

A CRUISE TO SOME LITTLE-KNOWN BRAZILIAN ATLANTIC ISLANDS:



(1) FERNANDO DE NORONHA AND (2) ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL ROCKS

by Ted Cookson

In March 2005 I sailed on the 382-passenger Silversea cruise ship MV Silver Shadow from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to Lisbon, Portugal. In the Western Hemisphere my cruise ship was to call at the ports of Salvador and Natal in northeastern Brazil as well as the small Brazilian archipelago of Fernando de Noronha, which lies at latitude 3.85 S. and longitude 32.42 W., some 214 miles (345 km) off the coast of Brazil. In the Eastern Hemisphere my repositioning cruise was also to include calls at the following ports: Dakar, Senegal; Tenerife, Canary Islands; and Funchal, Madeira.

For the first six days the Silver Shadow kept to the published cruise itinerary. But on March 13 at 7 a.m. when the ship arrived at Fernando de Noronha we encountered a six-foot (two-meter) north-easterly swell.

The smaller Hapag-Lloyd cruise ship MV Bremen, which had been lying at anchor off Fernando de Noronha since the previous day, was able to disembark its passengers onto the island on the morning of March 13 via the fleet of inflatable Zodiacs which it carries on board.

Unfortunately, however, the six-foot (two-meter) swell was sufficient to prevent Silver Shadow passengers from disembarking safely into the ship's tenders or onto a trawler. Many of the ship's 284 passengers (the vessel was only three-quarters full) had signed up for three-hour "Archipelago by Trawler" excursions that were to have included an opportunity for swimming. These tours had to be cancelled.

Rather than commencing disembarkation procedures, the Silver Shadow instead made a two-hour counter-clockwise circumnavigation of the island. Captain Emanuele Chiesa also announced that, in consolation, he would deviate from the planned transatlantic route in order to view the seldom-visited mid-Atlantic rocks of St. Peter and St. Paul at about 9 a.m. on the morning of March 14.

Of course most passengers were disappointed not to be able to set foot on Fernando de Noronha. However, I had already flown to Fernando de Noronha in February 2001 prior to a previous cruise I had taken on MV Silver Shadow from Rio de Janeiro on Cape Town via Ascension and St.

Helena in March 2001. So I was not as disturbed as were the other passengers; and, in fact, I welcomed the opportunity to make a second visit to Fernando de Noronha for a chance to soil by and photograph St. Peter and St. Paul Rocks.

Originally called Ilha da Quaresma, or Lent Island, Fernando de Noronha was probably first sighted by the Portuguese expedition to Brazil led by Fernao de Loronha in 1501-1502. However, as Amerigo Vespucci, who traveled to Brazil with a Portuguese expedition in 1503, was the first person to describe the archipelago, he is often credited with its discovery.

Between 1534 and 1737 Fernando de Noronha changed hands between the English, French, Dutch and Portuguese a number of times. Finally in about 1770 Vila das Remedias, the first permanent Portuguese settlement, was established. Brazil's independence in the nineteenth century had little impact on the archipelago. In the first half of the twentieth century the English, the French and the Italians all had some involvement with the island in connection with transatlantic cable communications. The island also served as a prison for many years.

The U. S. built an airfield on Fernando de Noronha during World War II. This was one of a chain of airfields which stretched from Florida all the way to Egypt via South America and Central Africa. Aircraft were flown from the U. S. to North Africa by this circuitous route in order to support the Allied war effort. U. S. troops remained on the island from 1942 to 1945. Later, NASA maintained a missile tracking station there from 1957 to 1962.

Of the 21 islands in the Fernando de Noronha Archipelago, which is of volcanic origin, only the main island is inhabited. The total land area of the archipelago is 10 square miles (26 square km); and the highest peak, Morro do Pico, reaches 1,053 feet (321 meters). There is a permanent population of about 1,300. The few historical sites of interest to the tourist include a Portuguese-built fort and a church in the hamlet of Vila das Remedias. Nowadays there is daily air service to Fernando de Noronha (airport code FEN) from Recife, Brazil via Boeing 737 jet.

During the five centuries since its discovery, some 95% of Fernando de Noronha's native vegetation and trees was destroyed. The marine national park which was declared in 1989 set aside about 70% of the archipelago as a sanctuary. Today Fernando de Noronha is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Due to the existence of the marine national park, cruise ships such as Silver Shadow now can only lie at anchor off the northwest coast of the island.

No more than 480 tourists are allowed on the island at any one time. An environmental preservation tax is imposed on island visitors by the state government. Interestingly, this tax escalates the longer one remains on the island!

