



UNIVERSITY of STRATHCLYDE  
CENTRE FOR  
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW  
AND GOVERNANCE



UNIVERSITY  
of Prince Edward  
ISLAND



# COVID-19 Island Insights Series

No. 20, May 2021

## St Helena

Kamar Tanyan and Nicole Shamier

The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

For more information on SCELG see  
<https://www.strath.ac.uk/scelg>

For more information about the IIS see  
<http://islandstudies.com/>

For further information about Island Innovation see  
<https://www.islandinnovation.co/>

Suggested citation: K. Tanyan and N. Shamier, *St Helena, COVID-19 Island Insight Series, no 20, May 2021*, University of Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance, University of Prince Edward Island Institute of Island Studies and Island Innovation.

ISSN 2563-6944

## St Helena Island - South Atlantic Ocean

Population of 4,527<sup>1</sup>

Size= 121 km<sup>2</sup>

St Helena is a British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic Ocean, one of the safest and most remote islands in the world boasting a pristine terrestrial and marine environment. St Helena island, until October 2017, was accessible only by sea, via a five day boat trip from South Africa, and is now accessible by air.

### COVID-19 data and timeline

Number of community cases:0. St Helena island remains free from COVID-19 confirmed or suspected cases in the community.

Number of fatalities:0

Schools have remained open since the beginning of the pandemic.

Travel restrictions enacted on 21 March and have been constantly reviewed to limit travel. Travel restrictions were in place limiting to returning residents between Jan 2021 to March 2021. Tourists allowed to travel before Jan 2021 and after Apr 2021, but subject to 14 days quarantine and testing before entry.

Weekly flights to South Africa have been temporarily suspended. Flights to UK via Accra have been chartered, approximately every 5 weeks.

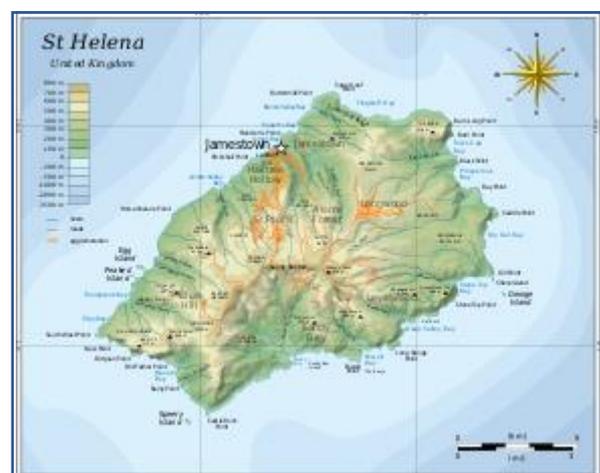
AstraZeneca vaccinations provided to over 95% of the adult population.

### Dr Kamar Tanyan

Dr. Kamar Tanyan is the Senior Medical Officer of St Helena Government. She is a Public Health specialist and holder of a Master's degree in Disaster Medicine.

### Nicole Shamier

Nicole Shamier is the Chief Economist of St Helena Government. She holds a Master's degree in economics.



St Helena<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *St Helena Statistics, as of Jan 2021*

<sup>2</sup> Source [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Helena](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Helena)

## **An overview of St Helena: Remoteness, vulnerability and tourism**

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St Helena recently declared itself as a Small Island Developing State, in an attempt to increase its ability to be involved in development strategies and increase its resilience on the international stage. St Helena is known to be one of the most remote islands in the world. The airport opening in October 2017 provided a better accessibility to the island that the government turned into a strategy to support small businesses and promote tourism to the island.

St Helena is a remote island with limited resources; it hosts an ageing population with a high prevalence of non-communicable diseases and associated risk factors.

The vulnerability of the island to COVID-19 was at the center of planning of the prevention stage of the island strategy, when COVID-19 pandemic first started. Gaps in our island readiness to respond to the threat were identified and measures were quickly taken to tackle them.

As the situation was changing at a fast pace around the world, St Helena put restrictions on travel from high-risk countries (China, Hong Kong and later on Italy) to limit the risk of getting the virus to the island while building the preparedness capacity. Cruise ships were restricted from coming ashore but humanitarian support to people onboard vessels stayed unchanged. Quarantine for 14 days for all arrivals was first introduced in March 2021. Since then, the entry requirements have changed, reacting to the news from the world. The Island implements a risk-based approach to deciding its entry measures.

The community of St Helena, however, is relatively risk averse, and the Health Service has designed measures to match community sentiment.

## **St Helena Island preparedness plan**

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St Helena has one general hospital that provides primary and secondary level of healthcare, with 2 Intensive Care unit (ICU) beds and a very small healthcare team. There also is an established referral system to South Africa for medical cases at the tertiary healthcare level. Initially, there was no testing capacity on St Helena to diagnose cases and no facility to isolate or treat positive cases. The St Helena Government rapidly and timely identified the risks to the island and immediately started working on a preparedness and response Plan. An emergency crisis command system, called the Incident Emergency Group (IEG) was created, including as members the island Executive Council. A mandatory 14 day quarantine period was established for all arrivals and a pledge was made by the UK government for additional funding to respond to the threat.

There were several stages to the Plan. Preventing the virus from entering the community was the first stage, which used tests and quarantine measures (which at the time of writing is 14 days), as well as suspension of weekly flight services and a short-term suspension of tourist visitors (January 21- March 21 when cases in the UK were very high).

Between March and July 2020, two existing facilities were repurposed and commissioned to be a quarantine site and COVID-19 treatment center. The government called on the private sector and individuals to provide construction materials and a workforce, and the construction work was completed in a record time of four weeks, demonstrating a significant level of community resilience and engagement. The design and implementation of the quarantine and treatment facilities were in accordance with Public Health England and World Health Organization standards. Between July 2020 and January 2021, the 50 bed quarantine centre was the only place where arrivals from the UK could quarantine. However, as of January 2021, home quarantine was allowed for all arrivals, as long as their home passed certain tests

by a responsible officer. Arrivals from St Helena's nearest Island, Ascension, which has also been COVID-19 free, were allowed to quarantine at home from October 2020, and will not require quarantine at all from May 2021 so long as Ascension's community stays COVID-19 free.

There is also a contact tracing policy, a Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) policy, and business continuity plans drawn up to ensure quick transition to social distancing and other community measures should an outbreak occur.

The preparedness plan is outlined by:

- 1- Creation of Incident Emergency Group that included the island Executive Council and technical advisors;
- 2- an expansion of the healthcare team to improve the existing numbers and skill mix;
- 3- creating a remote medicine support from UK specialists in related fields to support local teams in their management of the new disease;
- 4- acquiring testing kits and strengthening the testing capacity of the only laboratory on island;
- 5- procuring personal protective equipment for healthcare and essential workers;
- 6- ordering an oxygen plant to equip the dedicated COVID-19 treatment facility;
- 7- creating a contact tracing cell that involved multidisciplinary team including local police;
- 8- establishing an alternative medical referral pathway to the UK;
- 9- maintaining a sustainable supply chain for food, medicine and essential items.

The AstraZeneca vaccine was provided to St Helena in 2021 and by the end of April over 95% of the adult population have had two doses of the vaccine.

## **COVID-19 threat to St Helena Island**

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Until vaccines were administered, the local community and healthcare system felt very vulnerable considering the aging population, the limited health resources and the high prevalence of chronic health conditions.

In early March, there was a suspected imported case of COVID-19 and a possible spread to another community member was considered. Contact tracing was immediately activated and a number of individuals were asked to quarantine, mainly due to an inability to test the suspected case. The St Helena Government issued a recommendation to adhere to enhanced social distancing measures and recommended some businesses close to avoid large gatherings. It is worth noting the high level of cooperation by the public and adherence to the government directives to stay at and work from home. The suspected case was found not to be a COVID-19 case. However, the exercise was positive as provided the island a practice run in how to deal with an outbreak.

Regular weekly flights from South Africa (SA) to St Helena were suspended on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2020 when South African authorities entered a level 5 national lockdown. Nationals of St Helena were stranded in SA and could not return home for several weeks. Referral of medical cases was suspended, and this suspension is still in place. Referral by air ambulance for extreme emergencies was not affected by the South African lockdown but proved to be very challenging within COVID-19 context.

Cargo, food and medical supplies from SA and the UK remained possible with some delays caused by the restrictions imposed in these countries. This highlighted again St Helena's vulnerability. However, as a mark of St Helena's resilience, it has become accustomed to having shortages, St Helena's merchants tend to buy in bulk and use warehouses to store their stock to avoid shortage situations. This has the advantage of smoothing local inflation when there are price shocks internationally.

Due to these significant limitations of the island connection with the outside world, charter flights were scheduled. This included a repatriation flight from South Africa to bring back nationals and facilitate return to the island of essential workers as well as newly recruited healthcare workers. These flights, executed in May, also brought in medical supplies and equipment. Since April 2021, tourists have once again been allowed to enter St Helena, as long as they complete the 14 day quarantine and do the necessary testing. Flights to the UK via Accra now occur every 5 weeks which allow access to and from the island.

### **Key socioeconomic pressures during COVID-19**

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The tourism sector is badly affected by global travel restrictions and quarantine rules. The government financial support to owners of holiday houses, restaurants, bars and hotels is the main buffer to such economic stress.

Most tourists who visit the island are usually from South African and European countries. The arrival numbers in the December 2020 - March 2021 peak season were badly hit. Visitors to St Helena ranged from a low of 28 in a month (off peak) to a high of 108 in a month (December peak), most of which were returning St Helenians, usually non-resident, travelling to see friends and family. This compared to 166 (off peak) 478 (peak) in the same months a year previous. A number of schemes were put in place to support the sector and workers including 'hardship support for impacted sectors'.

St Helena's economy relies heavily on aid from the UK Government. Whilst its biggest export, tourism, (worth around £5m) has suffered, St Helena was able to manage due to the approximate £30m annual aid budget from the UK Government. Its other biggest exports, coffee and fish, were not affected substantially by COVID-19. A reduction in global fuel prices, and a strong Pound compared to the Rand also allowed St Helena to keep inflation low.

### **Post COVID-19 recovery and the Sustainable Development Goals**

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St Helena is considering safe ways to return to the new normal by exploring air bridges with COVID-19-free islands and by developing new concepts of tourism bubbles within quarantine corridors. Furthermore, St Helena continues to monitor the worldwide country risk using statistics and a Red, Amber, Green and Gold country classification system with regards to prevalence. The local government follows closely evidence related to risk reduction by mitigation measures. Once the world prevalence rates start to fall, it will be necessary to review again the test and quarantine measures and change entry requirements without actually reducing the per arrival risk of transmission.

Furthermore, the UK Crown awarded the following in recognition of achievement related to COVID-19 response:

- Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) to Adam Williams, Captain of the MV Helena for keeping the supply ship calling the Island, managing a crew with very little shore leave.
- British Empire Medal (BEM) to Rhys Hobbs, St Helena Government Project Manager, for leading a team to complete the quarantine facility within a time sensitive 6 weeks, with few resources to call on.

St Helena has been privileged to observe the unfolding and impact of the pandemic around the world; especially on islands; this allowed the island to evaluate approaches taken by similar societies to return to a new normality and select what is applicable to the local context.

## Useful Sources

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- Visit the COVID-19 resource centre at <https://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/coronavirus-covid-19/>

### Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

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| #1. Malta. November 2020               |  |
| #2. Egadi Islands. November 2020       | #11. Aotearoa New Zealand. February 2021   |
| #3. Grenada. November 2020             | #12. Hawai'i. February 2021                |
| #4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020 | #13. Barbados. March 2021                  |
| #5. Shetland Islands. November 2020    | #14. Jamaica. March 2021                   |
| #6. Åland Islands. November 2020       | #15. Newfoundland and Labrador. March 2021 |
| #7. Guam. December 2020                | #16. Prince Edward Island. March 2021      |
| #8. Okinawa Islands. December 2020     | #17. Iceland. March 2021                   |
| #9. Mauritius. February 2021           | #18. Lesvos. April 2021                    |
| #10. Seychelles. February 2021         | #19. Croatian Islands. April 2021          |



With thanks to the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF), creators of the *COVID-19 Rural Insights Series*, for kindly giving us permission to use "Insights Series" as part of our series name