

# Ascension Island

**By Adam Dawson, January 2022**

Leafing through last December's "Strider", I came across Simon Pipe's excellent article on the island of St Helena. I was immediately reminded of my own Ocean Walk - a trip I made to Ascension Island back in 2012.

Like St Helena, Ascension is a tiny dot of a place, a lonely British Overseas Territory, located just south of the equator and right in the middle of the Atlantic. In fact St Helena is the nearest neighbour, a "mere" 1300 km / 800 miles away. The island is just 10 km across, so a bit of a strange destination for a long distance walker I have to admit. Simon, in his article, calls it a "truly weird place" and I have to agree that it is.

Many readers will probably be asking themselves what on earth I was doing there. I suppose I've always been fascinated by islands, and in my book the more isolated the better. But the interesting thing about Ascension is that although it's over 7000 km from the UK, more or less due south, it is (or was - I'll come to that later) very easy to get to.

Ascension has no permanent population, but there's a big, transient, military presence attached to the huge airstrip which is almost as long as the island is wide. It's jointly used by the RAF and the USAF and was extended in the 1980s so it could act as an emergency landing site for the Space Shuttle. The runway and the access it affords to the island does occasionally cause Ascension to make the news headlines, but not always for the happiest of reasons. Back in the 1980s it briefly rose to prominence as a staging point for military flights during the Falklands conflict. Then as recently as last year it was mooted by the Home Office as a potential holding site for refugees coming to the UK.

But most relevant to visitors, it hit the headlines again in 2017 when potholes were discovered in the runway, making it unsafe for heavy jets to land there. The inevitable argument between the RAF and USAF ensued about who should pay to repair it and as a result, although it was supposed to reopen in 2022, it remains out of commission to large aircraft with no clear date for it to be fixed. Flights to the Falklands nowadays go via Cape Verde.

So it is fortunate that I chose to visit in April 2012, well before these problems arose. At the time, a twice weekly RAF flight departed from Brize Norton to Mount Pleasant, in the Falklands, conveniently putting down in Ascension to refuel. Although primarily a military flight, any spare seats could be bought by civilians like me. In due course, a gap arose in my work and domestic commitments so I seized the opportunity, packed my bags and headed south along with several hundred heavyweight squaddies (I was the only passenger on the flight with a neck, I think).

After a surprisingly comfortable overnight flight, I disembarked into the hot sunshine of a tropical morning. It's a dislocating experience getting off the plane onto the minibus that takes you to the only hotel on the Island – the Obsidian Hotel (now sadly closed) in the capital town of Georgetown. Georgetown, by the way, isn't so much a "town" as a tiny settlement with only one general store, a Sue Ryder charity shop (of all things) and a bar. Feral donkeys roam the streets. The roads are good, you drive on the left, and the road signs are all in mph. It's dislocating because you feel like you are in Cornwall – except that you're sitting on the edge of an 850m / 2800ft high dormant volcano (it last erupted in the sixteenth century) and a near-vertical equatorial sun beats down overhead.

My purpose for visiting – aside from general curiosity – was to explore the island on foot and by bike. I brought my “Brompton” folding bike with me, and it proved to be an excellent way of getting around on the decent network of military roads. Enthusiastic walkers like me are lucky in that military personnel stationed on the island used their spare time to place a series of “letterboxes” at strategic locations around the island. If you are (or were) a geo-cacher, you will immediately recognise what these letterboxes are – small boxes containing a log-book for you to sign and sometimes even a rubber stamp you can use to create your own record of your visit.

The letterboxes have their origins in maritime history – initially they really were “letterboxes” and were used to deposit letters for collection by passing ships to deliver to all four corners of the globe. Today, the network has been extended and there were 22 when I visited but the number has I think grown to around 30 more recently. Just like geocaches, the exact location of the letterboxes isn’t published, but fortunately there is a guide book which gives you directions approximately how to find them. It’s out of print in the UK but at the time I went, I was able to pick up a copy at the Georgetown museum.

In the course of my week’s stay, I managed to “collect” about fifteen of the letterboxes. But just because the island is small, you shouldn’t imagine that the walking is boring, or even particularly easy. The terrain is varied, ranging from arid desert on the coastal plains, to tropical rainforest on the peak of Green Mountain, the central volcano. The letterbox guide provides somewhat laconic directions like “make your way steadily across the plain to the mountain on the far side” then depositing you in front of a lava field about a thousand meters wide strewn with tumbled blocks of basalt about three meters high. It’s potentially ankle-breaking stuff and there is no mobile phone signal and no mountain rescue service to call even if there was, so you have to take care. Luckily, I struck up a friendship with the expat running the museum, so he and I were able to do some exploring together – safety in numbers and all that.

The walking was varied and absolutely fascinating. Perhaps one of the most memorable excursions was to the east of the island, and an ascent of White Horse hill. It’s quite tricky to find your way up the hill and even harder to get back down again. There’s only one safe route and it’s not easy to find where the way down starts when you are sitting on the top. Fortunately, I had recorded my route up on the excellent (and now sadly defunct) ViewRanger app on my phone, so was able safely to retrace my steps back down again. But if I’d left the summit a couple of meters to the right or left and I might well have fallen off a precipice. The day wasn’t complete yet though, as after I’d descended, I followed the notorious “Goat Path” across the middle of the White Horse cliff and round to the Letterbox peninsula. It’s a wild and lonely place out there, literally at the edge of the world, and nobody around. Just the nesting boobies and swooping fairy terns to keep you company.

A week wasn’t really long enough to do justice to the island and all its curiosities. I could write more about even the short visit I made, but I’ll stop here. If you ever fancied a trip to somewhere that will be unlike anywhere you’ve ever visited before – or are ever likely to go again – I’d highly recommend it. I meant to go back myself one day, but never got around to it before the runway closed. So all of us restless travellers will just have to wait until RAF and USAF settle their differences and get the man with the spare bit of left-over tarmac to fix the holes in the runway. Until that happy day, we will just have to stay earthbound and daydream.

***Photos on next three pages***



The first “letterbox” I visited – along the coast near the BBC power station (yes, bizarrely, the BBC World Service relay station has a generator which provides most of Ascension’s electricity)



This is the point where the guidebook advises you to “make your way carefully across the plain to the hill on the far side”





My “Brompton” on the way down to the Broken Tooth crater

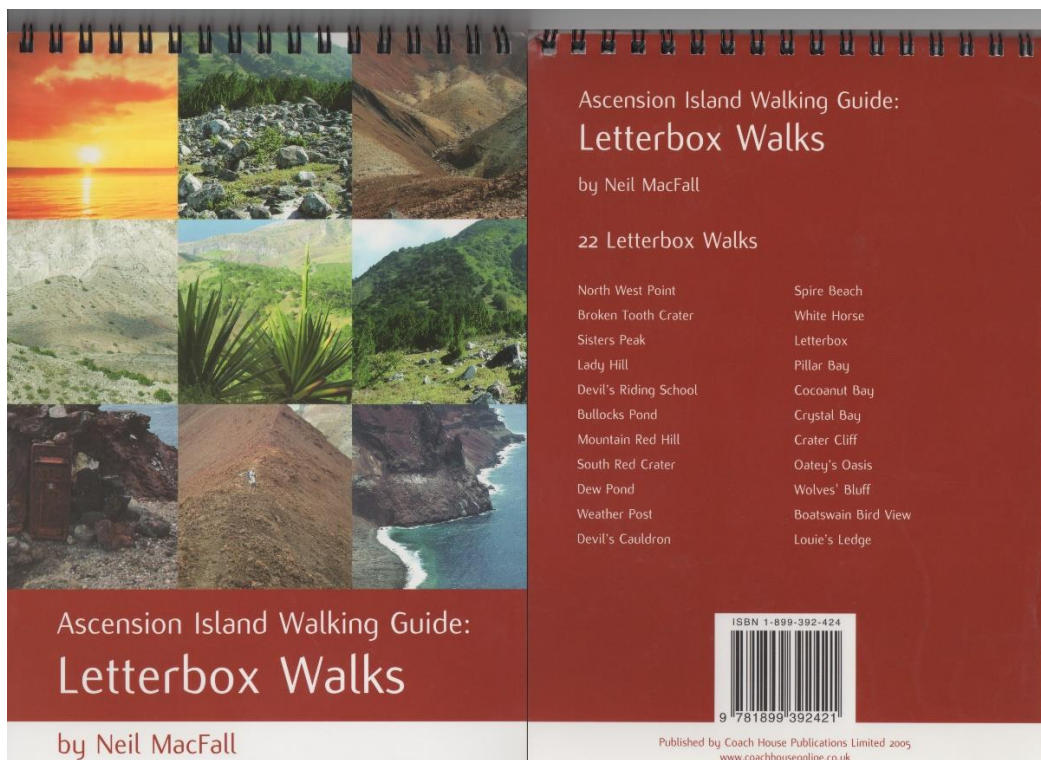


The infamous “Goat Path” which cuts its way directly across the vertiginous slopes of White Horse hill





Nesting turtles on the beach are a source of fascination to visiting zoologists



The letterbox guide – out of print and hard to come by in the UK. I bought mine at the museum in Georgetown