



SKIP NOVAK

THE DISTANT AND REMOTE ISLAND OF TRISTAN DA CUNHA IS A PLACE WHERE THE SUN STILL SETS OVER THE BRITISH EMPIRE, BUT IT IS SLOWLY CHANGING

In the southern winter of 1988, *Pelagic* escaped the icy grip of South Georgia and made course for Cape Town. We'd finished our first Antarctic expedition season and we were heading for the docks to finish building the boat. But that is another story.

The island of Tristan da Cunha lies right along that empty passage so it was a given that we would attempt a visit. Lying at 37°S, this volcanic outlier of only 38 square miles sits right on the southern edge of the Atlantic high, 1,300 nautical miles west-south-west from Cape Town.

Along with Pitcairn in the Pacific, it is one of those very isolated islands on the edge of a horizon where the sun still rises and sets over what is left of the British Empire.

Luckily for us, it was a relatively calm, sunny day when we dropped anchor in 20m on a steep slope of loose volcanic scree. While we were getting organised to go ashore at 'Edinburgh', a small launch came along side with a swarthy looking chap who, without warning, flung a 4ft slimy sea creature into our cockpit and said: "We don't eat

octopus, no sir!" and kept right on going.

We had met Mike Repetto, descendant of a shipwrecked sailor.

Landing is never assured here as it is open roads, a swell is always

running and if an onshore wind sets in you have to pull up and go. The only shelter is a small boat harbour with a metre of water, which is awash and unusable for most of the time. Their small lobster boats are craned on to cradles which are then pulled up a ramp to the cliff edge.

Luckily, we had the rare good fortune to spend three days and two nights hanging on the hook, always with a crew on board at the ready to sound the alarm.

We were the only yacht that had stopped there that year, except for a small German cruiser that had never left after being washed ashore and eventually salvaged by the islanders. Re-supply from the UK was twice a year, other supplies came in ad hoc with fishing boats from Cape Town. Communication with the outside was amateur radio. We were indeed a welcome distraction and received

a congenial welcome from the curious islanders.

Today's roughly 285 souls still originate from only seven family names. When Napoleon was incarcerated on St Helena in 1816, Britain took possession of Tristan as a safeguard against his escape. A garrison was installed but later recalled. However, two of the soldiers were so enamoured they promptly took wives back in the UK and returned. Shipwrecked sailors and other chancers followed, adding to the mix, and their descendants live on today.

The attraction of such an isolated life style is not to be underestimated. In 1961 the island's volcano crown blew its top and the entire population was evacuated and eventually billeted in RAF barracks on Calshot Spit, Southampton Water – not the most salubrious location in southern England. The British Government had reckoned they had been let off the hook by an act of God, and a plug had been put into the drain on the exchequer by the Tristan subsidies. They were proved wrong of course, when after only two years the island was deemed safe to return – and, by god, all but 14 did.

In 1988, we had met the civil servants – a doctor, the teacher and the preacher, but not the magistrate. He never appeared to say hello, and it was explained he did not like or encourage any visitors and intended to keep the island a 'human museum'.

Happily, this became an impossible proposition after satellite communication systems were installed and the internet age following. I have never returned to Tristan but my yacht *Pelagic Australis* was able to briefly land during her end of season delivery cruise back to Cape Town for refit in May of this year.

During the last decade a few cruise ships have also landed and there is more yacht traffic for sure. The islanders are still welcoming, but some rules have been imposed.

No visitors are allowed ashore after 1800, for example. Although short visits from yachts and ships are tolerated, long stays where people are dropped by fishing boats and picked up six weeks later are more popular with the islanders. A case of time to get to know us.

Apparently, social media has raised an ugly head even here, with short stay yacht and ship visitors depicting this exceptional collection of people as an oddity and in a none too favourable a light. ■

'SOLDIERS, SHIPWRECKED SAILORS AND OTHER CHANCERS SETTLED THERE'