

Walking in the South Atlantic - Without Getting Your Feet Wet

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How could I resist it! With the approach of my retirement date, the offer of a six-month posting to Ascension Island didn't need much deliberation on my part, and there were of course many good and valid reasons why I should jump at this opportunity. But the most important requirement was a pink-pass from my wife. Much to my surprise, considering how indispensable I thought I was about the house, this permission was granted without much hesitation. How would she be able to start our 27-year-old lawnmower in order to cut the grass without my help? Visions of a summer hay field wafting in the wind at Queens Den flashed through my mind. But we all know that graveyards are full of indispensable men, and women too, and I was soon on my way.

Ascension Island is situated in the middle of the South Atlantic just 8 degrees latitude south of the equator and 14 degrees longitude west, halfway between Brazil and Angola. The nearest land, 1,300km away, is that other South Atlantic Island of Saint Helena, famous for being the prison station of Napoleon Bonaparte. However for me Ascension Island could never be considered a prison. Though trapped there without leave for half a year, this interesting island had plenty to keep me captivated.

My Met. Office post entailed the management of a small team charged with the provision of flight forecasts for the eight-hour Airbridge flights between Ascension Island and the Falkland Islands and the eight-hour return flights between Ascension and the UK. Other parts of the job were the recording of weather observations for the Island, the supply of occasional flight forecasts to the African continent, and the issue of forecasts to Florida for the US Airforce, also based on Ascension.

The Island is roughly the shape of an equilateral triangle and, although only approximately 35 square miles in area, its land surface is packed with fascination. We can thank Joao de Nova Gallego, a Portuguese seafarer, for its discovery in the year 1501, and the initial name of Conception Island. It was then forgotten, to be found again two years later by Alphonse D'Albuquerque, who renamed it Ascension Island after the feast day on which it was rediscovered. At that time the island was without any kind of mammal, either human or animal. Although often visited by the ships of various nations, it never had permanent inhabitants until the British government took possession in 1815 and established a garrison lest the French use it as a base from which to rescue their Emperor imprisoned on St Helena.

Being the most isolated tropical island in the Atlantic, some of the plants, birds and marine life found here are unique, having evolved differently from their closest relatives. It is also a very young island in geological terms, constructed on the five to six million-year-old oceanic crust of the South Atlantic plate. It is surrounded by very deep seas and is built on a volcanic structure that has only the top few percent of its mass exposed above sea level. It is said that if the surrounding ocean were drained, the island would sit on top of a steep 4,000m mountain. Because the island is so young, spectacular volcanic rock debris and lava flows are relatively unspoiled by erosion. This makes for some awfully interesting walking, or should I say rock hopping, in places over razor-sharp rock.

Much of the western and northern part of the Island has very sparse or desert-like vegetation. However in the more eastern parts of the island and on Green Mountain, the highest peak at 2,817ft, rainfall is more regular and heavier, and there is a great variety of vegetation, from grasses to shrubs and trees, both tropical and non-tropical. Man has introduced many of the plant species growing above about 1,500ft in the last 150 years, some having been imported from the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

The enhanced rainfall recorded on the eastern half of the Island is brought in on the moist and persistent south-east trade winds, which blow around the semi-permanent sub-tropical high pressure belt of the South Atlantic. These winds are cooled, condensed and relieved of some of their oceanic moisture as they are forced aloft over the Green Mountain. It is truly extraordinary to climb this hill and observe the change of vegetation from desert at lower levels to luxuriant jungle near the peak. It is also remarkable to pass from a climate with bright sunshine on the mountain's western slopes to cooler, overcast hill-fog conditions at the summit. Temperatures as well as rainfall figures show great variation across the island depending on height and exposure. The nice thing is that if it rains, at least it is warm rain, even at the top of Green Mountain. Rainfall amounts can also vary greatly from year to year, going from drought conditions in years such as 1857, to great deluges with roads destroyed in the rapid runoff, as happened during heavy rain in March 1984. As much as nine inches of rain were recorded in one day on the Island in 1859. However this is a very rare occurrence, as is the incidence of thunderstorms, and for much of the time the weather is dry and sunny. Afternoon maximum temperatures at the airport range from around 30°C in March and April to 27°C in September. Overnight minimum temperatures range from 25°C in March and April to around 22°C in September.

From the above you can see that the essentials for walking in Ascension, apart from a good pair of stout boots and a walking pole, are shorts, tee-shirt,



Lava Flows and Cloud on Green Mountain

hat and ample supplies of a high-factor sunscreen plus plenty of drinking water. A moderate, fairly constant, 15mph south-east breeze helps to keep you cool, but it also means that it is very easy to become dehydrated. A machete might be another useful implement for walkers to carry on Green Mountain. On mentioning this in jest to my walking companion on one expedition, I was a bit surprised when he reached into his rucksack and actually produced one! Many of the paths on this mountain are now overgrown, and with the current human population only around 900, there are insufficient walkers or tourists to trample back the encroaching vegetation. This is a great pity, since many paths and tunnels were cut into the volcanic cinder around Green Mountain in the 19th century. The most spectacular of these, Elliot's Pass, was constructed in 1840 on narrow ledges with many tunnels. It hugs the 2,400ft contour and circumnavigates the mountain, giving magnificent ever-changing vistas of the island. This path was originally built to offer a lookout from which the horizon could be scanned for approaching enemy ships, when the peak itself was obscured in cloud. The clear unpolluted atmosphere of the South Atlantic provides unlimited visibility over a vast ocean, with the distant rounded horizon disproving, once and for all, the beliefs of the Flat Earth Society.

At lower elevations Prickly Pear cactus is often encountered on the Island. It is an impressive plant that can grow to a height of 15 feet and is well avoided. Its spread has now been halted to some extent by the introduction of a cactus moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*) which feeds on the plants and eventually kills them. Another bush or small tree, a species of acacia called Mexican Thorn, is rapidly becoming a menace to walkers. It is said to have been imported to the Island as recently as the early 1980s and is spreading rampantly. Its only enemy, apart from myself armed with my bamboo walking pole, seems to be the occasional feral donkey and the wild sheep that also roam the Island. These animals are certainly no match for its prolific growth and may even help it by spreading the seeds, enveloped in a liberal dose of manure. Such is the increase of this particular shrub in recent years that some mountains are changing colour.

All the mountains or hills on Ascension are volcanoes, though according to reports from visiting geologists they had been dormant, if not extinct, for at least a few hundred years before man appeared on the scene. At 1,792ft, Red Hill is the third highest volcano on Ascension. Though not high by Scottish standards, it is still an exciting hill to climb, being composed of bright red ash and lava. However, people revisiting this hill recently after only a few years' absence have noted that the northern slopes in particular are a lot greener than before. A small grove of eucalyptus trees has also sprouted near the summit. Should this greening effect continue, I think a name change might be on the cards.

The most spectacular increase in vegetation brought about by man's intervention must be at the Dew Pond, near the peak of Green Mountain. Here a lily pond, stocked with goldfish and frogs, was established in 1875. Around the same time a bamboo forest was planted in order to increase the water catchment for the pond. This forest, along with a luxuriant growth of wild ginger, has made a chain saw almost essential in order to reach the top of the mountain. Needless to say, this bamboo jungle obscures the magnificent views of the whole island. However, by fighting through the undergrowth and dropping down about 150 feet below the Dew Pond and the Peak, amazing views can be enjoyed of the whole south side of the Island. Clearly visible from this vantage-point is Wideawake Airport with its 10,000ft runway, built by the United States Army Engineers in 1942. Not far from the airport can be seen the white guano-covered nesting grounds of the Sooty or Wideawake tern. These birds, which are now said to number 200,000, breed in large colonies called fairs every 10 lunar months. The unusual breeding pattern is a survival tactic to outwit their predators, and the noise they create when they are in residence at the fairs has to be heard to be believed.

Much quieter creatures to be observed on Ascension are the giant green turtles, which weigh from 400 to 800 pounds when mature. These visit the Island between January and May each year, when they come onshore to lay their eggs on the Island's numerous sandy beaches. An essential magic moonlight walk is a stroll along any of these beaches at night to watch the enormous turtles struggle as far as 150 metres above high-water mark to dig a large pit about 3 metres in diameter and about 80 centimetres deep. Here they deposit some 150 eggs resembling table tennis balls, carefully burying them before returning to the sea. Other moments to be savoured are shoreline walks nine or ten weeks later, to see the baby turtles as they hatch and dig their way out of the nest pit and make a frantic dash to the sea.

Before modern communications gave us the 'miracle' of almost instant e-mail, as long ago as the 17th century outward bound ships would leave messages on the Island for the next ship to take home, an early sort of postal service. We have all heard tales about 'the message in a bottle'. In fact there is a remote headland on the east of the Island called Bottle Point, and a nearby cairn called Letterbox. Although this is a rather exposed location because of the persistent trade winds and southerly sea swell, legend has it that this is the site where the original 17th century letterbox was located, and a visit to this spot is well worth the effort.

The concept of letterboxes seems to have appealed to modern-day walkers, and the Island Heritage Society have now published a guide book with maps of 18 'Letterbox Walks' on the Island. At each letterbox a notebook and hand-stamp are provided, so that people can prove they have actually been to the place. Most of these walks are not long in distance, compared to many Munro-bagging expeditions, but given the terrain and temperature they are still quite challenging and rewarding. Each walk provides excellent views of the best of Ascension Island, lots of interest from the geology, flora and fauna and even marine life, when you encounter land crabs on mountain paths.

Perhaps the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, or the newly-formed Munro Society, will organise some sort of similar scheme for verifying the completion of Munros and Corbetts. Funding for such a vast project might be a problem, not to mention the logistics of the installation of the boxes. But if mankind can visit the moon, why not? In our Scottish winter conditions, accessibility of the letterboxes might be the greatest technical challenge. Happily this will never be a problem for walkers in the tropical heat of Ascension Island!