

# Notes from a very small island

What this island needs is.....

I recently went back to the UK for a fortnight. This is not a simple matter of getting onto a plane and arriving back 12 hours later a little travel worn, but involves a 4 and a half hour flight to Johannesburg on a Saturday night, a lay over to the following evening to catch the late service to London arriving on the Monday morning at about 6am. This effort delivers you to a prosperous first world nation with all the trappings of wealth (and inequality) that go with that.

You go from having to hear by word of mouth what shop has what in today, or when the boat with fresh supplies is coming, or who might have some bananas, to being able to wander down to Tesco at 4am and buy what you like. Things that are taken for granted in the UK are not available on St Helena, like uninterrupted electricity and fast unlimited broadband or some cooking ingredients (try getting bread flour at the moment).

Life is, by anybody's standards, limited by the isolation of this place. That is its curse and its attraction. A particular refrain you often hear is, "What this island needs is....." followed by simple solutions to its many perceived problems. Huge amounts of UK Government money are spent keeping the island going, incomes are very low and the cost of living high. Unlike Gibraltar with internet gambling or the British Virgin Islands with its banking, St Helena's main purpose in life ended with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Up until then ships coming back from the east would re-provision in St Helena and sailors would spend their money. Jamestown abounded in pubs and brothels but what is left of that is the reminder of times gone past in the shops that still carry the names of the pubs they once were.

Attempts are being made to give St Helena a purpose, primarily through the newly opened airport being a means of attracting tourism. But things move slowly and the cost of getting here, even from South Africa, is very high. Austerity is also coming in public services which means that lean(er) times may be ahead. Hence the oft proposed simple solutions to incredibly complex problems. However without a purpose St Helena runs the risk of turning into something akin to a village in Europe where all the youngsters have left to seek a better life in the cities.

So what to do? For someone like me this is a paradise, but I am always acutely aware of the income difference between incomers like me who are funded by the UK taxpayer and Saint Helenians on what are called 'local salaries.' This inequality, quite rightly, breeds resentment. It also creates a two tier economy in housing which gets worse as the number of UK funded employees increase. Those who have houses to let aim at the ex pat community for whom £500 a month is a cheap rent, but for many Saint Helenians amounts to just less than their monthly salary. Saints, as local inhabitants are called, often work abroad and buy land on their return when approaching retirement (to then live on UK state pensions). As these people are better heeled the cost of land has increased to the position that to buy a plot and build a small house now costs over £80,000.

With a minimum wage of £3.13 an hour it is hardly any wonder that people can no longer afford to build a house or rent one. Government landlord property rents are just a few pounds a month but these houses are few and far between. So what do you do? You need foreigners to bring with them the skills needed to service what is a village with Human Rights legislation, its own currency, a fully functioning social service with education and healthcare systems. How do you get round that problem if when the few Saints that do leave to go to university often choose to remain in the UK where career prospects and salaries are better? Or where all Saints have British citizenship with good family connections in England or the Falklands and, exploiting those connections, can easily find work abroad?

Saints have a very strong national identity and the reality is that St Helena will endure, but can that ever be as a fully functioning economy that his self supporting? Which is why people search for a solution by completing the sentence, "What this island needs is....."

- Duncan Cooke



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