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## Route sa1

# SOUTH AFRICA TO THE CARIBBEAN

VIA ST.HELENA, ASCENSION AND THE BRAZILIAN COAST

**Principal contributors David and Annette Ridout**

Edited by Jane Russell

Readers should be aware that the RCCPF publication South Atlantic Circuit may be helpful when planning voyages in the South Atlantic. Details of that book, and additional relevant web pilot and blog information is listed on the South Atlantic Map on this web site.

For text version, see below

For interactive Google Map version,



click on pin.

To return to text version, press 'back' button on your browser.

### CONTRIBUTORS

The Pilotage Foundation is extremely grateful to the following who have provided this information which is now available for the benefit of others;

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### WEATHER

The SE Trade Winds in the South Atlantic are more constant than the North Atlantic Trades. The average windspeed is 15 knots. During the southern winter the SE winds reach the equator and sometimes even further north. After December (southern summer) they don't extend so far north.

These patterns can be disrupted by 'La Nina'.

Variable winds occur between 25° S and 32° S. But east of the 0° meridian winds tend to be southerly.

Sailing up the Namibian coast puts you into the cold Benguela current and the area is subject to offshore fog.

Tropical storms do not occur in the South Atlantic.

### PASSAGES;

#### SOUTH AFRICA TO ST.HELENA

Simon's Town to St Helena 1720 M

Cape Town to St Helena 1690 M

This has the reputation of being an easy passage. The most favourable conditions are usually November to April, although the passage can be made at any time of the year. SE winds predominate during the summer, which makes it an enjoyable and fast passage. The course to steer is directly for St Helena. Most yachts will

hardly notice the transition from the SE winds of South Africa to the SE trade wind. Later in the year strong NW winds are associated with the fronts which reach the coasts of S Africa. If you are departing at that time of year, watch the forecast carefully. Try to leave immediately after the passage of a front, when the next one appears a long way off, and stay well offshore.

Some yachts choose to call into Namibia at Luderitz and Walvis Bay. Sailing up this coast puts you into the cold Benguela current and the area is subject to offshore fog.

### **GOUGH ISLAND**

An option is to visit Gough Island. Details of which can be found in the publication South Atlantic Circuit under corrections. See publications section on this site.

### **ST. HELENA TO ASCENSION**

702 M

Gentle SE winds should make this an enjoyable passage.

### **ASCENSION TO TOBAGO**

3000 M

The trip from either St Helena or Ascension to the Caribbean is likely to be one of the longest a yacht will do on the average round the world voyage. It is likely to be very light winds. The doldrums are supposed to be at their narrowest just north of the eastern tip of South America, so yachts tend to head NW to this point and then due north until they pick up the easterlies. In very light winds and with confused seas the wear and tear on the rig and sails can be substantial.

GRIB files are reported to be rather inaccurate for this region.

One possibility on this passage is to go into the Brazilian island of Fernando de Noronha, a reportedly beautiful island. However the swell can make the anchorage untenable. N.B. Non E.U. citizens may need a Brazilian Visa to be allowed to stop here. The other possibility is to visit the Brazilian port of Fortaleza or Rio Paraiba.

If you manage to keep sailing WNW, and it would appear that in most non 'Nina' years this can be done, the following should be considered;

The Amazon River spews out waterlogged trees which are encountered for up to 100 M offshore. There are also reportedly many unlit fishing boats near the shore. However, once west of the Amazon estuary you should aim to cut back into the shore as there is a favourable current here. Further north the current is forced NNW by the coast of Trinidad.

### **ST.HELENA TO RIO PARAIBA**

St Helena to Rio Paraiba (Cabedelo) 1,800M

This passage is possible throughout the year. It is generally a straightforward trade wind passage. You can sail a direct course for your desired destination.

### **RIO PARAIBA TO TOBAGO**

Río Paraiba (Cabedelo) to Tobago 1,931M

This passage is possible throughout the year. Venezuela and Trinidad are just outside the hurricane belt. Passages to these destinations can be made at any time of year, though the weather will be hotter and calmer with squalls in the northern summer.

Along the NE coast of S. America the trade wind is generally steady and the current favourable. A direct course can be steered.

Between August and December sail within 50M off the 100m line. This enables you to avoid the Equatorial Counter-current (up to 2kn SE have been reported by yachts) which almost meets the coast at 6°N. This current is not shown on all Pilot charts and routeing software. One yacht has reported staying within 50M of the 100m contour and gaining 4 days on a vessel that took a course less than 50M further to seaward. The rest of the year it is possible to sail further offshore.

The Amazon River spews out waterlogged trees which are encountered for up to 100 M offshore. There are also reportedly many unlit fishing boats near this shore.

However, between August and December you are advised to sail within 50M off the 100m line up the NE coast of South America. This enables you to avoid the Equatorial Counter-current which almost meets the coast at 6°N. The rest of the year it is possible to sail further offshore.

Keep a lookout for oil platforms over the continental shelf.

## HARBOURS AND ANCHORAGES

### SOUTH AFRICA

**Simon's Town** Simon's Town is a charming town. It is only a short train journey or drive into the capital. Car hire is not expensive. The False Bay Yacht Club is attached to the marina in Simon's Town. It is very friendly and helpful and has a brochure of information about everything for visitors. They make foreign cruisers welcome and they are extending the marina and laying more moorings. Royal Cape Yacht Club may be fully subscribed. There are some places in the Elliott Basin nearby. Most places fill up quickly during the season, so it pays to think ahead.

**Customs and Immigration:** Check in with immigration and customs in Cape Town (a one hour train journey away, less than an hour by car). South Africa is changing their rules and regulations. You will have to ask the latest rules, which probably will differ from port to port.

**Facilities:** There are several repair facilities available here or in Cape Town (a one hour train journey away, less than an hour by car). Some food shopping in the town though to get to the main super markets you will need to go by train or car. There is a laundry in town and internet cafes and post office.

**Cape Town** Cape Town is an excellent jumping off point for crossing the Atlantic to Brazil or to the Caribbean.

**Facilities;** The facilities and welcome for visiting yachts at the Royal Cape YC are first rate. Every sort of repair or yacht gear is available in Cape Town and the provisioning is excellent.

### ST. HELENA

**Jamestown** This is a very enjoyable stop. At the top of the town there is a tourist information office where you can find out about touring the island. A stay of a week is recommended, especially for those who like walking. The hinterland is lush and green with many good walks. You can visit the tomb of Napoleon.

**Anchorage;** C-MAP charts are reported to be accurate. The anchorage may be fairly rolly. There is a compulsory 'on demand' launch service to take crews ashore. There is no space to put dinghies ashore.

**Formalities;** Customs, Immigration and the Harbour Office are all in the main street just a few minutes walk from the landing quay. N.B. St. Helena and Ascension Policy of Insurance; You must have valid health insurance. If you don't have it, you must buy insurance on arrival, but it is quite expensive.

**Facilities;** One of your first stops in town should be to Anne's restaurant/bar which is situated on the left hand side set back in a lush garden. Anne is of great help to visiting yachts. She provides a laundry service. Diesel is available, but needs to be carried in cans from a garage. this requires a taxi trip.

There is very limited fresh food available. Stock up on fresh food before leaving South Africa.

N.B. St Helena bank notes may not be exchangeable currency in other countries. So don't exchange more than you need for your stay.

### ASCENSION ISLAND

The beach at the anchorage should be visited at night because it is the nesting place of many giant turtles. Watching these leviathans clamber ashore, dig a huge hole, lay many eggs, fill in the hole and then somehow make it back to the sea is an awesome and moving spectacle. The other 'must do' activity is to climb to the top of Green Mountain past the original 19th century water collectors. Diving and snorkeling are excellent and there are huge numbers of fish as there is no fishing industry at all here.

**Anchorage;** C-MAP charts are reported to be accurate. The anchorage is much less rolly than St Helena, but there are various unlit hazards. A night time entry is **not** recommended. Anchor off the beach to the east of the local boats in Clarence Bay. This is the only place permitted.

**Formalities;** Customs and Immigration are near the landing steps. N.B. St. Helena and Ascension Policy of Insurance; You must have valid health insurance. If you don't have it, you must buy insurance on arrival, but it is quite expensive.

**Facilities;** Dinghy ashore with cans for water and diesel. Diesel is available from a garage with limited opening times, some distance inland. There is water on the quay. There is very limited fresh food available except at the American base where fresh stuffs are flown in every few days. Stock up on fresh food before leaving South Africa.

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**Some unedited notes and paragraphs by David and Annette Ridout.**  
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**PASSAGE NOTES**

The first thing to realise about this passage is that it is a lot longer than one tends to think. Approximately 1700M to St Helena, another 700M to Ascension and over 3000M to Tobago.

It is known to be one of the easier passages on a yacht's trip around the world. It was not for us and so my advice may well be tainted but perhaps that is better than just giving the usual version of this trip.

South Africa to St Helena was exactly as expected and after the usual slow start we experienced winds from the SE. Not very steady but sufficient to make it an enjoyable and reasonably fast time. Some of our friends called into Namibia, Luderitz and/or Walvis Bay. No difficulties were experienced and it is one way of seeing this fascinating country. We went up there by car from South Africa and having visited the above anchorages by land I am glad we did it this way as they are neither attractive nor particularly snug. Sailing up the coast puts one in the decidedly cold Benguela current and subject to offshore fog.



**1. St Helena steps, a must-climb task!**



**2. Town of St James and the anchorage in St Helena. Visitors anchor to the right (eastern side) of the anchorage as seen in the picture.**

St Helena is a very enjoyable stop. The anchorage proved to be fairly rolly but liveable with. There is a launch service to take crews ashore that runs on demand. There being no space to put dinghies ashore the use of this service is compulsory. Customs, Immigration and Harbour office are all in the main street just a few minutes walk from the landing quay.



**3. The famous landing steps. Can be tricky in rough weather (see grab ropes!)**

One of the first stops in town will be to Anne's restaurant/bar which is situated on the left hand side set back in a lush garden. She is of great help to yachties. Will do washing for you. Diesel is also available but must be carried in cans from a garage so the service of a taxi is necessary.



#### **4. Anne's bar restaurant**

One small point is that on returning home to the UK we found no bank would change our St Helena pound notes. In this respect they are not like Channel Island ones. Get rid of them before you leave. At the top of the town there is a tourist information office, amazing as there are very few tourists! Here all will be revealed as to touring this island.



#### **5. Napoleon's house, now French territory**

A stay of a week is recommended, especially for those who like walking. The hinterland being of a lush green nature with many walks as well as the houses and tomb of Napoleon to visit.

Some yachts went from here to South America. Some went directly to the Caribbean and a few of us went to Ascension Island. This is a trip of 700nm and was carried out with just enough wind to make it enjoyable. It was a good decision and we much enjoyed our visit. The anchorage was much less roilly than St Helena but there are various unlit hazards and whereas we had successfully anchored at night on arrival at St Helena, albeit with a cloudless sky and a full moon, we held off Ascension and in the morning were very glad we had done so. Anchor off the beach to the east of the local boats in Clarence Bay (only place permitted).



**6. Clarence Bay beach taken from the anchorage, Ascension Island. Green mountain in the background.**

Customs and Immigration are near the landing steps and formalities were quickly and helpfully done. This beach should be visited at night because it is the nesting place of many giant turtles. Watching these leviathans clamber ashore, dig a huge hole, lay many eggs, fill in the hole and then somehow make it back to the sea is a not to be missed experience. The other 'must do' activity is to climb to the top of Green Mountain past the original 19<sup>th</sup> century water collectors. Diving and snorkeling is excellent and there are huge numbers of fish as there is no fishing industry at all here.

Diesel was available but from a garage with limited opening times and some way away. Locals helpful and friendly. One uses ones own dinghy to get ashore and there is water on the quay.

I will mention the subject of food stores here. To our surprise we were unable to get very much fresh food of any quality on St Helena and even less on Ascension. The only way to have a salad on the latter was to go to the American base. They let visitors do this. They flew in fresh veg every two days but would not sell any to take away. This should be considered and all possible fresh food should be purchased in South Africa. The eating of our last tomato and last apple were sad occasions, especially as we still had over two weeks at sea in front of us when we did this.

The trip from either St Helena or Ascension to the Caribbean is likely to be one of the longest a yacht will do on the average round the world voyage. For us it was exactly the same distance as Galapagos to Marquesas. Namely just over 3000nm. It did however take us five days longer and was much more of an effort. We set off using the chart of a friend who had gone this way in the '90s and also knowing the details of another friend who had done it the year before us. Our vessel is considerably faster than both of these yachts. They had both gone pretty well directly.



## 7. Windless ocean in the Doldrums

The doldrums are supposed to be at their narrowest just north of the eastern tip of South America and both of our friends had experienced no really slow days. We were to experience day after day of light winds from astern. The following comes from the appendix to the log of our voyage.

*On the last leg we had eight days where the miles sailed were fewer than 120 and in three cases fewer than 100 and one case just 60. This may not sound a problem when compared with the averages that used to be done by yachts. It should however be seen against the fact that when there is a sailing breeze that holds the sails steady in average ocean conditions Nordlys will be doing at least six knots. On all other passages we have done there have only been three occasions when the daily run has been below 120 and only a handful of occasions when it has been under 145. On this leg the result was a lot of sail and rig damage. Two of our working sails, the genoa and the reacher needed professional care when we got to Trinidad. More care than they had needed in over 50,000 miles of use. The lesson to be learnt as far as I am concerned is that modern yachts with their easily driven hulls that very quickly reach a speed where there is very little wind over the sails when going downwind are a problem in these conditions. I now understand why so many resort to the engine much earlier than I would do. When we crossed the Pacific we met many experienced yachtsmen who carried large quantities of diesel. The year we did this it was unnecessary but I now understand why they did it. If I was going world cruising again I would carry much more diesel and less water. In our case we have 280ltrs of diesel in tanks and 480ltrs of water and a watermaker. We do also usually carry 100ltrs of diesel in cans on deck. I say all this not because I am impatient and need to be going fast. I do however need to be in a situation where I am not watching expensive sails do horrible things to themselves. I am not experienced in very modern very light yachts that tend to never sail on a run but reach at many degrees off the course but at huge speeds. I can give no advice if such a vessel is being sailed. All I can say is that a friend just ahead of us was in such a vessel and he still found things very trying. Another much heavier very traditional yacht actually seemed to suffer less than the rest of us. Interesting. Another thought is that if we had not had a radio to pick up the GRIB files and had not known two others who had done the direct route we would have stuck to my instinct. Namely sailed North West until the wind went too light. Then sail/motor north until it arrived. We ended up doing this after hanging on to a westerly course for too long and using too much diesel. The GRIBS showed no wind until well over 300nm north of the equator. In reality we got into the easterlies at the equator. Modern technology can cause more heart ache than it saves on occasions. We had noticed that the GRIBs were very poor as we approached the equator in the Indian Ocean. They were even more inaccurate in the Atlantic.*

One possibility on this passage is to go into the Brazilian island of Fernando de Noronha. Many yachts will have decided to do this anyway to see the apparent beauty of the place. However this was not an option for us. Two yachts did go there. One was unable to get ashore due to the swell and the other after returning from ashore had the whole of his stern dinghy platform wrenched off by said swell. This platform was of considerable strength the vessel concerned being a Danish 56 foot X yacht. It should also be noted that EU nationals do not need a visa to visit any of Brazil but American nationals and many others do. This was enforced. The other possibility is to visit the port of Fortaleza. In slight desperation we considered this but a

long detailed email from our son spoke of a yacht club closed due to crime and yacht moorings that suffered from much movement as well as vandalism.

If you manage to keep going WNW, and it would appear that in most years this can be done, then the following should be considered. The Amazon River spews out waterlogged trees which are encountered for up to 100nm offshore and that there are apparently many unlit and irrational fishing boats near the shore. However when west of the Amazon estuary it is desirable to cut back to near the shore as there is a favourable current here. We were several hundred miles offshore and although by now in good winds we had three days of nearly three knots of current against us. By the time it was with us the current was being forced NNW by the coast of Trinidad and so we carried 20 degrees of starboard drift as we approached Tobago. We were able to radio this information to a yacht astern and he saved many hours at sea by acting accordingly.

I realise that this all may sound a bit off putting and perhaps I should point out that we very much enjoyed our visits to St Helena and Ascension and in many years I am sure the whole trip would have been enjoyable. It was apparently a La Nina year in 2008.

All the crews in our 'village' of yachts were very experienced and all suffered as we did. None of us really believed the winds would be this light. 8/10 knots from dead astern is a killer for modern yachts when the ocean has a large and often confused swell. In these circumstances a large supply of diesel is a welcome addition to ones arsenal. Since returning we have met a sailor of huge experience who did exactly the same trip as us and took over 60 sailing days compared with our 35. He said with a wry smile that he was very thin when he arrived in Tobago and his sails were put in the garbage bin.

### **Charts**

I have not put in the exact lat and long of our anchorages as I do not want to be responsible for others but I can say that in both St Helena and Ascension Cmap electronic charts were very accurate.

More details of this and other adventures can be found on <http://blog.mailasail.com/nordlys>.

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