

“MAROONED”

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Not a word you see much used in the 21st century. It suggests being put off a ship in a very remote place and left there. Given changes in our world, very few places are remote, isolated, and out of contact. Some may imagine that the only way to be marooned today would be in space. But life can be surprising when the circumstances would seem predictable. In the break between our Fall and Winter Quarters just such an unexpected event happened.

On some of our university holidays, I agree to provide lectures on world affairs on a cruise ship. All of these are the smaller variety ships that feature lectures for passengers on the destinations, their natural environment, or so-called “special interests” where the topics are less thematic. At the end of November my wife and I departed Grand Canaria, Spain on a voyage down the west coast of Africa to Capetown, South Africa. I brought with me eight lectures about all manner of things given that I was tasked with the “special interest” lectures.

A couple of the ports we were to visit were new to us so we were eager to experience those societies and cultures. All went well. The sea was calm though I am not one of those unhappy when it is a bit rougher. We visited Dakar, Senegal made visible in the US by the Obamas' visit and reports that Michelle thought her heritage linked to that place. We then stopped at The Gambia (the correct official name of that country; only two places in the world officially start with THE – the Bahamas and the Gambia). The colonial history of the Gambia is fascinating. The country is just the territory along the north and south banks of the Gambia River. It is completely surrounded by Senegal owing to the peculiar colonial history and the French vs. British colonial designs. To that point, all was proceeding quite as planned. The itinerary then called for five days at sea with a stop at the island named St. Helena. My guess is that it is on no one's bucket list or anyone's list at all. On the way, we crossed the Equator which is always an excuse for a party.

I had shared my ideas from five of the eight lectures and the passenger interest was normal. The ship had one third Brits, one third Americans and the other third were assorted Europeans. On the night before arriving to the island of St. Helena, my wife became ill. A decade ago she had a heart issue and was concerned that it could be recurring. We visited the ship's doctor and staff and she was examined and observed through the night. As dawn approached, the parties involved had expanded. The ship's doctor interpreted some tests to be worrisome. The ship's protocol calls for evacuating problematic cases. No doubt the lawyers saw an opportunity to avoid any complications. We were told she would be evacuated by the marine rescue unit on the island and taken to the hospital where she could be seen by a cardiologist. If cleared, she could return to the ship. All that seemed reasonable at that moment, but it became clear to me that I would also be put ashore and that I would need to hastily pack given a return was not assured.

We are always sharing with our students that knowledge is king. In this case the ship's knowledge of the island was less than exemplary. When I joined my wife in the Jamestown Regional hospital on the island, it was an awakening. A building at the top of the <u>one</u> main street, it was clean and very very basic. The doctor who had brought her from the ship on the launch was also the ambulance driver. They giggled when we asked if there was a cardiologist on staff. My wife was settled in the one room. Two other rooms were wards for multiple old folks – one for men, one for women. From what I could tell, there was one toilet for patients and a second for staff. All this was not distressing because the two doctors and the nurses were friendly and more or less present. One might have been more concerned but the island is a part of the British Overseas Territories

and has a population of 4000 English speaking people. The gracious young doctor explained that both the ship and the local protocol call for 24 hours observation in spite of that fact that the hospital's tests indicated no reason for concern. At that point, our fate was sealed. The ship will leave without us. The hospital has no internet. It isn't clear if there is any internet anywhere. The phone system has very few international "circuits" that seem constantly busy. There is a sense that folks here don't rely on communication as we so compulsively do.

Marooned! As it happens, I am not the first to be marooned here. Napoleon Bonaparte was brought here and exiled after his historical loss at Waterloo. It was the most remote place in the British Empire at the beginning of the 19th Century. I found some irony in that. We are/were both short, stocky and said by some to have outsize egos. Manikins of him are common in Jamestown and the comparison was inescapable. But even as the first day passed, I became concerned that I knew far too little of this pace and our choices. The doctor explained that there is air service to the island – regularly once a week on Saturdays. A flight on AirLink Airlines is a six hour flight from the island to Johannesburg, South Africa. "In season" there could be a second on Tuesdays.

My wife seems fine. We have to maneuver a minefield of medical hurdles. The travel insurance company that has learned of our evacuation from the ship requires the island's hospital doctors to clear my wife for travel and provide their insurance doctors with data that leads them to the same conclusion. All this is tense, but finally accomplished by Saturday morning. We then gather our things and go to the island airport. It is a modern looking operation that causes one to be optimistic. I approach the one ticket counter to purchase the air tickets for us. They are 700 local Island pounds each for the one way flight. Ok. It is what it is. I pull out my credit card only to be told that the tickets can only be purchased in cash in local currency. St. Helena has its own currency – St. Helena Island Pounds. I try a debit card. I ask if there is an ATM. The island does not take cards and has no ATMs. Alarmed, I ask how one gets local currency. I am told that can be done but only at the island's one bank. Oh, and the bank is not open on weekends.

As I return from the closed bank office (at the airport) to the ticket office to appeal to whomever, the announcement is made that the flight coming to the island has turned back given some weather concerns and is cancelled. "There may be a flight on Tuesday."

As modern Americans and experienced problem solvers, we return to the town where the airline has made a reservation for us. It is a charming and fine hotel. Our immediate needs accommodated. I become concerned about how I will pay for the hotel and manage meals until the possibility of the next flight.

With considerable effort, we connect with the travel insurance folks. They are also unaccustomed to the lack of reliable communications options. Turns out the airline will pay for the hotel however long we are stranded. And they provide meal vouchers for the four best restaurants in the town. Remarkable. The next task is to get the insurance company to issue us air tickets so I am not confronted by my inability to pay in local currency. The bank opens on Monday but I don't know how they would decide to simply give me local money on my word.

To this point the cascading challenges have been a hassle. But with housing and food provided, we are able to turn to the place. Jamestown is a tiny community. The people are hyper-friendly. It is not an exaggeration to say that every last person says hello or good morning to everyone he or she meets. Benches are everywhere to simply sit and relax. Locals say everyone knows everyone else's business. While commonly said, here it is true. My wife is approached regularly on the street and ask if she is the lady from the ship. She had become a celebrity of sorts and was often engaged in conversation – from where, what ship, impressions of the island, etc.

I need to share more about the place. Famous for Napoleon's exile and death on the island, the other attractions are Jacob's ladder, a 700 step climb from town to one of the peaks and fortress above the town. There is also a distillery that is on the "tourist" itinerary. The most popular coffee shop is closed some mornings. There is no supermarket, only ma and pa grocery stores. Three big video rental places. One gas station from what I could tell unattended. Most people have multiple jobs. The "port agent" is also the travel agent, the ticket office person at the airport, and the immigration officer. The deputy constable, is a fire fighter, taxi driver and village historian. There is a library (door locked), court room (rarely used), jail (beautifully painted), two Anglican churches. Christmas lights were hung while we were there. Simple colored bulbs crisscrossing the main street. Christmas trees were displayed on the street. My wife noticed that one was especially cleverly decorated with empty coffee pods. Across the mountainous island there are signs that indicate bus stops but we never did see a bus. Individually owned taxis provide transportation to locals.

The food was really good. Most, apart from fresh fish and some meats, is imported. The supply ship comes once a month from Capetown (five days voyage) with supplies. The whole time we were there we saw one man in a suit and speculated that there was a court session that day. Visitors often come on some sort of government business. Young people typically leave the island for the UK or South Africa. Some return with earnings and build a home in the countryside. The island's population was hurt by Brexit (UK leaving the EU) because funding for

development projects evaporated. Popular food are “toasties.” Evening recreation is either strolling down the main street or reminiscent of 1950s America, putting the whole family in the family car or truck and riding along the road on the seafront. The only view is of what from there looks like the endless sea. A couple of bars advertise entertainment featuring local talent. No headliners here.

In my moments when I could think like a political science professor, I heard and observed that the population down to the very last individual is tolerant of his fellow man in spite of the universe of heritages, races, status. I looked for evidence that these were more than just words. And I found it consistently. The islanders perhaps because of their isolation have come to recognize that each contributes, each is worthy of respect, and that the community is strongest with that as the core value. Life is more pleasant and livable when tolerance prevails.

Napoleon died on the island and after some years was shipped back to France. We were able to leave the island on that next Tuesday flight that actually did make it – to the applause of those in the airport (staff and passengers). Naturally, eager to get home and disappointed at having missed visits to Namibian ports, there was something very special about our unplanned visit to St. Helena Island. My wife reflected on her experience. She is fine, healthy and as intrigued as I am with St. Helena islanders. But she is convinced that a hospital, even one with little traffic, should have internet service. We have arranged to pay for the creation and maintenance of service as a thank you for a very special St. Helena experience. Take a minute and find it on a map or globe …