

Ascension and Fernando de Noronha

# Sailing the heights

**Nick and Jenny Coghlan** narrate a voyage to Ascension and Fernando de Noronha, a pair of often overlooked islands in the South Atlantic



**B**efore HMS Beagle left St Helena for Ascension Island in 1836, near the end of her five-year circumnavigation of the world, the locals warned Charles Darwin: “We know we live on a rock, but the poor people of Ascension live on a cinder.”

And while similarly remote Juan Fernández in the Pacific inspired a classic of world literature - *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* - Ascension’s contribution is *Sodomy Punish’d*, derived from the diary of a Dutch sailor who was cast ashore here for the said crime in 1725.

So, when we were on our first crossing of the South Atlantic in the late 80’s, it was with low expectations that, after a warm trade-wind sail of a week in the Beagle’s track, we dropped anchor in the uncomfortably open roadstead that is Clarence Bay. We introduced ourselves by VHF to the Port Captain. He spoke with a noticeable American accent;

the conversation was terse, but we had our lines rehearsed:

“What is the nature of your distress, captain?”  
 “Good morning to you as well. We have an issue with our raw-water pump sir, which I need to work on, and we’d like to take on some fresh water if we may. I believe we are entitled to a 72-hour stay, is that correct?”

There was a long pause. Then reluctant acquiescence and notification that our clock was now running; we were asked to note the exact time in our log.

Ascension has no indigenous inhabitants. Instead, it has NASA; the European Space Agency; a BBC World Service relay station; a set of hush-hush listening antennae jointly run (or so it is said) by unnamed British and American intelligence outfits; sundry military and a surprisingly long airstrip and related infrastructure, called Wideawake Field (named after an endemic tern). Casual visitors are neither expected nor very welcome.

**FACING PAGE**  
 O Pico, Fernando de Noronha

**ABOVE LEFT**  
 Approaching Ascension, evening in the South Atlantic

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
 Landing the dinghy at the pier head, Ascension

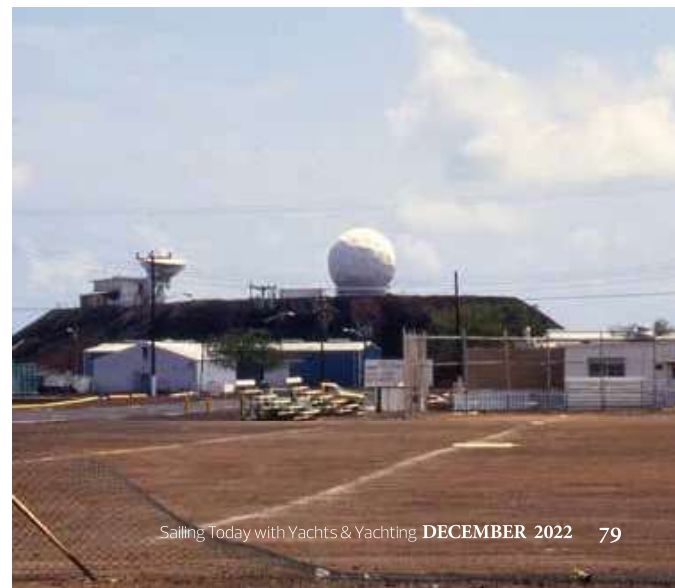
**BELOW LEFT**  
 Wideawake Field, from Green Mountain

**BELOW RIGHT**  
 Communications dome, Ascension

## *A less than friendly welcome*

The same American officer who had spoken to us on the radio observed us impassively as we struggled to manhandle our rubber dinghy up a steep flight of twenty steps cut into the pier head - the swell was such that there was no question of leaving it tied up. But he did thaw a little to tell us, after extracting fees for landing and for medical insurance, that the US-run canteen at The Base was currently open. We had better take advantage of it now, as we were required to be back on board every evening by dusk.

A cheeseburger and a Bud, in a fiercely air-conditioned, gloomy and smoke-filled bar where American football was showing on TV, made for an odd welcome to this British outpost. Outside, at sea level, the island was as advertised: a huge pile of red and black ash and cinders where the equatorial heat made the landscape shimmer and, as far as we could see, drove everyone indoors. The large golf-ball domes of clandestine purpose and the





prefabricated nature of most of the buildings contributed to the feeling that we were on Mars.

But over at the little white church you could have been at any of the old staging posts of the British Empire. Here for example was a marble memorial to Oliver T. Lang Esq, RN who, while in command of HMS Lee in 1865 “was killed by a fall from the bridge while coming to an anchor off this island.” A stained-glass window reminded us of a more recent imperial episode: the Falklands conflict of 1982.

Ascension was a vital staging post for the fleet steaming into the South Atlantic, and it was from Wideawake that Operation Black Buck was launched: a Vulcan bombing raid on Stanley that, at 6600 miles return, was at the time the most ambitious such attack ever launched.

In front of a stately cream building that once served as the Marine barracks, is a cricket square, possibly the only ash pitch in the world. We wondered if the evidently large American contingent had ever been persuaded to put an Eleven together.

Our water pump could wait; we had not lied to the Port Captain, but it had been dripping for two years now. So for our second day ashore

we trudged inland in stultifying heat to Two Boats. On either side of the road into this tiny settlement is a wooden whaleboat standing on its transom; they were placed here by Marines in the 19th century, to provide shade for travellers.

Passing more white-painted prefabs (still nobody to be seen) the road winds its way high into the cloud that sits permanently on Green Mountain. The landscape changes, the temperature drops quickly. Now there are green hillsides clad oddly in cracking concrete slabs: a long-disused water catchment system. A well-engineered path – Elliot’s Pass - circles the top of the mountain neatly, with tunnels and cuttings; this was built in the 1840s so as to allow sentries to scan the surrounding ocean for approaching ships.

There is a farm up here where the pigs greeted us enthusiastically and we contemplated the lettuces lustfully. But there was nothing for sale to visitors. We were even more disappointed when the old building known as the Red Lion turned out not be a pub serving a hoped-for pint of English bitter, but another Victorian-era Marine barracks. At the very peak of Green Mountain, where you might expect to find a

**ABOVE LEFT**  
St Mary’s Church,  
Ascension

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Jenny practices her  
batting stance on  
the cricket square,  
Ascension

**BELOW LEFT**  
At the farm, Green  
Mountain, Ascension;  
the lettuces are  
tempting....

**BELOW RIGHT**  
Raising our home-  
made Q and Brazilian  
courtesy flags,  
approaching Fernando

crater, is a bamboo thicket and a dew pond some 5m in diameter; to commemorate our ascent we left our names in the log-book provided.

When it came time to leave, and after stocking up on Marmite, Sugar Puffs and tinned sponge pudding at the NAAFI (British military) store, the Port Captain came to see us off again. Or, at least, he stood at the pier head again, ostentatiously looking at his watch every few minutes as we struggled to launch the dinghy. When I looked back an hour later through the binoculars, the anchor up and our sails set for running, he was still there, watching.

Fernando de Noronha is another 1100 miles to the west and, at 4 degrees south, closer still to the equator. Jenny spent much of her time on this downwind passage rummaging through the bag of coloured spinnaker scraps that we had begged from a sailmaker in South Africa, so as to make a Brazilian courtesy flag. The flag in question has a blue disk with 27 stars (yes, we checked) on a yellow diamond, with an encircling band reading “Ordem e Progresso” (Order and Progress). While we are punctilious in hoisting such flags (along with the yellow for





Q) in advance of arriving in a new country, obtaining them in advance can be challenging.

### ***A warmer welcome***

Fernando is distinguished by a massive thumb-shaped mountain, on top of which sits a rotating aero-beacon; this is so high and powerful that we could see it from thirty miles away. Our arrival in the Baía de Santo Antônio, at the east end of the main island, was a relaxed affair in contrast to Ascension; the police came out to visit us in their launch, bade us a warm welcome and warned that the immigration officer was currently taking his siesta. This should not stop us going ashore, they said; they rattled off a list of suggested things for us to do, of which (speaking Spanish but no Portuguese) we understood a fraction.

One recommendation – this had been rubbed in with much gesticulation and many thumbs up - was to climb O Pico, which sounded straightforward enough; we understood there was a ladder all the way up. It began at the foot of a limestone cliff, past a sign that said “Military Zone – No Access.” Thirteen steel flights bolted to the largely vertical face, with occasional

**ABOVE LEFT**  
Climbing O Pico

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Views of Fernando from O Pico, looking east

**BELOW LEFT**  
Jenny and the aero-beacon, on the summit of O Pico

**BELOW RIGHT**  
The anchorage at Fernando, seen from the summit of O Pico

rungs missing, then took us up no less than 1056 feet (according to our chart). About half-way up the ladder, the crew – a few rungs below the captain - was heard uttering mutinous remarks but was persuaded that it was easier to keep going up (we were younger then, and more rash...). There were of course stupendous views as we sat huddled atop the pinnacle against the searchlight of the aero-beacon, which happily did not rotate in the daytime. Tropicbirds and noddies fluttered all around us, apparently amazed to see anyone here, while large iguanas eyed us more stolidly. The descent, as we had supposed, was indeed worse than the climb up.

### ***Tropical paradise***

Fernando was a little tropical paradise. There were deserted sand beaches – one reached via a less challenging ladder climb down through a pothole - where dolphins came to swim with us and a small village where you could buy exotic fruits for next to nothing. We made a friend called Ziza who daily ransacked his garden for us, plying us with armfuls of starfruit, spring onions, peppers and, most wonderful of all, maracujá (passionfruit).

We were sad to leave, after a week. Checking in at the posh Iate Club de Fortaleza after a four-day sail to the mainland of Brazil was salutary. The tie-wearing duty officer at Reception was friendly enough. But after handing us a form that told us we may not use the “swimming poll” he pointed out a section that read “several times thieves have stolen all he can.” We were assigned a security guard:

“This is Heitor. He will remain on your vessel when you are on shore. And we recommend that he stay on board at night as well. Of course, you will need to feed him. But...” (this said in English and in a low voice) “you should not supply him with any alcohol.”

Heitor saluted us sharply and seriously with one hand, a shotgun in the other. We tried to look as though this was a normal practise and smiled in welcome to our new friend. He mumbled something interrogative under his breath to the sailing club official, who turned back to us in order to add:

“Ah yes. Heitor would just like to remind you that if he needs to use any ammunition, that will be on your account.”

Thankfully, none was used. ✦

