Life on the World's Loneliest Island

by Simon Winchester

published: 08/30/2009

From 50 miles, it was a patch of cloud on the blue horizon. From 20 miles, it was a perfect pyramid rising out of an empty ocean. Closer, I could see grazing sheep and cattle, a scattering of cottages, and a church or two clinging to a meadow at the base of an enormous, still-sputtering volcano.

The isolated speck I was about to visit was Tristan da Cunha, a lingering possession of the British Empire and the world’s most isolated inhabited island. Tristan da Cunha is actually an archipelago of four islands, but only one—called Tristan da Cunha Island—is inhabited. Home to 269 residents, it is located in the far South Atlantic, over 2000 miles, or six days' hard sailing, from the coast of Brazil and almost 1750 miles from the nearest coastline of South Africa.

Tristan da Cunha Island was settled in 1816 by British marines sent to guard Napoleon, who was in exile on St. Helena, 1300 miles to the north. When the garrison left 16 months later, one marine chose to remain. He was joined over time by sailors from passing ships and shipwrecks—and imported women. They and their descendants made up the island’s seven founding families, who have lived there ever since. As a result, most Tristanians bear one of seven surnames: Hagan, Swain, Rogers, Green, Lavarello, Repetto, and Glass. Because of intermarriage, many look strikingly similar—tall with pale brown skin.

In Edinburgh, we were shown the sights of interest—the British administrator’s office, an Internet café, a pub (The Albatross), a shop, a supermarket, a golf course, a swimming pool, a post office. What you will not find anywhere on the island: a movie theater, a restaurant, traffic lights.

Some of us went up a spur of the volcano, a black finger of rock that extends down into a meadow above the pub—a reminder of the power beneath the earth. Geologists consider the volcano still active, and at the top we could smell puffs of gas being emitted. “It makes a lot of our people sick, all the sulphur,” the guide told us. Above our heads circled petrels and other squalling birds (the archipelago is prized by scientists for its biodiversity). And that was about all there was to see on Tristan.

Leading some visitors to wonder: Why would anyone want to live here? At one point in the last 50 years, all the islanders were forced to leave. In 1961, the volcano suddenly exploded, raining rocks and lava and fire on the houses. The terrified population of 270 people (the number varies little year after year) was eventually taken to England and put up at a disused army base. Even though they were exposed to the delights of modern technology—cars, phones, elevators, all of which they’d never seen before—they were homesick and voted almost unanimously to return. Two years later, a ship brought them back, and there most have stayed.
the Island of Tristan
by chelez  posted: 08/31/2009 04:31:PM

Never heard about this island til I read your article, very fascinating. Would like to know more about the people and the island life

REPLY | Number of replies: 0

Tristan
by smoor17  posted: 08/30/2009 11:19:AM

I wouldn't mind living there. One wouldn't need worry about crime from so called "mixed use housing coming in," and the people seem to be very happy. Let's just hope the wrong kind of people don't try to come and habitat the place, then ruin it for all, like greedy developers.

REPLY | Number of replies: 0

Tristan
by afeldner  posted: 08/30/2009 09:19:PM

I would love to see more pictures and hear more facts about this fascinating place!

REPLY | Number of replies: 0