

A community-run non-profit internet service provider designed for St Helena

Vince Thompson

A new communications business is being launched which is tailored to St Helena's specific needs; the aim is to bring the Island's communications capability into the 21st century for the benefit of all telecom users, from Facebook users to island businesses to international conference organisers.

Set up as a non-profit organisation by Christian von der Ropp, a leading expert on global telecommunications who has for many years campaigned for better communications for St Helena and Karl Thrower who has helped several small internet businesses over the years in a professional capacity. Christian and Karl have published an investment prospectus; an important stage in the formation of any new company. Already they have attracted the involvement of two important companies. One of them is De-Cix the world's largest operator of internet exchange points; De-Cix will provide the Saintel connection required at Lisbon, the European end of the Equiano cable. The other is Hurricane Electric who will provide internet connectivity from Lisbon to St Helena. Both companies have offered their support at no cost.

Saintel will need to develop their own island communication network. The communications network we have is owned and operated by Sure South Atlantic and is not developed to take full advantage of modern high capacity, high speed communications. The best solution is for the island telecom network to be owned by a separate utility company with customer interface communications providers sharing the network. This arrangement is not available in St Helena so any new communications company has to set up its own network. Saintel's development plan shows they intend to cover up to 80% of the Island's communications users within 12-18 months. They also propose to share their network with any other users who want to test equipment or developing technologies.

Saintel will not be laying cables all over the Island. Microwave wireless technology will be used, using highpoints to erect the masts needed for communications transmission. Several landowners have already indicated they are willing to provide the sites needed for the masts. Development permission to erect the masts will, of course, be required.

Saintel's aim is to set up a communications system which gives Saints the communications facilities which exist in the rest of the world and are now taken for granted. Their investment prospectus points out that in terms of broadband connectivity St Helena is still isolated despite the recent airport and the temporarily suspended weekly air service. They also state that telecom charges in St Helena are 314% higher than the United Nations Broadband Commission's target and restate the European Commission's assertion that "St Helena's development is hampered by having some of the most expensive telecommunications in the world."

Saintel also emphasise the severe drawbacks of the communications system we now have.

- Slow and unreliable service at prohibitive prices and



The new communication network will connect up to 80% of the population within 12-18 months

limiting Internet access

- Tariffs which pose financial risk to subscribers (exceeding data volume 300-749% more expensive than underlying subscription)
- An outdated business model based on low volume/ high pricing for Internet, phone and TV
- Unwillingness to test demand elasticity (even shows resistance to provide unlimited broadband plans after cable's arrival)
- Businesses banned from operating Wifi hotspots and Internet cafés
- A current lack of government oversight through a competent and independent regulator

Saintel points out these restrictive practices and punitive charges discourage Internet adoption by islanders with widespread socio-economic impacts. Personal use is severely restricted, the advantages of modern communications enjoyed in all developed countries and many developing countries is absent. St Helena is denied an expanded range of facilities to improve education and health-care as well as supporting businesses in a multiplicity of ways. All of this significantly limits the opportunities available elsewhere which can support development of the Island's economy.