

Falkland Islands: How an South American uninhabited island can be claimed by 2 countries.

In the semi-final of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, England takes on Argentina. There is a lot at stake for both countries: Argentina wants to reach a World Cup final for the second consecutive time, while England hopes to reach the final for the first time since winning the World Cup in 1966.

However, the rivalry between the two countries goes far beyond football. Matches between England and Argentina still evoke memories of iconic moments, such as Diego Maradona's "Hand of God" during the 1986 World Cup and David Beckham's red card at the 1998 World Cup. But after Argentina's 2–1 victory, this time the conversation is not just about football.

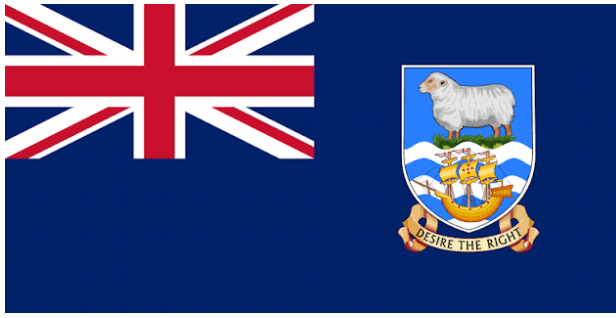
After the final whistle, a large banner appears among the Argentine supporters and players reading: "Las Malvinas son Argentinas" ("The Malvinas are Argentine"). At the same time, English supporters are seen carrying a striking blue, white, and green flag featuring the British coat of arms. That flag does not belong to England, but to a remote island group in the South Atlantic Ocean: the Falkland Islands.

These islands—known in Argentina as the Islas Malvinas—have been a source of diplomatic tension between Britain and Argentina for almost two centuries. Only around 3,500 to 4,000 people live on the islands. They use the Falkland Islands pound, a local currency that is almost exclusively valid on the islands. Remarkably, the islands were originally uninhabited before European explorers arrived.

But why do both Argentina and Britain claim this remote island group? How did the dispute begin? And perhaps most importantly: what do the people of the Falkland Islands themselves think?

In this article, we dive into the history of one of the world's most well-known territorial disputes and discover why this small island group, more than 12,000 kilometers from London and approximately 500 kilometers from the Argentine coast, remains an important political and emotional issue for both countries.





Flag Falkland Islands. Source: wikipedia.org

Geography and History

To better understand the Argentine banner, we first need to look at the geography and history of the island group. The Falkland Islands—known in Argentina as the Islas Malvinas—are located in the South Atlantic Ocean. Together with South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, they form the British Overseas Territories in the South Atlantic, although these territories are not administered as a single unit.

The Falkland Islands themselves have an area of approximately 12,173 km², comparable in size to the Belgian region of Flanders. The archipelago consists of two main islands—East Falkland and West Falkland—as well as hundreds of smaller islands.

The capital is Stanley, where more than 50 percent of the population lives. The official language is English, and the local currency is the Falkland Islands pound.



Location Falkland Islands on the world map. Source: BBC.com

It cannot be determined with certainty whether indigenous peoples ever lived on the Falkland Islands. To this day, no conclusive archaeological evidence has been found to prove that they did. Furthermore, the first European explorers to write about the islands made no mention of an indigenous population.



One of the first known Europeans to document the island group was the Portuguese explorer Estêvão Gomes. During his voyage in 1520, he described the islands but made no mention of any signs of permanent settlement. After that, very little happened on the remote archipelago for almost two centuries.

That changed in 1764, when the French navigator Louis Antoine de Bougainville established the first permanent European settlement on East Falkland: Port Louis. France therefore became the first country to establish a lasting presence on the island group and claimed the eastern part of the Falkland Islands.

However, this French settlement would not remain French for long. Within a few years, both Spain and Great Britain would also lay claim to the islands, laying the foundations for the long-running territorial dispute that continues to this day.



Louis-Antoine de Bougainville. Source: wikipedia.org

Without knowing that the French had already established a settlement on East Falkland, the British founded their own settlement on West Falkland in 1765: Port Egmont.

At the time, Spain controlled almost all of Spanish South America. With a few exceptions—such as Brazil, Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana—the continent was under Spanish rule. For the British, the Falkland Islands were strategically located along important shipping routes in the South Atlantic. Britain therefore decided to establish its own settlement there, unaware that the French had already settled on the other side of the archipelago.

A year later, in 1766, France sold the settlement of Port Louis to Spain. This created a remarkable situation: East Falkland was under Spanish



control, while West Falkland was in British hands. Naturally, this arrangement could not last forever.

Tensions eventually led to the Falklands Crisis of 1770. Spain demanded that the British leave Port Egmont and expelled the British forces, creating the threat of war between the two great powers. Eventually, a diplomatic agreement was reached in 1771, allowing Britain to re-establish its settlement.

However, just a few years later, the British voluntarily decided to withdraw their forces. Rising tensions with the American colonies, which would eventually lead to the American Revolution, combined with the high cost of maintaining the remote settlement, led Britain to abandon Port Egmont in 1774. The British did, however, leave behind a plaque declaring that they had not abandoned their claim to the islands.

From that point onward, Spain effectively controlled the entire island group. In the years that followed, Port Egmont was abandoned and eventually destroyed, leaving the Falkland Islands entirely under Spanish control.



The capture of Port Egmont. Source: wikipedia.org

Intake and retention

In 1816, Argentina gained independence from Spain. A few years later, Spain withdrew permanently from the Falkland Islands, creating a power vacuum. Both Argentina and Britain believed they had a legitimate claim to the island group.

During the 1820s, Argentina began establishing settlements on the islands. In 1829, the Argentine government appointed merchant Luis Vernet as governor of the Falkland Islands. From the settlement of Puerto Soledad, he attempted to strengthen Argentine administration over the islands.



However, this situation did not last long. In 1833, the British Royal Navy returned to the Falkland Islands to reassert Britain's claim to the archipelago. A British warship arrived at the Argentine settlement. The small Argentine military presence was no match for the British fleet and withdrew without significant military resistance. From that moment onward, the Falkland Islands once again came under British administration, a situation that—with the exception of a brief period in 1982—has continued to this day.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British presence on the islands continued to grow. The port town of Stanley developed into the administrative and economic center of the archipelago and was later officially designated as its capital.

The islands also gained strategic importance during the First World War. Stanley served as a supply port for the British Royal Navy, where supplies such as coal, ammunition, and spare parts for warships were stored.

On December 8, 1914, the Battle of the Falkland Islands took place off the coast of the archipelago. A month earlier, a German squadron led by Admiral Maximilian von Spee had defeated the British at the Battle of Coronel. The Germans then attempted to destroy the British naval base at Stanley. This time, however, the British were prepared. The British fleet destroyed almost the entire German squadron, allowing Britain to retain control of the South Atlantic shipping routes and the strategically important port of Stanley.

As a result, the Falkland Islands became important not only in the colonial dispute between Britain and Argentina, but also in world history.



Battle of the Falklands. Source: wikipedia.org



After the Battle of the Falkland Islands, the archipelago remained relatively peaceful for a long time. That changed abruptly in 1982, when Argentina decided to retake the islands by military force. This marked the beginning of the Falklands War.

On April 2, 1982, Argentine forces landed on the islands and quickly overwhelmed the British troops stationed there. The small British defensive force was unable to withstand the Argentine invasion. Two days later, the British troops surrendered and were repatriated to Britain via Uruguay.

The British government, however, refused to accept the loss of the islands. Within days, a large naval task force was assembled and sailed more than 12,000 kilometers toward the South Atlantic. On May 21, 1982, British forces landed at the settlement of Port San Carlos, establishing a beachhead from which they began their campaign to retake the islands.

After several weeks of intense fighting on land, at sea, and in the air, British forces reached the capital, Stanley. On June 14, 1982, the Argentine commander surrendered, bringing the war to an end. Around 900 military personnel were killed during the conflict, including 649 Argentines, 255 Britons, and three Falkland Islanders.

Since the British victory, the Falkland Islands have once again been under British administration, a situation that continues to this day. Argentina, however, has never abandoned its claim to the islands and still considers the Islas Malvinas an integral part of its national territory. As a result, despite the absence of further military conflict, the dispute remains a sensitive diplomatic issue between the two countries.

Recent Falkland

But how do the current inhabitants of the Falkland Islands actually feel about this issue? This is perhaps the most important question in the entire dispute.

The current population of the islands consists largely of descendants of British settlers and immigrants. The approximately 4,000 inhabitants have far more in common culturally, linguistically, and politically with England than with Argentina. English is the main language, the local currency is linked to the British pound, and British influences are visible throughout the capital, Stanley. This can be seen in the architecture of



churches and government buildings, pubs, and even the famous red British telephone boxes that can still be found throughout the town.

To gain a clearer understanding of the population's wishes, a referendum was held on March 11, 2013. The central question was:

“Do you wish the Falkland Islands to retain their current political status as an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom?”

The result left little room for interpretation. Of the 1,518 votes cast, only a few were invalid. Ultimately, 1,513 residents voted in favour of retaining the British status, while only 3 voted against it. This meant that more than 99.8% of valid votes supported maintaining the islands' relationship with Britain.

For the British government, this referendum is an important argument in the dispute. London argues that the right to self-determination of the islanders should take precedence.



Postal office on Stanley, in East Falkland Island. Source: commons.wikimedia.org

Conclusion

Before writing this article, I already knew about these islands, but I did not know the specific history behind them, and especially not about the conflict between Argentina and Britain over their sovereignty. The dispute runs so deep that it even became the most controversial issue



surrounding the 2026 World Cup semi-final. After all, who do the islands really belong to?

There were no known indigenous inhabitants of the islands, according to the accounts of Portuguese explorers in the sixteenth century. The objectivity of the 2013 referendum can also be questioned, as the islands have been under British control since 1982 and the population is therefore overwhelmingly made up of people of British descent or those with close ties to Britain.

However you look at it, the issue still provokes strong emotions among both Argentines and Britons today. To put it simply, two countries are disputing a territory roughly the size of Flanders with a population of only around 4,000 people. It is a fascinating example of how an originally uninhabited island group can become the subject of competing territorial claims between two countries.

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