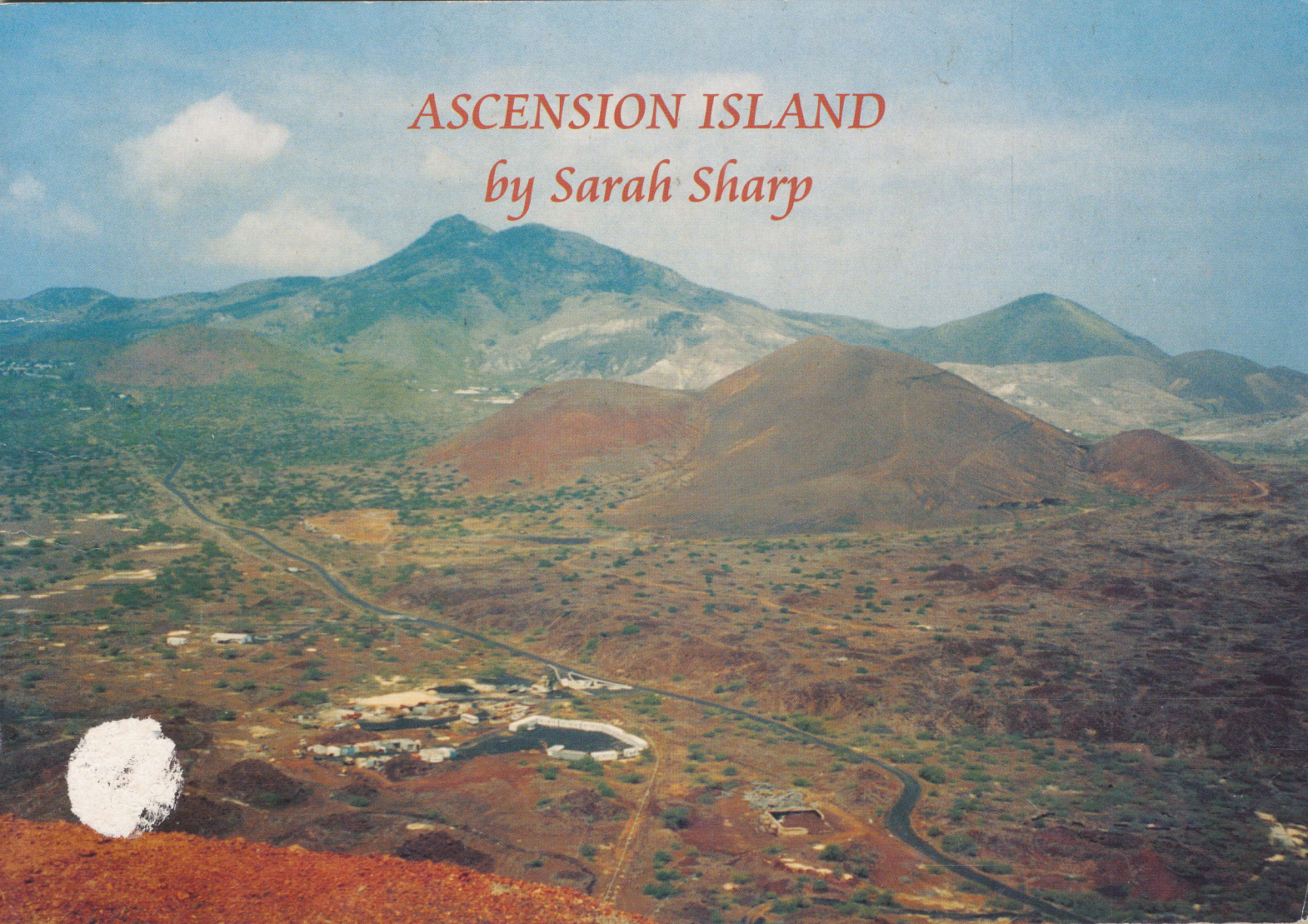
ASCENSION ISLAND

by Sarah Sharp




English Bay
N.E.Bay
Comfortless Cove
Boatswain Bird Island
Long Beach
Pierhead
Georgetown
Sisters
Two Boats Village
Letterbox
Travellers Hill
Dew Pond
Crater Cliff
NASA Road
Crystal Bay
Wideawake Airfield
Cocoanut Bay
Pillar Bay
Mars Bay

Ascension Island

Approximately 34 square miles Ascension Island is 8 degrees South of the equator in the South Atlantic Ocean. 900 miles from the continent of Africa and over 1,000 miles from South America, the nearest land mass is St Helena over 700 miles away. With no airstrip St Helena is linked to Ascension by ship. Two planes a week from RAF Brize Norton fly through Ascension Island on their way to the Falklands and back.

First discovered in 1501 by Juan da Nova, Ascension was called Conception before being re-named in 1503 by Alphonse D'Alberquerque. A stopping off point for ships, Ascension was not continually inhabited until 1815 when Napolean Bonaparte was imprisoned on St Helena. The British occupied Ascension to prevent the French from using the Island as an escape route. The Victorian Marines worked hard to make the Island habitable, introducing a variety of plants and animals. Buildings, which still stand today, were erected up the Mountain and in the Garrison, now called Georgetown. Although almost indefensible, forts were built but British sovereignty was never challenged. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Ascension had gone into decline.

In 1899 The Eastern Telegraph Company found a new use for this speck of land. Now Cable and Wireless, the Eastern Telegraph Company laid telegraph cable on the sea bed, and soon Ascension became the centre of communication in the South Atlantic.

Later NASA found another use for the Island and tested the moon buggy on the lava flows.



Georgetown

Originally called Garrison by the Victorian Marines, Georgetown houses most of the Island's public buildings. In the general view opposite can be seen the Church of St Mary the Virgin within the Island's race track. The corner stone was laid in 1843 and it was finally consecrated by the first Bishop of St Helena in 1861. To the left of this can be seen the Exiles club. The two storey building with a clock was originally a barracks and has since become a club for the whole Island. Fort Hayes can be clearly seen on the coast line. Built in about 1860 it is now used by the Heritage Society as a museum. The museum also boasts a splendid picture gallery as well as a large and varied number of artefacts from the Island's history.

Ascension Island is a dependency of the British Crown Colony of St Helena and governed by an Administrator who has his offices in Georgetown. The police force is formed from half a dozen officers of the St Helenan force and the small Island prison is hardly used. Crime is rare and usually traffic related. The work force is mainly Saint Helenan with some UK personnel. No one stays on the Island without a job unless they are a dependant. The Americans have a base on the Island which is self contained.

Georgetown also accommodates the Post Office, which issue their own stamps, and shops. One shop acts as the general store with a second branch renting videos and selling non food stuff. There are two private shops one selling souvenirs and fancy goods and the other clothes. There is also a hospital and dental surgery.



Green Mountain

The tallest peak on the Island, Green Mountain is often shrouded in mist. It was recognised as having the greatest potential for vegetation and the Marines had a farm up there. In Victorian times and well into the twentieth century this provided all the fresh produce for the Island including milk and vegetables. Today, with the advent of the twice weekly Tristar, the farm is considerably smaller than it was. The herd of cows has been reduced to a handful of cattle which have become wild. UHT has rendered them redundant. There are a number of pigs remaining and a small quantity of fresh vegetables make their way to the shop periodically. Still standing are several of the buildings including the Red Lion, which despite its name was never a pub in the UK sense. Several of the cottages, built as light relief from the heat of Georgetown, can still be hired while others have fallen into disrepair or have gone completely.

There are a number of walks up the mountain. One takes you from the end of the road to the Dew Pond while Elliots encircles the whole mountain offering spectacular views of the Island. Several of the walks start or end at the Residency where the Administrator lives. This used to be the old sanatorium and there are paths with the names Convalescence and Invalids although one cannot imagine either being such a simple walk. Also from the Residency there is a path to Monkey Rock Cemetery. The views on a clear day are fabulous and the road a public right of way. A diagram of all the walks appears at the top and bottom of the Mountain Road known as The Ramps. Twisting and turning it is not a drive for the faint hearted.



The Dew Pond

The Dew Pond is the highest point of the Island and can be found at the summit of Green Mountain. It was dug out in 1875 to act as an emergency water supply, although in practice it would never have been sufficient to provide for the Island. Water was a big problem to the early settlers on the Island. The only natural water supply was located in several drips around the Island. One such drip is named after William Dampier whose ship, The Roebuck, was marooned and finally sank off Ascension in 1701. He is said to have buried still undiscovered treasure on the Island. Dampier's Drip can be located at the foot of Green Mountain just above the two long boats upended into the ground to provide shelter from the sun to the water carriers. Another drip was found at Breakneck Valley, where an old wind pump can still be seen. An interesting, and not too difficult walk can begin at the Red Lion where the road ends near the top of Green Mountain. You can pass through the Mountain in a tunnel the Victorians built for the water pipe, and walk down Breakneck Valley to a picnic spot called The Pines. It is here Norfolk Pines were planted to provide new masts for sailing ships.

The Dew Pond is the focus for the 'Dew Pond Run', a regular event on the Island. Participants from as young as six to over fifty gather at the turtle ponds in Georgetown and climb the 2817 feet from sea level to the Dew Pond covering nearly seven miles, allegedly one of the hardest road races in the world.



Sisters

Sisters is one of the most recently active volcanic peaks of the Island and dominates the skyline. A path was cut up to the top and in 1972 it was opened as the Hannay-Pass up Sisters. It was the positioning of the first letter box. The lava flow down the other side of the peaks can be clearly seen and there are fumaroles to be explored.

At the bottom of this picture can be seen the village of Two Boats. It was built to house the BBC workers when the South Atlantic Relay Station was opened at English Bay. It is so named after the two long boats which were up ended into the ground to act as shelters from the sun at the bottom of Green Mountain when water was carried down to the coast. Two such boats can still be seen on the way to Dampier's Drip from a stile in Two Boats.

Two Boats has its own club and swimming pool which are both actively used. There is a shop and gift shop and a surgery is held there.

Two Boats houses the Island's only school. The Primary and Secondary school are combined and run on English School lines implementing the National Curriculum in the Primary School and offering a small range of GCSE courses.



Devil's Riding School

A beautiful and simple walk to a dried up volcanic lake. The rings of coloured ash can be seen from the rim. Running through the centre is a fault line which is almost passable. Children chip out the 'Devil's eyeballs' made from concentrations of calcium minerals found on the surface. Such is its interest that it has become the positioning for a letter box. There are eighteen such official boxes around the Island. These can be found at the end of walks of varying degrees of difficulty but always of scenic interest and beauty. Stemming from the time that sailors left messages and letters in jars along the coast line for other ships to pick up and mail, the tradition of leaving calling cards continued well into the twentieth century to prove walkers had reached the obscure point of the Island in the South East now called Letter Box. The trouble was the walkers themselves had no proof to take away with them. The idea of having rubber stamps was introduced in 1979 and slowly over the next twenty years the numbers grew to 18. Now a walk book can be purchased with spaces to collect your stamps. This is the complete list of letter box walks which are maintained by the Island's Heritage Society:

Sisters	Spire Beach	Pillar Bay	Bullock Pond	South Red Crater
Letter Box	Cocoanut Bay	White Horse	Broken Tooth	Devil's Riding School
Dew Pond	Crystal Bay	Devil's Cauldron	Lady Hill	
Weatherpost	Crater Cliff	Mountain Red	North West point	



Comfortless Cove

A beautiful cove and one of only two places where swimming is safe when the sea is calm. A rope has been pulled across the entrance to the cove making it even safer. Ideal for snorkelling when the sea is calm you can see a variety of fish including the blackfish which are the dustbins of the sea. Throw in any food substance and it will be enveloped by blackfish pushing and fighting to get their share. Inedible and not useful for bait they are perhaps one of the most common sights in the sea especially around the pierhead and completely harmless to the swimmer.

Comfortless Cove was originally called Comfort Cove. It was where the ships carrying yellow fever docked. Islanders would bring the stricken sailors food and water across the rocks whilst preventing an epidemic amongst their own community. There are several small cemeteries around its coastline the most visited is above the cove and well signposted. It is called the Bonetta Cemetery after the ship HMS Bonetta who brought its fever victims to the shore in 1838. Such desolation led to the change of name.

The Maersk can be seen on the horizon of the picture and is a familiar sight to those who live on Ascension. Anchored off shore for the majority of time the Maersk Ascension is the fuel ship for the Island and participates in regular pump overs. Should the sleeping volcanoes ever decide to awake the Maersk is also the escape route from the Island.



Boatswain Bird Island

Really a stack, Boatswain Bird is inhabited by seabirds and landing by the public is forbidden. Boat trips and divers anchor off its shores and dolphins often play around the boats although they tend to shy away from swimmers.

Boatswain Bird Island can be seen from many vantage points around the Island; the top of Weatherpost or White Horse or simply by walking along from Hannay's Beach where the blow hole spews water into a fountain.

In 1923 the English Bay Company began mining guano deposits. The remains of this mining and the old light railway tracks can be seen on the surface of Boatswain Bird Island and around English Bay itself. Even after the English Bay Company stopped commercial operations the guano off Boatswain Bird was collected to fertilise the farm. Now the birds are free to make it their home. There is the Boatswain Bird itself with its beautiful long tail who remains fairly aloof unlike the Fairy Terns, who in their eager curiosity fly low over your heads to see what you are doing. The Ascension Island Frigate can be seen circling the skies looking for prey. The distinctive red pouches of the male are rarely seen. The Boobies are a sight to behold when there is fry around the pierhead as they dive straight into the water to catch their share. Other birds include the Petrel, Brown and Black Noddies and the Wideawake or Sooty Tern.



The American Influence

In March 1942 as World War Two was being fought at sea around this practically undefended Island the American forces arrived and built the airstrip at Wideawake Airfield. Built in a matter of months the first plane landed in July 1942. The airstrip has since been enlarged to become the second longest airstrip in the world and has the unusual feature of a bump in the middle of it. The Americans outnumbered the British until the end of the war when the Island was left in the hands of the Cable and Wireless Company once more.

By the mid 1950s the Americans were once again on the Island using it to monitor test missiles fired from Cape Canaveral. NASA began to test out its moon buggie on the lunar type landscape around English Bay and the American Base close to the Airhead began to expand. Although practically self contained with its own water distillation, supply planes and ships it offers the Island an open air movie screen and a fast food restaurant. Although NASA have left the Island, their legacy of a road out towards Devil's Ashpit in the South East remains. This has opened up much more of the Island to walkers who do not now have to make the climb up Green Mountain to fetch their car at the end of a day out.

The Americans are also responsible for one of the newest man-made sights on the Island; four large wind turbines built in 1996. Ideally situated they help generate the Island's electricity.



Wildlife

Probably the most famous of the Ascension wildlife is the Green Turtle or Chelonia Mydas which swims from Brazil to the Island's shores to lay its eggs every November to May. During its 1,000 mile journey the turtle fasts. Mating off shore the female clambers up the beach to dig her hole and lay up to 120 eggs at one time. When these hatch the young make their way instinctively to the sea where a variety of predators mean few will survive. The turtles once provided fresh meat for the sailors and a good source of income for the Island. Today they are a protected species.

The only indigenous inhabitants of the Island are the land crabs and the sea-birds. The land crabs are most prolific around the foot of Green Mountain and the old NASA site. They are purple or orange and despite living on the land return to the sea to lay their eggs.

The sea-birds have all but left the Island. Ships inadvertently brought rats and mice on shore. In a bid to exterminate them the cat was introduced. They found the birds much easier prey and drove them onto the hard to reach cliffs and shacks off the coast. The Wideawake or Sooty terns, which gave their name to the Airhead, still nest on the fairs in season. However the Ascension Island Frigate, Brown Booby, Fairy Tern and other birds can still be seen off shore.

Donkeys and sheep introduced by the early farmers for labour or food have since been allowed to roam free causing a unique traffic hazard.



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