Among the tiny islands scattered across the vast empty expanse of the Southern Ocean are earth’s remotest islands. Inconsequential though they may appear, they are vital refuges for vast numbers of seals, penguins and other seabirds, since there is nowhere else they can go to breed and raise their young.

The peri-Antarctic islands are also interesting for their histories of discovery, exploitation, scientific research and, in some cases, human settlement. The small communities that have lived – and died – on some of these lonesome isles are remarkable testaments to resilience and determination. In most cases, people lived on an island for a short period of years and little trace remains of their stay. At Tristan da Cunha, however, the inhabitants are successfully balancing the traditions of their island community with the intrusions and benefits of modern life.

No voyage – not even a circumnavigation of Antarctica – will take in all the peri-Antarctic islands. There are simply too many. Voyages sailing from Australia, New Zealand or South Africa will often stop at Macquarie Island or Heard Island and New Zealand’s sub-Antarctic islands. Resupply vessels visiting Îles Kerguelen, Îles Crozet, Île Amsterdam and Île St Paul take tourists. Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island are usually visited on ‘repositioning’ cruises, en route to the northern hemisphere, where the ships ply Arctic waters during the austral winter, or on the return south the following season. Bouvetøya, Peter I Øy and Scott Island are visited only rarely.
BOUVETØYA

Bouvetøya is the most isolated island on earth. Not counting its tiny neighbor to the southwest, Larsøya, the nearest land (Antarctica) is more than 1600km away.

Bouvetøya is the tip of a volcano that rises out of the Southern Ocean, and although the volcano is dormant, there’s still geothermal activity on the island. Another island, Thompson Island, was first sighted by 19th-century sealers northeast of Bouvetøya. It’s believed to have been destroyed during a volcanic explosion in 1895 or 1896.

Sometime between 1955 and 1958, a low-lying shelf of lava rock rubble appeared on Bouvetøya’s western coast, probably as the...
result of a landslide. This created the island’s only bird-nesting site of any size, an area about 500m wide and 2km long. Norwegian discoverers named it Nyrøysa (New Rubble); it’s also called Westwind Beach. Scientists landed on Bouvetøya in 1978 and measured a below-ground temperature of 25°C.

Bouvetøya covers about 54 sq km. The highest point is 780m Olavtoppen (Olav Peak). It and another high peak surround the ice-filled crater of an inactive volcano known as the Wilhelm II plateau. Glaciers cover 93% of the island and prevent landings on the southern and eastern coasts, while steep cliffs as high as 490m block access to the north, west and southwest. Landings can be made in only a few places, and numerous offshore rocks make navigation hazardous.

Bouvetøya’s weather is nearly always cloudy or foggy. The mean temperature is -1°C; in summer, the average high is 2.2°C.

The island is named for French navigator Jean-Baptiste-Charles Bouvet de Lozier, who, sailing in *Aigle*, first sighted it on January 1, 1739, but was unable to get a good fix to determine its position. It was not until 1808 that British whaling captains James Lindsay and Thomas Hopper, sailing in *Swan* and *Otter*, resighted it and proved that it was indeed an island. Bouvetøya’s precise position, however, was only pinned down 90 years later by the German Deep Sea Exploration Expedition in 1898 sailing in *Valdivia*, which did not succeed in landing.

An American sealing expedition led by Benjamin Morrell in *Wasp* made the first landing on December 8, 1822. They took 192 fur-seal skins, Fanning writing later that the seals were so tame ‘that they would come up and play among the men who were skinning their companions.’

This encouraged other sealers, who visited sporadically during the 19th century. Two British sealing ships, *Sprightly* and *Lively*, rediscovered Bouvetøya on December 10, 1825, and named it Liverpool Island, taking possession for the British crown.

Science, in the form of the Norwegian oceanographic expedition in *Norvegia*, first visited Bouvetøya in December 1927. Despite the ship twice hitting an underwater reef, parties were put ashore on seven days during the month, 667 fur seals were taken, and a small hut was built at Cap de la Circoncision on the northwest coast. The expedition found enormous numbers of fin whales in the waters surrounding Bouvetøya; one man recalled later that their blows reminded him of the smoke coming from the many chimneys of a Norwegian town during the winter.

The *Norvegia* expedition also claimed the island for Norway on December 1, and on January 23, 1928, it was formally annexed by Norwegian royal proclamation. (The British Parliament declined to get upset about such an unpromising dot of territory and renounced all claim to Bouvetøya later in 1928.)

When a 1955 South African expedition visited in HMSAS *Transvaal*, all that was left of the *Norvegia* hut was a cable, the leg of a stove and some cement.

In 1971 Norway made the island a nature reserve.

Bouvetøya has only rarely been visited. Several events, however, are mysterious. First, a sunken lifeboat and assorted supplies were discovered at Nyrøysa in 1964, but their origin could not be determined.

Second, a thermonuclear bomb test seems to have occurred to the west of Bouvetøya in 1979. Although no country ever admitted setting off a bomb there, an orbiting satellite detected a brief, intense burst of light on September 22, 1979. Magnetic, seismographic and ionospheric evidence all pointed to a nuclear blast. Personnel at Australian Antarctic stations later detected radiation and radioactive debris. In May 2006 the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* said that newly disclosed documents revealed that Israel and South Africa had conducted a ‘nuclear experiment.’

Third, a newspaper in the Norwegian capital of Oslo reported in 1986 that US census records showed that, since 1959, 60 women and 26 men had emigrated to the US from the uninhabited Bouvetøya!

Three huts were set up by a Norwegian research expedition that spent four months on the island in 1978. They’re now gone, but in 1994 a shipping container brought to Nyrøysa, on the island’s windward coast, was converted to a small Norwegian research station, last used during the 2001–02 season. A five-member research team landed for a three-month stay in December 2007, but found it had vanished – along with major sections of Nyrøysa itself. They built a small camp of nine tents, most of which a storm soon destroyed. Using extra timber, they enlarged a wooden shipping crate into a shack. The destruction of
all of these huts indicates the ferocious winds and waves experienced by Nyrøysa.

Macaroni and chinstrap penguins, elephant seals and many fur seals breed on the island.

PRINCE EDWARD ISLANDS

Bleak and barren in winter, lush and green in summer, the Prince Edward Islands consist of Prince Edward Island and the larger Marion Island, 22km to the southwest. They cover 316 sq km and are part of South Africa’s Cape of Good Hope Province.

Dome-like Marion Island is dotted by many small lakes and more than a hundred small hills; as the 1961 edition of the Antarctic Pilot picturesquely notes, the island ‘appears from northward as a cluster of rugged nipples.’ Rugged, indeed: a sealing captain who visited in 1842 noted that Marion’s volcanic cinders ‘will thoroughly demoralize a new pair of boots in one day’s time.’

Prince Edward Island is more vertical than its larger neighbor, with dramatic cliffs towering to 490m high on the southwestern coast. At Cave Bay is a large cave that has sheltered two groups of castaways as well as an incongruous Champagne toast made by a secret South African naval expedition in January 1948.

The island’s highest point is Marion’s 1230m Mascarin Peak, formerly known as State President Swart Peak. It had a small ice plateau, but recently this has all but disappeared due to climate change. Also, the island’s bogs are now noticeably drier, and meteorological records show a large reduction in annual rainfall and an average temperature rise.

Nevertheless, the weather is fairly consistent: low temperatures year-round, extremely strong westerly winds, abundant snow and rain, and skies usually at least three-quarters covered by clouds.

South Africa declared the islands a Special Nature Reserve in 1995. No tourist visits are permitted. Even research on Prince Edward Island is severely restricted: a group of not more than four people is permitted to land only once every three to five years, staying no more than two or three days.

NONEXISTENT ANTARCTIC ISLANDS  Robert Headland

Along with the groups of isolated oceanic islands surrounding Antarctica, there are reports of a curious assortment of 18 nonexistent, but putatively similar, far-southern islands: Aurora Islands, Burdwood’s Island, The Chimneys, Dougherty’s Island (also called Keats Island), Elizabethides, Emerald Island, Isla Grande, Macey’s Island, Middle Island, New South Greenland, Nimrod Island, Pagoda Rock, Royal Company Island, Strathfillan Rock, Swain’s Island, Thompson Island, Undine Rock and Trulsklippen. These have all been recorded in the Southern Ocean or the extreme southern limits of the adjoining oceans, and all have appeared on official charts. Several have been seen more than once, and three may once have existed but become submerged following volcanic explosions.

Besides volcanoes, there are several reasons why people may have supposed these islands existed. Many might be explained as sightings in bad weather of icebergs that were carrying rocks and moraine. A captain, rightly erring on the side of safety, would report these (dirty ice can look convincingly like an island). Some sightings, however, were more likely the result of too much rum. A few may have been deliberate hoaxes: sealers always tried to keep secret the locations of good sealing discoveries, especially new islands, in order to reduce the competition. Some of the sealers may well have deliberately led others on wild goose chases. New South Greenland was probably invented to embellish a book by an author known as ‘the greatest liar in the Pacific.’

The problem with all these nonexistent islands has been getting rid of them. If there was a possibility of a supposedly sighted island being a hazard to navigation, the British Admiralty and other maritime authorities were very reluctant to expunge it from the charts. It usually took a substantial hydrographic survey before this was done (although the satellite age has now simplified this). The persistence of nonexistent islands is phenomenal: Swain’s Island, ordered to be deleted from the charts in 1920, could still be found in a 1995 comprehensive world atlas produced by a well-known publisher. Some nonexistent islands have even appeared in novels – there is a lot of writing that can be done with such a theme.

Robert Headland is a senior associate at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, England