

LOST IN TIME

If you're searching for silence, go somewhere remote, right? When **Ryan Enslin** scratched a ten-year itch to visit a tiny island in the middle of the South Atlantic, he discovered a deep stillness, unexpected friendships and a night sky that made him feel both small and whole. ➔

ALL PICTURES BY RYAN ENSLIN

Protecting the peace.

High Knoll Fort was built by the Royal Engineers in 1874, incorporating an earlier structure built around 1790. It commands views of the green, peaceful undulations of St Helena





“Even the roads take their time, winding up through the cloud forest, curling past slopes laden with flax and flecked with fern”



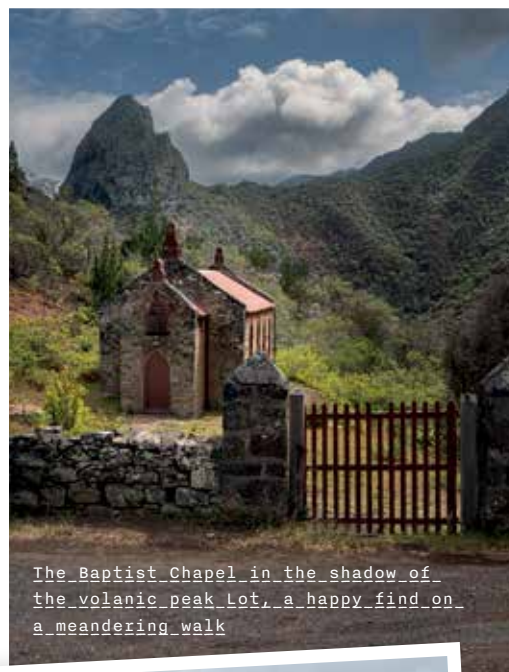
St Helena’s coral ecosystems attract abundant marine wildlife, including whale sharks



St Paul’s Cathedral was consecrated in 1924



Farm Lodge, with owners Stephen and Maureen (right)



The Baptist Chapel in the shadow of the volcanic peak Lot, a happy find on a meandering walk



The author finding peace at High Knoll Fort



I first heard whispers of St Helena a decade ago, carried not by wind or wave, but by a band of islanders who had crossed the Atlantic Ocean to South Africa, where I live. Hearing of this lone outpost — adrift in the South Atlantic, 4300km away, suspended in that ethereal no-man’s land between continents — stirred something within me that I would truly grasp only years later. A quiet yearning not just to reach those distant shores, but to step into a mystical place where the world grows still and my soul, perhaps for the first time, would be free to roam and listen.

Stories of Napoleon’s final exile, of Boer prisoners of war and a banished Zulu king only deepened the intrigue, adding layers to what I’d begun to imagine about this seemingly forgotten spot on the planet. Could such a place truly exist? It seemed unlikely. But there it was, on a map. A pixel of mystery floating in the blue.

WHERE TIME AWAITS

It took nearly ten years for me to finally step onto those black volcanic shores, which rise defiantly from sapphire waters. I came chasing an idea: a notion of stillness, of disconnect. But what I found wasn’t an absence. It was presence, in its richest form.

We speak of time as though it’s fixed. Linear. Absolute. But on St Helena that construct begins to loosen. Time doesn’t only march forward, it lingers, circles back, even pauses. Often, seemingly all at once.

Life here moves to a rhythm entirely its own: deliberate, human, weathered. Even the roads take their time, winding up through the cloud forest, curling past slopes laden with flax and flecked with fern. In this setting, my internal tempo, normally dictated by inboxes and calendar alerts, began to recalibrate.

PATHS WITHOUT ENDPOINTS

I wandered freely, often with no destination in mind. I walked country lanes, where the only witnesses were goats and wirebirds. I meandered through the graveyard at St Paul’s Cathedral, carrying a quiet thought of my friend Sandra back home, and her love for such pursuits. I watched cloud shadows

move across a valley through ancient arrow slits in a long-abandoned fort. And I sat, quietly and for some time, allowing the stillness to take up all the space it needed.

One afternoon, when rain arrived suddenly during a stroll, I took shelter beneath a St Helena ebony, waiting it out in the quiet comfort of simply being.

A few mornings later, I found myself in Half Tree Hollow, the island’s second largest settlement after the capital Jamestown, where I found the fresh country air had me up bright and early most mornings. One Thursday, I laced my walking shoes and set off for High Knoll Fort, a short walk from Jaye’s Guesthouse.

The fort — the island’s largest military structure — is imposing, offering commanding views over Jamestown, the Atlantic and much of the island’s interior.

I felt the gentle caress of the island’s now-familiar breath rising through the stones; and in that stillness, emotion welled, as if my body understood the moment before I did.

I sat on stone walls first laid in 1799 and thought about life, about how this Thursday had brought me here, with no pressing need to be elsewhere, no expectation to do something deemed useful by someone else. I felt the gentle caress of the island’s now-familiar breath rising through the stones; and in that stillness, emotion welled, as if my body understood the moment before I did. That ten-year wait had been worth it.

THE SAINTS I MET

In the days that followed, the island continued to reveal itself, not so much through landmarks, but through the Saints, as the locals are affectionately known. Their warmth is quieter. Unrushed.

One such occasion came at the wharf in Jamestown, where I slipped into easy conversation with Helen Joshua, beloved for her slices of homemade cake and savoury eats — precious treats indeed. She sells at local markets, and as one Saint told me: “You know Helen’s there when

you see people clutching little white boxes with pink stripes.” She may live in one of the world’s most remote places, but Helen runs a smart operation, rooted in the quiet conviction that seems to run deep among the Saints I meet.

Another encounter stayed with me; this one in the shade of the wide canopy of an ancient ficus tree in the Castle Gardens, where I met Basil George — historian, educator, poet and keeper of stories.

A quiet pillar of the island’s living memory, he shared details of his genealogy, offering insights into the cultural richness woven through Saint identity. Basil traces 16 ethnic roots in his family line. “I’ve got 12 per cent African in me. I tell people, this brown skin doesn’t come out of a bottle,” he smiled, touching his aged arm as we shared a light-hearted moment.

When I asked about everyday life on the island, both now and back in the day, he looked me in the eye and said simply: “Things take the time they take.” It wasn’t offered as advice, but as truth. I nodded, feeling the weight of it settle somewhere quiet inside me.

Now in his late 80s, Basil is part of a fast-ageing population whose lived experience reaches back across decades. The knowledge held by people like him is a finite resource, quietly vanishing from this island and from those of us fortunate enough to pass through it. In a place where time moves slowly, their willingness to share theirs with me felt like a rare and generous gift.

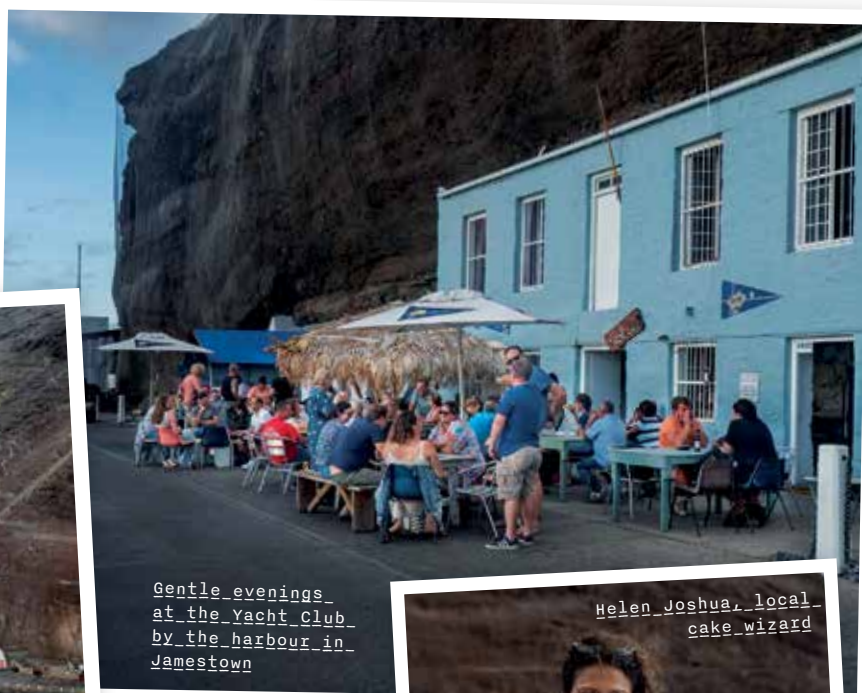
ECHOES OF THE SEA

Tucked into the lush countryside, at Farm Lodge Country House Hotel in Rosemary Plain, I met two local legends who, while not Saints themselves, have become part of the island’s story. Guernseyfolk Barry and Sarah Cash were on their fifth trip to this haven of peace and tranquillity when they befriended me. Over drinks and dinner, they regaled me with memories from past visits and sea passages on the RMS St Helena: before a runway carved its presence into Prosperous Bay, the mail ship was the island’s only link to elsewhere.

Farm Lodge is owned and run by ➔

St Helena

The narrow enclave of Jamestown has a population of about 700. Jacob's Ladder climbs 699 steps up the western slope to the fort at Ladder Hill



Gentle evenings at the Yacht Club by the harbour in Jamestown



Helen Joshua, local cake wizard

Stephen Biggs and Maureen Jonas, a former hotel services officer on the mail ship and a former assistant hotel services officer respectively. Today, they welcome travellers with the same grace and quiet charm they were once renowned for at sea.

Sarah and Barry's stories lingered warmly, but one particular evening at Farm Lodge left its own quiet imprint, when a serendipitous break in the cloud revealed another of St Helena's many attributes: the glorious night sky. Surrounded by endless ocean, the island's isolation becomes cosmic, showcasing some of the clearest, most unspoilt night skies in the world.

Wrapped in a light jacket, I stepped outside and looked up. Stephen, noticing my awe and ever the consummate host, ran about turning off as many lights as he could, gently deepening the darkness around me.

The sky unfurled itself completely, dense with stars and bursting with constellations I hadn't seen properly since sleeping on the salt pans of Botswana. The Milky Way was so vivid it felt textured, seemingly close enough to touch. In that vastness, I felt very small. And yet, somehow, more whole.

IN THE COMPANY OF CREATURES

The following morning, with stars still lingering in my thoughts, I turned my gaze back to land. Making my way back

to Jamestown, I spotted some wirebirds, once critically endangered and now a conservation success story. In some ways, they represent what the island does best: holding space for things to recover, to move slowly, to survive. I took time to watch as they darted across open ground on notoriously thin legs, etching scribbles of movement into the landscape.

On a boat trip later that day, a whale shark rose from the deep; a slow, curious giant circling our vessel in silence. Its dappled back caught the light, and then, just as quietly, it vanished. There I sat, adrift on

*He looked me in the eye and said simply:
"Things take the time they take."*

the Atlantic, rocked gently by the sea's slow pulse. It felt as though the ocean had offered up a secret it was briefly willing to share.

Some moments ask nothing more than to be felt. And feel them I did.

A DANCE BENEATH THE STARS

On my final evening, I made plans to visit the local nightclub, Donny's Bar, with a new friend I'd made during my marine excursion. Helen, a Capetonian, had been out on the water with her pal Louise and we'd all fallen into easy, laughter-filled conversation.

Looking back, I'm not surprised. After

two weeks on this island, something in me had shifted. St Helena has a way of tuning you to quieter frequencies, of opening the soul to unexpected connections, sometimes sparking plans made on a whim. Helen has since become a good friend, and we keep in touch with visits whenever I pass through Cape Town.

She and I danced that night beneath a million stars, there at the water's edge in Jamestown, as a particular kind of euphoria hung in the air; a shared sense of celebration across the island. The supply ship had docked, ending a week-long beer drought that had been quietly endured.

Maybe it was that, or simply the joy of a new friendship that led Helen and I to re-enact that iconic Titanic pose as part of our dance routine. Or perhaps it was the proximity to the ocean. In the end, it doesn't really matter. What I do know is this: on that tiny island in the middle of the Atlantic, my world had somehow become a much bigger place. 🌙