

Small, but perfectly formed

It's quite a mission to get to the tiny island of St Helena in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the air is pure, the pace slow, and the ocean looms as big as the sky. Welcome to the world's most fascinating and remote destination to boast marriage equality.

Words and photos by: Julianne Feinberg

THE HUB: The island's largest settlement is Jamestown.



LONGWOOD HOUSE
Napoleon's residence
(1804-1815)

The Consulate Hotel in Jamestown doesn't seem very keen on walk-ins. Sometimes it's open, sometimes it's not, and which is when is anyone's guess. No one answers the phone, and the sign on the reception desk isn't very helpful, either. "Some afternoons, mornings, or even whole days, we are not there at all," it warns, "but lately we have been constantly open, except when closed, although we should be there, unless we left early."

Did I step through a wormhole and end up in Fawcett Towers? It sure feels that way. But, no, I am in St. Helena, a volcanic rock rising from the churning waters of the South Atlantic, somewhere between Angola and Brazil. Which is probably not any less weird, and still feels like I have traveled a few decades back in time. All I vaguely know about the island is that it is the place the British exiled Napoleon to after his defeat at Waterloo. The emperor—or, if money, as you would have it—perished here in 1821, exactly two centuries ago.

Napoleon's prison, a rather elaborate mansion named Longwood House, can still be visited on the island. Situated on a hill that is often shrouded in fog, it was owned and managed by the French government, who have stationed a consul here for that very reason and presumably not much else. The island is a rock in the ocean, after all. Don't worry, I am not going to dig up that old Napoleonic history again—as most, if not all, travel reports from the island will. That is not where I am going. A far more interesting fact in the context of this magazine is this: St. Helena legalised marriage equality in 2017, and the island's first same-sex wedding took place in 2018—but more on that later.

A smooth mix of European, African and Asian ancestries, the people of St. Helena are known as Saints. A highly anticipated fibre-optic cable didn't arrive until August 2021, after my visit (it won't be operational until early 2022), so the island is a bit of a time capsule. It is quite lovely to experience one of the few remaining modern societies where the internet is impossibly slow and prohibitively expensive. Many parts of the island don't have a mobile phone signal—much less 5G. It all adds to a general sense of having arrived in a parallel universe, and a very pleasant and chatty one at that. Instead of being engrossed in social media feeds, Saints wave at passing cars. There is always time for a chat or even a good gossip—the only thing that travels fast on the island—at the pub. Patience is a way of life here. With cargo ships only



ALL EYES ON YOU
Napoleon is always on display at the Consulate Hotel

arriving now and then, stores often run out of goods that are taken for granted in most of the world. Sometimes there are no potatoes for a month. Happy are the days when there are walnuts or avocados on the shelves. Once the island almost ran out of beer—a near calamity—and even sparkling water can be hard to come by.

The general atmosphere of friendliness and conviviality extends to anyone who has taken the trouble to get to St. Helena—an effort that is nearly always met with curiosity and pride. Anyone new to St. Helena soon finds out that there's no such thing as a quick hello. During a one-week stay, as well as everyone in the hospitality industry, I also meet the island's only dentist, the pharmacist, chemistry teacher and the weatherman. On only the second day of my visit, I am invited on a hike with what seems like, and probably is, half the police force on the island.

In a community that can be described as a tiny village with not much more than a dial-up connection to the outside world, it's remarkable that less than two decades after the first gay and lesbian couples in the world got married at Amsterdam's town hall, same-sex marriage has arrived in one of the remotest corners of the planet. And, by all accounts, most of the islanders today are supportive.

To put things in proper perspective, let me reiterate how closed off St. Helena has remained until very recently. Even

"It's remarkable that same-sex marriage has arrived in one of the remotest corners of the planet"



GORGE-OUS:
Jamestown sits in a deep valley



MOON LANDINGS:
The lunar landscape near the airport

today, the island is one of the most inaccessible places on earth. Until 2017, there was no operational airfield, so the fastest way to get here was a five-day journey from Cape Town aboard a British mail ship, the *RMS St. Helena*. Then, an airport that had been in the works since the 1930s was finally opened, the *RMS* was decommissioned a few months later, and the romantic sea journey replaced by weekly, five-hour flights from Johannesburg.

The new airport hasn't necessarily made things easier. It is notoriously windy and sits on the edge of a cliff. If the weather turns and flights are cancelled, visitors are stranded on the island for a few days.

It is fair to say that travel to St. Helena requires a bit of flexible planning. I'm a travel writer, and it's there, so I had to go, but should you? Well, I think so. The amazing marine life, warm waters year-round, and excellent diving alone are worth the headache of getting there. You might even consider getting married on the island. Think about it: shake off those racist antics and make it an intimate affair with the people who care so much about you that they would travel to the end of the world for you. If on top of that, you have a taste for the remote and pleasantly bizarre, look no further.

Let me explain. At first sight from the airplane window, St. Helena appears dramatic and forboding, the kind of place where dragons, giant apes or leftover dinosaurs roam. The approach to a lone runway extending to a cliff edge hundreds of metres above the ocean is terrifying and spectacular in equal measure. Soon after landing, though, there's an overwhelming sense of having arrived at the end of the world, at a place where time is warped, and everything is slightly confused.



CAFE SOCIETY
Friends get together—and not a phone in sight.

“Around one corner lie tropical views, while around another, fog hovers above grassy meadows”

This is partly because of the unusual geography of the island. Though the airport is set in a decidedly lunar landscape, St Helena's interior is lush and green. On the way to Jamestown, the main town on the leeward of the island, each valley feels like a lost world of its own. Around one corner lie tropical views of banana plantations, tree ferns and flax covered hillsides, while around another, fog hovers above grassy meadows and windswept plains. It is as if the Almighty stitched leftover pieces of Egypt, Costa Rica and Scotland together into a ruffled, 122-square-kilometre quilt. It's gorgeous.

Jamestown is sleepy but all kinds of lovely. When Charles Darwin made a stopover here shortly after the death of Napoleon, he was amazed at how English it looked, and that still rings true. The town stretches through the bottom of a narrow gorge on the island's leeward side, ending in a sparkling bay. Its main street runs from the harbour and roughly divides the town in two. The church, the prison (an actual one, not a mansion), the harbour, the souvenir shop, the post office, several hotels, the museum and the pubs can all be found here. Just offshore, in the crystal-clear waters of St James Bay, the early 20th-century wreck of SS *Papanui* is at snorkelling distance.

I am staying at the Mantis, the island's only modern luxury hotel, which is housed in the former barracks of the British East India Company, right next to the oldest Anglican church in the southern hemisphere. Though it is the only place on the island to offer free (albeit very slow) Wi-Fi, mingling with Saints and other guests at the lively cocktail bar is a much more attractive option. On my visit, in 2019, Kyle Jones, the 33-year-old operations

manager, and his husband Chay Benjamin, 34, the founder of Benjamin-Jones Travel, are both working there. They got married in 2020 at Longwood House. They aren't the only gay men in the hotel, either. As it turns out, Matt Joshua, the hotel's general manager at the time — he's now the island's head of tourism — used to live in London and shared an office with the editor of this very magazine. Running into a friend of *attitude*? Perhaps the island isn't quite as disconnected as it seems.

That gay marriages have taken place at one of the island's highest-profile locations paints a very attractive picture: that LGBT people are everywhere. The first openly gay couple on St Helena were the French consul and his husband of South African descent — both very well respected members of the community. But the claim to fame as the first same-sex couple to marry on the island — and key players in changing the law so this could happen — is held by 39-year-old, St Helena-born Lemarc Thomas, and his Swedish husband Michael Wernstedt, also 39.

Now based in Sweden, where he runs a matchmaking service, Lemarc tells me the story via email. “I had a dream of travelling from the top of Africa to the bottom and then getting the RMS *St Helena* home. We compromised and started in Kenya.

“On the five-day journey home on the RMS *St Helena*, we learned that there would be a vote for same-sex marriage shortly after we arrived. We talked with a counsellor about the marriage bill who happened to be on the ship with us. It was clear that she was going to vote against. This raised some curiosity in us, and the day after we arrived on St Helena, we talked with the human rights officer and those pushing the bill forward. We were then interviewed by the two local papers and the radio station, sharing our story to create awareness of why it was important to pass this bill. However, the bill was withdrawn during the council meeting due to lack of support. We were present during that meeting and, feeling shut down, I became passionate to do something about it.

“I said to Michael, ‘We have to do something — why don't we apply to get married?’ accidentally proposing to him in the town street in an emotional mess. He said, ‘OK, let's get married.’ We applied to get married knowing that if two men applied to marry, the application, like any other, would be published and if anyone objects, it would go to the supreme court for them to decide what to do. The marriage law on St Helena was from the 1800s and did not specify man and woman. Plus, the constitution was very modern and said that people should not be discriminated against by sexuality. So Michael was sure the law could be interpreted in our favour.

“Two people objected to our marriage by writing in a caveat. Those letters were painful to read. How could these random people have any opinion on whether Michael and I should marry? The case went to the supreme court, and we felt quite confident that it would go through; however, after a year, the marriage bill was back on the political agenda and this time it went through.

“A year later, we returned, and on 31 December 2018, we were the first same-sex couple to marry on the island. We spent some time making sure the marriage was about love and not politics, and I have beautiful memories of that period. My husband is Swedish, so we had about 45 people from Sweden, the UK, and South Africa fly to St Helena for our wedding. Seeing everyone get off the plane from the viewing deck at the airport was so emotional. They all lined up and did a Mexican wave in front of the plane. St Helena



ROLL OUT THE RAINBOW! The Benjamin-Jones and Thomas wedding at Longwood House



PHOTO: THE HELMERS/STHELLENIA/PHOTOGRAPHY

WHITE WEDDING. The Benjamin-Joneses married at Longwood House in 2020



is such a magical place, from the moment you see the island from the plane, you can feel its magic."

The ceremony took place at Plantation House, the home of the island's governor, and was the first wedding to take place there. "It was the most magical, perfect, beautiful day that we could have asked for. Our reception was held at Princes Lodge, a co-created festival-style party. It was a serious clash of Swedish and St Helenaian culture combined with burning Man attitude of anything goes."

"We spent the morning at Plantation House getting ready, and from a window, we watched our guests arrive and participate in a musical workshop with our band. We joined them as the music was in full swing, and after the music and dancing led to a crescendo, there was a silence to indicate the start of the wedding ceremony."

"We stood in the middle with our guests seated in a circle around us. Our guests passed our rings around the circle, crying and blessing our rings with their wishes. We read our vows. Exchanged rings. Kissed. Everyone embraced us in a massive group hug. We signed the paper and drank champagne with our loved ones and Jonathan the tortoise in the background."

Let's pause there to reflect on that image because after Napoleon, Jonathan the tortoise might be the most famous inhabitant of the island. He's portrayed on the five-pence coin for good reason. At the ripe age of 189 years, this Aldabra giant tortoise has lived on the lawn of Plantation House since 1882, when the governor received him as a gift. Today, Jonathan is known as the oldest living land animal on earth, and a gift that keeps on giving.

Eight around the time the same-sex marriage bill was passed, Joe Hollins, the island vet, made an interesting discovery. Frederika, Jonathan's partner of 26 years at the time who had always been assumed to be a female, turned out to be a male. "It hit the press about five years ago and made a big buzz, but I can tell you animals don't have any hang-ups about homosexual activity," says Hollins. "So it's not really a story except for hung-up humans who think it's abnormal behaviour — which we know it isn't."

Of course, while ancient gay tortoises get a pass, islanders' attitudes towards LGBT people haven't always been quite as saintly as today.

"I feel privileged to have grown up on St Helena and had



such an amazing childhood, but it was difficult as a gay child," Lemarc Thomas reflects. "I had no role models. Most gay people leave the island to live elsewhere. I felt that I was wrong being gay. I left home when I was 17 and now, 19 years later, attitudes have changed so much. People on St Helena are so warm and welcoming, and we had so many people

coming up to us to tell us how happy they were for us and told us stories of their gay relatives." I can attest to that warmth. The more I explore St Helena, the more I fall in love with its people and the island itself.

On both sides of Jamestown, steep roads switchback out of the gorge. For pedestrians, Jacob's Ladder, a 180-metre staircase of 699 steps, is a daunting but very scenic alternative, leading straight uphill to a small fortress that overlooks an ocean that is as vast as the sky. The rest of the island is best explored on foot: a network of 21 so-called 'post box walks', each up to 12 kilometres long, leads through green valleys, meadows, cloud forests and stone deserts. A few hair-raisingly steep walks follow the coastline, offering stunning views of wild and godforsaken bays. Thankfully, Diana's Peak, the highest point of the island, is an easy hike; its summit marked by a solitary, straight Norfolk pine that is said to have been planted there — for future use as a ship's mast — by the crew of Captain James Cook, who visited the island twice.

For the island's most famous resident, it can't have been a bad place to be imprisoned. Although the defeated emperor complained bitterly about his incarceration at Longwood House, he had servants and a butler, enjoyed wines from Madeira, and dined on suckling pigs from Spain in the company of generals who would let him win at chess. Inside, a dimly lit museum is permanently decorated as if it was the day the deceased emperor was laid out there. The iconic bicorn hat on display is a replica, but his strand of hair is real. Nearby, the unmarked tomb where he was buried until his remains were shipped to Paris still draws visitors.

Another key part of the island's history is the RMS *St Helena*. Although it was decommissioned after its last voyage from Cape Town in February 2018, it is remembered

fondly by many who considered the ship part of the island. In a great number of halls and living rooms, photographs and models of the ship are on display. Many like to reminisce about the romantic sea journey, sometimes even reflecting on the multiple ways those five days aboard the ship compared favourably to five hours on a plane. The RMS *St Helena* offered entertainment, good food, bingo nights and barbecues on deck; your bed was made every day, and after several nights aboard the small vessel, the island felt like a big place.

Perhaps most importantly, the time spent aboard the ship gave first-time visitors and Saints on their way home plenty of time to acclimatise and befriend each other. Of course, the airport has changed all that, but not as much as you might expect. The arrival of visitors is still a remarkably happy and sociable event. This eccentric little outpost has a way of embracing the newly arrived and making them regret they didn't plan a longer stay. Perhaps an unreliable connection to civilisation isn't such a bad thing after all.

When, at the end of my stay, I finally find someone at the reception of the Consulate Hotel, he echoes a sentiment I have heard many times on St Helena: "This is not a holiday island." The fact that the tourists aren't exactly arriving in droves doesn't seem to bother him. "It is probably for the best. You don't want to see traffic jams here, do you?" Maybe not. But a LGBT Pride parade would certainly live things up. ❦



Stay

The island's only modern luxury hotel, **The Mantle** in Jamestown occupies the former barracks of the British East India Company. From here, everything in town, including the bay, for snorkelling, is a walking distance. mantlesthelema.com

The Farm Lodge, part of a grand 17th-century estate, is surrounded by beautiful gardens, plantations, and forests in Saint Helena's interior. The walls are filled with portraits of British royalty and stuffed pheasants; display cases overflow with silver, china, books and faded issues of *National Geographic*. A chaise longue and an octagonal wine cooler are said to have originally belonged to the exiled emperor. sthelema.com/accommodation

Getting there (it's complicated)

Until 2020, the only airline to offer flights between Saint Helena and the African mainland was Airlink. Regular flights operated on Saturdays from Johannesburg, and during peak season from December to February there was an additional midweek flight via Cape Town. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Airlink cancelled all flights. At the time of writing, there is a mandatory quarantine of 10 days. Airlink flights will likely remain suspended into next year. Haseyatic, chartered flights operated by Titan Airways from the UK are the only way to get to the island. While a direct route sounds like a lot easier, given the current schedule with, at best, three weeks between Titan flights, anyone considering travel there must be prepared to invest quite a bit of time. Up-to-date flight information can be found at sainthelema.gov.sh/visitors