

# Archipiélago Juan Fernández



Stranded in the Pacific Ocean, 667km east of Valparaíso, lies the archipelago of Juan Fernández. It is not part of world-famous Easter Island, but its own set of solitary isles. Though few have ever heard of them, they have a famous history of their own. It all goes back to a marooned Scotsman named Alexander Selkirk who, unfortunately for him, spent more than four years in utter isolation on the archipelago's main island. Hapless Selkirk later became the inspiration and real-life model for Daniel Defoe's 1719 fictional character Robinson Crusoe, in the eponymous book that is often credited as being the first novel in English. Reimagined in the Caribbean, Defoe's account of Selkirk's experiences is an enduring classic and has, in turn, influenced a generation of bad reality TV shows. The main island where Selkirk did his time is now named Isla Robinson Crusoe.

Archipiélago Juan Fernández, which also includes Isla Alejandro Selkirk and Isla Santa Clara, is much more than just a hermit's hideaway. Singularly serene, it is also a unique national park and a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve. A thinly populated land of green mountainous viewpoints, rare plants (some 30% to 40% of the islands' plants are endemic), extraordinary birds and world-class fishing, it's also developing a reputation as the best place to scuba dive in Chile. Despite all of these attractions, tourism is growing slowly due to the remoteness and lack of tourist infrastructure. Between the summer months of December and March, only about 50 to 100 foreigners visit the island per month; during the rest of the year few foreigners, or mainlanders for that matter, set foot on the islands.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Watch the sunrise from **Mirador de Selkirk** (p422)
- Arrive in **San Juan Bautista** (p419) to a crowd of locals welcoming everyone home
- Grab a freshly caught **lobster** (p421) from the pier in San Juan Bautista
- **Snorkel** or **scuba dive** (p420) with the sea lions
- Hike through the lush forests of ferns and rare plants in **Parque Nacional Juan Fernández** (p422)



ARCHIPIÉLAGO  
JUAN FERNÁNDEZ

■ POPULATION: 650

■ AREA: 9571 HECTARES

■ ELEVATION: 0–1650M

## History

Uninhabited when Portuguese mariner Juan Fernández stumbled across the islands in November 1574, they still bear his name. For more than two centuries the main value of the islands was as a stop-off for ships skirting around the Humboldt Current, and as a refuge for pirates and other salty characters. Traffic to the islands eventually increased as sealers sought the pelts of the endemic Juan Fernández fur seal (which was nearly hunted to extinction).

Juan Fernández archipelago is most renowned for the adventures of Scotsman Alexander Selkirk, who spent more than four years marooned on what was then called Isla Masatierra. After a dispute with the captain of the privateer *Cinque Ports* in 1704, Selkirk was put ashore at his own request. This was tantamount to a death sentence for most castaways, who soon starved or shot themselves, but Selkirk survived, adapting to his new home and enduring his desperate isolation.

Ironically, the Spaniards, who vigorously opposed privateers in their domains, had made his survival possible. Unlike many small islands, Masatierra had abundant water, but the absence of food could have been a problem if the Spanish had not introduced goats. Disdaining fish, Selkirk tracked these feral animals, attacked them with his knife, devoured their meat and dressed himself in their skins. Sea lions, feral cats and rats – the latter two European introductions – were among his other companions.

Selkirk would often climb to a lookout above Bahía Cumberland (Cumberland Bay)

in hope of spotting a vessel on the horizon, but not until 1708 did his savior, Commander Woodes Rogers of the British privateers *Duke* and *Duchess*, arrive with famed privateer William Dampier as his pilot. Rogers recalled his first meeting with Selkirk when the ship's men returned from shore:

Immediately our Pinnace return'd from the shore, and brought abundance of Craw-fish, with a man Cloth'd in Goat-Skins, who look'd wilder than the first Owners of them.

After signing on with Rogers and returning to Scotland, Selkirk became a celebrity.

After Selkirk's departure, privateers (personae non grata on the South American mainland) frequented the islands for rest and relaxation, of a sort, and to hunt seals. In response, Spain re-established a presence at Bahía Cumberland in 1750, founding the village of San Juan Bautista. Occupation was discontinuous, though, until Chile established a permanent settlement in 1877.

Prior to this, after the turn of the 18th century, Masatierra played a notorious role in Chile's independence struggle, as Spanish authorities exiled 42 criollo patriots to the island after the disastrous Battle of Rancagua in 1814. The exiles, including prominent figures such as Juan Egaña and Manuel de Salas, neither accepted nor forgot their relegation to damp caves above San Juan Bautista; for many years the island remained a nearly escape-proof political prison for the newly independent country. Later during WWI it again played a memorable historic role, as the British naval vessels *Glasgow* and *Orama* confronted the German cruiser *Dresden* at Bahía Cumberland; the German crew scuttled their vessel before it could be sunk.

The last half century has seen slow development of the islands with fishing and a bit of tourism. Otherwise, they've stayed out of the headlines.

## Geography & Climate

Adrift in the open Pacific Ocean, the Juan Fernández archipelago consists of Isla Robinson Crusoe (formerly Masatierra or 'closer to land'); tiny Isla Santa Clara (known to early privateers as Goat Island), just 3km off the main island's southern tip; and Isla

### COMPREHENDING CRUSOE

It only makes sense if you're visiting Isla Robinson Crusoe that you read (or reread) Defoe's classic book. However, *Robinson Crusoe* is not the only account of Selkirk or the islands. One of the most interesting stories is Captain Woodes Rogers' *A Cruising Voyage Round the World*. Rogers was the captain who actually rescued Selkirk from the island. The most thorough English history is Ralph Lee Woodward's *Robinson Crusoe's Island* (1969). Nobel Prize winner JM Coetzee's 1986 novel, *Foe*, is a retelling and reevaluation of Defoe's tale.

