

# ***Kerguelen: geography***

## ***Location***

Roughly, Kerguelen is located midway between Africa, Australia and the Antarctic; more specifically, between 48°30' and 50° south and between 68°30' and 70°30' east. This is about the same longitude as the cities of Kabul (Afghanistan) and Tashkent (Uzbekistan); places with the same latitude are hard to find, but Puerto San Julián (Chile) and the Antipodes Islands (southeast of New Zealand) come close.

Kerguelen is about as far from civilization as one can get. The closest other island, Heard Island (an Australian possession), is 750 kilometers (500 miles) distant and even more desolate than Kerguelen itself. The nearest town that shows on my world map (Saint Denis on Réunion or Taolagnaro on Madagascar; they are both about the same distance from Kerguelen) is over 4000 kilometers (2500 miles) away.

The main island of the Kerguelen archipelago measures 6617 square kilometers, thus making it the 91st largest island in the world (greater than the Canadian Prince Edward Island, for example, and also greater than the state of Delaware). The entire archipelago, with 7215 square kilometers, is almost as large as the French island of Corsica.

Kerguelen and Heard Island are both located on the Kerguelen Plateau, an ancient volcanic plateau (from the Cretaceous era) that stretches some 2300 kilometers (1500 miles) to the southeast from Kerguelen.

## ***Climate***

The climate of Kerguelen is rather inhospitable. According to the British Antarctica Survey, the average temperature on Kerguelen is around 5 degrees centigrade; just above freezing point in winter and around 9 degrees in summer. (The minimum recorded temperature is 6.2 degrees below zero, the maximum is 20.5 degrees). Wind speed doesn't vary much according to season; it averages 35 kph, but there are frequent maxima of just below 100 kph.

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Last updated: October 21, 2002 by Jaap Boender

# ***Kerguelen: history***

## ***Discovery - Kerguelen's First Visit***

Kerguelen was discovered on February 12, 1772 by a French navigator named Yves de Kerguelen-Trémarec. Kerguelen was in command of two ships, *Fortune* and *Gros-Ventre*, and had been commissioned by King Louis XV to discover the Southern Continent for France. Kerguelen firmly believed that a massive continent had to exist on the southern hemisphere, just as there was on the northern hemisphere.

Kerguelen himself tells it like this:

**At the same day [February 12], at six o'clock in the evening, still following the same course, we took notice of a small island before us, at four miles; I took soundings without finding bottom, approached the island to two miles and, since night had fallen, came alongside [the *Gros-Ventre*], holding small sail until daybreak. I publicly gave 20 écus (as I had promised) to the sailor who had first discovered land, and promised double that amount to the one who would first see the continent, certain that we would see it by noon the next day, for I noticed that there were more birds and that they flew eastward.**

**(translated from Alain Boulaire: *Kerguelen, le phénix des mers australes*, Éd. France-Empire, 1997)**

The small isles that mentioned by Kerguelen are the Fortune Islands, named after his ship. The next day, they did indeed find 'the continent'; Ensign de Boisguellehenneuc, of *Gros-Ventre*, landed on the southwestern coast of Grande-Terre (in a bay still named Gros-Ventre Cove) and claimed it in the name of Louis XV.

Kerguelen himself, aboard *Fortune*, could not approach due to the perennial bad weather; on February 17, he made for Ile de France (Mauritius), without notifying *Gros-Ventre*. This ship spent considerable time searching for *Fortune*, even landing on the west coast of Australia (the true southern continent) in the process. Eventually, it too returned to Ile de France.

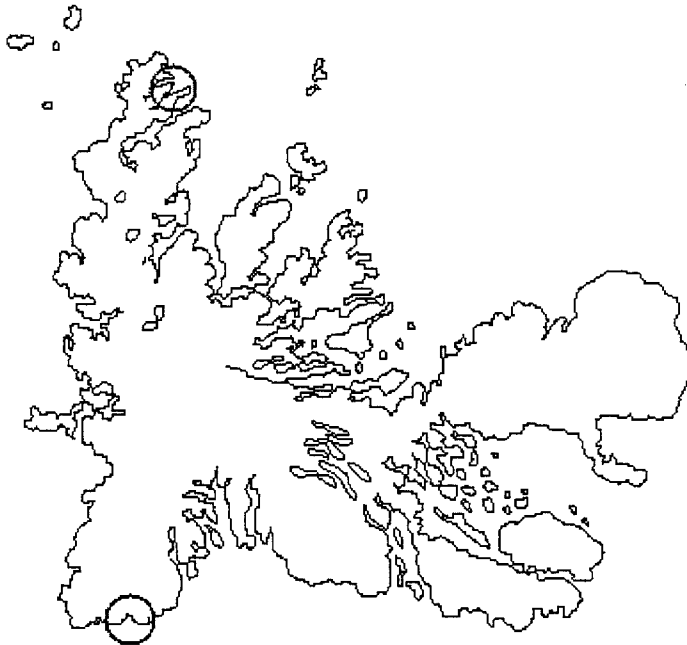
## ***Disappointment - Kerguelen's Second Visit***

Once back in France, Kerguelen boasted enormously about the

'continent' he had just discovered. King Louis, overjoyed, promoted him to captain (thereby passing over eighty-six lieutenants, who were not at all pleased) and awarded him the Cross of Saint Louis. Also, Kerguelen received authorization for another expedition to the 'Southern Continent'.

This expedition left Brest on March 16, 1773, with the vessels *Roland* and *Oiseau*. The expedition sailed to Ile de France, where the *Dauphine* joined it. During the voyage, relations between Kerguelen and his officers slowly began to deteriorate; nonetheless, the expedition arrived at the north coast of Grande-Terre on December 14.

Once again, Kerguelen did not set foot on the lands that were to bear his name; on January 8, a few men from *Oiseau*, commanded by Ensign de Rochegude, succeeded in landing and left copper plaques, once again taking possession of the island for France. On January 18, the three ships left for Madagascar.



**Kerguelen's anchorages in 1772 (lower circle) and 1773 (upper circle)**

On September 7, 1774, Kerguelen arrived in Brest. One of his officers, Ensign du Cheyron, almost immediately sued him; Kerguelen had not only insulted him in front of the crew, but also illegally smuggled a sixteen-year-old girl, Louise Seguin, aboard. On May 15, 1775, Kerguelen was sentenced by a court-martial to six years of incarceration, as well as losing his grade of naval captain and his position as an officer of the King.

During the French Revolution, however, he was freed and rehabilitated and died on March 3, 1797 (or Ventôse 13 of the Republican year V, as it was then called) as a retired Rear Admiral.

## ***The Time of Whalers***

For the next two centuries, Kerguelen was infrequently visited by whalers and scientific expeditions. The first of these was the famous British explorer Captain James Cook, who visited Kerguelen during his third voyage around the world with *Resolution* and *Discovery*. On December 24, 1776, he landed at Baie de l'Oiseau (the same place where Ensign de Rochegude and his men landed in 1773; Cook did not know this, since he only had heard of Kerguelen's first voyage), which he named Christmas Harbour.

He rediscovered the signs of Kerguelen's second visit, explored the north coast of Kerguelen and concluded:

**I could have very properly called the island Desolation Island to signalise its sterility, but in order not to deprive M. de Kerguelen of the glory of having discovered it, I have called it Kerguelen Land.**

In 1799, the first whaler arrived: HMS *Hillsborough*, under the command of Captain Robert Rhodes. He and his crew spent eight months on the archipelago, charting the east coast.

Very quickly, the islands became popular with sealers and whalers. In 1817, when the British sealer *Eagle* visited, Kerguelen's seals were all but extinct. However, hunting for whales and sea elephants continued until far into the twentieth century.

Exploration continued, though not by the French, even though they possessed the island. In 1840, James Clark Ross visited Kerguelen for two months while conducting his Antarctic expedition with *Erebus* and *Terror*.

1874 and 1875 were busy years. In the beginning of 1874, Captain George Nares visited Kerguelen with HMS *Challenger*; in 1874 and 1875, Kerguelen was visited by separate expeditions (American, German and British), whose primary objective was to observe the transit of Venus on December 9, 1874, but who also conducted extensive research on Kerguelen itself.

In 1893, the French finally showed an interest in Kerguelen and sent *Eure*

to reaffirm their sovereignty.

## ***Settlement***

In 1877, the first attempt was made to settle Kerguelen. A British company attempted to mine coal at Kerguelen; however, the coal turned out to be of very poor quality and the mine was soon abandoned.

The *Compagnie des Iles Kerguelen* was more successful; they operated a whaling station at Port-Jeanne d'Arc between 1908 and 1929 (though with several intermissions).

During the Second World War, Kerguelen was used as a base for German surface raiders: *Atlantis*, *Komet* and *Pinguin* all visited the island.

Finally, in 1951, a meteorological station was founded by the French at Port-aux-Français. This station continues to exist today; there even are other settlements, such as a salmon farm at Port-Armor.

## ***Exploration in the twentieth century***

During all this, exploration continued. The Rallier du Baty brothers (Raymond and Henri) visited Kerguelen in 1909 with the ketch *J.B. Charcot*. They financed their expedition by hunting for sea elephants at Kerguelen, but their principal objective was is exploration and discovery. Raymond committed his experiences to paper in English: *15 000 miles in a ketch*. He wrote:

I knew that, once we would find our first anchorage along the coast of that desolate island, we would not see other faces than those of our good comrades, that we could not expect any help of a friendly hand, that we would find nor fires to guide our way, nor footsteps that would give us any hope of human company. We were there, all six of us, like a small band of brothers, and could not count on anyone but ourselves.

Rallier du Baty returned to Kerguelen in 1913, and published the first complete map of the archipelago in 1922.

Other visitors were the Deutsche Süd Polar Expedition under the command of Erich von Drygalski in 1902 in *Gauss*, Edgar Aubert de la Rüe in 1928 in *Austral* (to find economically exploitable minerals), the BANZ (British, Australian and New Zealand?) Antarctic Research Expedition,

under the command of Sir Douglas Mawson in 1929 and 1930 in *Discovery*, and French expeditions in *Antarès* in 1931 and in *Bougainville* in 1939.

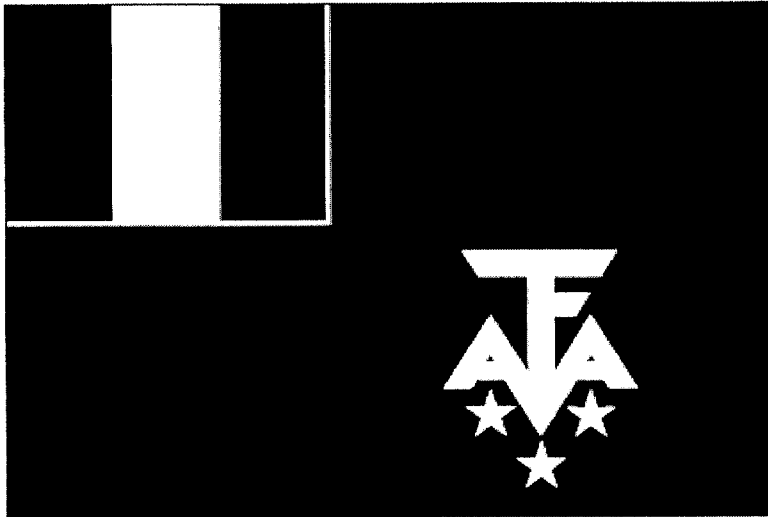
## **Sources**

- Alain Boulaire, *Kerguelen: le phénix des mers australes*. France-Empire, Paris, 1997
  - Jean-Paul Kauffmann, *Kerguelen* (Dutch translation), Atlas, Amsterdam/Antwerpen, 1994
  - Raymond Rallier du Baty, *Aventures aux Kerguelen* (French translation), Editions Maritimes et d'Outre-Mer, Rennes, 2000
  - [Kerguelen Archipelago](#) , a website by Martin Nicholson
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**Last updated: October 3, 2001 by Jaap Boender**

## ***Kerguelen: politics***

Politically, the Kerguelen archipelago is a part of the French Southern and Antarctic lands (Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises, TAAF for short), which are an overseas dependency of France. Apart from Kerguelen, the TAAF consist of Amsterdam Island, Saint Paul Island, the Crozet Isles (all three in the Indian Ocean), and Terre Adélie, the part of Antarctica that France has a claim on.



Flag of the TAAF (from the World Flag Database)

Kerguelen and other French possessions all over the world make France the country with the largest Exclusive Economic Sea Zone. For 200 nautical miles (370 kilometres) around the islands, France has exclusive rights for the exploitation of natural resources (fish, oil, valuable metals, etc.) in the ocean and on or in the ocean bottom.

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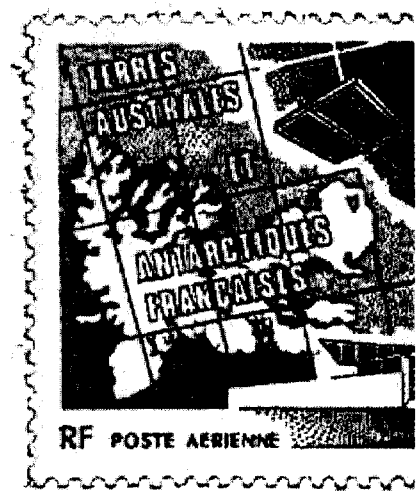
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Port aux Français

A POPULATION VARYING BETWEEN 50 and 100. \* Kerguelen has been continually occupied by scientists since 1949, with the French Base at **Port aux Français** is large and well equipped with a restaurant, library, sports centre, cinema and chapel (Notre Dame des

CNES (The French National Space Centre) who operate a base dedicated to the tracking of satellites. For national security reasons, the base needed to be on French soil in the Southern Hemisphere, and Kerguelen is ideally placed to track Ariane rockets launched from Kourou in French Guiana and by the Japanese Space Programme from Tanegashima and by the Indians from Shriarikota. The station was constructed by Alcatel and is manned by personnel from CEGELEC



TAAF Stamp depicting the CN

The bases are supplied from **Reunion Island** by the **Marion Dufre** trips a year to visit The Crozet Islands, Terre Adelie and Amsterdam/S



Paul Carroll, June 29, 2003