

Robinson's Real Island

Daniel Defoe's famous novel was inspired by the true story of an 18th century castaway, but the real Robinson Crusoe Island bears little resemblance to its fictional counterpart. It's in the Pacific, nearly 700 km off the coast of Chile, and is frequently shrouded in mist. Robinson Crusoe Island is the largest of the Juan Fernandez Islands, a tiny archipelago that is now Chilean territory. Its link to Daniel Defoe's book dates back to 1704 when a British buccaneer ship called at the island.

The ship was leaking badly and its crew was sick and exhausted. One of the sailors, a young Scotsman called Alexander Selkirk, said it was madness to continue their voyage and argued his case with the captain.

What happened next is unclear. Either Selkirk refused to rejoin the ship, or was forced off it by the captain. Either way, he remained on the tiny, uninhabited island as the ship sailed off into the distance.

Selkirk lived here alone for the next four years and four months, surviving on fish, berries and wild goats until another British ship passed by in 1709. Selkirk hitched a lift back to London, where he became something of a celebrity. Defoe heard of his story and apparently used it (at least in part) as the basis for Robinson Crusoe, published in 1719.

Defoe made lots of changes to Selkirk's tale. He moved the island to the Caribbean and peopled it with cannibals, one of whom became Crusoe's faithful servant Friday.

While Selkirk was stranded for a mere four years, the fictional Crusoe spends 28 years, two months and 19 days as a castaway, as he meticulously notes in his journal.

Defoe clearly took much of his inspiration from the Caribbean, not the southern Pacific. Crusoe's island is covered in tobacco plants, cocoa trees and tropical hardwoods that would never grow here. These days, around 800 people live on Robinson Crusoe Island, surviving on lobster fishing and tourism. It is a stunningly beautiful place of dramatic cliffs and soaring mountains. There is only one village, San Juan Bautista. The locals are proud of their Robinson Crusoe connection. A local brewer even produces a dark beer called Alexander Selkirk stout ale.

(Adapted from www.bbc.co.uk)



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