Episode Book

EPISODE #5710

Tristan da Cunha: Life on the World's Most Remote Island

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SYNOPSIS

Tristan da Cunha sits 2,414 kilometres from the nearest inhabited place, with one village, 222 residents, and a language that linguists call the smallest and most isolated native variety of English on Earth. This episode explores how the island's founding principle of enforced equality still shapes daily life — from two-sheep quotas to unlocked doors — and what happened when Starlink arrived in September 2024 and multiplied the territory's internet speed thirtyfold overnight. It's a story about isolation, community arithmetic, and what changes when the world's most remote island suddenly gets a reliable connection to everywhere else.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's spent the last couple of weeks walking us around the emptiest places on Earth, and this week he's picked the one that actually has people in it.



Herman

Right, and it's the one that started the whole thing for him.



Corn

Here's what he wrote. During the early days of the pandemic he reconnected with a childhood friend over the shared hobby of exploring random parts of the planet on Google Earth and Google Maps. You zoom into a stretch of ocean that looks like nothing, you keep going past the point where the scale gives you anything useful, and eventually a name appears. That's the trick of it. And there's something vaguely romantic, he says, just in knowing these communities exist. If you're being driven mad by construction noise in Jerusalem, it's useful to know there's an isolated rock in the middle of an ocean if you were ever determined enough to get away from it all.



Herman

Which rock?



Corn

Tristan da Cunha. And Gough Island, which is part of the same archipelago, has no permanent civilian population, but does have a small scientific staff on it. He's watched documentaries. Two things struck him. First, the accent sounds English, and that is not what you expect from people living that far from anywhere. Second, the community looks idyllic, and he remembers an islander saying nobody locks their doors because everybody knows everybody. Then the actual questions. What's it like to live somewhere that remote? Does the internet give them a reliable connection to the outside world? And is the periodic boat visit really the only lifeline for goods? He wants the population, and he wants to know how isolation let this place blossom into something like a remote haven that's still connected to the world.



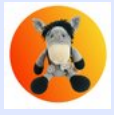
Herman

That's four questions and a thesis.



Corn

He's thorough. So where do we start?



Herman

With the geography, because everything else follows from it. Tristan da Cunha is a volcanic island in the South Atlantic, part of a British Overseas Territory, and the nearest inhabited place to it is St Helena, two thousand four hundred and fourteen kilometres to the north. Montevideo is four thousand kilometres west. Cape Town is two thousand eight hundred and nineteen kilometres away, and Cape Town is the one that matters, because that's where the ships come from.



Corn

One island, one village?



Herman

One settlement. Edinburgh of the Seven Seas, named for Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, who visited in 1867. Everything and everyone is there. Population as of the third of July this year, per the island government's own update, two hundred and twenty-two resident islanders, plus eighteen overseas. Density works out at one point three people per square kilometre, which makes it about the fifth least densely populated place on Earth.



Corn

And you can see that number moving.



Herman

In the wrong direction. Two hundred and fifty permanent inhabitants in October 2018. Two hundred and twenty-nine when the BBC reported in September 2025. Two hundred and twenty-one in NPR's feature this April. Two hundred and twenty-two on the official count in July. I'd treat the government figure as the authoritative one, but the trend line across all of them is the same, and it's gently downward.



Corn

Before we get to the accent, tell me about Gough, because Daniel's picture of this is two islands and only one of them has a village.



Herman

Gough is roughly three hundred and fifty to four hundred kilometres southeast of Tristan. Sixty-five square kilometres of volcanic rock, rising to Edinburgh Peak at around nine hundred and ten metres. No permanent population at all, except for a weather station staffed by about six people. South Africa has run that station continuously since 1956, at Transvaal Bay since 1963, with British permission. Which makes it one of the most remote places on the planet with a constant human presence.



Corn

Six people on a rock in the Southern Ocean. That's a shift, not a posting.



Herman

And they rotate in teams, numbered sequentially. The teams are called overwintering teams. Gough 70 came home in October 2025 after thirteen months, Gough 71 took over, and Gough 72 is recruiting now for the coming season. The roster tells you what the job is. A meteorologist or senior meteorological technician, a diesel mechanic, a medic, a communications engineer, and conservation field assistants.



Corn

You know what that list is? That's a list of everything you can't call someone to come fix.



Herman

That's exactly what it is. And that's the thread that runs through this whole episode. But if you're asking what Daniel's actually poking at, it's the accent.



Corn

Because it sounds English.



Herman

It sounds English because it is English, and the reason is a very small founding event. In 1817, after the garrison withdrew, a corporal named William Glass and two stonemasons stayed behind. Two Englishmen and a Scotsman. That's your original language community. Then you add arrivals over the following decades. Five women from St Helena in 1827. American whalers passing through. Shipwreck survivors, including Italians off the wreck of a ship called the Italia in 1892. So today's islanders are descendants of Dutch, American, English, St Helenian, South African, Scottish and Italian sailors and settlers and survivors.



Corn

So it's not an English accent because England kept in touch. It's an English accent because a handful of English-speaking people didn't leave.



Herman

That's the whole thing. And then it did something interesting, because an isolated founder population of a few dozen speakers, left alone for two hundred years, doesn't preserve the parent dialect. It drifts. Linguists treat Tristan da Cunha English as a distinct contact variety. Schreier calls it the smallest and most isolated native variety of English there is.



Corn

How small are we talking?



Herman

About two hundred and seventy-eight speakers as of June 2008, which is the last count I've got I'd stand behind. And it has creole-like features. There's a preverbal perfective done. So "I's done eat" means "I've eaten." Past tense verbs go uninflected. And present-tense be levels to is across all persons. I is, we is.



Corn

"We is." So the whole island conjugates like one person.



Herman

Grammatically, yes. And there's a second layer to it that I find more interesting than the features themselves. The islanders reportedly code-switch between what they call School English and Island English. They'll use the local dialect as a marker of who's an insider and who isn't. Which is a very normal thing for a small closed community to do, and a slightly uncomfortable thing to notice under the idyllic surface. The door's open, but the language changes depending on who walks through it.



Corn

That actually answers something about the rest of the picture. The doors don't lock because it's a village. The dialect shifts because it's a border.



Herman

That's the right way to hold both of those at once. And I'd flag something that the research can't help me with. There's no current study of how the dialect is behaving now that the island has fast internet. All the linguistic literature is academic and pre-Starlink. Nobody has documented what happens to the smallest native variety of English when its speakers suddenly start hearing the whole world every day.



Corn

That's a question for the next twenty years. Now the daily life, because Daniel said it looks idyllic.



Herman

The best piece of reporting on this is NPR's feature from April, and the line I keep thinking about is this. "Life on Tristan da Cunha may look quiet from the outside, idyllic even, but on the inside, it moves fast. Everyone does everything. All at once. And somehow, they manage."



Corn

That's not idyllic. That's a startup with a very long commute.



Herman

It's a village of two hundred and twenty-two people trying to run a full modern civic infrastructure. You've got to staff a hospital, a school, a government, a fisheries operation, a harbour, a power station. There aren't two hundred and twenty-two jobs' worth of adults. So everyone covers multiple roles. People cover shifts for each other, run errands for each other, and slaughter cows for each other, because if you're the one person on the island who can do a thing, you do it, and when you can't, someone else does it for you.



Corn

And the rhythm of the day?



Herman

Fishermen are out of the harbour between five thirty and six in the morning. Government offices close by three. Then people go and work their family potato patches in the afternoon. And the evenings are for visiting. No invitation needed, front door stays open.



Corn

So Daniel's documentary memory checks out. The door really does stay open.



Herman

It's not sentimentality, though. It's arithmetic. In a community that size, if you're not on good terms with your neighbours, you've broken your own supply chain. The open door is a load-bearing wall.



Corn

And it goes all the way back to the founding.



Herman

The founding document. 1817. Glass and the two stonemasons set up what they called the Firm, and the document says every member's stock and stores should be shared equally, and, quoting it, "no member shall assume any superiority whatever, but all to be considered as equal in every respect."



Corn

Two hundred and nine years of that as the operating principle.



Herman

And you can see it running in the rules that still govern daily life. Each islander may keep two sheep. Each household may keep one working dog. Livestock numbers are strictly controlled, because there are only so many square kilometres of grass and the whole thing will eat itself if you let it.



Corn

Two sheep and one dog. That's not a lifestyle, that's a quota.



Herman

It's a quota that keeps the island alive. Which is the pattern. Every romantic thing about this place turns out to be an engineering solution. The open doors, the equal shares, the two sheep. Somebody did the maths a very long time ago and they've been updating it ever since.



Corn

So that's the human side. The accent, the daily rhythm, the founding principle. But Daniel's second big question is the one that's actually changed in the last two years. Does the internet work there?



Herman

It did not, historically. Before 2024 the island ran on a VSAT link, geostationary satellite, ten megabits per second for the entire territory. And in the early 2000s, if you wanted internet access, it cost you over five pounds a minute through a UK provider. Five pounds a minute means you're not browsing. You're composing an email offline and then paying for the transmission.



Corn

And now?



Herman

September 2024, Starlink goes live. Administrator Philip Kendall's announcement was, and I'll quote it, "Starlink has arrived on Tristan and it's a real game changer. The world's most remote inhabited island now has internet speeds thirty times faster than ever before." Initial tests came in at up to two hundred and ninety megabits per second, and the hardware's rated for up to three hundred. There was an islander, in the reporting on this, who was somewhat emotional at seeing friends live on a video call for the first time in years.



Corn

Say that again. First time in years.



Herman

Two hundred and ninety megabits is on the order of thirty times what they had. Ten to two hundred and ninety. And the physical installation tells you where you are. The antenna sits on the roof of the IT container, which is the communications headquarters, commissioned in May 2022. It's rated for winds over eighty kilometres an hour, and it can be physically removed and stowed before a serious storm.



Corn

So the country's internet connection gets unbolted and taken inside when the weather's bad.



Herman

And that's the correct engineering decision, which is why I'd push back hard on anyone who thinks Starlink means Tristan is now just like everywhere else. The important part is what they didn't replace. Voice traffic still runs over the old VSAT link. So the island has two entirely independent routes to the outside world, and if one goes down, the other picks up the telephone.



Corn

Which tells you they lived through the version where it went down.



Herman

They've had two centuries of practice. And here's the detail I can't stop thinking about. The Starlink uplink routes via Berlin. So the world's most remote inhabited island sees German-language advertising.



Corn

So you leave Cape Town on a ship, sail for up to two weeks, land on a volcanic rock where the front door stays open and nobody's locked anything since 1817, and then you get served an advert in German.



Herman

Because the satellite doesn't know it's over the South Atlantic. It knows which ground station it's talking to. Berlin is the routing.



Corn

That is the least remote thing that's ever happened to that island.



Herman

And that brings up the contradiction in the numbers, which I think is the most interesting unresolved question in this whole topic.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

The government celebrated two hundred and ninety megabits. That's a peak test at launch. Speedgeo, which aggregates speed tests by territory, lists an average download of twelve point six megabits per second for the territory across July 2025 to June this year.



Corn

So the headline is two hundred and ninety and the lived average is twelve point six.



Herman

Both numbers can be true. That gap is the difference between a test that was run on a good day when the link was clean, and the average of every measurement taken over twelve months. And in a place with heavy ocean weather, an antenna that gets removed before storms, and a single uplink, the variance is going to be enormous. A calm Tuesday might hit two hundred. A week of swell might not hit anything.



Corn

So which is it? Faster than before or slower than promised?



Herman

Both. The honest answer is that they went from absolutely unusable and extremely expensive to actually usable. Ten megabits for an entire island is a catastrophe. Twelve point six in the average month is a functioning connection. Two hundred and ninety is what it does when everything's right. And "reliable connectivity" on Tristan doesn't mean a guaranteed number. It means two independent routes, hardware that comes down before the storm, and a community that knows how to wait.



Corn

Which brings us to the boat, because the internet hasn't replaced it.



Herman

Nothing has replaced it. There is no airport. The only way onto or off that island is a ship, two thousand eight hundred and nineteen kilometres from Cape Town, and the crossing can take up to two weeks depending on weather. There are nine ships a year and one hundred and thirty-six berths total.



Corn

One hundred and thirty-six berths, for a year.



Herman

And getting a berth is only the start. Calshot Harbour was built in the late 1960s, and it's too small for ships to actually berth in. So the ship stands off and passengers and cargo are ferried ashore on motorised rafts. Boats have to be lifted in and out by crane. A BBC reporter got there and waited five days offshore before he could land, because heavy swell had closed the harbour.



Corn

So even when your boat arrives, your boat might not arrive.



Herman

That's the correct summary of it. And what happens when a ship does manage to land is the best picture of this island you'll get. The whole village shifts into gear. Fuel, food, tools come off by raft. Hundreds of empty gas bottles get swapped for full ones. Diesel gets pumped into the generator tanks. Couches and cars and beer get delivered to people's front doors by forklift.



Corn

Beer by forklift.



Herman

Fresh fruit and vegetables disappear from the supermarket shelves almost as soon as they arrive. Which tells you what a fresh vegetable actually costs there, in a way no price tag would.



Corn

It's not that food is expensive. It's that food is a ship.



Herman

And the economy that pays for the ships is one animal. The St Paul spiny lobster, Jasus paulensis, found only around a handful of remote southern-ocean islands. A single tail can fetch thirty-nine dollars on the US market, twenty-nine pounds. They sell to Japan and the UK as well. Fishing season runs eighteen to seventy-two days depending on the year. The annual catch is around four hundred and forty-one tonnes, against a quota of roughly eight hundred thousand lobsters.



Corn

So one lobster fishery, and it's the whole island's income.



Herman

And it's protected by something remarkable. Tristan sits inside what is the fifth-largest marine protected zone on Earth, six hundred and eighty-seven thousand square kilometres, with ninety-one percent of the territorial waters closed to commercial fishing entirely. The inshore lobster fishery is preserved as the economic lifeline. So the island is running a conservation regime over an ocean area roughly the size of France, with a single small patrol boat called the Wave Dancer, a range of three hundred miles, and satellite tracking.



Corn

There's a line from one of the fishermen in that BBC piece. "It's our livelihood. Without the ocean, our community wouldn't function." And an eighty-two-year-old named Cheseldon Lavarello saying, "Tristan's ocean is something we must look after. Because, without it, we're gone."



Herman

That's not environmental rhetoric. That's a man doing the maths on his own island.



Corn

So the picture's complete. Now let's talk about the island Daniel's actually asking about when he says "small scientific staff." Gough.



Herman

Gough's the part of this that's farthest from anything, including from Tristan. UNESCO World Heritage Site, inscribed in 1995, extended in 2004 to take in Inaccessible Island as well. It hosts almost the entire world population of the Tristan albatross and the Atlantic petrel. One of the most important seabird colonies on the planet.



Corn

And it's being eaten.



Herman

By mice. House mice, introduced probably by nineteenth-century sealers, and these are about fifty percent larger than normal house mice. They prey on seabird chicks. As of October 2018, the estimate was that they were causing roughly two million fewer eggs and chicks to be raised every year, and threatening several species with extinction.



Corn

Two million a year. On a sixty-five square kilometre island with six people on it.



Herman

The RSPB and the Tristan government ran a rodenticide baiting project in 2019 to try and clear them. It's the logical fix, because mice on an island can be eradicated if you can get bait to every single one of them, and Gough is small enough that it's theoretically possible. But the logistics are brutal, and here's where I have to be honest with you: I could not confirm from the material I've got whether it worked. Wikipedia still describes the mice as present. There's no definitive post-project assessment I can point to.



Corn

It failed, or it's not finished, or nobody's published.



Herman

All three are possible and I don't want to guess. What I can tell you is it's one of the hardest conservation problems on Earth, on one of the hardest-to-reach islands on Earth, and it's a slow-motion extinction in progress while the fix gets attempted.



Corn

Six scientists on a rock trying to save a seabird colony from an oversized mouse. That's the least glamorous, most important job in this entire episode.



Hilbert

Would any of that let you put a second dish somewhere without anyone living there?



Corn

What?



Hilbert

The satellite. Would one work on Gough.



Herman

...Yes. Physically, yes. It needs power and a clear view of the sky. The weather station's got both, and it's been running continuously since 1956.



Hilbert

I spent a winter at a place like that. Not that one. A weather station, Southern Ocean, on the radio. You'd get a window twice a day, ten minutes each, and you'd have a list written out before you sat down, because if you talked past the window you lost the traffic and you waited till tomorrow. Everything was store and forward. You sent it out and you got answers back in a day and a half.



Herman

What did that do to you?



Hilbert

It's not the same as not talking. It's a different thing. You get used to the delay and the delay stops feeling like distance. Then they put a satellite phone in and I called my mother and she didn't believe I was where I said I was.



Corn

Because why would you be.



Hilbert

She thought I was in a hotel. It took me four minutes to convince her. Cheapest minute of my life and the most expensive.



Herman

That's the thing I don't think I'd really understood until right now. The speed was never the point.



Hilbert

The speed isn't the point. The point is you stop deciding in advance what's worth saying. With a window, you triage. You pick the four things. When it's on all the time you just say things, and half of what you say is nothing, and that's the part you missed the most. I'd have paid good money for the nothing.



Corn

But there's a cost to that too. If you can see what's happening back home in real time, you can't pretend nothing's changed.



Hilbert

No you can't. You see it all happening without you, live, and you can't do a thing about it. Some of the lads found that harder than the silence. I didn't mind it. But I could see it in them.



Herman

I hadn't thought about it that way.



Hilbert

The adverts are the funniest part. Every one of them came in German. You're on a rock in the middle of nothing and somebody's trying to sell you a car, and you don't even know what car. It doesn't matter where you go.



Herman

It doesn't.



Hilbert

I had one of the dishes. First one we got. It's gone. They took it when the contract switched over and I never got it back.



Corn

The honest version of the connectivity story isn't the number, is it.



Herman

No. It's that there's a difference between reaching people and being able to say nothing to them. Tristan went from the first to the second in September 2024. That's the change. The megabits are just the receipt.



Corn

Which leaves us with the misconception, because I think most people hearing this walk away with one particular wrong idea.



Herman

What's that?



Corn

That the isolation is what defines this place, and everything else is a workaround for it.



Herman

That one's exactly backwards. The isolation isn't the defining feature. It's a condition they've been engineering around since 1817, and they've been doing it extremely well. The open doors aren't innocence, they're infrastructure. The two-sheep rule isn't quaint, it's a stocking policy. The second satellite route isn't redundancy theatre, it's two hundred years of knowing the link fails.



Corn

The thing that's actually new isn't the remoteness. It's that the remoteness now has a live video feed on it.



Herman

There's a set of questions I can't answer, and I want to leave them open rather than paper over them. Whether the mice are still on Gough is unresolved. The gap between the advertised speed and the measured speed is real and probably permanent, because physics doesn't care about a press release. And nobody has any idea yet what happens to the smallest native variety of English on Earth now that it's hearing everybody else's.



Corn

My guess, for what it's worth, is that this island will be quietly fascinating for the next twenty years and almost nobody will check on it. Which suits the island fine.



Herman

There's a real romantic pull to knowing these places are out there. Daniel said it in the prompt. Any night you can zoom in on the South Atlantic and find Edinburgh of the Seven Seas, and somewhere on that rock right now somebody's got their door open and a German advert is loading on their screen.



Corn

Thanks as ever to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to keep us going, leave a review wherever you found us, and if you've got a question about the emptiest corners of the map, send it in.



Corn

We'll be back soon.