

# SAINT HELENA: CITIZENSHIP AND SPATIAL IDENTITIES ON A REMOTE ISLAND

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## ABSTRACT

Saint Helena is an extremely isolated island in the South Atlantic. It is connected to the outside world through the Internet, telephone and a shipping link. Its inhabitants, who call themselves Saints, were denied full British citizenship until May 2002. This prevented a large out-migration. At the same time the struggle for citizenship provided a common cause, which united the people of Saint Helena. With the return of citizenship, an escape route became available. Roughly a quarter of the island's population has since left 'prison home' Saint Helena. Two options are now open, which will both bring major change to the island. Air access might bring much-needed economic development, but it will also have an impact on the Saints' identity and 'way of life'. Without air access, more Saints will probably leave and this way of life will be shared by less and less people on the island.

**Key words:** Spatial identity, Saint Helena, insularity, access, citizenship, migration

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## INTRODUCTION

'Saint Helena, the ultimate island, is seemingly purpose-designed to serve as a prison.' That is what Irish geographer and island specialist Stephen Royle wrote in the concluding chapter of his book, *A Geography of Islands – Small Island Insularity* (2001, p. 224). 'But even here its insular constraints made things difficult', he added.

Saint Helena Island (122 sq km), a British Overseas Territory deep in the South Atlantic, is best known for having had the former French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte among its inhabitants. He was a prisoner on the island from his defeat at Waterloo in 1815 until his death in 1821. In recent years, Saint Helena formed a kind of prison for its own inhabitants, who were deprived of full British citizenship through the 1981 British Nationality Act. This meant that Saint Helenians, who call themselves Saints, did not have the right of abode in the UK. Only a limited number were allowed to go to the UK for either work or study, thus severely

limiting migration to St Helena's 'mother country'.

The barriers to leave the island used to be formidable. Apart from legal barriers, insular constraints also made it hard for Saints to move away. The island is extremely isolated. The nearest land is Ascension Island, located 1,125 km to the northwest. Ascension is an important military base for the US and UK and thus off-limits to most civilians. The nearest mainland is the west coast of Angola, about 1,950 km away. The east coast of Brazil lies about 2,900 km to the west.

Saint Helena is connected to the outside world through the Internet, telephone and a shipping link. Since 1995 a limited selection of television channels has been available on the island. Saint Helena does not have an airport. The hope for a relatively quick construction of an airport has dwindled as negotiations between the St Helena Government and the most important potential private investor came to nothing in 2002. Air access will probably not



Figure 1. The location of St Helena and the RMS route.

be realised, if at all, until 2010 (Hogenstijn & Van Middelkoop 2002, p. 175).

The Royal Mail Ship Saint Helena (commonly referred to as ‘the RMS’) is the only regular shipping service to call at Saint Helena. It runs a schedule linking Ascension Island (two days sailing), Saint Helena and Cape Town (five days sailing). Four times a year it continues to the UK from Ascension, an extra 12 days of sailing (see Figures 1 and 2). Passenger numbers are limited to 128 per trip, which means ‘escape’ from Saint Helena has to be planned far ahead. During a UK visit of the RMS, the island cannot be reached for approximately five weeks, making it one of the remotest places in the world.<sup>1</sup> Saint Helena is harder to reach now than it was 150 years ago. In the 1850s, over 1,000 ships called at the island annually (Royle 2001, p. 215). In the present age, the RMS calls about 25 times a year; apart from that, only the occasional navy vessel, cruise ship or yacht visits the island.

While physical barriers remain, legal barriers have largely been removed. Full British citizenship was returned to the St Helenians in May

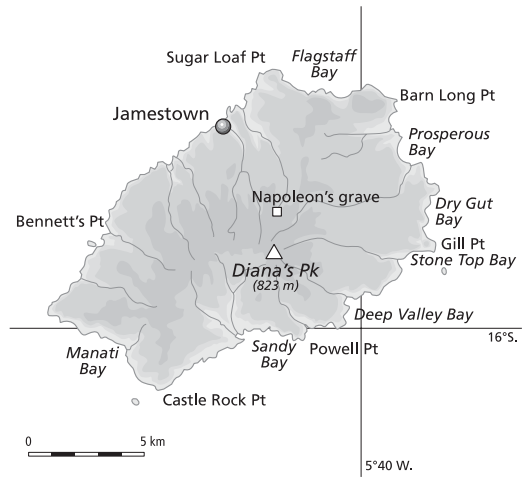


Figure 2. St Helena Island.

2002, after a long struggle by St Helena’s Citizenship Commission. The lack of citizenship united the Saints to a certain extent: they had a common cause to fight for, which helped strengthen the specific ‘Saint’ identity. Now that citizenship has been returned, this common cause has disappeared and opportunities to leave have greatly increased. The return of the right of abode has consequences for the identities of the Saints, but also for migration. The population of St Helena was estimated at 3,900 in late 2003,<sup>2</sup> compared to an enumerated population of 5,157 in the 1998 census (House of Commons Hansard debates 2003). Although the numbers were already dropping before the return of citizenship, emigration has grown significantly since then.

In this paper we consider how changing opportunities for interaction with the outside world affect the spatial identities of the citizens of Saint Helena. In researching this theme, we employed various qualitative methods. We stayed on the island for 2½ months, and in this period we conducted 26 interviews with key informants, such as the governor, government officials, private-sector entrepreneurs, teachers and councillors. In addition, we held many more informal interviews, we analysed the content of the weekly local newspaper *Saint Helena Herald* over the 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 volumes, read other secondary literature and participated in Saint Helenian society during

our stay on and travel to and from the island (6 March–12 June, 2002).

### INSULARITY AND SPATIAL IDENTITY

To get a grip on the functioning of Saint Helenian society, we first need to consider the concepts of insularity and spatial identity and their connection in the specific case of Saint Helena. Cross & Nutley (1999) observe that island's 'insular status automatically renders them "peripheral" in the simple geographical sense', and this peripherality often translates into economic marginality and neglect by the central political power. They state that a number of generalisations about small insular islands are often heard: 'they have small populations; they are rural in character, probably dependent on agriculture and/or fishing; they are "poor in resources", by which is meant presumably that they lack the basis for industrialisation and self-sustaining growth; they are dependent on subsidies from the central state; they suffer from "isolation"; their people are disadvantaged in that they are out of touch with the cultural mainstream' (p. 317). They take a number of Irish islands as examples, which provide evidence for the stereotype outlined above. On these islands this syndrome of related problems, with perceived better opportunities elsewhere, led to a loss of population over a long period.

In the case of Saint Helena the notions of insularity and spatial identity are closely intertwined. Spatial identity is a concept that is bound to a certain geographical scale. We define it as the 'feeling of attachment to a territory at a certain geographical scale, perceived as unique to and by an individual or group'. This definition covers only one geographical scale. However, the total spatial identity of an individual is multi-layered and multi-scale, and it consists of different spatial *identities* (note the plural). The lower the scale, the smaller the group of people that has this spatial identity in common, while at the lowest scale spatial identity is totally individual. Usually one or two levels of a person's spatial identity take prominence and define a very important part of a person's overall social identity. The interactions and identifications with the various spatial scales influence this process. Sibley (1995) suggests that spatial identities on one scale can influence

the construction of identity on other scales, but recognises that identity on one scale cannot be projected on the other. Therefore spatial identities at different spatial scales can influence each other (and spatial behaviour at those different scales), but they can at the same time be quite different.

The scales of spatial identity can be visualised in concentric circles. One belongs to a village, a town area, a province, a country. Salazar (1998) presents the image of 'a matryoshka of identities, one inside the other' (p. 121). A generally accepted view in geography is that national identity is the most important spatial identity, 'overriding claims of lesser communities and larger allegiances' (Herb & Kaplan 1998, p. 2). On Saint Helena, national identity is not entirely clear. The concept is often confused with citizenship, which on Saint Helena is a complicated issue that has brought a lot of turmoil to the island in recent years. In this paper, we use the concept of citizenship purely in its legal sense: being an 'official' member of a state. Saints, while deprived of full British citizenship through the 1981 British Nationality Act, still felt deeply connected to British nationhood. Strong commitments to both the island and Britain can still be discerned.

### SAINT HELENA ISLAND

The Portuguese sailor Joao da Nova Castella discovered Saint Helena on 21 May 1502. It had no native inhabitants. The development of Saint Helena and its place in the wider world since its discovery can be divided into three periods:

- 1502–1659                      Discovery and early exploration.
- 1659–1834                     Property of East India Company.
- 1834–present                 Colony under the crown.

In the first period, the island was discovered by explorers from different countries and used as a resupply base, or a base from which to launch attacks on other ships. No permanent settlement was established on the island. In 1659 the (British) East India Company formally took possession of the island and turned it into an important revictualling base for ships on the way from Britain to India. Many ships visited

Saint Helena each year. A Royal Charter, issued by King Charles II, settled the status of the island in 1673. This document is still relevant today, as it guarantees the islanders full British citizenship.

In 1834 the island was handed over to the British crown, a move referred to as 'the fall to second class status' (Turner 1996). The island lost its importance and became more and more dependent upon Britain, a situation that continues to the present.

The population descends from three 'sources': British settlers, African slaves and Asian labourers who were brought in after the abolition of slavery. From the late nineteenth century onwards these populations have mixed and differences are now undiscernable.

Saint Helena is a typical case of a MIRAB economy (Migration, Remittances, Aid, Bureaucracy), a term usually reserved for Pacific island states (Royle 2001; Aldrich & Connell 1998). Its people form Saint Helena's most important export product. The economy is heavily dependent upon the remittances sent to the island by Saints working overseas, amounting to around two million pounds a year. In addition, Saint Helena is the last British colony to structurally receive aid from the 'mother country'. In the financial year 2000/2001 the aid coming from Britain through DfID (the Department for International Development) amounted to just over 10 million pounds. The government is the largest employer on the island, employing over 65 per cent of the total workforce (Statistical Yearbook Saint Helena and Dependencies 2000). This large government sector does little to boost productive investment while it stifles the local entrepreneurial spirit; many people expect to make a living in the government sector anyway. According to Aldrich & Connell (1998) this is quite usual for small dependent islands. In this way an employment pattern is created that 'creates or maintains jobs and activities that have value in sustaining households rather than contributing to economic development' (p. 91).

### SAINT HELENA AS PRISON

Ironically, economic prosperity in Saint Helenian history is linked to periods in which it served as a prison. Spending by the prisoners and those

guarding them generated much-needed revenue. The island's most famous prisoner was of course Napoleon Bonaparte. He spent most of his time on the island in Longwood House, where he died in 1821. Though Napoleon was buried on the island, his remains were removed in 1840 and taken to France. Saint Helena was left with an empty grave, locally known as The Tomb.

In 1890 the Zulu chief Dinizulu, along with two uncles and several wives, was brought to the island as a prisoner of war. The exiles brought some prosperity as they spent about 1,000 pounds annually (Gosse 1990, p. 336). Dinizulu was released in 1897, but more prisoners of war soon followed. The Boer War broke out in 1899, and in 1900 the first Boer prisoners were brought to the island. The Boer prisoners contributed to the highest population Saint Helena ever had – nearly 10,000 in 1901 (Royle 1998) – and brought a certain degree of prosperity. Again, 'the repatriation of the prisoners and their guards was followed by acute unemployment and distress' (Gosse 1990, p. 343). In the 1960s the island was once again used as a prison; three Bahraini princes were sent there as political prisoners.

### INSULAR CONSTRAINTS AND ESCAPE

Apart from the 'official' periods of serving as a prison, Saint Helena has been a place of confinement and/or restraint for its own inhabitants throughout its history. Many islanders wanted to migrate to the Cape (South Africa) in the early twentieth century to escape the hardship following the return of the Boer prisoners of war. They were unable to do so because emigrants had to be able to read and write. The standard of education on the island at that time was low, and secondary education was completely absent. In more recent history emigration to the Cape again became unattractive during Apartheid, because Saints were regarded as coloureds.

Immigration legislation made it harder to move to the UK after 1966, as a work permit was required from that year on. This was made worse by the 1981 Nationality Act, which took away full British citizenship from all inhabitants of British colonies (then called 'dependent territories'). That legislation was passed mainly

with Hong Kong in mind. This territory would revert into Chinese hands in 1997, after the expiration of the British 99-year lease. To prevent the citizens of Hong Kong from migrating *en masse* to the UK they were deprived of their right of abode. In order to avoid singling out Hong Kong, and thereby being accused of anti-Chinese sentiments, the other colonies were also included in the legislation (Royle 2001, p. 219).

The British Nationality Act severely limited the number of St Helenians allowed to seek employment in Britain. Saints still went overseas, but only on a temporary basis. People now went mainly to Ascension Island and the Falklands, where wages were (and still are) considerably higher than on St Helena. Temporary labour migration to these islands is possible as the US and British military bases on Ascension as well as companies like the BBC recruit Saints, mainly for domestic and maintenance jobs. After the 1982 war with Argentina, the Falkland Islands experienced strong economic growth, which resulted in a demand for labour higher than the fairly limited population of these islands could provide. Saints form over 10 per cent of the population of the Falklands, and almost two-thirds of the population on Ascension (Statistical Yearbook Saint Helena and dependencies 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Although away from the island of Saint Helena, these labour migrants are usually not away from the Saint community. For the Saints working on Ascension and the Falklands, Saint Helena generally still remains the 'stable centre of their universe'. Their stay on the other islands is limited to the length of their work contracts. In fact, until 2002 no one was permitted to settle on Ascension Island permanently.

As a result of the British Nationality Act, Saints lacked the legal means to permanently 'escape' their island, unless they could somehow acquire a permit to settle on the UK 'mainland'. Still, people left temporarily to find a better-paid job. Besides, they were also looking for better career opportunities. It is hard to make a career on-island. People in high-level jobs often stay there for decades, because there is nothing else to move or aspire to. 'As people get more qualifications, they have fewer opportunities on the island', as one of our interviewees told us.

Money and the lack of career opportunities are not the only reasons for (young) Saints to leave the island however. An informant stated that 'young people in particular leave the island because they want to see "the outside world", they like to try new things, they don't have any commitments'. The attraction of exploring the world probably applies to young people everywhere, but living in a small place like St Helena makes this attraction significantly more compelling for many.

Insularity leads to a lack of exposure to 'the outside world'. The head teacher of the (only) secondary school on the island gives an example of the consequences. 'You find that St Helenians are not as articulate as people elsewhere. They don't like to express themselves. They say what they have to say with a minimum of words . . . If you are living on a small island in the middle of the Atlantic you don't really need to talk that much I suppose. You see the same people every day, so unless you want to have a great discussion on the potatoes or the catching of fish you don't have an awful lot to stimulate you there.' The island's chief education officer also considers the lack of exposure a problem for her own professional development. 'I am stuck here on Saint Helena. I get information all the time about meetings, conferences, etc. And they are all forums that I regard as essential. It would be very good to interact with other professionals. Once I have talked to the other chief officers I might see things in a completely different light, have completely different ideas than when I stay here, where I am isolated.'

A final reason to escape lies in the social structure. St Helena, with its present number of around 3,900 inhabitants, is a very small community in which 'everyone knows everything about everybody else'. Because of this it is very hard to be different. There is an image of social homogeneity: there are hardly any 'subcultures' or 'minority groups'. There are simply not enough people to make up a sizeable minority. As small communities often are, Saint Helenian society is also rather conservative. This may cause problems: those who are different from the homogenous mainstream have to either adapt or leave the island; social control is very strict. Someone who has lived on the island for many years but who was not born there commented to us that 'life is more complicated here

than on the mainland. You can never really let yourself go, you have to be very discrete'. Mistakes made in the past are rarely forgiven and almost never forgotten by the community. An informant commented on the personal reasons for leaving: 'It's a small island, so if you break up with your boyfriend, or break up with your husband, you have to live with your ghost. If there is a job in the offering and you can go off from the island and leave it behind you for a while, there is nothing for a lot of people to consider, you know'.

### FAMILY AND 'BEING A SAINT'

While the tightly knit social structure may be a reason for some to 'escape' Saint Helena, for many others it is valued as one of the great virtues of life on 'the lonely rock'. The island is where your family is and it is where you belong, your home. The (extended) family plays a very important role on the island, and some people describe the kinship relations as a 'clan structure'. It is a favourite topic of conversation and an important source of identity. The place you will occupy in society is largely determined by which family you are from. It is the first source of identification, as the French consul on the island stresses: 'they will always classify the person by which family he or she belongs to. The individual identity only comes through that. It never works from friendship. They will never tell he is a friend of'. Even when away from the island, the family often retains its importance for identity. Remittances go through family lines, and more often than not Saints overseas end up in communities with other Saints, where identification through family continues.

The 'lowest' level of identity that seems to be important is thus family. From a geographical point of view, this is not necessarily a *spatial* identity. There are certainly spatial elements in the 'family identity' however. Families tend to be concentrated together: uncles, aunts, grandparents, etc. often live close to each other in one district on the island.

Inhabitants of Saint Helena basically have two options available to them. Either they talk to an 'insider' and refer to their family, or they talk to an 'outsider' and refer to being a Saint. Family impacts day-to-day life, while being a Saint makes one distinct from others. When asked

about the meaning of 'being a Saint', Saints stressed the distinctiveness of the 'way of life' on the island. In 2002, students at the secondary school on the island took part in an essay contest on what 'being a Saint' means. The typical characteristics of Saints came to light in the essays; these included the local dialect, local food, the friendliness and the resourcefulness of Saints. The first prize winner stressed friendliness: 'Our island has shaped the way we approach life. There is little crime and we have almost nothing to fear. That is why we welcome others and hope that they will feel as we do about our home'. In a showcase in the Saint Helena museum, the meaning of 'being a Saint' is summarised thus: 'This fusion of people has created a distinctive culture. Saints eat Saint food, speak a distinctive language, build their houses to face the sea and wave at passing cars. A typical Saint is friendly, fun loving, unhurried, resourceful, has a strong sense of family and a deep connection to his or her island'.

### LOCAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Researchers (for example, Schulenburg & Schulenburg 1997) perceive the Saint Helenian identity to be the local identity of the people of Saint Helena. The Citizenship Commission concurs, stating that 'a very clear local identity does not preclude a broader national identity' (Turner 1997, p. 16).

The broader national identity would seem to be a British identity, although in an outdated version. Examples of Britishness are present throughout island life: the popularity of cricket, the British curriculum at schools and the preference of Saints for British products. The mourning by many Saints when the Queen Mother passed away during our stay on the island hints at the outdated character of the 'Saint' version of the British identity. The Anglican Bishop on the island confirms this: 'this island is still very British, but old-fashionedly British. We're beginning to get away from colonial things, but there is still a lot of it'. Sociologists (for example, Cohen 1983) have tried to let islanders choose between Saint Helenian and British identities, which is not fair, according to the Citizenship Commission: '[B]y forcing young Islanders to choose between considering themselves as British or as Saint

Helenian, *but not both*, they [the sociologists] have managed to undermine the “self-definition” they came to investigate’ (Turner 1996, p. 58). British identity and Saint Helenian identity *do not exclude* each other, as the Citizenship Commission concludes. We would like to go one step further: we think that being a Saint *includes* Britishness. Elements of Britishness are a part of everyday life; in both its physical and non-physical forms, Britishness is an integral part of ‘being a Saint’.

For the St Helenians the island strongly represents home in the traditional, territorial sense. Rapport & Dawson (1998) define this as ‘the stable physical centre of one’s universe – a safe and still place to leave and return to (whether house, village, region or nation), and a principal focus of concern and control’ (p. 6). Saints working and living abroad almost always keep in close contact with people (relatives) on St Helena; they still read the local newspaper (which is available on the Internet) and send remittances to those staying behind on the island. Often people who have worked and lived ‘off-island’ for many years return ‘home’ after retirement.

Saint Helena can be relied on as the stable centre of one’s universe, a feeling that almost becomes physical when you see the lonely rock looming as you approach the island on the RMS. This is a very emotional moment for Saints who have been away from home for a long time. One Saint told us about a song he wrote which features Saint Helena as home. To the melody of ‘Country Road’ he sings:

Ocean Road  
Take me home  
To the place  
Where I was born  
Saint Helena  
Few have seen her  
As she stands  
All alone

Saint Helenians are proud of their island. Until May 2002, the struggle for citizenship was a uniting factor on the island, although reasons for supporting this struggle differed among islanders. Some Saints wanted citizenship returned because they regarded it as ‘a basic human rights issue’, while for others it was mainly important that a British passport would

enable them to leave the island, should they so desire. The Citizenship Commission interpreted the fact that Saint Helenians were still proud of themselves and friendly towards Britain as proof of the strength of their culture: ‘When Saint Helenians show themselves generous and reconciling to their “oppressors”, this is not the result of a deficient, self-alienating, dependency culture, to cite the sociologists. That a people can retain their self-definition, even when others are taking it from them, and still others are encouraging them to let it go, is a sign of how strongly that self-definition is held’ (Turner 1997, p. 57).

### ESCAPE REVISITED

An alternative interpretation of the strength with which Saint Helenians held on to their ‘self-definition’ is that there was simply no alternative. Deprived of citizenship, Saints were all in the same boat and had to work together. Once the situation was resolved, different options opened up to individual Saints. They had already been exposed to life outside, not only through family and friends overseas, but also through TV and the Internet. Now they also have the ‘escape route’, an option offered to them by the return of British citizenship.

What reason do they have to stay on the island? St Helena, with its history of dependency on the outside world for its very existence, is unlikely to reach self-sufficiency, even in the long term. All hope is pinned on tourism. However, to attract tourists, better physical access to the outside world is a prerequisite. Since 2001 there have been serious discussions and negotiations about building an airport and introducing an air service. The negotiations between the St Helena Government, DfID and private investors broke down in the middle of 2002. A new round of negotiations came to nothing in early 2004. Access to and from the island will therefore remain a problem in the near future. The lack of economic development and career opportunities on St Helena, and the resulting outflow of people, is also unlikely to be solved without air access.

The fact that many Saints seek to escape from the island, a process speeded up by the return of citizenship, has serious consequences, both demographically and economically. According

to the Human Development Report on St Helena (UNDP 1999), arguably the most serious consequence of offshore employment is the brain drain. The most entrepreneurial and most educated individuals leave the island in search of better wages, thus depriving the island of its economically most promising people.

The large emigration, in combination with St Helena's low birth rate, can have serious consequences for the age profile of the population in the future. According to the Human Development report, 'the demographic trend shows an ageing population' (UNDP 1999, p. 10) and 'if the island's immigration policy is not relaxed and access improved then there is every reason to believe that St Helena will become an island of the old, poor and unemployable' (p. 18). Recently, the issue of depopulation was addressed in a debate in the House of Commons. On 19 November 2003, Mr John Smith MP, who had just returned from an official visit to the island, commented on the urgency of the problem: 'The biggest challenge facing the island is depopulation. If it continues at its current rate, only the elderly and young will be left on the island, and that will make the provision of a sustainable economy impossible'.

### SAINT HELENA'S FUTURE

The island's social work manager used the following words to express the dilemma Saint Helena currently faces. 'St Helena could be described as at the adolescent stage in society. This is not a value judgment or poor reflection on things here. Rather, St Helena is at the crossroads in its development.'

Two options seem to be left for Saint Helena after the return of full British citizenship. Both will bring major change to the island. Air access might bring much-needed economic development, but it will also have an impact on the Saints' identity. Many fear that with an airport, and the resultant influx of 'outsiders', the Saints' 'way of life' will disappear. On the other hand, without air access this way of life will be shared by less and less people on the island. A rapidly declining and ageing population will have an impact on every aspect of Saint Helena society.

At present, the future looks grim. Since May 2002, Saint Helena is losing people at an alarm-

ing rate. The possibility of a complete depopulation of the island in the (more distant) future does not seem as impossible at present as it was perceived in the past. Measures to 'turn the tide' therefore seem to be necessary and many Saints would probably welcome them.

The big difference compared to the situation before 2002 is that Saints can now choose to be part of the island's future. If they choose not to, they have an 'escape route' in the form of a British passport. At present, this escape route is very attractive, due to the lack of economic opportunities on Saint Helena itself. In the words of Canon Nicholas Turner of the Citizenship Commission: 'When we consider the Island's young people who have not yet made their life and money and home, it is not an escape route to England that they need, but the political and economic basis to make a good life as British citizens on their own island' (*Saint Helena Herald* 12 April 2002).

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### Notes

1. In early 2004 the operators of the RMS and the Government of Saint Helena decided to have the RMS stay in the South Atlantic for a trial period of one year, starting in September 2004. The ship will run a schedule calling at Cape Town, the Namibian ports of Lüderitz and Walvis Bay, Saint Helena and Ascension Island. The annual number of RMS calls will increase from 25 to 33, and the maximum amount of time the RMS is away from the island will be reduced to 17 days (now approximately 35 days). The one-year experiment will be evaluated in 2005.
2. Exact population figures are not available. This estimate is based on the number of births and deaths on St Helena and passenger numbers of the RMS St Helena since the 1998 census. An official census is held on the island approximately every



ten years. The St. Helena Statistics Office does not record migration figures.

3. Apart from the labour migrants on Ascension and the Falklands, there is also an unknown number of Saints in South Africa. They are not recorded in official statistics.

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