

# The busiest place you've never seen

What life looks like on the world's most remote inhabited island

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*Autoplay video?* ✓

SCROLL





Photographer Julia Gunther and writer-filmmaker Nick Schönfeld have made multiple trips to Tristan da Cunha since 2023 to chronicle the rhythms of daily life. During their time there, NPR published their story “**The Okalolies of Old Year’s Night,**” which looked at the island’s unique New Year’s Eve tradition. They returned in 2025 to continue their work and help lead the expansion of the island’s community archive.


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You'd be forgiven for thinking that life on Tristan da Cunha is quiet: a hammock-strung-between-two-coconut-palms kind of existence, somewhere in the shimmering blue Pacific. It is anything but.

Tristan da Cunha is a rugged Scottish highland dropped into the middle of the South Atlantic. Towering volcanic cliffs rise from the sea. There are no palm trees or white sandy beaches here; instead, you'll find potato fields, fierce winds and plenty of activity.

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Part of one of 14 British overseas territories, Tristan lies roughly halfway between South Africa and South America, over 1,500 miles from its nearest inhabited neighbor. Just 221 people live here — descendants of Dutch, American, English, St. Helenian, South African, Scottish and Italian sailors, settlers and shipwreck survivors who found refuge on the once-uninhabited island between the early 19th and early 20th centuries — in a single village called Edinburgh of the Seven Seas, the island's only settlement.

A topographic map of Tristan da Cunha island pointing out Edinburgh of the Seven Seas

## Shared self-reliance

Extreme isolation has shaped every part of life on Tristan. With no airport and only a handful of ships visiting every year, residents say they rely largely on themselves — and each other — to keep life on the island running.

With so few residents, there are simply too few people for all the jobs that need doing. When someone is off island or unwell, others have to fill in, whether that means covering shifts, running errands or slaughtering a cow. The limited labor pool means skills are shared and tasks are stretched across families, making daily life a constant balancing act.

*Islanders carry timber and other construction materials from the beach at the Caves, a flat area on the south side of the island where Tristanians keep their feral cattle and where several families have huts that they use during the Christmas holidays. The huts hadn't been renovated in 30 years and were in dire need of repairs. Once materials were off-loaded from a cargo boat, it took three days to carry them the mile to the huts.*

*Each Tristanian can keep two sheep. For most of the year, the animals roam the island's northern pastures, hills and cliffs, but in the days before Christmas, they're rounded up and brought to the shearing pens. Men head out early and spend long hours shearing as many sheep as they can. The next day, their families join them: Women bring food and drinks and help shear the remaining sheep, and children play or try to catch new lambs. Pictured here are brothers Dean and Randal Repetto (from left); Riaan Repetto; Dean's partner, Anita Repetto; Riaan's brother, Clifton Repetto; and Rodney Green (bottom right), as the men shear sheep on Dec. 16, 2023. Most of the wool ends up on the community's potato fields as fertilizer, while the best wool is saved for knitting.*

*Fisherman Jason Green attaches lifting cables to the Island Pride as it's prepared to be lowered into the water by crane at the start of a fishing day. He and his fishing partner, Dean Repetto, head to the harbor between 5:30 and 6 a.m. and will spend the full day at sea fishing for crawfish, the island's main export.*

*James Glass (middle), chief islander at the time, with his grandson Connor Glass-Green (left) and Clifton Repetto off the coast of Gough Island, which lies 223 miles south of Tristan da Cunha. They were part of a team that spent 11 days on a fisheries expedition, placing camera traps and carrying out other monitoring work to assess the island's marine and bird life. Gough is one of the islands that make up an archipelago itself called Tristan da Cunha, which also*

*includes the island of Tristan da Cunha (the only inhabited island), the Nightingale Islands and Inaccessible Island.*



The island's cooperative spirit traces back to 1817. The United Kingdom's Royal Navy annexed the island and stationed a garrison on Tristan in 1816. When the garrison was withdrawn in 1817, Cpl. William Glass, his wife, their two children and two English stonemasons chose to remain behind, founding what they called "the Firm" — a shared-labor model that still shapes Tristan's collective approach to life today.

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*A photograph taken by Alfred Saunders during the 1933 visit of the RRS Discovery II to Tristan da Cunha, with the island's settlement visible in the distance.*

Credit: Tristan da Cunha Archive


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Tristan da Cunha's early "founding" document, drawn up in 1817 by Glass and his two compatriots, the stonemasons, after they chose to settle on the island. The agreement declared that "the stock and stores of every description" should be shared equally and that "no member shall assume any superiority whatever, but all to be considered as equal in every respect."

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*Photo by Julia Gunther, taken at the British Library with permission/Tristan da Cunha Archive*



Tristan sits so far from any other landmass that it often seems to generate its own weather. Fog rolls in off the sea, rain clouds form against the steep volcanic slopes and squalls appear without warning.

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*Passengers head out to the S.A. Agulhas II to begin their journey back to Cape Town, South Africa, after spending two weeks on the island. Calshot Harbour, built in the late 1960s, is Tristan's lifeline to the outside world, providing the only way for people and supplies to reach the island. Yet the harbor is too small to accommodate ships, so passengers and cargo are ferried between shore and vessel on motorized rafts.*


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Conditions can change hour by hour, reshaping the day's work on the fly. "On Tristan," says James Glass, a descendant of Cpl. Glass and Tristan's head of fisheries at the time, "you need a good-weather plan and a bad-weather plan." Most days, islanders end up using both.

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*Calshot Harbour is the only way for people and supplies to reach Tristan, yet it can be used only infrequently: Severe storms, heavy swells and limited sea defenses often make landings unsafe. The island also generates its own fast-changing weather, with Queen Mary's Peak, which stands 6,765 feet tall, disrupting wind and cloud patterns and creating highly variable conditions around the coast.*

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 Topographic map of Tristan da Cunha island pointing out Calshot Harbour

## Life in motion

*Fishing boats are prepared at first light at Calshot Harbour as crews ready themselves for a full day at sea. Most fishermen arrive between 5:30 and 6 a.m., having set bait the previous night, before heading out to catch crawfish. From above, the small harbor's limitations are clear: Boats must be lifted in and out of the water by crane, as no vessel can berth in the harbor itself.*

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Some days on Tristan follow a gentle rhythm. Others turn into a flurry of activity. A few minutes before 7:30 on a muggy morning in January 2024, 12-year-old Connor Glass-Green and his dog, Ridge, walk out the front door. After telling Ridge to “stay” (which he doesn’t), Connor jumps the gray breeze-block wall that surrounds his house and heads to school.

*Ella Repetto walks up a narrow lane lined with New Zealand flax on her way to St. Mary’s School. The island’s only school teaches children from early years through secondary school.*

*Connor Glass-Green with his dog, Ridge. On Tristan, dogs are mainly used as working animals, relied on to herd sheep and cattle across the island’s rugged terrain. Each household is permitted one working dog. When a dog reaches 8 years of age, it retires into family life and the household takes on a new puppy to train as its next working dog.*

Connor’s father, Rodney Green, is already down at the harbor. Today is a fishing day, and there won’t be enough space on the quay to launch the Jasus Tristani — one of the two rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) operated by Tristan’s Fisheries Department — until all the lobster fishing boats head out to sea. Green is anxious to get going. They’ve got 200 lobsters to tag. It’s going to be a long day.

In her kitchen, Connor’s mother, Sarah Glass-Green, is rushing to finish a stack of freshly made ham and cheese sandwiches that she needs to bring to her husband before he leaves. Connor’s older brother, Kieran Glass, 19, is also at the harbor, waiting for the lobster fishing boats to clear before he can board the Conservation Department’s RIB to go and tag blue sharks near Inaccessible Island.

Glass-Green would rather be out on the water with her husband, but instead, she'll spend the day in the Fisheries Department's container laboratory, measuring and dissecting four telescopefish — caught at Gough Island as part of scientific research into deep-sea species in Tristan da Cunha's waters — to send to Aberystwyth University in the United Kingdom.

*Rodney Green tags a rock lobster after his colleague has measured it; then he drops it into a bucket with other tagged lobsters that will be released at the same location where they were caught. As part of a long-term monitoring program, 5,000 lobsters are tagged over the course of a season to help track growth rates, movement patterns and overall population health. After each batch of 50 to 100 lobsters is tagged, the animals are released at the same coordinates where they were caught.*

*Shannon Swain (left) and Tristan Glass (middle), accompanied by the deputy head of Tristan da Cunha's Conservation Department, Julian Repetto, watch a group of feral cattle at the Caves, on the southern side of the island. As part of their environmental monitoring work, they monitor for signs of bird flu or other abnormalities in the local seal population.*

*A silver porgy is weighed by Sarah Glass-Green at the laboratory for the village's Fisheries Department. The data, including the fish's age, sex and weight, along with five fin samples, was sent to the U.K. for further research. The silver porgy is an invasive species, believed to have arrived in Tristan's waters when the oil platform PXXI washed ashore in 2006. It competes with native species, including the Tristan rock lobster, for resources.*

On the rare occasion a visiting ship is in, the entire village shifts into gear. Cargo is off-loaded by raft: fuel, food, tools, supplies. Hundreds of empty gas bottles — many Tristanians have gas-powered stoves and water heaters — are replaced with full ones. Diesel, which powers the island's generators, is pumped into large storage tanks.

Couches, cars and cases of beer ordered from Cape Town are delivered to front doors by a bright yellow extendable forklift. Fresh fruit and vegetables disappear from supermarket shelves almost as soon as they arrive.

While deliveries make their way through the village, work ramps up elsewhere too.




On the Base — the area above the sheer cliffs that encircle Tristan and below Queen Mary's Peak — a group herds sheep down from the mountain.

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*Sheep make their way down the Red Sands after being herded back toward the settlement from Anchorstock, a secluded grazing area accessible only by climbing the island's steep cliffs. While some of the community's sheep are kept in large pens throughout the year, feral animals — as well as the occasional domesticated sheep that jumps a fence — sometimes scramble along steep cliffs to get to Anchorstock and must be brought back by islanders.*

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 A topographic map of Tristan da Cunha island pointing out the Caves


Another group heads by boat to the Caves, a flat grassy plateau where some cattle are allowed to grow feral. Livestock numbers are strictly controlled on Tristan, and the community manages the herd by occasionally slaughtering animals for meat and leather.

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*Julian Repetto climbs out of a gulch while searching for a cow he needs to cull on behalf of his brother Riaan Repetto. To prevent overgrazing, each Tristanian is allowed only a set number of animals, and when calves are born, older cows must be removed to keep the herd at a sustainable size. Because not everyone on the island owns a rifle, men often work in groups to locate the animal that has been selected for culling. Almost every part of the cow is used: the meat for families, the bones for dogs and the hide for leatherwork.*

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By midday, west of the settlement, a road crew is busy clearing debris after a small landslide the day before. Farther out, Jerry Green checks his flocks out past Top Wash, a fenced-in pasture right up against the massive cliffs overlooking the island's potato patches. Meanwhile, in the town's Council Chamber, a meeting is underway about license plates for a set of new cars on the island.

A topographic map of Tristan da Cunha island pointing out the potato patches

*Nathan Swain repairs a ford just west of the settlement that was washed away during a recent rainstorm. Erosion is a persistent concern on Tristan, where rockfalls and landslides are common. After heavy rain, swollen streams can burst their banks, carrying mud and boulders down the mountainsides. The road to the potato patches — where the community grows most of its vegetables — crosses several large gulches that frequently spill tons of rock and soil onto the track, requiring regular maintenance.*

*Jerry Green, the island's shepherd at the time, holds a newborn lamb while his dog looks on. During lambing season, Green spends long days at and around the sheep pen, located about 3 miles west of the settlement, making sure the lambs survive their first few hours. Although the sheep are mostly left to fend for themselves, he tries to watch over as many ewes as he can. Some lambs, however, are lost to sudden cold snaps or are killed by skuas, huge brown gull-like predatory seabirds.*

Most government offices close by 3 p.m. — earlier on Fridays — but the day doesn't end there. Islanders head to the patches to work their fields: spading, planting, weeding or harvesting potatoes, depending on the season. Some decorate the village hall for a christening or birthday. Others are busy in one of the village's two refrigerated storage lockers, cutting up meat from a previous trip to the Caves and carefully labeling each plastic bag with a marker: steak, roast, mince.

Janine Lavarello, who spent the morning working on a report in her role as the officer for Tristan da Cunha's marine protected zone, rushes home to prepare for her partner, Christiaan Gerber, who's about to return from

Inaccessible Island, where he has been removing invasive plants for the past three months as part of a conservation project.

*Godfathers gather before 6-month-old Emily Tahlia Swain's christening. In a community as small as this, a child's birth and christening are major events. After the ceremony at St. Mary's Church, the whole island comes together for a reception at Prince Philip Hall, with women preparing food and the men running the bar. Later, Emily's 22 godparents are invited to the family's home for more food and drinks.*

*Christiaan Gerber, a South African who settled on Tristan, works as part of the Flax Eradication Project on Inaccessible Island. For the past five years, Gerber and his team have worked to remove invasive New Zealand flax, which was introduced to the archipelago in the 1930s. Living for months in remote camps, the team navigates steep cliffs and dense tussock grass to clear as much flax as possible from the island, a UNESCO World Heritage site.*

*Tristan's potato patches are located a few miles west from the main settlement. The patches are individually owned family plots where islanders grow potatoes and other vegetables. Passed down through generations, these small agricultural holdings help supplement the island's diet and reduce reliance on imported food. Many islanders also keep small cabins here, where they spend weekends and holidays.*

*A first-birthday banquet for Hope Repetto. On Tristan da Cunha, first birthdays and christenings become major community occasions. Hope's mother, Anita Repetto, spent days decorating the unicorn cake, while her godmothers and relatives prepared the food. Her father, Dean Repetto, and the godfathers set up and ran the bar during the reception at Prince Philip Hall. Afterward, the godparents — 25 in total — gathered at the family home for more food and drinks.*

After 6 p.m., once the lobster catch has been brought ashore — on a good day, the men can come back with 5 metric tons — 86-year-old Joyce Hagan clocks in at the lobster-processing factory to help process the day's haul.

Last to return to the harbor is the RIB carrying Rodney Green and the rest of the Fisheries Department's boat crew. They decided to do some fishing after finishing their lobster tagging. Ten 35-pound wreckfish — enormous silver deep-water dwellers that live down to 650 feet — are filleted and bagged on a large stainless-steel table on the quay.

*Joyce Hagan, 86, stands outside the lobster-processing factory moments before starting her shift. The processing plant provides part-time employment for many islanders, most of them pensioners who tail and pack lobsters. On fishing days, it hires as many people as are willing to work to process the catch as quickly as possible.*

*Cliff Swain prepares fishing ropes on Gear Check Day ahead of the fishing season, which starts on July 1. Before each season, which generally runs from July to April, Tristan's fishermen inspect and repair their gear, which is essential to ensuring they're ready to fish safely in the often wild waters surrounding Tristan da Cunha.*

Back at home, Sarah Glass-Green unwraps a large bowl of her famous potato salad. Rodney's mother drops by with a plate of homemade fish cakes. Rodney is off delivering packets of fish to other members of his family.

Evenings are for "visiting" — no invitation needed. The front door stays open.

But it'll be an early night. Tomorrow looks like another busy day.

*Men enjoy a drink after a Sunday morning of marking lambs. A few weeks into lambing season, many on the island head out to catch and identify their young animals, cutting a small notch in the ear so each one can be recognized. Working with their sheepdogs, they chase down and separate each lamb from its mother, a process that takes less than 30*

seconds before the animal is released again. Almost all quickly reunite with their ewes, and any that struggle are guided back.

## It wasn't always this way

Life on Tristan used to follow a slower rhythm. Up until the late 1930s, people worked when the weather and seasons demanded it. There was no electricity, no cash economy and few outside goods. Food was grown, caught and shared. Labor was communal.

*Sidney Glass (from left), Andrew Glass and George Swain with bullock carts pulled by two oxen each. For most of Tristan's history, this was the island's primary form of transport, alongside the use of donkeys. Photograph taken by Alfred Saunders during the RRS Discovery II's 1933 visit to Tristan da Cunha.*

Credit: Tristan da Cunha Archive

That began to change during World War II, when the British government built a secret naval weather and radio station on the island. Soldiers arrived, concrete buildings went up and, for the first time, islanders were paid wages. With money came generators and electricity. Then, in 1949, the launch of a commercial lobster fishery introduced a new, regular income stream, and regular shipping schedules further sped up the pace of life.

*British soldiers stationed on Tristan pose for a photo taken by an unknown photographer in the early 1940s, during World War II. The image dates from the period when the island was secretly designated HMS Atlantic Isle and a covert weather station was established, bringing cash wages, electricity and unprecedented contact with the outside world to the island's community.*

Credit: Tristan da Cunha Archive

Things accelerated following a volcanic eruption in 1961, after which the entire community was evacuated to the United Kingdom. When the islanders returned two years later, they brought new tools, habits and stronger ties to the outside world.

*Seren Green plays at Runaway Beach, one of the island's few sandy beaches and one that's accessed by a steep set of stairs built into the side of a cliff. The rocks Seren stands on are ancient lava flows, remnants of Tristan's volcanic origins.*

*Kieran Glass, before a dive inside Calshot Harbour. After completing marine science and navigation training abroad, he now works for the island's Conservation Department.*

*Philip Rogers holds a feral lamb he caught that morning on the Base, the high plateau where feral sheep live year-round. After catching the animal, he carried it in his rucksack more than 1,000 feet down a steep cliff toward the settlement. The lamb was later given as a pet to a friend's daughter and kept at home until it was strong enough to join the rest of the sheep on the grazing plains below.*

Today, life on Tristan is shaped not only by the land and weather but by infrastructure, logistics and growing connections to what elderly Tristanians still call the "h'outside world." Government employment now includes dozens of roles across education, health, administration and

maintenance. Imported goods are more common. Schedules are fuller and life is busier.

More changes are on the horizon too. The island's new lobster concession holder — the previous company held exclusive fishing rights for 30 years — plans to introduce a larger vessel with more berths and cargo space, making travel easier for residents and opening Tristan to more tourism and economic opportunities. And the island's connection to the internet has improved with the recent arrival of new satellite technology, linking islanders to the outside world faster and more reliably than ever before.

*Eugene Repetto poses for a photo with the Tristanian flag under his arm and his dog, Rex, by his side. It's Repetto's job to raise the flag whenever a vessel arrives and during community celebrations such as christenings or public holidays. Dogs like Rex are vital on Tristan, where the small population relies on well-trained border collies to help herd sheep and cattle. Breeding dogs is no longer allowed on the island, so new dogs must be ordered from Cape Town. Repetto had only recently gotten Rex and had just started to train him.*


*Kelly Green, Tristan's head of tourism, collects eggs at the end of the workday. Alongside cows and sheep, islanders keep chickens and ducks, valued for their eggs. While some families keep their birds close to their homes, Kelly's husband, Shane Green, keeps his coop just west of the settlement, perched on the edge of a large gulch. Kelly, originally from the U.K., was the first female outsider in more than 100 years to settle on the island, back in 2012.*



Yet despite the changing pace of life, Tristan da Cunha's size and enduring isolation mean one thing won't change: Life on Tristan da Cunha may look quiet from the outside — idyllic even — but on the inside, it moves fast. Everyone does everything. All at once. And somehow, they manage.

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*Streetlights illuminate the road through Edinburgh of the Seven Seas, Tristan da Cunha's only settlement. The lights were installed as part of a major electrical upgrade project that began around 2013. Beyond the village, however, the island is completely dark, giving the island an exceptionally clear, star-filled night sky.*



## MORE STORIES FROM NICK SCHÖNFELD AND JULIA GUNTHER



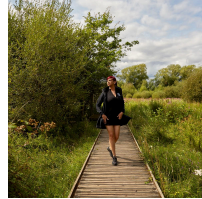
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