



NAPOLEON GOES SOLO...

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It is one of the most remote spots on the globe. Its population of around 4,500 has huge problems reaching the outside world. For St Helena, however, a new airport means that life is about to change dramatically. Alan Dron reports.

In 2016, the tiny island of St Helena, which lies 1,200nm (2,220km) off the coast of Namibia and is just 47sqm (122skm) in area, will open up to the outside world with the inauguration of its first airport.

The five-day sea voyage from Cape Town, currently the only way of reaching the island, will be replaced by a five-hour Boeing 737 flight from Johannesburg.

St Helena is a self-governing Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom. Some 7,000km from the UK, the island was initially discovered by the Portuguese in 1502 but has been a British possession since 1659.

It is best known today as the final residence of French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, who was exiled there after being defeated by a coalition of European nations in 1815. His home, Longwood House, is still owned by the French government and the bicentenary of his death in 2021 is expected to bring an influx of visitors.

There have been plans for an airport on the island for years but the project was delayed by the

economic crash of 2007. However, work on the £200 million (\$300 million) project finally began in 2011 and it is now due to open officially in May 2016.

The airport is being built on Prosperous Bay Plain, on the east side of the island. It will have a 6,070ft (1,850 metre) runway with full airport infrastructure, plus a bulk fuel installation for six million litres of diesel and aviation fuel and a nine-mile (14km) access road.

The airport has two main buildings – a 3,500sqm terminal plus a ‘combined building’ that will house the facilities required for the airport to operate, such as the control tower and fire service. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the airport’s construction was the filling of a valley – Dry Gut – with more than 7.6 million cubic metres of material so the runway could be built on top of it. In terms of markets, you could hardly find anything more ‘niche’ than St Helena. Traffic is expected to consist of a mix of ‘Saints’, as the islanders are known, taking advantage of the greatly reduced travel time (and cost), as well as family members revisiting their homeland.

There is also expected to be a certain amount of business traffic, notably with UK Government officials or contractors handling projects on the island.

However, potentially the greatest traffic flow is expected to come from tourists – not only people simply curious to explore one of the most remote spots on Earth, but also eco-tourists.

Packed into its tiny area, St Helena has desert, tropical rainforest, pastoral farmland and spectacular cliffs. It is also home to unique species of birds and flora that have developed in isolation over millennia. Visitors can swim with huge, but harmless, whale sharks in the waters just off the island.

The St Helena Government (SHG) asked for bids from airlines interested in operating a service to the island, which resulted in Comair of South Africa winning the contract. Comair, a British Airways (BA) franchisee, will operate the service with a new Boeing 737-800 in BA livery.

It will be operated under an initial three-year contract with SHG, providing a weekly service between Johannesburg and St Helena, with an automatic renewal for a further two years.

“We’re of the view that the majority of the passengers will be travelling for tourism,” said Stuart Cochrane, Comair’s executive manager, business process. “However, we do expect to see a fair amount of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) traffic – Saints travelling to and from St Helena – with small volumes of business traffic.”

The opening up of one of the world’s last truly unspoilt locations has sparked considerable interest, said Cochrane: “We’ve had enquiries from tour operators from all over the world.” The biggest potential market is, naturally enough, the UK, followed by France because of the Napoleonic connection.

There is also considerable interest in St Helena in South Africa, as the island was used as a prison for Boers during the wars against the UK at the turn of the 20th century. “We’ve had very, very keen interest from all of those markets and, as the market matures,” added Cochrane, “you might find adventure sports becoming an attraction.”

Comair’s 737-800 will be delivered in a two- class configuration of 28 business- and 132 economy-class seats. However, the aircraft is landing weight restricted at St Helena as a result of the short runway, which means that a maximum of 120 passengers can be carried. The aircraft has also been certificated to 180-minute extended-range twin-engine operational performance standards (ETOPS) to operate the long sector over water.

St Helena’s relatively short runway, with nearby hills and no instrument landing system (ILS) approach because of terrain (an offset localiser approach is used instead) makes it one of the more challenging destinations into which any airline is likely to operate. Comair has already installed a specific programme for the island in its simulator to allow crew to practise operations there. It will operate a proof flight in late January that will not only serve as a familiarisation exercise but also will allow the airline to have a full ‘dry run’ of all the airport- related processes on the island.

Another company hoping to be an early entrant in the St Helena market is UK-based Atlantic Star. The company was set up some years ago and aims ultimately to operate its own aircraft to St Helena. However, as a first step, it plans a short series of charter flights to the island from next May.

For this, it will act as a 'charter facilitator', using a Boeing 737-800 from Dutch charter company TUIfly.

The ideal aircraft for St Helena, said Atlantic Star's principal and founder, Richard Brown, is the Boeing 757-200 with Rolls-Royce RB211- 535E4 engines, whose excess thrust means that: "it absolutely leaps off the ground."

However, there are few European carriers that still use the type. Brown and his team initially looked at Icelandair and Thomson Airways, but eventually settled on TUIfly, whose 737-800 was "an excellent substitute, for a couple of reasons".

One was that: "You don't have to fill it quite so full to generate yield" – 110 passengers as opposed to 140 on the 757. Secondly, TUIfly already has a base in Banjul, Gambia, which makes a convenient stopping-point for the refuelling necessary for flights between the UK and St Helena.

TUIfly also routinely positions crews in the Gambian capital, which makes it much more economical for the necessary crew changes for the long haul down to the South Atlantic. And the Dutch carrier comes with the bonus of being a highly respected brand, said Brown.

Depending on the success of the initial programme of flights, Atlantic Star would decide whether it remained as a charter facilitator, or developed its business model, perhaps with its own aircraft, he added.

The airport was initially planned to open in late February 2016. Following calibration flights – the first aircraft to land at the airport was a Beechcraft King Air 200 of Flight Calibration Services Limited from South Africa – some modifications to electronic equipment were required and the opening will be slightly delayed, but it is still intended to be open for business well before the official opening in May.

At that point, the island will enter a new chapter in its existence. For St Helena, the rest of the world will never again seem quite so far away.

Header image by Remi Bruneton

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