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A willing castaway

By Chris Moss

For tourists seeking solitude, Chile's Robinson Crusoe Island is the ultimate destination



A view of Bahía Cumberland, home to San Juan Bautista, the island's main population centre, known locally as 'el pueblo'

I suppose I had come looking for the Robinson Crusoe thing. But when I landed on the tiny airstrip above the cliff top, my palms hotter than usual after a flight, I wasn't sure why. As the small aircraft bumped below the clouds, I'd seen grassy slopes and beautiful coves but around me now was a harsh landscape: treeless steppes, craggy ridges and slopes splashed with the reds and greys of dead volcanoes.

It was here, 419 miles off the coast of Chile, that Alexander Selkirk, the Scottish sailor who inspired Daniel Defoe's novel, was marooned in 1704. At that time, the island was called Más a Tierra – meaning, in prosaic mariners' language, "Close to Land", to distinguish it from its sister island 104 miles to the west, Más Afuera ("Further Out"). In 1966 the former was renamed Isla Robinson Crusoe and, confusingly, the latter became Isla Alejandro Selkirk. Tourists, thought the Chilean government, would be drawn by the stories – real and fictional – of the famous castaway. In 1972 the company that operated flights between the island and Chile's capital, Santiago, built Crusoe Island Lodge for visitors, and that's where I was heading.



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If the flight was enlivening, the transfer was no coach trip either. It takes an hour by open-top boat to get from the aerodrome to the island's only population centre, San Juan Bautista, (which everyone calls "el pueblo"). Black-browed albatrosses and shearwaters escorted us in, their firm but flexible wings much better at coping with the squally winds than the boat or the plane. I could now see the edges of Robinson Crusoe and it became obvious that this was a fortress of an island – sheer walls, very few inlets or beaches,

and streams pouring from crevasses. Dark clouds at the top of the peaks gave the tableau a gothic aspect.

The next day, the guide at the lodge, Francisco Balbontin, took me up to the top of a viewpoint called Salsipuedes (meaning "Get out if you can"). The climb, up animal tracks, was steep and, as ever with volcanic soil, arduous, but the view from the top revealed the bay around the *pueblo*, Bahía Cumberland, to be a beautiful horseshoe of blue-green water.



I could also see a clear line where the introduced trees – cypress and eucalyptus – gave way to native vegetation. Since its discovery by Spanish sailor Juan Fernández in 1574, the archipelago (which takes his name), has been used as a prison, a forward base to protect Peru and Chile from pirates, and a safe harbour in storms. With settlers, sailors and prisoners came foreign animals – rabbits, aardvarks, goats – and flora. Since 1935 the archipelago has been a national park and the process of recovering endemic and native species is ongoing.

Crusoe Island Lodge, a 10-minute drive from the *pueblo*, is the island's smartest property. The single-storey wooden buildings, which contain 15 bedrooms and a bright, airy common area, were refurbished in 2011 by Chilean architect Mathias Klotz, who is also a co-owner. There are open fires, coarse-woven rugs, low-key lighting, and a sort of ranch-meets-retreat feel. Beds are huge and soft, the wine list goes from solid Shiraz to fabulous reserve blends, and there's a library of books about the archipelago.

My hosts were manager Pia Pablo and housekeeper Victor Aguirre, an affable and talented team put in place in the hope of kick-starting a new wave of tourism. The island attracts only about 1,000 visitors a year and, says Pablo, can handle three or four times that number. As far as I could see, though, I was the only person staying at the lodge and, in fact, the only tourist on the island.

Our next walk was up a steep zigzag to a point known as Selkirk's lookout. This high position, in a saddle between two peaks, afforded spectacular views of the eastern ridges of the island and across to neighbouring Isla Santa Clara at the western end. It was peaceful up there and I reflected on the extremity of Selkirk's predicament. He spent an astonishing four years and four months on the island, completely alone, killing goats and sea lions, making fires, trying to prevent rats from gnawing at his feet. Archaeologists have found remains of the shelters he built out of loose stones. Above the lookout is a plaque laid by the crew of HMS Topaze in 1868 to commemorate the Scotsman's solitary sojourn. If he were a hero and inspiration for Daniel Defoe, he embodies sailors' innermost fears.



A sign for the island's aerodrome

To make a day of the walk, we descended on the opposite side, heading towards an inviting prairie. The path was wide and Balbontin said there was talk of turning it into a road to connect the *pueblo* with the aerodrome. Fortunately, no one has bothered yet and the journey to Bahía Villagra followed a lovely, winding path through fronds of native and exotic gunnera, ferns of every shade of green, native chonta palms and Chilean myrtles. On a rest stop, I saw a red Juan Fernández firecrown (an endangered species of hummingbird) flitting about the flowers of a cabbage tree.

I had already tried just about every fish on the island so, after our long walk, Balbontin decided we should have a barbecue. We stopped in the town to pick up meat from what looked like an ordinary house. I was having difficulty distinguishing homes, shops, workplaces. In a small place such as the *pueblo* – the population is about 700 – it's all about who you know and who has what to sell.

Robinson Crusoe has had a tough couple of years. On February 27 2010 an earthquake measuring 8.8 on the Richter scale – with its epicentre off the coast of Chile – sent a tsunami into Bahía Cumberland. The 3m-high wave killed 16, destroying the town hall, school, museums and several homes; rebuilding continues. Then, on September 2 2011, a Chilean air force CASA 212 twin-prop crashed into the sea in Bahía Carvajal, killing four crew and 17 passengers.



Fisherman Rodrigo Chamorra measures a lobster to see if it can be sold

Life right now is an odd balance of privations and possessions. There are no newspapers, broadband is hopeless and there's neither a bank nor an ATM. But there is a radio station, several restaurants and two breweries (the Archipiélago lager is excellent). The island isn't used to tourism and, on occasions, it shows. The fisherman who was due to take me to out at gam went fishing without me – at 5am. Fortunately, another boat, skippered by Rodrigo Chamorra and Bruno "El Loco" González, offered to take me, with the warning that they were going to the south of the island – which meant nothing to me but was whispered in a portentous tone – and we would be out till the end of the day.

After an hour of pitching and rolling in rough waters, we reached Bahía Villagra, beneath the prairie I'd hiked to. Here we fished for sprats, wrasse, sole and eel. Soon two buckets were full of fish and eels, which we would use as bait in lobster traps. Lobsters love eating putrefying eel.

The sea never really calmed. The work – which the others did while I clung on and took photographs – was hard. But the spiny lobster of Juan Fernández is considered a delicacy on the mainland and Chamorra told me that each one could fetch about 20,000 pesos (\$42). A good catch could be 30 lobsters in a trap and he had 30 or so traps out around the island.

Like most committed landlubbers I "respect" the sea – which is to say, it frightens me to death – and I had one real scare during our lobster mission. The outboard motor had been turned off while we laid some traps, but when Chamorra went to fire it up, the starter cable snapped free. We were drifting close to the rocks, with the sea frothing wildly and the sea lions and seabirds grinning at the human tragicomedy. How serious was it? I am not sure but El Loco – I now wondered how he got the name – spat out a phrase unsuitable for translation. He asked me to help him work the anchor while they looked for a wrench.

For 15 minutes, I was suddenly less keen on the Crusoe/Selkirk fantasy – and pined for dry land, cities, traffic jams, even small planes.

Back at the lodge, where we finally arrived at dusk, I ate one of the lobsters along with a tranquillising glass of Chilean sauvignon blanc. Selkirk stayed more than four years; I booked for four days and got five – flights are routinely cancelled. My visit was hardly history-making or heroic but it was certainly an adventure. On the plane, it was just me again – and 10 boxes of angry lobsters.

Tourism fetishises solitude but there's a deep loneliness on Robinson Crusoe Island that is affecting and slightly alienating. It's definitely worth the trip; and if you want more of the same, you can always ask El Loco to drop you off on Isla Alejandro Selkirk: population around 50, no airport, no hotel.

Details

Chris Moss was a guest of Wexas Travel (www.wexas.com) and LAN (www.lan.com). Wexas offers three nights in Santiago and four on Robinson Crusoe Island, with domestic flights and transfers, from £3,579 (or £4,449 with flights from London). For more on Chile see www.chile.travel