Fifty Islands

Fifty remarkable island stories
from around the world

Fifty Islands

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Preface

According to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, an island is a naturally formed land surface surrounded by water that is still above water at high tide. Thus, a sandbank is not an island if it is submerged at high tide. An island has a territorial limit of twelve nautical miles and an Exclusive Economic Zone of two hundred nautical miles. Article 121 of the Law of the Sea Convention states: “Rocks that cannot support human habitation or economic life in themselves have no Exclusive Economic Zone.” An Exclusive Economic Zone is particularly important because of mineral extraction and fishing rights.

What is the difference between an island and a rock? Island lovers and geographers have been arguing about this question for centuries. In Scotland, a general definition was formulated as early as 1861, when a census was taken: “an island is a piece of land surrounded by water, with sufficient vegetation to allow at least one sheep to graze, or inhabited by people.” This leaves out rocks, rock points, sandbanks and the like. The Millennium Ecosystems Assessment, created by the UN in the year 2000, sought to end the controversy once and for all: “the size of an island must equal or exceed 0.15 square kilometers. In addition, an island must have multiple plant species. A rock has no plant species except lichens.”

No idea how they arrive at a size of 0.15 square kilometers, but at least it’s a benchmark. And if an island is 0.10 square kilometers in size and the surface is covered with tropical jungle? Isn't it an island then? There are hundreds of these pinpricks in the Pacific Ocean, yet they are represented as real islands on the world map. The contradiction in the definitions of islands and rocks is reinforced by several rulings of the International Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which in one case declared an island that exceeded the 0.15 square kilometers standard to be a real island and in another to be a rock. Then there are differences between rocks and islets, although the definitions vary and are not precise. Rocks generally differ from islets in that they have a surface composed of rocks, sand or hard coral and minimal vegetation. In the Caribbean, this is referred to as a Cay: the accumulation of sand on a reef. Polynesian Motu refers to a reef composed of broken coral and sand surrounding an atoll. Most countries use entirely different definitions of islands and rocks, and conflicts over overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones are therefore common.

Islands have caused conflict for centuries. Most conflicts arose during the time of the great voyages of discovery, when the world was mapped fairly accurately and the colonial powers tumbled over each other to claim or conquer islands. With the rise of Euro-colonialism, island literature also emerged. The archetypal story of island literature is *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. Both the story and place and time are completely fictional, but Defoe did base his story on a real character and a real event. Scottish buccaneer Alexander Selkirk spent four years on an uninhabited island of Chile's Juan Fernández Islands, present-day Robinson Crusoe Island. The eighteenth-century reading public devoured stories about newly discovered, exotic places, especially islands, and the further away the better. Daniel Defoe created his own literary movement: the Robinsonade, which also permeated philosophy and the behavioral sciences. The success of *Robinson Crusoe* led to a whole series of books in the same genre, for example *The Swiss Family Robinson* by Johann David Wyss, *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne, *Insel Felsenburg* by Johann Gottfried Schnabel, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift and *The Secret Island* by Jules Verne.

Wanting to escape island isolation is sometimes called island fever, although ardent island lovers mean just the opposite: the urge to visit as many islands as possible. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the negative variant is also called rock fever. The feeling, which mainly happens to mainlanders, of being suffocated by the size and isolation of the island, leaving sufferers anxious, irritable, desperate and claustrophobic. The ailment is usually attributed to homesickness and the solution is simple: leave the island and go home. World literature has produced a torrent of melancholy island stories that can unquestionably be associated with island fever.

In some cases, islanders also get island fever. The residents of the islands in the Pacific Ocean then went in search of new islands. Long before the arrival of the first European explorers, they had scattered over vast distances, across the more than twenty-five thousand islands of the Pacific. Thor Heyerdahl proved with his voyage on the *Kon-Tiki*, which began in Peru and ended in the Tuamotu Archipelago in French Polynesia, a journey of nearly seven thousand kilometers, that the Pacific islanders could travel thousands of kilometers on simple rafts and that contact with the inhabitants of South America was likely. Columbus covered

only five thousand kilometers on his first transatlantic voyage, which ended on San Salvador, one of present-day 's Bahamas.

The era of the great voyages of discovery led to the colonization of large parts of the world. In the first half of the fifteenth century, before Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean, the Portuguese already established hundreds of sugar cane plantations on islands off the West African coast, worked by tens of thousands of slaves. From the sixteenth century onwards, the other colonial powers turned the fertile volcanic islands in the Caribbean Sea into one big slave plantation. Islands provided protection, were strategically located and made it difficult for slaves to escape. Bruce Chatwin, in his masterpiece *In Patagonia*, set out to find a place to survive the then inevitable nuclear war and described the islands of the South Pacific as follows: "An island was out of the question, because an island is a trap." The inhabitants of the Pacific Islands escaped the terrible fate of the African slaves, because Euro-US colonialism only turned its attention to their islands after the abolition of slavery. Instead, they succumbed en masse to diseases brought by the first explorers. They had lived in isolation on their islands for so long that the visit of a few Europeans or Americans brought diseases that proved fatal.

At the outbreak of World War I, the world had only a handful of independent island states: Great Britain, Japan, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. All other islands were territories or areas under influence of European colonial powers, Japan and the United States. A large part of the non-European world was divided between a small number of countries from the global north. The remaining countries were former colonies and a small number of countries that had managed to remain independent. In the decolonization process that began after World War II, most of Africa, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific gained independence. More than forty new island states emerged. Of the nearly two hundred nations officially recognized by the United Nations, more than a quarter are independent island states. The largest island state in the world is Indonesia, both in area and population. Greenland is larger in area, but is not independent and part of Denmark, with a large degree of self-government and the intention to become fully independent in the future. The smallest island state in the world is Nauru, both in size and population. The island is only five kilometers in diameter and has eleven thousand inhabitants.

In addition to the forty-six independent island states the world now has, there are at least forty more potential island states. Most are located in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. A quick glance at the world map gives the impression that the decolonization process got stuck there halfway through. Many islands in these regions are still dependent territories of France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, the United States and New Zealand. Should the potential island states become truly independent, there still remains a whole series of islands that will never make it to independence. These islands are economically too small to become politically independent and usually have only a few thousand inhabitants, such as Saint Helena and Wallis and Futuna. Economically, they depend almost entirely on support of the mother country. Living under the tropical sun on an island with white sandy beaches seems like a dream come true, and it is. Island life also has its less pleasant sides: imported food is incredibly expensive due to its remoteness, there are only tourist or government employment opportunities, and education and health care are often inadequate.

Especially in France, the decolonization process of islands never really took off. After World War II, more than twenty independent island states emerged from the British Empire, most of them in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Only two independent island states emerged from the French colonies: Madagascar and the nearby Comoros. Madagascar was too big to hold. The Muslim Comoros were culturally too distant from France and wanted to become independent themselves. If we add the New Hebrides, now the independent Vanuatu, we get three. But this was only half French, because it was a condominium of France and Great Britain. France still has a whole series of islands and archipelagos under its care, which easily can continue as full-fledged countries, such as Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mayotte, Réunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. In terms of population size, these islands can easily compete with smaller European countries such as Malta, Iceland or Luxemburg.

Unfortunately, the inevitable rise in sea level may also reduce the number of island states in the future. The Maldives and the Seychelles are only a few meters above sea level on average and are doomed to disappear. In the Pacific Ocean, several island states are in the same alarming position, such as Kiribati and tiny Tuvalu. The islands of the mini-state are no higher than five meters above sea level. Most island states will survive the projected sea level rise of thirty centimeters around the year 2050. For the year 2100, sea levels are expected to rise by a meter or even a meter and a half. Melting of the Greenland ice sheet or part of Antarctica would be dramatic. Thousands of islands would be completely wiped off the map. Of the islands included in this book, several are in the danger zone: Howland, Nui, Isla de Aves and

the mythical Nan Madol have maximum heights of only a few meters. In all likelihood, the world map will look very different in a hundred years: more island states, disappeared island states and perhaps thousands of disappeared islands.

In my opinion, the fifty islands included in this book give a good picture of more than five hundred years of Euro-US colonialism, of the decolonization process that got underway after World War II, of the decolonization process that is still ongoing and of the importance small islands played in the many territorial disputes that shaped the world map. Many of these islands were exploited economically, to mine guano or phosphate, for hunting or as a base for whaling. But most of the islands described in this book became part of a dark stain in history. They were used to trade slaves or set up large-scale slave plantations. Almost all the islands in this work changed hands several times throughout history, especially in the Caribbean; where the European colonial powers fought each other to the limit in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, because the most fertile volcanic islands were located there. Islands such as Sint Eustatius and Tobago changed hands dozens of times in the seventeenth century and could therefore hardly be left out of this work. Most of the islands in this book have a European colonial past, as was to be expected, but I have also included several islands with a Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Australian, New Zealand or US colonial past.

The selection criteria for including fifty islands cannot all be listed. The number fifty is arbitrary in itself, but it is a nicely rounded number that creates a certain expectation and is not so high that potential readers are discouraged in advance. Much of the selection happens in the writer's head, as he browses one atlas after another for suitable candidates. There are probably millions of islands scattered across the world's oceans. No one has ever bothered to count them, probably because it is not feasible, especially given the controversies over the definition of islands and rocks. Impossible to trace the history of all the islands. So, I relied on my right index finger sliding over the smooth paper of one map after another, stopping suddenly at exotic-sounding names like Nancowry, Vostok or Rapa Iti. On closer inspection, such chance finds turned out to fit well into the concept of this work. Other islands I ignored on reflection, because they disappointed me as an island, were too predictable or told a story that another island had already told me. And of course, I couldn’t leave out some of the islands I’ve visited myself, as I too am a victim of the positive variant of island fever.

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Arguin

The first signs of European colonialism

Island: Arguin
Country: Mauritania
Status: Banc d'Arguin Parc National
Surface area: 12 km^2
Population: uninhabited
Location: Arguin Bay, Atlantic Ocean
Colonizer: Portugal, Netherlands, Brandenburg, France

Arguin is only two kilometers wide and six kilometers long. The flat, sandy islet lies just off the northern coast of Mauritania, in the Bay of Arguin, about a hundred kilometers south of Western Sahara. The Bay of Arguin is home to several islands, sandbanks and reefs, which are part of the Banc d'Arguin National Park that covers approximately twelve thousand square kilometers and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a breeding ground for migratory birds, including flamingos and pelicans. Human interference in the area is nowadays minimal and almost nothing recalls the obscure role that little Arguin played in the inhumane transatlantic slave trade.

The year 1415 is usually cited as the beginning of European overseas colonialism. A huge Portuguese war fleet led by Prince João I conquered the North African caravan city of Ceuta. The city played no major role in Portuguese colonialism, but the victory was morally important, because the Moorish threat was finally over. Portuguese colonialism developed in the next fifty years along the West and Central African coast; with the conquest of Madeira, the Canary Islands, Cape Verdia, São Tomé, Príncipe and Bioko. Even before Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1492 and landed on San Salvador, the Portuguese had already established an extensive slavery-based plantation system on these islands, which supplied Europe with sugar from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, and Arguin played a crucial role in this.

The Portuguese explorer Nuno Tristão reached Arguin in 1443, raided a Berber village and took fourteen inhabitants as slaves to Lisbon. Prince Henry the Navigator, third son of King João I and initiator of the Portuguese voyages of discovery, subsequently issued permits to various Portuguese traders to go manhunting in the area around Arguin. A year later, dozens of Portuguese ships left for this dirty job in the Bay of Arguin. On his third voyage in 1445, Nuno Tristão went even further south and probably reached Senegal. In Lisbon, he enthusiastically reported to Henry the Navigator that he had finally reached 'Terra do Negros', the mythical land of the blacks. According to the stories of Arabic slave traders this area had gold in abundance. On his fourth voyage along the West African coast, Nuno Tristão went even further south, sailed up a river and again tried to enslave a number of natives. However, they put up fierce resistance. He got an arrow in his chest and died immediately. Prince Henry the Navigator was deeply saddened by the death of his favorite explorer. The voyages of discovery were put on hold for a decade and the Portuguese became more cautious. After that, they avoided the dangerous interior and bought their slaves from middlemen on the coast.

After the discovery by Nuno Tristão the Portuguese built a fort on Arguin. Within a few years, more than eight hundred slaves were transported yearly to the north. Some of the slaves went to the slave market in Lisbon. The rest went to Madeira. The Portuguese had discovered this island in 1418 and the fertile volcanic soil proved to be excellent for establishing sugar cane plantations. First, Portuguese were recruited to work the plantations. Subsequently, it was the turn of the Guanches of the Canary Islands. However, they succumbed en masse to European diseases. Thereafter, only slaves from West Africa were employed on the plantations. They were stronger and could always be replaced by new slaves.

João de Santarém and Pêro Escobar explored the Gulf of Guinea in 1470 and discovered the uninhabited São Tomé. The volcanic island is located about two hundred and fifty kilometers off the Central African coast and is as big as Menorca. The distance to Lisbon is seven thousand

kilometers. The Portuguese initially used the island to deport unwanted groups from the mother country, such as Jews and criminals, but they also thought this would trigger colonization of the island. From 1497 onwards, more than two thousand Jewish orphans aged eight and older were deported to São Tomé. They were divided among the colonists, received Catholic education and worked in the fields. Due to the poor living conditions and tropical climate, only sixty were still alive five years later.

São Tomé is dominated by a two-thousand-meter-high volcano and is covered with tropical rainforest. The island is intersected by two fast-flowing rivers that meander through the hilly landscape towards the Atlantic Ocean. Like Madeira, the fertile volcanic soil was very suitable for the establishment of sugar cane plantations. Water mills were built at the rivers to process the sugar cane. However, the colonists continued to succumb to the heavy work under the tropical sun. As on Madeira they were replaced by thousands of black slaves, who were bought in the nearby Niger Delta, Angola and Congo. Slaves were also brought in via Arguin. Later also via islands such as Goree and Kunta Kinteh.

The slave trade from Arguin now not only ran northwards to Madeira and Lisbon, but also four thousand kilometers southwards to São Tomé. Portuguese slave ships transported about a thousand slaves from Arguin annually to the expanding plantations on São Tomé. Sugar from São Tomé, Madeira, the Canary Islands and the Cape Verde Islands was exported to Lisbon in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and transshipped on Antwerp ships. From Antwerp, sugar found its way throughout Europe and contributed significantly to the economic prosperity of the Southern Netherlands in the sixteenth century. The Portuguese continued to grow sugarcane on São Tomé and the neighboring island of Principe, until 1650. After that, sugar cane from the islands along the West African coast was outcompeted by the large-scale plantations in the Caribbean and Portuguese Brazil. In São Tomé and Principe, plantations switched to coffee and other products.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the fort on Arguin had a garrison of thirty to forty men. Less than half were soldiers. A few decades later, the fort had a garrison of only twelve soldiers. The Portuguese usually built forts and columns of arms (padraos) along the coast, established relations with the hinterland and subsequently reduced the garrisons of the forts to a small, dynamic minimum. At larger strongholds, they kept troops in reserve that were sent to the other forts in case of calamities. It was impossible to man all the forts on the African and Asian coasts to the maximum. The mother country had only one million inhabitants and could only supply a limited number of troops.

The presence of the Portuguese existed by the grace of good contacts with local rulers. They supplied slaves from the areas under their control, but also slaves from the sub-Saharan region. Slavery was not introduced to Africa by the Portuguese, but it was perfected, especially when the transatlantic slave trade began. And not only Africans were enslaved. In the Mediterranean, tens of thousands of enslaved Europeans toiled on the galleys of the Barbary States. Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, was captured by Barbary pirates in 1575 and served as a slave in Algiers for five years until his parents ransomed him. An estimated one and a half million Christians were taken as slaves to North Africa.

The Dutch West India Company captured the Portuguese fort on Arguin in 1633. The small Portuguese garrison was no match for the three well-armed Dutch ships. The Dutch West India Company, which had a state monopoly over America and West Africa, initially started trading Arabic gum on Arguin, which was extracted from acacia trees in Traza and Brakna and used for textile prints. Later, the Dutch also became involved in the slave trade. The slaves ended up on plantations in South America and the Caribbean. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch West India Company owned dozens of forts and trading posts on Africa's west coast, often captured from the Portuguese, and most were used in the transatlantic slave trade. French troops expelled the Dutch from Arguin in 1678 and destroyed the fort. The island remained uninhabited until 1683. In that year, a ship with a curious flag appeared in the Bay of Arguin.

Captain Cornelius Reers of the frigate *Rother Löwe* from Brandenburg, concluded a treaty with the Emir of Traza and rebuilt the old Portuguese fort. The duchy managed to hold the fort until 1721. The Brandenburgers also traded slaves, Arabic gum, ivory, gold and wood.

Brandenburg-Prussia developed into an important economic and military power in northern Europe in the seventeenth century under the Hohenzollerns. Its territory consisted of areas in present-day Poland, Brandenburg and the duchies of Cleves, Jülich, Mark and Ravensberg in western Germany. In 1701, Elector Friedrich III of Brandenburg was promoted to King of Prussia. Prussia soon dominated the kingdom and the Brandenburgers had little to say anymore. Brandenburg's colonial ambitions began with Elector Friedrich Wilhelm I, who in 1651, attempted to purchase the strategically located trading post of Tranquebar on the

Indian Coromandel Coast from Denmark. This plan failed due to lack of money. In 1682, Frederick Wilhelm I founded the Brandenburg African Company, with the support of Dutch traders. In this way, the Dutch tried to circumvent the state monopoly of the almighty West India Company. Due to the lack of a port of its own, Brandenburg ships left from Pilau on the Baltic coast. From 1683, the port of Emden was used, close to the Dutch border and far from the restless Baltic region. The company never had more than twenty-eight ships under its flag. Moreover, many ships were of Dutch origin.

Despite their limited strength, the Brandenburgers were very ambitious. On 1 January 1683, they started to build Fort Gross Friedrichsburg on the African Gold Coast, in present-day Princess Town in Ghana; where the English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Danes and Swedes also founded dozens of forts and trading posts. Between 1683 and 1685, the Brandenburgers built three more forts, with which they controlled a coastal strip of about thirty kilometers, for trading gold and timber, and off course slaves.

The Brandenburg African Company also gained a foothold on the Caribbean island of Saint Thomas. The island was owned by the Danish West India and Guinea Company, but the Danes leased the Brandenburgers a small part of the island. The island is located sixty kilometers east of Puerto Rico and is about the size of the Channel Island of Guernsey. The Brandenburg African Company was given an area to lease near the capital Charlotte Amalié and some smaller areas in the west, Krum Bay and Bordeaux Estates, for a period of 99 years. It was not much. The Danes kept the most fertile lands for themselves. In 1686, the first Brandenburg ship from Gross Friedrichsburg reached Saint Thomas and delivered 450 slaves. The Brandenburg African Company had finally created the much-desired triangular trade, following the example of the companies of the larger countries: shipping goods to Africa, buying slaves with the proceeds, transporting the slaves to their own plantations in the Caribbean and transporting the proceeds of the slave plantations to Europe.

In 1688, the Brandenburg part of Saint Thomas was populated by three hundred Europeans and more than a thousand slaves. In 1715, the entire island was populated by five hundred Europeans and more than three thousand slaves. Between 1686 and 1735, the Brandenburgers transported approximately ten to thirty thousand slaves from West Africa to the Caribbean. Most slaves were sold at slave markets on French, Spanish and English islands.

The slave plantations of Saint Thomas paled in comparison to the thousands of plantations of the Spaniards in Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico; the Dutch in Suriname, Berbice, Essequibo and Demerara; the French in Martinique and Guadeloupe; the Portuguese in Brazil, and the English in Jamaica and the Windward Islands. Mid-seventeenth century, the entire Caribbean area was one big slave plantation. Not only because of the fertile volcanic soil, but also because an island is easy to defend and it is almost impossible for slaves to escape.

The Danish West India and Guinea Company also conquered the nearby islands of Saint John and Saint Croix. Slavery on these islands continued until 1803, when Denmark was the first land to abolish slavery. After that, the Danish Virgin Islands were only loss-making. The main reason for Denmark to sell them to the United States in 1917.

In 1695, the Brandenburg African Company tried in vain to buy Tortola and Sint Eustatius from the English. After that, it all went downhill. The Caribbean activities became less profitable, mainly because the French West India Company kept thwarting them. In 1695, the French plundered the Brandenburg plantations on Saint Thomas. The Danish plantations were left alone, to avoid a war with Denmark in Europe. The Brandenburg African Company lost fifteen ships to the French.

In West Africa, the Brandenburg African Company was also thwarted by the French. They conquered Arguin in 1721, which was under the command of Dutchman Jan Wynen Bastiaens. Gross Friederichsburg was also plundered several times, not only by the French, but also by the Dutch and English. Because of the mounting losses, Friedrich Wilhelm I sold the colony of Gross Friederichsburg in 1720 to the Dutch West India Company for the sum of 7200 ducats and twelve black slaves. The Dutch renamed the fort 'Hollandia,' but soon they stopped caring about it and left it to its fate. The Brandenburg African Company went bankrupt in 1731. The last Brandenburgers left the exclaves on Saint Thomas in 1735. This ended Brandenburg's brief colonial period, which began with the arrival of the *Rother Löwe* on Arguin. The Dutch again occupied Arguin for a short time, but after 1728 the island fell into control of local rulers. They also used the island for slave trading.

Arguin came into French hands again in 1895, as a result of the Berlin Conference of 1885. The island became part of the vast colony of French West Africa. This colony covered the territory of present-day Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger, Burkina Faso and Benin. In addition, Algeria, Tunisia, Djibouti, Madagascar and the greater part Morocco came into

French hands and France also controlled a large part of Central Africa with the colony of French Equatorial Africa. The German colonies of Togo and Cameroon were conquered in 1914. On the eve of World War I, almost half of the territory of Africa was under French rule. This was about ten percent of the earth's surface.

Before 1895, the French presence in Africa was very limited, mainly forts and trading posts on the west coast of the continent and settlements in the northern part of modern-day Algeria, were the French gained influence from the mid-nineteenth century. The French only got full control of the islands of Mauritius and Réunion, east of Madagascar. In the eighteenth century, these islands, like the Portuguese islands along the west coast of the continent, were developed into large scale plantation islands where tens of thousands of slaves died in the tropical sun to supply Europe with coffee, sugar, cotton and cocoa.

Arguin is now part of Mauritania. A striking detail is that Mauritania was the last country in the world to officially abolish slavery in 1980. In practice, it took decades before slavery was completely eradicated. Slavery is something of all times and of all continents, and is still widespread nowadays, not only in the so-called Third World, but also in Europe and America, in all kinds of forms, less visible, less named, but just as dehumanizing.

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Bioko

Portuguese slave colony on the Equator

Island: Bioko, Fernando Po, Fernando Póo, Otcho
Country: Equatorial Guinea
Status: insular region
Surface area: 2,017 km²
Population: 335,048 (2015)
Location: Gulf of Guinea
Colonizer: Portugal, Netherlands, Great Britain, Spain

From the fifteenth century onwards, Portugal showed the other Atlantic-European countries the way to the rest of the world, to new trading areas, new discoveries, but also to the dark times of the slavery-based plantation system, which lasted more than four centuries. Bioko was one of the islands along the west coast of Africa where the Portuguese built large-scale plantations in the fifteenth century, where tens of thousands of slaves toiled. The island is located just above the equator, a few dozen kilometers off the coast of Cameroon, but is part of Equatorial Guinea, two hundred kilometers to the south; a discrepancy due to the intervention of Portugal and Spain. The distance to Lisbon is seven thousand kilometers. The island or parts of it have alternately belonged to the sphere of influence of Portugal, Spain, England and the Netherlands.

Bioko has an area of two thousand square kilometers and has more than three hundred thousand inhabitants. The island is about seventy kilometers long and about thirty kilometers wide. The volcanic, mountainous island has a real high mountain range with the Pico Basilé, with a height of 3011 meters. The city of Malabo, formerly Santa Isabel, in the north of the island, is capital of Equatorial Guinea. Ninety percent of the inhabitants of Bioko live in Malobo. The southern side of the island has the dubious honor of having the most rainfall in all of Africa; more than ten thousand millimeters per year. In colonial times it was called “a white man’s grave.” Attempts by the Portuguese and Spanish to implement an active population policy repeatedly failed, due to the merciless tropical climate. Most European immigrants succumbed to yellow fever.

In 1472, the Portuguese Fernando do Po was the first European to reach Bioko. The Portuguese called the island first ‘Formosa Flora,’ because of its beautiful flora, but after 1494, the name Fernando Po came into use. The Portuguese established large sugar cane plantations on Bioko, which were worked by thousands of slaves. The local Bubi population, who had lived on the island since the seventh century, were driven inland to the mountains. The slaves were brought in via slave islands in the north and forts and trading posts on the West African coast. The Portuguese managed to hold Fernando Po with an iron fist for more than three centuries. The Dutch West India Company tried to get a foothold on the island in 1642, established a trading post on the south coast, but was driven out by the Portuguese six years later.

Spain acquired Fernando Po in 1778 with the Treaty of El Pardo, in exchange for areas in present-day Brazil, together with the islands of Annobón and Corisco and the coastal area of present-day Equatorial Guinea. Most sugar cane plantations had already been outcompeted by plantations on the Caribbean islands and South America’s ‘Wild Coast.’ Only two years after the Treaty of El Pardo, the Spanish governor deserted and the Bubis could return to the coastal areas.

Almost fifty years after the departure of the Spanish, the Briton William Fitzwilliam Owen founded the port city of Port Clarence, later Malobo. From there he managed to intercept twenty slave ships and freed 2,500 slaves. In 1807, the British banned slave trade and urged the other colonial powers to do the same. Incidentally, slavery continued in the British colonies until 1834, after which slaves were forced to work on the plantations for another five years. By then, they had probably succumbed to the hard work. Only the supply of new slaves was prohibited by the British. Fitz William Owen's actions had little effect. The slave ships of the other countries filled their quotas without much trouble at other locations on the West

and Central African coast and many British ships continued to trade illegally in African and Asian slaves.

Although the British made a good impression with their ban on the slave trade, slavery in Britain itself continued until 1917, albeit in a slightly different form. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, England sent almost half a million undesirable citizens as contract slaves to the colonies in North America and the Caribbean; mostly street children, rebellious Irish, Catholics and vagrants that the wealthy middle class wanted to get rid of. The first English ship with 136 street children arrived in North America in 1619, just twelve years after the first permanent English colony was founded in Virginia. The contract slaves were auctioned at the same slave markets where the black slaves were auctioned and usually ended up on the same tobacco plantations in Virginia. According to their contract, adult British slaves were freed after a certain number of years, children only when they reached adulthood. They usually did not reach that age. And the contracts could always be extended. Slave owners could extend the contract at their discretion, such as in case of laziness, disobedience or escape. Punishments for attempts to escape included public flogging, branding, and cutting off ears, the same treatment that black slaves received. They could also be sold on. The contract slaves were completely dependent on the goodwill of the plantation owners.

Fernando Po was formally still owned by Spain. The British had to leave the island in 1855. Spain then used Fernando Po to expel unwanted groups from its own country and the colonies: politicians, scientists, rebellious Afro-Cubans and hundreds of revolutionaries from the Philippine uprising of 1896. Until independence in 1968, Fernando Po remained a Spanish colony. Fernando Po and Rio Muni, the coastal area that the Spanish had acquired with the Treaty of El Pardo, were promoted from colony to Spanish provinces in 1959, a last-ditch attempt by the Franco dictatorship to retain the areas for Spain. But the population was already rebelling. All of Africa was rebelling and times were changing.

Present-day Equatorial Guinea consists of the former Rio Muni and the islands of Annobón, Corisco and Bioko. After independence, freedom and democracy were crushed immediately. The first president of Equatorial Guinea, Francisco Macias Nguema, had a large number of his political opponents liquidated in the first months of independence. Eight thousand Spaniards and Portuguese were still in the country. They were tied to their mansions, large estates and their privileged colonial lifestyle for generations and were naïve enough to think that everything would remain the same. When Nguema showed his true face in the first months of 1969, they tried in panic to get a place on the last ships leaving for Europe. Nguema turned the country into a dictatorship that can be compared in horror to that of Idi Amin in Uganda, supported only by the Soviet Union and Cuba. More than fifty thousand people died in prison. Many residents fled to neighboring countries. Nguema's rage was not only directed against the Bubis on Bioko, but also against the Fernandinos; the population group of European-African descent, among them descendants of the thousands of German prisoners of war that the Allies interned on Bioko during World War I.

In 1975, Francisco Macias Nguema changed his name to the Africanized 'Masie Nguema Biyogo Negue Ndong.' The island's name Bioko is based on his name. During the Nguema dictatorship, the island's cocoa plantations became overgrown and Equatorial Guinea's economy collapsed. All cows were slaughtered. According to the omniscient dictator, milk was a reprehensible colonial product. Ten years after independence, the balance could be drawn: twenty percent of the population had fled or died. After a coup d'état, Francisco Macias Nguema suffered the same fate as his victims. He was executed without trial in September 1979.

The regime in power is still corrupt, tortures and rigs elections. In 1990, oil was discovered off the coast of Equatorial Guinea. The country became a member of OPEC in 2017. Due to the revenues from the oil industry, Equatorial Guinea has a per capita income comparable to many European countries. Due to the enormous corruption, prosperity only benefits a small group and a large part of the population still lives in poverty.

Equatorial Guinea is the only continental country in the world whose capital is on an island. The revenues from the oil industry are being used to build a new capital on the continental part of the country. The reason for building this new capital is shrouded in mists: a capital on the mainland can be better defended. The days of colonialism are over and who wants to invade little Equatorial Guinea? Maybe we are hitting a national trauma here and it is better not to have an opinion about it.

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Cargados Archipelago

Latest sighting of the dodo

Island: Cargados Archipelago, Cargados Carajos, Saint Brandon
Country: Mauritius
Status: dependent territory
Surface area: 1.3 km^2
Population: 40 (2022)
Location: Indian Ocean
Colonizer: France, Great Britain

The Cargados Archipelago, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, is shown on almost all world maps and therefore seems more impressive than its actual size justifies. The sixty islands and sandbanks together are only 1.3 square kilometers in size, considerably smaller than the tiny German island of Helgoland. To be precise: only one third of Helgoland. I tried to find a known island of such small size, but could not find such a pinprick. Most of the islands of the Cargados Archipelago are located on a reef that is more than fifty kilometers long and up to five kilometers wide. The sea is only about six meters deep; clear water all the way to the bottom. The five largest islands of the archipelago are: Albatross, Tortue, Avocare, Mapare and Coco. Albatross Island lies about thirty kilometer north of the reef, is by far the largest island with one square kilometer, but is uninhabited. On the tiny Île Raphaël, in the north of the reef, there is nowadays a small lodge for tourists who come to dive or fish. Most of the islands are forested and have narrow sandy beaches.

Hundreds of ships have run aground on the treacherous reef of the Cargados Archipelago over the centuries. One of the most memorable shipwrecks was that of the *Arnhem* under the command of Volker Evertsz. The *Arnhem* was part of a fleet of seven ships that was on its way from Batavia to the Netherlands, but lost the other ships in a storm and ran aground on the reef on 12 February 1662. Volker Evertsz and the survivors managed to reach one of the islets of the Cargados Archipelago, but realized that they would starve there. They rowed south in a lifeboat to Mauritius, a journey of four hundred kilometers across open sea. In Mauritius they managed to survive by hunting goats, birds and pigs. Three months later they were rescued by an English ship. Not an exceptional story in itself. But the shipwreck of the *Arnhem* is of historical significance because Volker Evertsz and his crew were probably the last to see the *Raphus cucullatus*, or the legendary dodo, in the flesh.

That a group of Dutch sailors saw the last dodos is one of those ironic coincidences that form the basis of a good story. After all, the extermination of the dodo is attributed to Dutch sailors. The Dutch East India Company used Mauritius for more than a century as a stopover on its way to Ceylon, Malacca, the Dutch East Indies, Formosa and Japan. The Dutch sailors clubbed the dodos en masse to serve as salted supplies for the rest of their journey. That's what the schoolbooks say. But did Dutch sailors really eat so many dodos?

The uninhabited Mauritius was already known to Arab sailors. In 1506, Portuguese traders on their way to India were the first to land. They used the island as a supply station on their way north. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were not bothered by European competition in the Indian Ocean. They managed to keep the route via Cape of Good Hope to India and the Far East, which Bartholomew Diaz had discovered in 1488, hidden from their European competitors for over a century. Maps and documents were kept under lock and key in Lisbon. As a result, the Portuguese were able to establish a worldwide trading empire of forts and trading posts between 1420 and 1543, connecting Lisbon with Nagasaki.

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands fought its way free from Spanish rule and within a few decades the country developed into a major competitor of both the Spanish and the Portuguese. Spain and Portugal had been united by the Iberian Union since 1580 and were therefore both at war with the young republic during a large part of the Eighty Years' War. The Dutch tried to outsmart the Portuguese by finding an alternative route to the lucrative trading areas in Asia, via the Northeast Passage, around the

Eurasian continent. All three attempts failed and the last resulted in the mythical wintering of Barentsz and Van Heemskerck on Nova Zembla. Espionage proved to be a much cheaper and more effective means. At the instigation of the Flemish cartographer Petrus Plancius, one of the founders of the Dutch East India Company, the brothers Cornelis and Frederik de Houtman left for Lisbon in 1592, to gather information about the 'Carreira da Índia', the route to India and the East Indies. The brothers were captured. As spies they risked the death penalty. However, the evidence against their case was too thin, because they had never put the necessary information in writing.

Two years later they were ransomed by a consortium of Dutch merchants. A few months after his release, Cornelis de Houtman sailed for the Amsterdam 'Compagnie van Verre' as first Dutchman via Cape of Good Hope to the Indian Ocean and reached Java. The Portuguese had definitively lost their advantage. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company conquered a large part of the Portuguese strongholds on the African coasts, in Ceylon, India, Malacca, the East Indies, Formosa and Japan. A split-off of the Second Dutch Shipping Company to the East Indies, under the command of Jacobus van Neck, reached Mauritius in 1598. The Dutch called the island 'Prince Maurits of Nassau Island', after the then stadtholder. In 1638, Fort Frederik Hendrik was built. Soon after, a permanent settlement was established around the fort. Sugar cane was planted on a limited scale and timber was exported, but the Dutch, like the Portuguese, mainly used the island as a stopover on their way to India and the Far East.

The second Governor of Mauritius, Adriaan van der Stel, bought over a hundred slaves in 1641 to work the sugar cane plantations and cut timber. Within a week, half of the slaves escaped to the mountainous interior. The island was forested, had rivers, waterfalls and plenty of food: pigs, goats, deer and macaques. Later governors also imported African slaves, but economic activities remained limited and no more than a few hundred slaves were ever employed on the island.

The Dutch East India Company held Mauritius until 1710. The island was abandoned because the plantations were no longer profitable. Moreover, Mauritius had already been replaced as a supply station by the Cape Colony in the mid-seventeenth century. According to an article in the Leeds Intelligencer from 1755, the Dutch left the island because literally all the plantations were destroyed by a plague of long-tailed macaques, which the Portuguese had introduced in the sixteenth century.

France took Mauritius shortly after the departure of the Dutch and occupied it until the Napoleonic era. Under Governor Mahé de la Bourdonnais, sugar cane production was significantly expanded and the real colonization of the island began. Hundreds of sugar cane plantations were established, worked by tens of thousands of slaves, mainly supplied by Portuguese traders from Mozambique and Zanzibar, where the Portuguese had a firm foothold since the early sixteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, sixty thousand slaves worked on the island, which the French called 'Île de France.' The slaves made up eighty percent of the population.

The French East India Company, which administered the island until its transfer to the French state in 1767, managed to develop it into one of the largest and most profitable plantation islands of the French colonial empire. And one of the largest slave islands. The sister island of Réunion was also developed into a large slave colony. In addition to slaves, from 1729 onwards Indian contract workers were employed, mostly from Pondicherry, a group of fifteen small French exclaves on the southwest and southeast coasts of India. In the Caribbean Sea, the French also developed Saint Domingue, Guadeloupe and Martinique into large plantation islands. Of all major colonial powers, the French had a clear preference for islands to establish slave plantations. Their only continental plantations were in French Guiana.

Great Britain conquered Mauritius during the Napoleonic era. The British abolished slavery in 1835 and imported more contract workers to work the plantations; Indians, Chinese and Malays. The contract workers were hardly better off than the slaves. Disobedience or laziness was punished with corporal punishment or extension of the contract. The British retained control of Mauritius until independence in 1968.

Nowadays, the island has 1.3 million inhabitants; a colorful mix of all kinds of imported population groups, living on an area of less than two thousand square kilometers. Remarkable for a fairly isolated island in the Indian Ocean. The population density, at more than seven hundred inhabitants per square kilometer, is much higher than densely populated countries such as England, the Netherlands or Taiwan, which are among the most densely populated in the world - and in addition, much of the island is mountain range.

The neighboring island of Réunion, less than two hundred kilometers to the southwest and still firmly in French hands, has over eight hundred thousand inhabitants. The hustle and

bustle on both islands can be traced back to the massive import of slaves, the recruitment of contract laborers and the remote location of the islands, which meant that the descendants of the slaves and the contract laborers had nowhere to go. An island is a trap if you do not have the means to leave. Fortunately, Mauritius and Réunion are popular with tourists these days. They have a high level of prosperity by African standards.

No mammals were naturally found in Mauritius, with the exception of bats. The Portuguese were the first to introduce pigs and macaques, to serve as provisions on the way to India and the Far East. The Dutch added deer and goats to the local fauna. Dogs escaped, rats and mice came naturally with the ships. It is often claimed that Dutch sailors clubbed the illustrious dodos to death en masse. I can still clearly remember the school books from my childhood, with photos of tough sailors attacking the dodos with huge clubs, piles of slaughtered dodos and sloops returning fully loaded to ships with the red, white and blue in top, waiting to leave in the evening light. It did not arouse any empathy for the dodos in me. They just did not excel in grace or beauty or anything.

In reality, dodos were only hunted occasionally. It was not for nothing that the Dutch called the dodo 'walghvogel', which means 'disgusting bird.' Moreover, Mauritius had sufficient alternatives that were much tastier. When the Dutch colonized the island, the pigs and macaques that the Portuguese had introduced had already multiplied exponentially. It was not hunting that proved fatal for the dodo, but invasive species and, above all, the arrival of rats. The dodo had no natural enemies, had gradually lost its ability to fly and nested on the ground. Its eggs were eaten by pigs, macaques, dogs and rats and a century and a half after the first man set foot on Mauritius, the dodo was done for.

Other bird species in Mauritius did not fare too well either. Of the 45 endemic bird species that occurred on the island, 24 eventually became extinct, including the red rail, the Mauritius goose, the Mauritius duck and the Mauritius night heron. Only the dodo has stuck in the collective memory. Probably because of the Dadaist sound of its name.

The first dodo descriptions came from the Dutch at the end of the sixteenth century. When they, led by Jacobus van Neck, first reached Mauritius in 1598, they made three exploratory expeditions. Helmsman Heyndrick Dirksz Jolinck described the dodo in the ship's log:

> "To their left was a small island they called Heemskerk Island and a bay they called Warwijck Bay. Here they stayed for twelve days to recuperate. In this place they found a large quantity of birds, twice the size of geese they called 'walghvogels,' which had very good meat. But when they found an abundance of pigeons and parrots, they refused to eat the meat of those large rotten birds that were everywhere."

The word dodo most likely is of Dutch origin. The name may be derived from the word 'dodoor,' which means lazy or from the word 'dodaars,' which means fat ass. The combined meaning is the most striking: lazy with a fat ass. In 1602, Captain Willem van West-Zanen was the first to use the word dodaars in his ship's log. In 1634, the English writer Sir Thomas Herbert changed it in one of his books into dodo.

In 1662, Volker Evertsz and his crew were probably the last to see the dodo. Gerrit Ridder Muys noted in 1669, when he sailed along the coast of Mauritius, that the dodo was still common. The dodo had not been seen for several years at that time. He may have mistaken one of the other flightless birds that later became extinct for the dodo. Benjamin Harry, first mate of the *Berkeley Castle*, was the last to mention the dodo in 1681. He too probably confused several species, especially since the descriptions are often vague. What is certain is that the dodo did not live to see the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The age of discovery led to the loss of many endemic species. Especially on islands, whose remoteness makes them the perfect location for evolution to break new ground, to produce a variation on a variation; as a result of a smaller available area, less food and the absence of predators. The result in the form of giant tortoises, giant lizards, mini hippos, dwarf elephants and almost wingless birds is unusually exciting and impressive. In the plant world, the result is even more impressive: islands have probably produced hundreds of thousands of endemic plant species. In particular, rats that came with the ships and the introduction of goats and pigs have led to the extinction of thousands of species. And, of course, man's tendency to shoot at anything that moves.

The Cargados Archipelago is politically part of the Republic of Mauritius, which also includes Rodrigues and the Agalega Islands**.** Rodrigues is located 560 kilometers east of the main island. The Agalega Islands are 1122 kilometers further north and the Cargados Archipelago 430 kilometers further north**.** Mauritius also claims the Chagos Archipelago, two thousand

kilometers further north, now called the British Indian Overseas Territory. The BIOT was split off before the country's independence and is now leased by the British to the United States as a military base.

Several islands of the Cargados Archipelago are now no longer freely accessible, to prevent what happened in Mauritius, where invasive species displaced most of the original flora and fauna. Some islands of the archipelago have been excavated by guano miners in the past to such an extent that they nowadays disappear completely or partially under water during storms. Guano mining stopped at the beginning of the twentieth century, when guano was no longer profitable due to the introduction of artificial fertilizer. There was also some fishing around the Cargados Archipelago. If you were lucky in the past, something valuable from a sunken ship washed up on the beach. Nowadays, this is mainly plastic rubbish.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the islands of the Cargados Archipelago had 110 inhabitants, 97 of whom were men. Only one inhabitant was born in the archipelago. After that, the population declined rapidly, due to the end of guano mining. In 1921, the archipelago had only a few dozen inhabitants. The population increased again to a peak of over a hundred in 1983, only to decline again to 60, all seasonal workers, most of whom now live on the tiny jet-set island of Île Raphaël. If there was ever a native population in the Cargados Archipelago, it has been extinct for some time, as has the dodo in Mauritius.

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