



Portuguese navigator João da Nova discovers the island of Saint Helena - May 21, 1502

Brindha V[✉]

[✉]Correspondence to: E-mail: brindbiotech@gmail.com

Publication History

Received: 17 March 2013

Accepted: 05 April 2013

Published: 1 May 2013

Citation

Brindha V. Portuguese navigator João da Nova discovers the island of Saint Helena - May 21, 1502. *Discovery*, 2013, 4(11), 27-28

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General Note

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1. INTRODUCTION

St. Helena is well known as Napoleon's second and final island exile, but the rich and fascinating history of the island goes back to its discovery in 1502 by the Portuguese navigator, Joao da Nova. He named the unknown and uninhabited island in honor of Saint Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, since it was on her feast day that the island had been discovered. On May 5, 1659, the island was permanently settled by the English East India Company. Prior to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, St. Helena was an important stop for water and refit for ships sailing in the South Atlantic. Ascension is primarily a site for British and American military, satellite tracking, and communication activities. It is the only island of the three (St. Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha) with an airport and regularly receives military planes from England, the United States, the Falkland Islands, and Recife, Brazil. Ascension's first residents were British soldiers posted there during the exile of Napoleon to St. Helena. Today, several hundred "Saints" live and work on Ascension with expatriates. St Helena was much less frequently visited by Asia-bound ships, the northern trade winds taking ships towards the South American continent rather than the island.

2. ST. HELENA

St Helena Island is Queensland's most historic island. This beautiful National Park is located four kilometers from the mouth of the Brisbane River and for more than 60 years was home to hundreds of society's outcasts, for here stood colonial Queensland's foremost maximum security prison for men. The Island is rich in history and has a fascinating and colorful past. The island has two museums. Longwood House, Napoleon's home during the last years of his life has exhibits which make it the best Napoleonic museum in the world. The island's own excellent museum is managed by the Heritage Society. This museum is situated in Jamestown. It is the island's only town and retains many of the Georgian buildings built in the heyday of sailing ships. This museum overlooks the harbour where the East India Company's ships anchored to rest their crews and take on fresh provisions. St Helena was a welcome port of call after many months at sea on the return voyage from India. There are two National Parks. One helps protect some of the rare flora on the central ridges. Several of these species can only be found on St Helena. The second, at Sandy Bay on the southern coast, protects further rare native species and the spectacular geological structures which are a legacy of St Helena's volcanic origins.



3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1657, the English East India Company was granted a charter to govern Saint Helena by Oliver Cromwell, and the following year the Company decided to fortify the island and colonize it with planters. The first governor, Captain John Dutton, arrived in 1659, and it is from this date that Saint Helena claims to be Britain's second oldest colony (after Bermuda). A fort was completed and a number of houses were built. A new parish church was erected in Jamestown in 1774. Captain James Cook visited the island in 1775 on the final leg of his second circumnavigation of the world. In 1815 the British government selected Saint Helena as the place of detention of Napoleon Bonaparte. He was brought to the island in October 1815 and lodged at Longwood, where he died on 5 May 1821. During this period, Saint Helena remained in the East India Company's possession, but the British government met additional costs arising from guarding Napoleon. The island was strongly garrisoned with British troops, and naval shipping circled the island. The latter half of the 19th century saw the advent of steam ships not reliant on trade winds, as well as the diversion of Far East trade away from the traditional South Atlantic shipping lanes to a route via the Red Sea (which, prior to the building of the Suez Canal involved a short overland section). These factors contributed to a decline in the number of ships calling at the island from 1,100 in 1855 to only 288 in 1889. From 1958, the Union Castle shipping line gradually reduced its service calls to the island. Curnow Shipping, based in Avonmouth, replaced the Union-Castle Line mail ship service in 1977, using the RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Saint Helena.

The British Nationality Act 1981 reclassified Saint Helena and the other Crown colonies as British Dependent Territories. The islanders lost their status as "Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies" and were stripped of their right of abode in Britain. For the next 20 years, many could find only low-paid work with the island government, and the only available overseas employment was on the Falkland Islands and Ascension Island. The Development and Economic Planning Department, which still operates, was formed in 1988 to contribute to raising the living standards of the people of St Helena. In 1989, Prince Andrew launched the replacement RMS Saint Helena to serve the island; the vessel was specially built for the Cardiff-Cape Town route and features a mixed cargo/passenger layout. The Saint Helena Constitution took effect in 1989 and provided that the island would be governed by a Governor and Commander-in-Chief, and an elected Executive and Legislative Council. In 2002, the British Overseas Territories Act restored full passports to the islanders, and renamed the Dependent Territories (including Saint Helena) the British Overseas Territories.

4. WEATHER

Saint Helena has a (sub) tropical climate with no great extremes regarding temperature. The north coast has a very low annual rainfall, just over 100 mm in Jamestown for example, but this coast is sheltered from the southeast trade winds which bring much more rainfall along the southern coastline and also at higher altitudes more inland, roughly between 750 and 1,000 mm a year. Temperatures vary from around 16 to 19 °C from July to November (14 °C to 16 °C at night) and 22 °C or 25 °C from January to April (18 °C or 21 °C at night). Rainfall is pretty constant throughout the year with around 15-21 rainy days a month. The highest precipitation is in July and August, while May/June and November are driest. In this damned island most of the year we cannot see sun and moon, always rain or fog.