

JAMESTOWN, SAINT HELENA

It is before 7am when we anchor off the port of Jamestown, on the island of St Helena. The last time we came here, we spent the short time we had ashore looking around the town itself. This time however, we have already booked a shore excursion, which will show us the rest of the island.



Tender boats take us to the quayside, where a recent landslide has brought boulders down onto the road. Our transport is a mixture of minibuses, private cars and even an old Cadillac charabanc!

We pass through the town itself, which seems to squeeze itself into the narrow volcanic valley between towers of sheer rock.

Out of the town we climb steeply, in convoy, and stop at a number of viewpoints in order to take some pictures. At sea level, the vegetation is very sparse, mostly Agaves, Prickly Pear Cacti and succulents such as Delosperma. They are surrounded by rugged, unstable rock faces, where the evidence of recent landslides can be seen.



As we climb

up even further into the interior of the island, the vegetation changes dramatically, and we see grass, flax plants, flowering shrubs, and the endangered St Helena Gumwood trees.

They must have quite a lot of rain here to support such lush greenery, although today it is very hot.

A stop is made at the walk towards Napoleon's tomb, where a grassy path leads down to the clearing where Napoleon himself chose to be buried. His body was exhumed in 1840 and returned to Paris, where it remains still



A little further on, we arrive at Longwood House, which was the 18th century residence of the Governor of St Helena. It was extended and repaired 60 years later when Napoleon was exiled here in 1815. After Napoleon's death in 1821, the house fell into disrepair, but has now been renovated to its former condition, and is maintained by a resident Honorary French Consul.



It is pleasant to wander around the gardens, where sweet smelling, flowering plants abound. Inside the house, guides explain about the artefacts on display, and tell us a little of the history of Napoleon's incarceration here.

We now travel on narrow tracks which wind across the island, up and down the many hills, and through places with fascinating names such as Half Tree Hollow, Alarm Forest, The Gates of Chaos, Lots Wife, and The Asses Ears.

Our next stop is at Plantation House, the home of the island's Governor. Here we can see, and photograph, the giant tortoises who have free reign of the grounds. One of these tortoises, named Jonathon, is thought to be about 175 years old, and there are a further 8 smaller tortoises here as well. We are amazed at how fast these creatures can move.





Our tour guide tells us that the Governor is not well thought of, especially since he voted for a 100% pay rise for himself and his other councillors! In fact, it is quite amusing to read an account in the local paper, which explains his reasoning for the massive hike in salaries. Apparently, he thinks that they should have more money because they have to attend meetings! He ends by saying that "If you pay peanuts, you will get monkeys"! The average Saint is not amused by this, especially as the average minimum wage here on the island is around £70 a week. Housing is apparently difficult to come by, and there is very little government expenditure on hospitals, roads etc.



The last stop on this 4 hour tour is at the top of Jacob's ladder, where 699 steps link the top of the mountain with Jamestown below. Some passengers opt to walk down the steps, although we choose to stay on the bus and meet them at the bottom!

We have thoroughly enjoyed our tour of this beautiful island: it is amazing to see the differences in the scenery inland, and to meet the friendly inhabitants. In fact it is like taking a step back in time to the UK in the 1950's, when everybody knew each other and all had time to chat.

There are plans to build an airport here, which would undoubtedly change the island completely. We hope that it enhances the Saints' lives, rather than bringing in lots of brash hotels for the tourists. We will have to wait and see.