

# Falkland Islands/ Islas Malvinas



The Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas are a popular addition to many Antarctic voyages – usually in conjunction with a visit to South Georgia – but they're well worth seeing on their own for their spectacular populations of penguins, seals and albatrosses. Surrounded by the South Atlantic and by centuries of controversy, the islands lie 490km east of Patagonia. Two main islands, East and West Falkland, and more than 700 smaller ones cover 12,173 sq km, about the same area as Northern Ireland or Connecticut.

Until Argentina's military dictatorship made an ill-advised decision to invade the Falklands in 1982, few people could even pinpoint the location of this remote archipelago. Visiting was difficult until the Argentines built an airport in 1977. The 11-week Falklands War suddenly put the islands on the front page, at the cost of 900 Argentine and British military deaths – one for every three islanders.

Today more than four-fifths of the 3140 Falklanders (sometimes called 'Kelpers') live in Stanley. There are also more than 1200 British military personnel, nearly all at the Mt Pleasant base. The rest of the islanders live in 'Camp,' the name given to all of the Falklands outside Stanley. Few of the numerous smaller offshore islands are inhabited. About 60% of Falklanders are native born, some tracing their ancestry back six or more generations. Most of the remainder are immigrants or temporary residents from the UK.

Since the advent of large sheep stations in the late 19th century, rural settlement in the Falklands has consisted of tiny hamlets built near sheltered harbors where coastal shipping could collect the wool clip. Shepherds usually lived in 'outside houses,' which still dot the countryside, as do 700,000 sheep, which outnumber Falklanders by 200 to one.

The Falklands retain their rural character: the islands are laced with 400km of roads, but there's not one traffic light.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit the superb **Falkland Islands Museum** (p200) in Stanley
- Honor all those who died during the Falklands War at **Goose Green** (p204), site of the fiercest fighting
- See all five of the Falklands' penguin species at **Sea Lion Island** (p204)
- Survey the world's largest colony of black-browed albatrosses at **Steeple Jason** (p206)
- Share a drink with the locals in Stanley's picturesque **pubs** (p202)



## Climate

The islands' climate is temperate, with frequent high winds. Maximum temperatures rarely reach 24°C, while even on the coldest winter days the temperature usually rises above freezing. Average annual rainfall at Stanley, one of the islands' most humid areas, is only 600mm.

## Environment

Except for the low-lying southern half of East Falkland, known as Lafonia, the terrain is generally hilly to mountainous. East Falkland's highest point is 705m **Mt Osborne**; West Falkland's is 700m **Mt Adam**. Among the most interesting geological features are the 'stone runs' of quartzite boulders that descend from many of the ridges and peaks on both East and West Falkland. Grasslands and shrubs dominate the flora. There are no native trees. At the time of European discovery, extensive stands of the native tussock grass (*Parodiochloa flabellata*) dominated the coastline, but very little remains today, although some offshore islands have preserved significant areas of it. Among the 13 endemic plants are several unusual species, including: snake plant (*Nassauvia serpens*), with its phallic-looking stalks and tiny leaves; Felton's flower (*Calandrinia feltonii*), a caramel-scented, magenta-blossomed annual until recently thought to be extinct in the wild; and vanilla daisy (*Leuceria suaveolens*), which, while not endemic, is still interesting – its flowers smell remarkably like chocolate. There are no native land animals. Besides the five types of penguin (gentoo, king, macaroni, Magellanic and rockhopper) that breed here, there are many other birds equally interesting and uncommon.

## History

Although there's evidence that Patagonian Indians may have reached the Falklands in canoes, the islands were officially discovered on August 14, 1592 by John Davis, master of HMS *Desire*, during an English naval expedition, although a 1522 Portuguese chart indicates knowledge of the islands. The Falklands' Spanish name, *Islas Malvinas*, derives from early French navigators from St Malo, who called the islands 'Les Malouines' after their home port.

No European power established a settlement until 1764, when the French built a garrison at Port Louis on East Falkland,

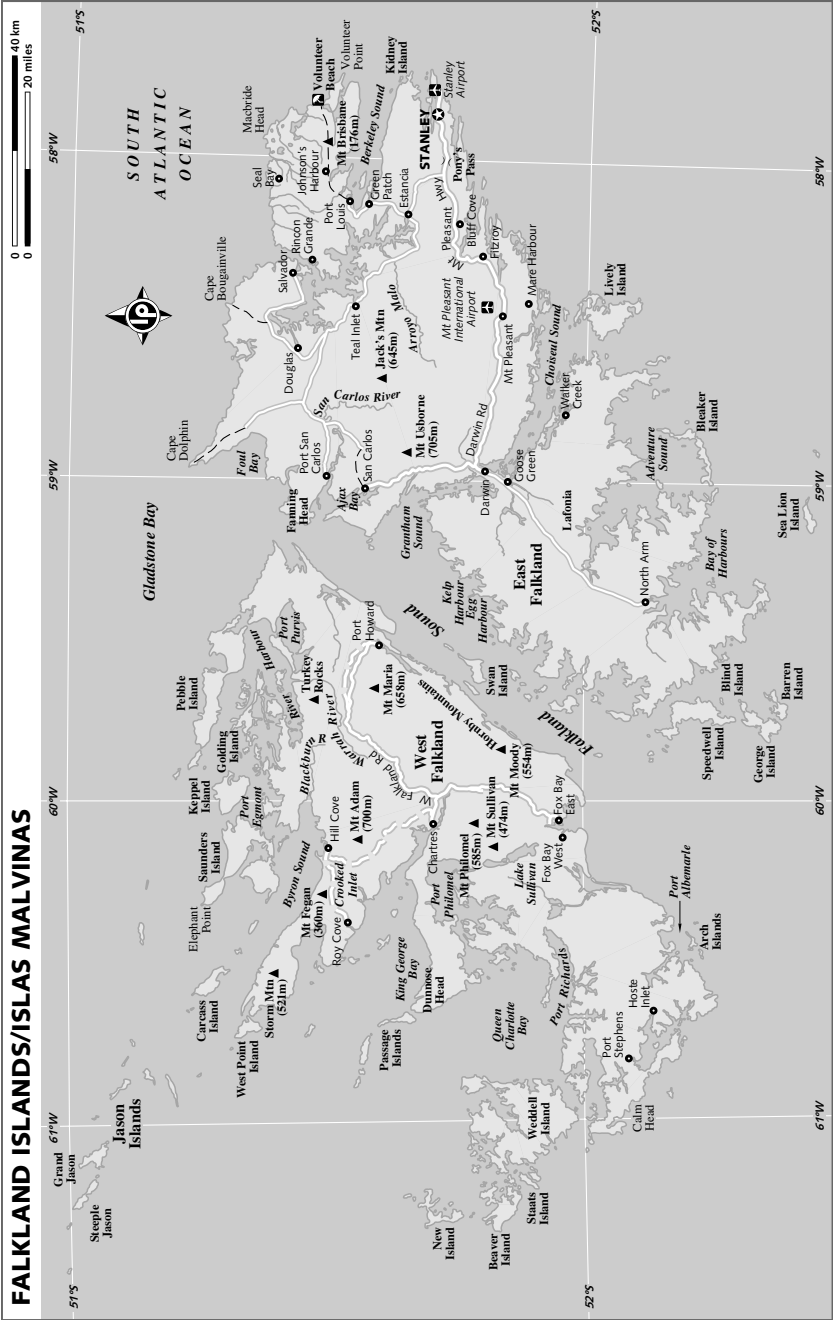
disregarding Spanish claims under the papal Treaty of Tordesillas that divided the New World between Spain and Portugal. Unbeknownst to either France or Spain, Britain set up a West Falkland outpost at Port Egmont, on Saunders Island, in 1765. Spain, meanwhile, discovered and then supplanted the French colony after an amicable settlement. Spanish forces next detected and expelled the British in 1767. Under threat of war, Spain restored Port Egmont to the British, who only a few years later abandoned the area – without, however, renouncing their territorial claims.

For the rest of the 18th century, Spain maintained the islands as one of the world's most secure penal colonies. After it abandoned the colonies in the early 1800s, only whalers and sealers visited, until the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata (as Argentina was formerly known) sent a military governor in the early 1820s to assert its claim as successor to Spain. Later, a naturalized Buenos Aires entrepreneur named Louis Vernet initiated a project to monitor uncontrolled sealers and sustainably exploit local fur seal populations.

Vernet's seizure of three American sealing vessels, *Harriet*, *Superior* and *Breakwater*, in Berkeley Sound triggered reprisals from a hotheaded US naval officer, Captain Silas Duncan, commanding the corvette USS *Lexington*, who vandalized the Port Louis settlement beyond restoration in 1831. After Vernet's departure, Buenos Aires kept a token force there until early 1833, when it was expelled by Britain. Vernet pursued his claims for property damages in British courts for nearly 30 years, unsuccessfully.

Under the British, the Falklands languished until the mid-19th century, when sheep began to replace cattle, and wool became an important export. Founded by Samuel Lafone, an Englishman from Montevideo, the Falkland Islands Company (FIC) became the islands' largest landholder. Other immigrant entrepreneurs occupied all other available pastoral lands in extensive holdings by the 1870s.

Woolraising was very successful and spawned similar operations in South America. Nothing stood in the way of sheep: the warrah, the island's only native mammal, was wiped out; bounties were placed on birds felt to be a threat to sheep; and the native tussock grass was soon devastated by overgrazing. By the late 1800s, the island's ecology was



## THE FALKLANDS WAR

Although Argentina had persistently affirmed its claim to the Falklands since 1833, successive British governments never publicly acknowledged that claim until the late 1960s. By then, the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Argentina's military government of General Juan Carlos Onganía had reached an agreement, to begin in 1971, that gave Argentina a significant voice in matters affecting Falklands transportation, fuel supplies, shipping and even immigration.

Islanders and their supporters in Britain saw the Argentine presence as ominous. Only a few years earlier, right-wing guerrillas had hijacked an Aerolíneas Argentinas jetliner, which crash-landed on the Stanley racecourse (the islands had no airport then). Afterward, the guerrillas briefly occupied parts of town. Concerned about Argentina's chronic political instability, Falklanders suspected the FCO of secretly arranging transfer of the islands to Argentina. They may have been correct.

This process dragged on for more than a decade, during which Argentina's brutal Dirty War after 1976 gave Falklanders good reason to fear increasing Argentine presence.

Still, the British government dithered. Official government papers released for the first time in late 2007 revealed that British officials warned Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1976 that Argentina would invade the Falklands, saying that the two countries were on a 'collision course.'

The crash came on April 2, 1982, when the military government of General Leopoldo Galtieri invaded the nearly undefended Falklands. The seizure briefly united Argentina and made Galtieri a hero, but he never anticipated British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's decisive response.

The fight was one-sided, despite Britain's substantial naval losses. Experienced British troops landed at San Carlos Bay, routing ill-trained and poorly supplied Argentine conscripts. The most serious battle took place at Goose Green on East Falkland, but the Argentine army's surrender at Stanley averted the capital's destruction. A total of 635 Argentines and 255 Britons died in the war, along with three Falkland Island women killed by a stray British mortar round.

Some of the war's longest-lasting legacies are the 25,000 Argentine landmines that render certain beaches and pastures strictly off-limits. The minefields have not prevented the return of penguins, which are too light to set off the charges.

For more information, read one of these books: *The Falklands War 1982* by Martin Middlebrook (1985), which covers the war in fairly detailed fashion as part of the Classic Military History series; *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign* by Sir Lawrence Freedman (2 vols., 2005), part of the Government Official History Series; *Razor's Edge: The Unofficial History of the Falklands War*, a hard-hitting examination by Hugh Bicheno (2006); or *Battle for the Falklands* by Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins (1983). Hastings, a London journalist, was in the Falklands with the British forces – he famously strolled into Stanley ahead of the Argentine surrender, and before the British troops marched in he had already knocked back a double whisky at the Upland Goose Hotel (today converted to flats).

tottering and the amount of exhausted land needed to sustain each sheep was growing. The deliberate introduction of cats and the accidental introduction of rats devastated small bird populations.

Land overuse brought problems, and so did land ownership. From the 1870s to the 1970s, the islands were a near-feudal society with landowners in London – absentee landlords, often exhibiting all the bad qualities those words imply – caring only about the bottom line, while the islanders were essentially poorly paid laborers. Since all the land had been parceled out in the early days of British rule, islanders could not acquire any. Even publicly owned land was minimal; apart from

a few outlying islands, the Falklands today are almost devoid of parks and reserves.

Things began to change in the late 1970s when the sale and subdivision of large land-holdings was encouraged in order to slow high rates of emigration. Change has become even more rapid since 1982. Prior to the Falklands War, there were only about 35 farms in the Falklands, and the islands' population was declining steadily. Now there are about 90 owner-occupied farms averaging about 12,000 hectares. Unfortunately, encouraging local farm ownership coincided with a steep long-term drop in wool prices, so many of the new Falkland landowners have been struggling.