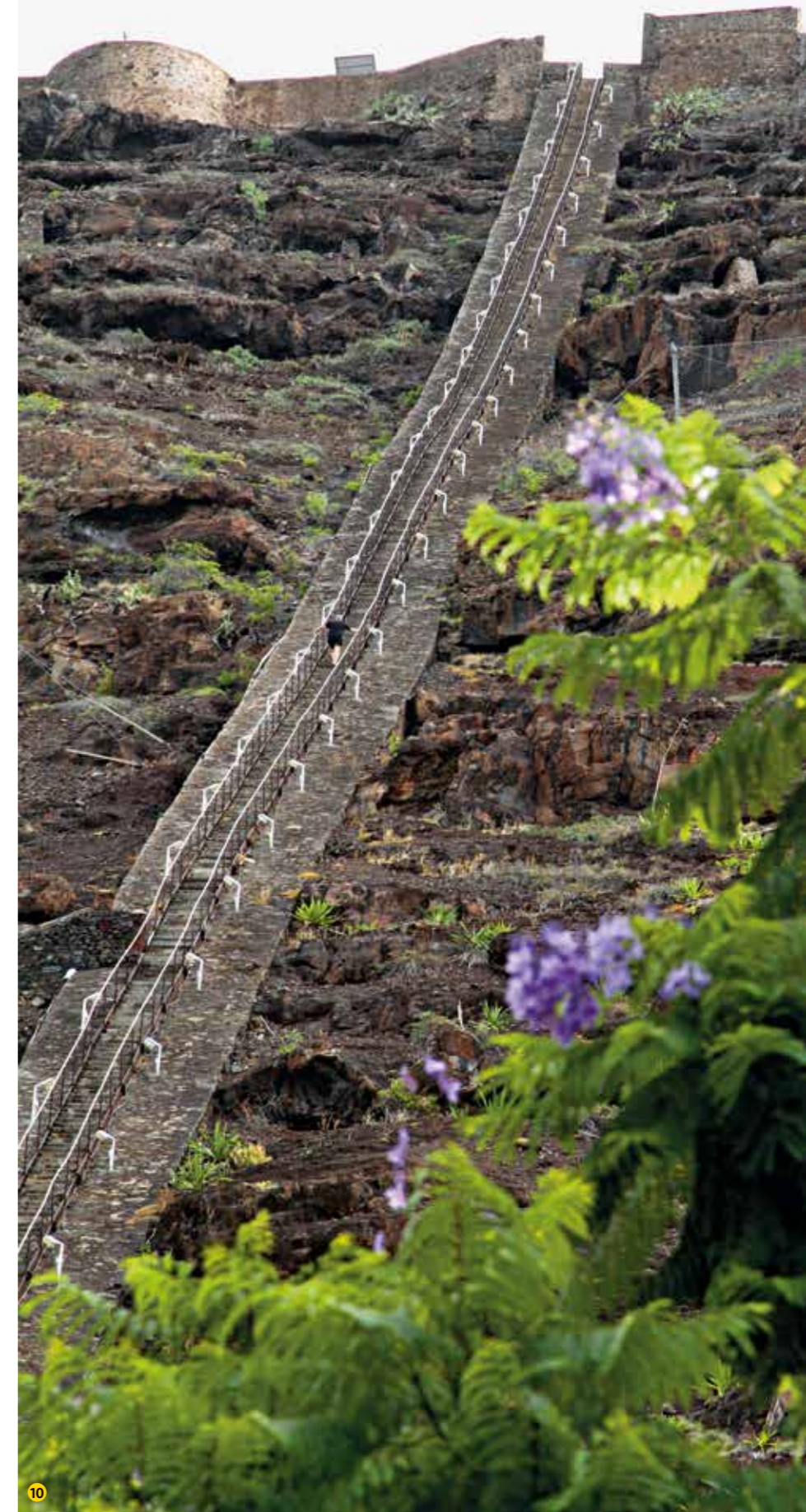
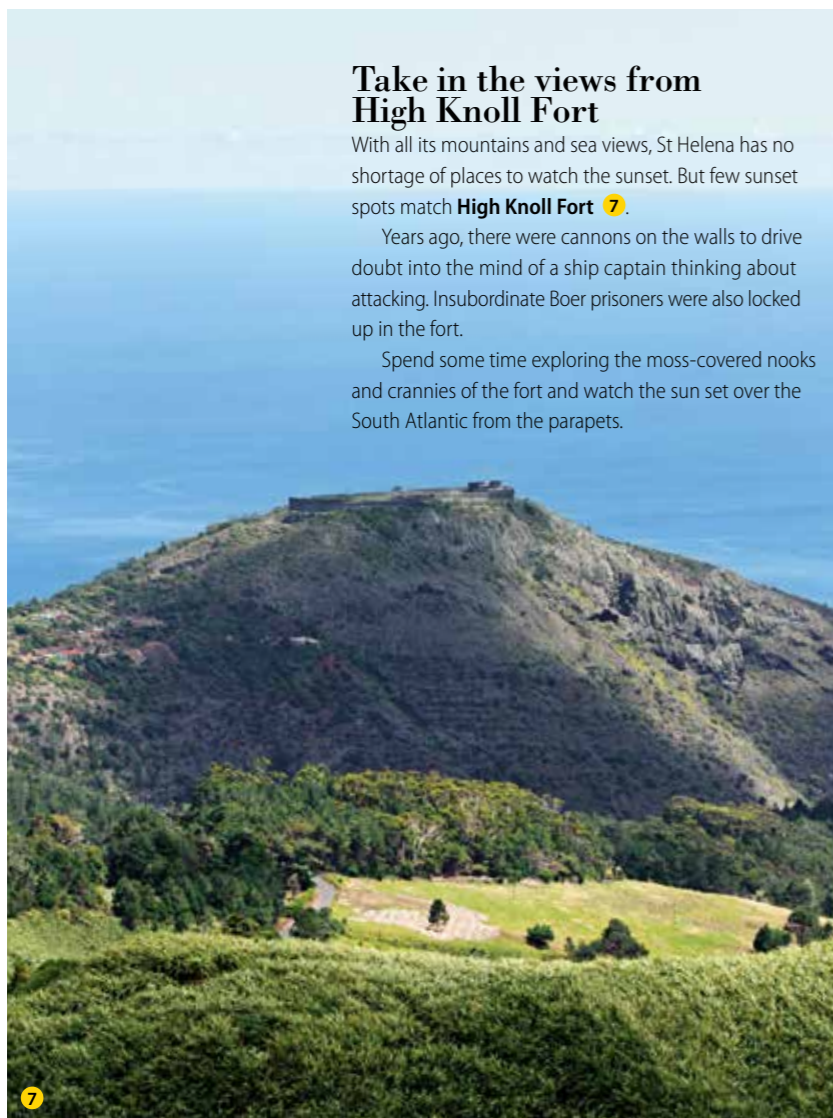
WHAT ELSE? The **museum 11** at the bottom of Jacob’s Ladder is open on weekdays from 10 am to 4 pm, and on Saturdays until noon. You can spend hours browsing the exhibits on shipwrecks, Boer history, the flax industry, St Helena infrastructure and prominent families. Also ask about the life of Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo, a Zulu chief who was exiled to St Helena between 1890 and 1897.

Take in the views from High Knoll Fort

With all its mountains and sea views, St Helena has no shortage of places to watch the sunset. But few sunset spots match **High Knoll Fort 7**.

Years ago, there were cannons on the walls to drive doubt into the mind of a ship captain thinking about attacking. Insubordinate Boer prisoners were also locked up in the fort.

Spend some time exploring the moss-covered nooks and crannies of the fort and watch the sun set over the South Atlantic from the parapets.





12

HEAD OUT TO SEA

The ocean temperature around St Helena might be a moderate 20° C, but the currents are dangerous – if you get caught in one you might end up near the equator! As such, the island doesn't have any safe swimming beaches. Rather explore the sea by boat.

Whale sharks 12 often congregate around the island. It's a rare privilege to swim with these gentle giants – despite being the biggest sharks on earth, they are

harmless plankton feeders. Jump in with your GoPro and try to keep up with the shark as it drifts past effortlessly. (Diving mask, snorkel and fins are provided for the trip.) You might also see bottlenose, rough-toothed and pantropical spotted dolphins.

Cost: A whale shark outing costs about R500 per person and takes about three hours.

Contact: Johnny Herne from Enchanted Isle Limited
 📧 Johnny.Herne@helanta.co.sh

Scuba-diving around the island is brilliant – the water is warm and visibility is generally excellent. On the western side of the island there are **eight shipwrecks** for divers to explore **13** of which the *Witte Leeuw* is the best known. This Dutch cargo ship carrying spices, porcelain and diamonds sank in 1613 after a short but devastating battle with the Portuguese cannons on the island.

Cost: From R500 per person, including gear hire (remember to bring your certification card and your log book). Also enquire about deep-sea fishing and birdwatching outings.

Contact: 📧 divesainthelena.com;
 📧 stadventures.com

WHAT ELSE? Jamestown has a **33 m swimming pool 14** where you can do a few laps when the school kids are done with their lesson.



14

EXPLORE THE ISLAND ON FOOT

St Helena is one big mountain and there are lots of amazing hiking trails. There are 21 Postbox Walks, ranging in distance from the 1,5 km Heart-shaped Waterfall Trail to the 12 km Sugar Loaf Trail. The terrain includes rugged volcanic mountain slopes and subtropical cloud forests.

The most popular route is the 3,8 km trail that takes you to **Diana's Peak 15** – the highest peak on the island at 823 m above sea level. The hike is not too challenging and on a clear day you'll have views in all directions. It goes through dense flax bush and past indigenous tree ferns and includes two other peaks, Mount Actaeon and Cuckold's Point. (On Mount Actaeon, look for the Norfolk pine that Captain James Cook planted in the 1770s. A Norfolk pine has a tall, straight trunk – seafarers used them as landmarks and as a source of wood to repair their masts.)

The 4,5 km trail to **Lot's Wife Ponds 16** on the southern side of the island is another highly recommended route. It goes along volcanic mountain slopes where masked boobies nest. Rock formations to look out for include Asses Ears, Lot's Wife and Gorilla's Head. When you reach the tidal pools, climb down the steep slope using the ropes. You can swim in the pools – a rocky reef shelters them from the open sea – but don't take unnecessary risks. Keep your eyes peeled for tropical fish and the big red crabs that are nicknamed Sally Lightfoots.

WHAT ELSE? The Postbox Walks are so named because each has a postbox with a unique ink stamp that you can add to your diary to remember the outing.



15



It's safe to swim at Lemon Valley, but you'll have to descend a steep 5 km path to get there. Some boat tours stop here so visitors can explore the ruins of the quarantine station, old stone houses and the British East India Company's fortifications.



Follow the path from Plantation House to the Butcher's grave (left), an eerie grave with a butcher's knife and scull and crossbones carved into the headstone. Apparently the butcher killed his wife before committing suicide.



In the late afternoon, fishermen unload their catch here.

Follow the footpath from Mundens Road (left of the tourism office, next to the Moonbeams shop) to get to this beautiful viewpoint.

Have a beer with the locals at Wicked Wahoe.

Boer prisoners of war were kept in two concentration camps: Deadwood Plain was situated here and Broadbottom was in the Blue Hill district in the west. Today the site contains wind turbines that provide about 30% of St Helena's power. The rest comes from a diesel generator.

The island has been doing weather research for the past 120 years. Be here at 11.15 am if you want to see the meteorologists release the daily weather balloon. A radiosonde attached to the balloon measures moisture, temperature and wind speed as it travels, before the balloon explodes 24 km above sea level.

Pull over at the turn-off to the Briars for a scenic photo of Jamestown with the bay in the background.

Enquire at the tourism office if you want to play nine holes.

St Matthew's is one of the most beautiful churches on the island. It's open during the day and you're welcome to visit.



Airport

You have a nice view from the ruins of the observatory.

One of the oldest churches on the island. The church spire and ancient graves make for interesting photos.

This rock sounds like a church bell when you hit it with a stone. It's tradition to make a wish afterwards.

Donkeys were once the backbone of transport on St Helena. This sanctuary now cares for the pensioned donkeys.



Here, you'll still find some of the old cannons that were used to protect the valley.

Arrange for a 4x4 guide if you want to visit this outpost in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean.

The Man and Horse Cliffs offer dramatic views of the volcanic coastline. Don't try to drive this road in your hire car: enquire about a 4x4 guide.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Best time to visit? St Helena is a year-round destination. It's a sub-tropical island and the temperatures are moderate. The weather can vary across the island: The sun might be shining in Jamestown while it's misty and rainy in the mountains. Bring a sun hat and a rain jacket. It doesn't get very cold.

How to get there? There's an Airlink flight from OR Tambo every Saturday and Tuesday. Return ticket from R13 577 per person. flyairlink.com

Do I need a visa? No. All you need is your passport, proof of medical travel insurance and a short-term visa (about R300; pay upon arrival).

Where do I stay? Self-catering accommodation from R340 per person; B&B from R1 100 per person; hotel accommodation R3 050 per person per night. Give the tourism office your budget and they'll suggest suitable places.

Where do I eat? The Boltons' coffee shop in the harbour makes a fine hamburger (R100); the

Sandwich Bar at the market sells delicious sandwiches (R85); Anne's Place in the castle gardens serves freshly caught fish (R200) and the Blue Lantern has juicy steaks from South Africa (R340 per person for a three-course meal).

Are there any shops? Yes, there are grocery shops that stock mostly British and South African products. Fruit and vegetables are put on shelf on Thursdays and sell out quickly. The island produces fresh meat and eggs on a small scale, but frozen products are imported from South Africa. The shops are only open until lunchtime on Wednesdays.

What if I have a medical emergency? There's a dentist and a small hospital staffed with international doctors on the island.

Money matters. There are no ATMs on the island and very few shops or places to stay accept credit cards. Bring cash and exchange it for St Helena pounds (equivalent to British pounds) at the airport or at the bank in Jamestown.

Can I phone home? Probably not. But there are a few places with Wi-Fi. The Wi-Fi at Anne's Place works well. R112 per hour.

Does St Helena have Uber? No, but you can use your South African driving licence to hire a car for about R280 per day. There are three filling stations on the island.

Contact: Visit sthelenatourism.com to plan your trip and visit sainthelenaisland.info/ for more information about the island. The tourism office is at the top of the main road in Jamestown, near the traffic circle.

Sophia travelled as a guest of St Helena Tourism.