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PITCAIRN KFZ-REGISTRIERUNGSSYSTEM
PITCAIRN VEHICLE REGISTRATION SYSTEM

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Pitcairn vehicle registration system

The *Pitcairn Islands*, or officially: *Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands* are a loosely grouped handful of tiny islands (of which only the main island is inhabited) scattered across several hundred miles of ocean in the remote South Pacific that form the last remaining British territory in Oceania. The rugged Pitcairn Island is farther from any continent than any other inhabited island in the world. The far-flung island was settled on January 15 in 1790 by the infamous mutineers of the HMS *Bounty* and their Polynesian companions, even today nearly all of the islanders are their descendants. With its mere four dozen current permanent inhabitants, Pitcairn is today the smallest nation in the world.¹

The story of this unique society goes back more than two centuries. At the end of 1787, His Majesty's Armed Vessel *Bounty* set sail from England under the command of Captain William Bligh (a decade earlier, Bligh had been appointed sailing master on HM *Resolution* serving under Captain James Cook on his final Pacific voyage, during which Cook was killed). The *Bounty*'s destination was Tahiti and the mission was to obtain hundreds of saplings of the breadfruit tree (*Artocarpus altilis*) [Tahitian: 'uru] and to transfer these safely to the West Indies, where they would be planted to be a source of cheap, fast-growing food for the African slave labour force used on plantations of British colonies in the Caribbean.

The *Bounty* arrived in Tahiti, the plants were duly collected, but the five-month layover on the beautiful island, during which many of the seamen lived ashore and formed relationships with native Polynesians, proved harmful to discipline. When the arduous return voyage began, the relations between Bligh and his crew deteriorated, he began handing out increasingly harsh punishments, criticism and abuse and humiliation, master's mate Fletcher Christian being a main target. After three weeks back at sea, on the morning of 28 April 1789, around 30 nautical miles² south of the island of Tofua (Tonga Islands) half of the *Bounty*'s crew with the leading of Christian mutinied against Bligh and forced him and his loyal crewmen off the ship and set them adrift in a launch boat. Bligh and the men in the launch, despite all imaginable odds, managed to sail nearly 4000 nautical miles to Timor in the Dutch East Indies. Nearly one year after the mutiny, Bligh was back in England.

¹ Pitcairn Islands is the least populous national jurisdiction (or 'country') in the world. Today there are 193 countries that are member states of the United Nations, 2 non-member observer states (Palestine, Vatican). In addition there are many more geographical areas in the sense of a political entity which are generally referred to as 'countries', e.g. the Cook Islands and Niue (both states in free association with New Zealand), dependencies on the United Nations' list of Non-Self-Governing Territories (among them all the British Overseas Territories, the French overseas collectivities, Territories of the US) and *de facto* independent countries with limited international recognition, such as: Taiwan, Kosovo, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), Northern Cyprus, Transnistria, etc.

² 1 nautical mile is equal to 1.852 kilometres

Christian recognised that Bligh could conceivably survive the voyage to report the mutiny, and that anyway the non-return of *Bounty* would bring about a search mission, with Tahiti as its first port of call. Thus the mutineers decided to search for an other Pacific island to hide. But after an unsuccessful attempt to establish a settlement on Tubuai in Austral archipelago, (hundreds of miles south of Tahiti) where they came to blows with the islanders, discontent was rising among the mutineers; sixteen of them wished to return to Tahiti to take their chances there. Christian sensed that his authority was crumbling, so the *Bounty* hightailed back to Tahiti and they were deposited (later of the 16 men on Tahiti, two were murdered, the rest were captured by Edward Edwards, who intended to return them all to England for a court martial. Four, however, died along the way after the HMS *Pandora* ran aground on the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia).

Christian and the eight mutineers who remained loyal to him plus six Polynesian men, twelve Polynesian women as well as a baby girl set sail that same night in search of a safe haven from the British navy in the South Pacific. After studying the maps Christian formed the idea of settling on the remote Pitcairn Island. Pitcairn had been reported in 1767, but its exact location was never verified. After months of search, Christian rediscovered the island on 15 January 1790, 190 nautical miles east of its recorded position. Pitcairn was uninhabited, virtually inaccessible, with enough food, water, and fertile land for its new dwellers, also the longitudinal error on the maps contributed to the mutineers' decision to settle on the island. The settlers took everything off the *Bounty* and then burnt the ship to the waterline on 23 January as precaution against discovery; from then on there was no means to leave the island anymore.

The initial period of the new community was anything but idyllic. Though the mutineers did remain in obscurity and thus evaded their capture by the Royal Navy, by the time the *Topaz*, an American whaling ship, discovered the community in 1808 all but one of the men (both the mutineers & Polynesians) were dead, principally as result of bloodshed over women, land or by alcohol-induced tensions. John Adams, the only surviving man spent most of his time studying the *Bounty's* Bible to use it as a guide for a new, peaceful society. The *Topaz's* captain, Mayhew Folger, was surprised to find a utopian island of a middle-aged Englishman and reformed mutineer with nine Tahitian women and 23 biracial children, the children of the notorious *Bounty* mutineers. Captain Folger sent reports of his discovery back to England, but the kingdom was preoccupied with the Napoleonic Wars and it showed little interest for Pitcairn.

The settlers' descendants, the Pitkerners³ commemorate the burning of the *Bounty* as 'Bounty Day' as their national day on 23 January each year.

Pitcairn Island is the most remote, yet accessible place on earth today where one can get and still find people. Pitcairn's isolation in the middle of the Pacific is further exacerbated by the lack of a port and the fact that it is not accessible by air (the island's topography makes it unfit for a construction of an airstrip). Getting there is complicated, time-consuming and expensive (all this is probably more than enough to raise desire in every true globe-trotter to go there once). First

³ Pitkern = Pitcairn in the local creole language based on an 18th-century dialect of English and Tahitian. Although spoken on the Pacific Ocean islands of Pitcairn and Norfolk, paradoxically it has been described as an Atlantic Creole language. (Andrei A. Avram)

one needs to travel to either Los Angeles, Auckland or Tokyo to take a long flight to Tahiti. From Tahiti there is one flight a week to Mangareva, in the southeast extreme of the Tuamotu Islands (~London-Belgrade distance, though it costs significantly more), from which it takes a two-day sail by the *Claymore II* to Pitcairn, which runs 6 times a year and has limited passenger capacities. The *Claymore II* will berth half a mile or two offshore Pitcairn and one has to change to the Pitkerners' longboats at sea. Small consolation: no one needs a visa to enter Pitcairn, if staying for no more than 14 days.

Following the discovery of John Adams' community on Pitcairn, it retained its *sans statut* for three more decades till 1838, when Her Majesty's ship *Fly* anchored at the island, and the Union Jack was hoisted on Pitcairn for the first time. The experience with American adventurer Joshua Hill ('The dictator of Pitcairn')⁴ and increasing visits by American whalers brought the Pitkerners to recognise their need for protection, therefore they prevailed upon Captain Elliott of *Fly* to draw up a simple constitution and a code of laws for them selected from those already in force. The new constitution was signed on board *Fly* and this event marked Pitcairn's formal incorporation into the British Empire (although for the majority of its colonial history the British central administration was very marginal).

Not only was this the first time female suffrage was written into a British constitution⁵, but it also incorporated compulsory schooling for the first time in any British legislation.

By 1920 at the peak of the Britain's power, the phrase "the empire on which the sun never sets" was often used to describe the British Empire, because its expanse around the globe meant that the sun was always shining on at least one of its territories. Curiously, this phrase is – physically – still valid until now, but without Pitcairn, the sun would indeed set on the "British Empire".

As a literary place Pitcairn represented the image of a 'utopian paradise'. As a result of the vast amount of books written about the story of the mutiny (which is not a myth, but has foremost eventuated the mythologisation of Pitcairn), the mutineers' settlement and their descendants, the Pitkern community made Pitcairn a nearly fictional island. As argued by critics, places are more than simply geographical sites with definitive physical and textual characteristics; places are also settings (or locales) in which social relations and identities are constituted (John A. Agnew), also internal and external narratives both contribute to the construction of place. In fact, Pitcairn is a feeble imitation of a paradise. If we follow up its story and history closely, we might have the impression that Pitcairn is a place which rather oscillates between a utopia (e.g. romanticised idea of an "exotic", but 'nonetheless' Western-style community flourishing in a faraway island) and dystopia (e.g.: the massacres of the first settlers, the 'dictatorship' of Hill, the 2004 sex scandals, involving rape cases and underage intercourse cases). It is relevant to inspect the terms utopia/dystopia also in the context of islands.

⁴ Joshua Hill was the basis for the character Butterworth Stavelay in Mark Twain's short story "The Great Revolution in Pitcairn."

⁵ New Zealand has often claimed to be the world's first "country" to grant women's suffrage (in 1893). Though not an independent country, Pitcairn will celebrate 180 years of women's suffrage this November (2018).

In the political imaginary, islands figure as rather different spaces: as mirrors which reflect and challenge 'mainland' societies, and as microcosms in which societies' alternative dispensations or possible futures, bright or catastrophic, might be acted out; spaces of quarantine and incarceration (Peter Mitchell).

Pitcairn shares these characteristics of islands: it is remote (compared to most other islands even extremely distant), still well networked; as islands in general, it is a place where policy, bureaucracy and infrastructure, however small a scale they're played out on, interrelate with those of other territories and the mainland at large in interesting and complex manners.

As mentioned above, today Pitcairn is our planet's least populous nation, or more correctly formulated: 'national' political division of all countries and dependent territories.

A *political division* is geographic area under the jurisdiction of a particular government entity. On the large scale, a political division is typically a sovereign state (colloquially referred to as 'country'), while on a smaller scale political divisions (also called *administrative divisions*) are subnational entities.

Administrative divisions are conceptually separate from dependent territories, with the former being an integral part of the state and the other being only under a different (mostly also lesser) form of control. However, the term 'administrative division' can include dependencies as well as accepted administrative divisions.

These administrative jurisdictions can be regarded as distinct spatial structures which are the political consequences of the inter-relationships between physical geography and state power.

It is common for political divisions (from the supranational to the subnational level) to possess an extensive system of codes and symbols which serves practical (or ideological) purposes, for example recognisability and ultimately it also contributes to defining the territory itself. Such symbols e.g. in the case of 'countries' generally include: names, flags, coats of arms, anthems, mottos, national days, etc.

These symbols intend to unite societies of a particular territory by creating visual, verbal, or iconic representations of the inhabitant people, their believed values and goals, or history. Ideally, these symbols are designed to be inclusive and representative of all the people of the particular community. The significance of symbols of specific political divisions varies from region to region, in some cases they are emotionally charged (often even overcharged) nationalistic/patriotic identifiers, on the other hand in some cases they are just of minor importance to the inhabitants and serve mainly orientational, administrative purposes (e.g. a coat of arms or a logo of a city district might not be even known to many of its inhabitants). In most cases these symbols do not just represent, but also reinforce the concrete or presumed, intrinsic or fabricated characteristics of the particular political division.

I have a strong fascination with such iconic representations (or by-products) of national & supra/sub-national political divisions and I have noticed apart from the national (as well as regional) symbols, e.g. flags, another exquisite example of the visual manifestation of bureaucracy. A vehicle registration system (i.e. registration plates); one common thing that I realised all the world's sovereign states (also states with limited recognition) and dependent territories possess, but of which Pitcairn – which notwithstanding its small size and tiny population surprisingly has most of the basic hallmarks of nationhood of a 'country' (such as: an unique history, ethnogenesis, national day, own flag, coat of arms, national anthem, a distinctive identity and even its own internet domain) – is bereft.

All countries require by law registration plates, also known as number plates (British English) or a license plates (American English) for road vehicles such as cars, trucks, and motorcycles. They are issued by an agency of the state or territorial government. The appearances of plates are frequently chosen to contain symbols, colors, abbreviations or slogans associated with the issuing jurisdiction.

While for 200 years, the only wheels rolling on the narrow volcanic red-dust, on pluvius days red-mud paths and tracks of Pitcairn were the wheels of the wooden Pitkern wheelbarrows, over the last couple of decades the island has seen an influx of imported motorised vehicles, mostly quads (ATVs) to such an extent, that these vehicles are today an inseparable part of the street/landscape since virtually every Pitkerner owns one.

"A dozen of quad bikes were parked near the jetty, like a herd of exotic animals congregating around a waterhole"

– Kathy Marks, British journalist & author of 'Lost Paradise'

Pitcairn also possesses a range of tokens, many of which might seem to be, or maybe are indeed unnecessary. I have found that these tokens, on a tiny island with only four dozen inhabitants at the end of the world have a surprising, often a slightly comical effect. A conspicuous example: the traffic signs 'SLOW DOWN', 'GIVE WAY' in Adamstown, Pitcairn's capital.

Another example would be the Pitcairn driving license. Oddly enough, on the island one has to take a test in order to receive an official permission to hop on a quad and drive it.

I knew I wanted to do something on the island, not to 'contribute', but more like to participate in a sense in the creation of some visual products of Pitcairn. I felt a ostentatious artwork, such as a statue or something similar would have been inappropriate in many ways, I was more interested in finding some small, 'missing' piece of the island's already existing mosaic, following the line of national symbols and local tokens. I definitely wanted to avoid taking something obtrusive and cumbrose there, which I would have considered to be out of place. At one point the idea had reached a stage where it had actually started to bother me that in the "quasi-country" of Pitcairn, which has its own flag, coat of arms, capital "city", national day,

national anthem, own stamps, traffic signs and even its own driving licenses and around one quad per capita, these vehicles do not have registration plates on them.

Thus I decided to create Pitcairn's first vehicle registration system, its first license plates, on my own. With the design of the plates I wanted to reflect on the island's double (British & Tahitian) heritage. The aesthetics of the plates were inspired by the current British license plates in the UK, whose design of these are roughly followed, while the barcodes conceal basic Tahitian vocabulary, some of the words are still known, or were until recently known by the Pitkerners.

Though both English and Tahitian elements are present in the local Pitkern language, the English ones are firmly more present, this is most probably the result of the time when John Adams was the only adult man on the island. As teacher and mentor of the whole community his language traits were probably more dominant for the children, then their mothers' native tongues. With the hidden Tahitian words in these functional objects wanted to draw attention to the fact that something had changed, some part of the heritage had got lost, or did not prevail in equal measure.

I commenced my project by contacting the Culture Advisor of Pitcairn Islands Council, a local, with the idea of holding an art exhibition on the island. At this time I was not yet sure about what was going to be brought to and showed on the island. My project idea developed somewhat later; this is also when I decided that I rather intended my project to be some sort of a surprise gift for the island and the islanders.

For this reason I told my contact person that I will send a package, but I did not specify its content. I did not wish to force my project on the islanders, only to offer them my 'present' as an option; whether they would participate was completely left to their decision.

"Just from the engine noise, the islanders can identify the driver of any quad bike that passes their house"

– Kathy Marks, British journalist & author of 'Lost Paradise'

There is definitely a certain absurdity of producing registration plates for a small island, where everyone knows each other so well, that they even know which vehicle belongs to whom. In this sense the Pitcairn plates are for now functionless, but I would argue they are not causeless. They are a complementary part of the already existing unity of Pitkern national symbols and tokens (especially the island's traffic signs, the driving license). This absurdity is further enhanced by the plates' unusually advanced code system. All the world has stuck to the century old letter-number character code systems, scannable, for the naked eye unreadable visual codes are not used anywhere else (yet), although I have learned barcode registration plates were occasionally featured in science-fiction movies, such as: *Blade Runner*, *Back to the Future*, and *The Congress*. This shows that the for humans undecipherable modern visual signs and codes are associated with the future, thus the Pitcairn registration plates serve also as symbols for an optimistic by-and-by scenario of an island now faced by depopulation.

Firstly, the barcodes imply they were made more for tomorrow than for today. Secondly, in a community of 50 people with around the same number of vehicles, the plates are basically useless (at least in practical terms), but for a potential five times this big number (which equals Pitcairn's historical maximum record of population), this is maybe not the case anymore.

Name: Pitcairn Islands
Official name: Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands
Pitkern Ailen (Pitcairnese)
Anthem: "Come Ye Blessed", "We from Pitcairn Islands"
Royal anthem: "God Save the Queen"
Status: British Overseas Territory
Capital: Adamstown
Languages: English, Pitkern (Pitcairnese)
Ethnic groups: Pitkerner (of mixed English, Cornish, Manx, Scottish and Tahitian descent)
Religion: Secular (de jure), Seventh-day Adventist, non-religious
Government: Dependency with a directly elected mayoralty under constitutional monarchy
Monarch: Elizabeth II
Governor: Laura Clarke
Administrator: Nicola Hebb
Mayor: Shawn Christian
Responsible Minister (UK): Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Member of the House of Lords
Legislature: Island Council
Demonym: Pitkerner, Pitcairn Islander
Area: Total 47 km² (18 sq mi), Pitcairn: 4,5 km² (1.8 sq mi)
Population: 50 (2018)
Density: 1.19/km² (3.1/sq mi)
GDP: (nominal) 2005 estimate US\$ 155 000 (2005)
Currency: New Zealand dollar: (NZD)
Time zone: UTC-8
Calling code: +64
National Day: 23 January
ISO 3166 code: PN
Internet top-level domain: .pn
International vehicle registration code: PN
Highest point: Pawala Valley Ridge 347 m (1,138 ft)
Export: honey, stamps, internet domains, souvenirs

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