Bounty Bay landing site and cruise ship Hanseatic

Pitcairn Island:
Home of "Bounty" Mutineers and Their Descendants

Maria Amoamo

This article draws on my year's experience on Pitcairn Island from August 2008 to September 2009 as I accompanied my partner and appointed Medical Officer to this small community in the southwest Pacific. The following narrative hopes to impart a sense of 'unique isolation' and discuss the obstacles and potential for tourism development to this remote Pacific Island community whose early history is inextricably bound to Eastern Polynesia and the latter day mutineers of HMAS Bounty whom, in 1790 made Pitcairn their home.

Pitcairn Island Bounty Bay

Pitcairn is a small volcanic island situated halfway between New Zealand and South America and is often referred to as the most isolated island in the world. The island is 3.2km long by 1.6km wide with an irregular shape of which only 8% is flat. It has a rugged coastline, steep slopes and cliffs and its highest point is 347 meters above sea level. Pitcairn enjoys a sub-tropical climate and is part of the Pitcairn Island Group and a British Overseas Territory which also includes Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands. Oeno and Ducie are small low atolls while Henderson is a much larger raised coral island and UNESCO world

heritage site. It offers a rare collection of native fauna and flora including nine endemic plants, four endemic species of birds and numerous migratory species. As the only inhabited island of the group Pitcairn's nearest landfall is Mangareva in the Gambier Islands, part of French Polynesia some 480kms north east. Due to its remote location accessibility is by 36 hour boat trip from Mangareva. The current service operates only four times a year but is expected to increase in the near future. Today Pitcairn's inhabitants' number only 52 people; many of whom are descendents of the Bounty mutineers. Their lifestyle offers a unique insight to a culture that is built on Poly-

nesian and British heritage, an intriguing history, remote location and lush natural surroundings. Notwithstanding these unique features, the difficult access has limited the development of tourism to irregular cruise ship and yachting visitors and some study groups including naturalists, divers and representatives of the Pitcairn Island Administration. However, recent steps towards more autonomous self government and community development projects to improve infrastructure hope to increase the flow of tourism to the island.

Pitcairn is infamous as a refuge for the mutineers of the HMAS Bounty. It is a place shrouded in history and intrigue;

Pitcairn honey

its story legendary with five movies and over 70 books relating the tale. The Bounty set sail from Spithead, Portsmouth in December 1787 bound for Tahiti to collect breadfruit and transport them to the West Indies where they were to be cultivated to produce cheap food for slaves (Nicolson 1997). The ensuing mutiny on the Bounty in 1789 is well documented and today attracts visitors to experience this desolate rock where Fletcher Christian and eight Bounty crew accompanied by nineteen Tahitian men and women sought refuge from the British navy. They remained undiscovered until 1808 when the American sealing ship Topaz visited the island. By this time only one mutineer, John Adams and a number of Tahitian women and children were left. Adams had created a peaceful and pious community that closely followed the teachings of the Bible that accompanied the sailors to the island. The Bounty Bible takes pride of place in Adamstown's museum on Pitcairn today where most residents are now Seventh Day Adventists, having converted to the faith in 1887 as a result of the visit of an American missionary of that persuasion. Thus, it is the Bounty heritage that draws visitors to the island today. Over the past decade, interest in Pitcairn stamps, once the major source of income for the island, has

fallen and the small trading economy declined. Combined with reduced investments and limited success in diversifying the economy, tourism is being explored as an integral part of its current development strategy. With a small and ageing population Pitcairn is vulnerable and tourism is strongly mooted as a means of kick-starting the economy, providing jobs, encouraging entrepreneurial activity and improving links with overseas markets (Pitcairn Island Council (PIC) 2008). Residing on the island are also a school teacher (there are six school age and two preschool children), a doctor on annual contract, policeman, a Family and Community Advisor, Pitcairn Island Commissioner and UK Governor's representative who is appointed annually. There is one grocery store, a warehouse, church, post office and an office for the Treasurer and Secretary and a community Town Hall. Local Council consists of seven members including a mayor who is elected for a three-year term. All Pitcairners of working age have government jobs, and many are employed on infrastructure projects such as the current redevelopment of the landing site at Bounty Bay (see photo: Bounty Bay landing site and cruise ship Hanseatic).

Incomes are supplemented by the sale of curios to cruise ships and other visitors, and the sale of Pitcairn honey

(see photo: Pitcairn honey). Production of unique art and crafts are an important part of Pitcairn's social and cultural identity and during my stay I initiated plans towards developing a "mark of authenticity" for these products that include wood carving, weaving and tapa cloth making. All materials are sourced from the Pitcairn Island Group and handmade by locals. Much time is spent by the elder women collecting, drying, and preparing pandanas leaves for basket-weaving; a highly labour intensive job but one which has become an integral part of Pitcairn social life and livelihood.

The social and economic context of tourism

Pitcairners are robust and resourceful people whose lifestyle is fashioned by their rugged and isolated environment. They are well connected with the rest of the world with internet and television and much of their day to day life is committed to maintaining roads, building homes, upkeep of basic infrastructure, fishing and growing fruit and vegetables. A recent governmental restructuring programme has devolved operational responsibility for local governance to the community and aims to develop a more self sufficient local economic model and gives attention to bio-security, education, public health, agriculture and fisheries and culture and tourism. The intention is to increase autonomy, improve living standards and encourage expansion of the population (PIC 2008). Pitcairn is heavily reliant on budgetary aid administered by DFID (Department for International Development). DFID was established in 1997 by the UK government as a department working towards Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by the United Nations (www.dfid.gov.uk).

DFID continually monitors how Pitcairn uses money and regularly sends administrative staff to the island to assess current development. A number of obstacles have hindered tourism development in the past however progress is now being made towards more self-directed and entrepreneurial approaches to developing tourism as a means to economical growth. The 2006 Pitcairn Island Development Plan emphasized the need to further develop cruise ship tourism in order to increase Pitcairners' econo-

mic self-reliance (TRC 2008). However the reality is that the number of cruise ships visiting the island has been slowly declining. Out of an estimated 40 ships that cruise in this region, currently only between eight to ten ships make Pitcairn Island a port of call. Of those that do visit, several only classify Pitcairn as a "cruise-by" destination and almost half do not land passengers on the island. Part of the reason for this is thought to be the strong swells and the difficulty of landing ships' tenders (TRC 2008: 1).

Current figures show a total of 2500-3000 cruise ship passengers during the cruise season October to March. There has been little change to this number for some years primarily because of: the relative isolation of Pitcairn Island, making it difficult to visit on a short cruise, perceived lack of facilities and things to do on-island, and the difficulty of getting passengers ashore, especially in heavy weather (TRC 2008). Pitcairn has no harbour or anchorage, and heavy swells pound the steep rocky cliffs for much of the year hence, landing visitors can present a significant challenge and risk for cruise passengers. The transfer of passengers ashore is usually undertaken by Pitcairn long-boats that are, in themselves an 'attraction' that many visitors to Pitcairn are keen to experience. Pitcairn men are skilled at navigating boats through the risky passage in to Bounty Bay; however the sometimes dangerous transfer between cruise vessel and long-boat, and the current set-up of the longboat (no seating except flat deck planking) does not suit many elderly passengers (see photo: Bringing passengers ashore to Bounty Bay). The long-boats have been the life-blood of Pitcairn for many decades and have enabled Pitcairners to visit and trade with passing container ships (see photo: Longboats "Moss" & "O'Leary"). This helps supplement the three-monthly supply ship that visits the island.

Addressing challenges in tourism

Current discussion between DFID and the Pitcairn Islands Government has seen the initiation of an 'alternative harbour' project planned for the western side of the island known as Tedside. This proposed $14million dollar venture will provide potential for up to 40% additional landing for cruise ships

Bringing passengers ashore to Bounty Bay

and safer passage for transfer between ship and shore. This will give the island two access points depending on weather conditions and increased passenger capacity. It is hoped this will attract more of the 40+ cruise ships that ply the Panama Pacific route. Passengers who land ashore are rewarded with a rich variety of culture, heritage, eco-tourism and adventure activities and of course, a chance to meet the descendants of the Bounty mutineers. When not possible to land any visitors, Pitcairn Islanders come to the ship to set up market stalls. The opportunity to take merchandise out to passengers is an additional source of income for many locals but can create problems with limited human resources. Crew are required to man the longboat, whilst locals also cater to those passengers who come ashore – offering quad bike sightseeing tours, walking tours, the sale of curios and souvenirs, and often hosting an informative lecture and lunch for visitors in the town square. At times specialist groups such as ornithologists, divers and botanists visit the island by private charter during the cruise season. These Bounty 'enthusiasts' are a growing niche market as well as visiting "yachties" during the sailing season April to June. Steps are being taken to promote and market the Pitcairn experience and the local Tourism Board has recently initiated plans to develop a promotional DVD for existing and potential cruise agencies and operators. This will also help change market perceptions of 'lack of on-island activities for visitors'. The

Tourism Board has also recently developed a website and produced brochures to aid this process. For independent travellers to the island accommodation can be provided with local families for a cost of USD$75.00 per person per night including meals and internet access. Home stays are popular with Pitcairn Island families and visitors alike, providing an opportunity for social exchange and insight to island life. However, these opportunities are restricted to the infrequent shipping schedule between Mangareva and Pitcairn. Visitors who stay ashore can experience stunning scenery and hikes to such sites as St. Paul's rock pools, Christian's Cave, Ships Landing, Highest Point, and Garnet's Ridge. An eco-trail has been created en route to Christian's Cave with interpretation signage that informs visitors of Pitcairn's native flora and fauna (see photo: St Paul's rock pools). Another feature that gives visitors a personally rich 'narrative' of the island are the descriptive names for many of the geographic features, e.g., Ned Young Ground, John Catch-a-Cow, Nancy's Stone, Little George Coconuts, and the ever popular Where Dan Fell.

The future of tourism on Pitcairn Island

It is interesting to note that, although Pitcairn was uninhabited at the time the Bounty mutineers arrived in 1790, the remains of a vanished civilization were clearly visible. The mutineers discovered four platforms with roughly hewn stone statues, similar, apparently, to those on

Longboats "Moss" & "O'Leary"

of these rock drawings and a chance to explore Pitcairn's only sandy beach – a great fishing spot (see photo: "Sleeping Elephant" and route to "Down Rope" site).

The history of Pitcairn is an important part of its cultural survival. This was evident when I became involved with a local heritage project during my time on the island. The 'cemetery project' was a community project to map, catalogue and re-dedicate the Pitcairn cemetery. Its current site was established from 1856 onwards when the entire population of 194 persons relocated to Norfolk Island because Pitcairn had become too small for their growing population. Many of these descendants stayed on Norfolk but a small group were homesick for Pitcairn and returned over the period 1859 – 1864. Due to neglect of the cemetery over time it was decided that it would be a worthwhile project to identify where possible, every known grave at the cemetery, map and catalogue the information, and order commemorative plaques from New Zealand. There was widespread enthusiasm from many local

Rapa Nui (Easter Island). Unfortunately, the English, being good Christians, destroyed the platforms and threw the images into the sea (Falk 2004). Evidence remains however, including burial sites, stone axes and ancient petroglyphs discovered at an area called "Down Rope" at the eastern end of the island. These

drawings, which have been the subject of numerous archaeological studies over the past century, have never been fully interpreted but together with other native artifacts, are considered to be Polynesian in origin. For those adventurous enough, the steep cliff face descent to Down Rope is rewarded with a glimpse

residents whom, over a two-week period progressively marked each burial site and checked details against the Pitcairn births and deaths register. The input of elder knowledge was crucial to this process and many stories and anecdotes were shared. A comprehensive alphabetical list of all births and deaths was collated that aided correction of several errors in the island's current register. The cemetery project has contributed to the social and cultural fabric of Pitcairn society and its ongoing preservation will be entrusted to a local trust or committee. The timing of this project was very relevant as 2009 marks the 150th anniversary of Pitcairners' return from Norfolk Island on 17th January 1859. The Pitcairn Island Commissioner Leslie

Jacques commented that "Pitcairn is honouring the past and taking responsibility for the future". Hopefully tourism development will provide a sustainable economic industry for the livelihood of this small community of Bounty descendants. Tourists who are prepared to go the 'extra mile' to this remote island paradise are rewarded with a rich and 'bountiful' experience.

St Paul's rock pools

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Maria Amoamo [amo.cardon@actrix.gen.nz] completed a PhD in tourism at the Department of Tourism, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. She has also published on Maori tourism and cultural representation.

"Sleeping Elephant" and route to "Down Rope" site