

The monarch of all I survey

Nick Coghlan narrates a visit to the Juan Fernández archipelago which found fame after Alexander Selkirk was marooned there, inspiring the story of Robinson Crusoe



It's always difficult to find good crew prepared to sail offshore. For some reason, people these days resent being shouted at by the captain, having to get up at all hours of the night to respond to emergencies on deck, trying to cook when the boat is swinging around madly, living in perpetually damp clothes, unclogging the head while under way. And, in the case of my spouse, suffering the self-appointed skipper's Bligh delusions and not even getting paid for the pleasure. But it seems it was always like this.

When in 1703 Captain Thomas Stradling recruited a young Scotsman called Alexander Selkirk as a deckhand aboard his privateer the *Cinque Ports*, it must have been with misgivings. Young Alex was already known to have a "quarrelsome and unruly disposition". He had been charged for "indecent conduct in church" in his hometown of Largo, and

escaped the consequences only by running away to sea. Then, some time later – after he returned – he was charged for assaulting his brothers. He seems to have participated enthusiastically enough in the rape and pillage that Stradling sanctioned on the Spanish Main for several months after leaving Scotland. However, when the ship and crew were recuperating at the lonely island of Más a Tierra (Closest to Land) – part of the Juan Fernández archipelago and 420 miles off the Chilean mainland – Selkirk began complaining to Stradling about the seaworthiness of the *Cinque Ports*.

Admittedly, the ship had had a rough time of things when rounding Cape Horn, but Stradling was clearly a no-nonsense captain. He put the stropky Selkirk ashore on the uninhabited island, with a musket, a hatchet, a cooking pot and a Bible – and sailed away. →



Cruising ~ Robinson Crusoe Island

The castaway had four-and-a-half years to regret his petulance. Although two Spanish ships anchored off Más a Tierra during that period, he dared not approach their crews when they landed to take on water – as far as he knew, Spain was still the enemy. He once hid in a tree and came close to being detected when a Spanish sailor approached and unbuttoned his britches to urinate. It was not until 1709, with Selkirk daily scaling the prominent peak now known as El Yunque (The Anvil) to scan for sails, that another privateer, the *Duke*, hove into view and took him on board.

Selkirk's solitary ordeal attracted widespread interest when he arrived back in England and he became a celebrity. Later, he inspired WS Gilbert (of Gilbert & Sullivan), Charles Dickens and the poet WM Cowper, whose most famous verse is:

*I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute;
From the centre all round to the sea,
I am lord of the fowl and the brute*

But one writer who read about Selkirk with particular attention was Daniel Defoe. His *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was the result, with Más a Tierra transposed to the Caribbean and Man Friday thrown in. Much, much later (in 1966), with Crusoe having become one of the best-known characters in English literature, the Chilean president renamed the island after him, in the hope of attracting tourists.

Like the *Cinque Ports*, we had a rough passage to Robinson Crusoe.



Only a day out of Puerto Montt (Chile), we were surfing north in winds of 40 knots and 5m (16ft) seas, with three reefs in the main. The crew – Jenny – was heard to utter profanities when she spilled an entire tin of powdered milk on the cabin floor and then, seeking to recover her balance, fell against the engine control panel and snapped the ignition key off. Bligh muttered darkly but was generally restrained as he prised the remains of the key out with a paper clip.

Later, with the seas subsiding, we enjoyed an especially lurid sunset to port. I'd read that hereabouts, in November 1914, a British Royal Navy squadron had unwisely found itself silhouetted against such a sky just as a large portion of the Imperial German Fleet hove into sight. There ensued the greatest British naval defeat (Coronel) in over a century – which in turn was avenged a month later at the Battle of the Falklands. We shook out a reef and sailed on into the darkness.

Cumberland Bay, at the head of which lies Robinson Crusoe island's only settlement – Juan Bautista, population 800 – is more open than

PREVIOUS PAGE
The western extremity of Robinson Crusoe Island

ABOVE
Jenny at work on the foredeck and possibly mulling over dropping 60m of anchor chain

BELOW LEFT
Cumberland Bay

BELOW RIGHT
Local fishing boats in Cumberland Bay

you'd hope, and deeper, too – about 22m (72ft). As we meandered around looking vainly for a shallower patch, the crew – whose responsibility it is to haul up our 15kg (33lb) anchor plus 30m (98ft) of chain by means of a manual windlass – grumbled as I read out the changing depths to her, already anticipating some hard work when we came to leave. The location is spectacular, however, with high cliffs backing the small town, a lush and mountainous interior, and a few traditional green and white lobster-fishing boats bobbing at their moorings.

After rowing ashore and checking in with the port captain, we wandered along the very quiet and shady waterfront and bumped into a friendly old gentleman who, with a little bow, presented to us his card: "Victorio Bettullo Mancilla: Professor and Historian"

Over coffee, Victor – who was lonely, and admitted that the tourist rush anticipated back in 1966 had yet to materialise – explained that the two large and evidently abandoned excavators we had seen rusting in the long grass had been landed with a view to improving the island's small airstrip; the only problem was that the airstrip is at the other end of the island and there is no road. He filled us in on some of the common but odd island surnames – Green, Schiller, de Roodt and Recabbaren (which is Basque) – and then directed us to a small monument visible along the foreshore.

"This island is not all about Robinson Crusoe," Victor commented.

Here, a German-language plaque





commemorates the sinking in Cumberland Bay of the light cruiser *Dresden* in 1915.

SMS *Dresden* had seen action at Coronel. Later, she'd fled the (German) catastrophe at the Falklands at a boiler-bursting speed of 27 knots and headed for the Horn. The British steamed vainly up and down the Strait of Magellan searching for her, but the enemy cruiser was well-hidden in a maze of islands and narrow channels to the west of Tierra del Fuego. Eventually the *Dresden* ran for it, going on to sink a British merchant ship off Valparaiso. But she needed coal, and sent off a message requesting refuelling. The British intercepted the transmission and caught up with her where she was waiting, here in Cumberland Bay. This time there was no escape: warning shots were fired, the *Dresden's* captain raised a white flag but then scuttled her before the British could board.

Among the crew members subsequently interned by Chile was Wilhelm Canaris, chief of German military intelligence in the Second World War. Some of the crew evidently enjoyed their detention: one returned to the island in 1931 to farm; you can still see the foundations of his stone farmhouse. He was denounced as a Nazi spy in 1943, said Victor, and no more is known of him. You can also still see shell holes in the cliffs from British naval guns that fired on the *Dresden*. Around the village are – rather incongruously – some deck guns salvaged from the ship. The wreck is reportedly in poor condition and lies

at the dangerous depth of 70m; following a number of diving accidents, the authorities have forbidden further exploration.

Meanwhile, high up on the slopes of El Yunque, is Selkirk's lookout, marked by a plaque that the crew of HMS *Topaze* placed here in 1869. The climb has you puffing after the enforced inactivity of days at sea. It's a windy place with a superb view, but it's hard to imagine that Selkirk actually had the time to trek this high in search of a sail every day, as is reputed. Far below and to the east is an overhang behind a rocky beach that was supposedly his home.

Meanwhile *Bosun Bird's* crew had her own adventures here. After making a few modest purchases at the Minimarket Crucero Dresden, Jenny put her foot through a section of rotten planking on the shop's exterior deck and promptly sank to mid-thigh level, with a great screech. She incidentally crushed our fresh new baguettes. Worse was yet to come. That evening, we rowed over to have a Pisco Sour (or two) with some old sailing friends – Graham and Avril, aboard *Dreamaway*, who had pulled into Cumberland Bay

ABOVE LEFT
Plaque to Selkirk at his lookout, left by the crew of HMS *Topaze*, in 1869

ABOVE
A view from Alexander Selkirk's lookout

BELOW LEFT
A street in San Juan Bautista, with a naval gun salvaged from the *Dresden* in the foreground

BELOW RIGHT
The Minimarket Crucero Dresden

before us. Jenny later claimed that she had not realised that Pisco Sours were alcoholic. The log reports laconically that there were even more complaints than anticipated when the time came for the crew to get up and hoist the anchor five or six hours later.

Back from the South Pacific, Selkirk went on to further exploits. While profiting from the selling of his story, he spent his share of the *Duke's* plunder (over 100,000 pounds in today's money) enjoyably but quickly. In 1713 he was charged with assaulting a Bristol shipwright and was jailed for two years. He married a barmaid, but left her to enlist again. He died as Master's Mate on board HMS *Weymouth*, in 1721, while the ship was engaged in anti-piracy activities off West Africa.

Bosun Bird's crew is far from "quarrelsome and unruly", but she complains ever more boldly about anchoring in depths over 15m. To himself, the captain muses that perhaps he should emulate the admirably firm Captain Stradling of the leaky *Cinque Ports* – but where would he find new crew at the wages on offer?

