

# Banks & Torres Islands



Despite these islands' beauty and fascinating culture, very few visitors make it this far north. You can expect glorious, isolated beaches, snorkelling with visibility to 40m, amazing volcanic scenery and hot springs – and you can expect to have them all to yourself.

There are 62 islands in the Banks and Torres groups, 47 scattered kilometres north of Maewo. Only 13 are inhabited; the others are either sandy islets or jagged volcanic rocks poking out of the sea. Two islands have active volcanoes: Gaua and Vanua Lava.

Archaeologists have found Lapita-style pottery on tiny Kwakea, just off Vanua Lava. Dated to about 1100 BC, it indicates continuous habitation from that time until about 400 BC. There are also indications that Kwakea was reoccupied by an unknown people in about AD 300; they stayed some 800 years.

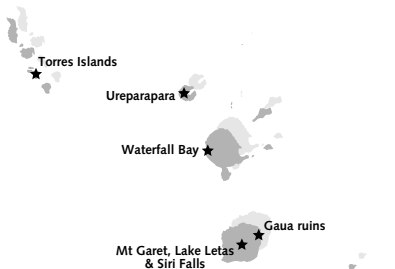
Prior to the 1950s, the people of Tikopia, a Polynesian island 180km northeast of Mota Lava, made regular journeys here by canoe. So there are signs of Polynesian influences, but the people are mainly Melanesian. The population was one of the first to suffer heavily from blackbirding and disease in the latter half of the 19th century. These days, the only problem is the crocodiles.

The province holds wonderful festivals aimed to promote the way of life, including the Waterfall Festival at Sasara Falls, and the Day Cultural Festivals on Vanua Lava and Ureparapara. They all showcase beautiful handicrafts, and feature *kastom* dancing, singing and game playing.

There are four airfields – on Linua, Mota Lava, Vanua Lava and Gaua – but little motor transport. Come prepared for a lot of walking and wild boat trips.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the **ruins** (p164) of Gaua's ancient villages
- Trekking to **Mt Garek, Lake Letas and Siri Falls** (p164) on Gaua
- Getting waterlogged by magnificent twin Sasara Falls at **Waterfall Bay** (p168)
- Sailing into Lorup Bay for a stunning introduction to **Ureparapara** (p170)
- Playing nature child for a glorious week on a **Torres Island** (p170)



## BANKS ISLANDS

pop 8000 / area 746 sq km

In 1606, Pedro Fernández de Quirós made his first Vanuatu landfall at Gaua, which he called Vergen Maria. The local people welcomed his crew, as they were thought to be envoys of Qat, their mythical creator. Quirós seized the chief and ordered his (sacred) hair and beard to be shaved off. Big mistake – the Spaniards made a lucky escape, firing their weapons as they fled.

Captain William Bligh sailed through the Banks in 1789 in his longboat, shortly after he had been cast adrift by his crew following the famous mutiny on the *Bounty*. Bligh was the first navigator to accurately log the Banks Islands' positions, naming them after Joseph Banks, the botanist on his 1774 expedition.

### Local Customs

#### DANCES

The most popular dance is a humorous fertility rite from Mota Lava and Mota, called the *ma*, or snake dance. This is performed by men striped with white paint, wearing boat- or fish-shaped headdresses and holding a long, decorated stick representing a snake. While they dance, a clown leaps about wearing a varied collection of nontraditional aids such as a mask and snorkel tube.

In the *mato* dance women and children also take part, and men wear bunches of dried seeds around their ankles, making a rhythmic rattle to accompany the drum beats.

#### TATTOOS

Until the end of the 19th century most women, and some men, tattooed intricate designs all over their bodies and faces. These either showed how far the person had progressed through their *sukwe* grades, or were representations of mythical heroes, particularly Qat. Tattooing died out gradually with the influence of Christianity.

#### Arts

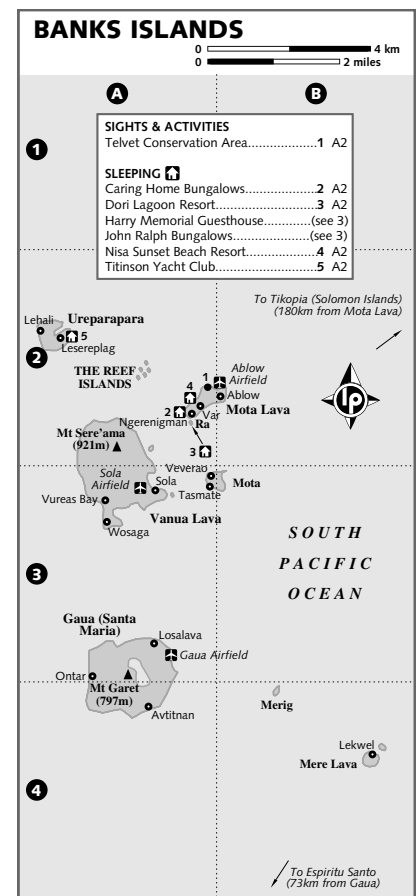
Bark paintings traditionally are produced by men. A strip of bark is outlined on a tree, peeled off, and dried to form a suitable surface to paint on. Subjects are based around mythology or grade-taking rituals.

Other traditional handicrafts include small carved figurines called *tamates* that represent spirits or mythical beings; shell or seed necklaces; tools and equipment (bows and arrows, headdresses, pig-killing clubs); decorated *laplap* (dough) grinders; and plates. Basketware and mats incorporate each island's own design. Open-weave baskets have a distinctive colourful pattern and the tear-drop baskets are for catching *noura* (big yabbies).

### Information

Cargo boats seldom visit, so shops run out of supplies. Bring emergency food, drinks and cigarettes. No-one stocks beer.

For **tourist information** (☎ 38550; Sola, Vanua Lava), Charles Smith at the Council Offices is



the tourism officer. He will organise accommodation, speedboats and guides anywhere in the Banks group.

### Festivals & Events

**Ureparapara Arts Festival** This celebration of local culture is held in August each year. Information is posted at [www.vanuatu-tourism.com](http://www.vanuatu-tourism.com) as soon as details and dates are decided.

**Twin Waterfall Bay Festival** ([www.geocities.com/ramblingbrian](http://www.geocities.com/ramblingbrian)) At Sasara Falls each September and exclusively for international visitors. It's a grand three-day exposé of the Banks culture, including how to build canoes, houses and pig fences, with plenty of natural wonders to explore as well.

**Vanua Lava Day Cultural Festivals** In July and August, villagers hold local dance celebrations with food and handicraft stalls, games and competitions. Contact Charles Smith (☎ 38550) at the provincial offices, in July, for details.

### Getting There & Around

**Vanair** (☎ 25025) flies from Luganville to Gaua, Vanua Lava and Mota Lava twice weekly on Monday and Friday, with one flight calling in to the Torres group if there's a demand. Flights may change order, some landings may be omitted, and schedules change unexpectedly. Be ready to dash to the airstrip should a plane appear.

For a boat that call into these northern islands, see p185. There are a number of good anchorages, but the only options for visiting most places are either speedboats or walking.

A speedboat from Sola costs 12,000Vt return to Tasmate, on nearby Mota, and 16,000Vt to Var on Mota Lava. However, the seas are often too choppy for safe travel.

### GAUA (SANTA MARIA)

Gaua offers spectacular treks to a crater lake, a volcano, falls and caves. The highest point, Mt Gareth (797m), rises 115m above the floor of a semicircular volcanic crater. At the base of the crater is beautiful, sulphur-tinted Lake Letas.

Gaua's northeastern coast (its most populated area) is fringed by extensive coral gardens and a few small, sandy bays. An arts festival is held every two years. See the **VTO** ([www.vanuatu-tourism.com](http://www.vanuatu-tourism.com)) calendar for dates.

High cliffs fall straight into the sea on the west coast. Vila Cultural Centre has a recording of water music created by the women of Lakona Bay who clap under the water in the ocean.

### MT GARET VOLCANO

Mt Gareth erupted in 1965 and when it made loud rumbling noises in 1973 the whole island was temporarily evacuated. It's considered the most dangerous volcano in Vanuatu because there is only a thin layer of rock between the magma chamber and the bottom of Lake Letas. A crack in the rock would let water hit the magma and – boom – another Krakatoa.

### History

Quirós in 1606 told the king of Spain that Gaua was cultivated, with an abundance of pigs, chickens, fruit and about 200,000 people (probably exaggerated). In the late 1800s Polynesians from Futuna landed. A few Futunans managed to settle but most were slaughtered. From 1900, blackbirding and a series of epidemics devastated the population, bringing it down to 700.

During the following years, men returning from Queensland became involved in bitter land disputes. Poisoned well water wiped out whole villages: some said it was poison brought back from the canefields; others blamed voodoo. In fear for their lives, entire villages left for Mere Lava where the language is almost the same. Locals say that by the mid 1960s the population had dropped to 70. Things eventually settled down, families returned, and now 2500 people live here, many with relations on Mere Lava.

### STONE RELICS

Everywhere on Gaua is evidence of more populous times. You'll find long stretches of dry-stone walls and rock foundations of houses and *nakamals* (clubhouses) everywhere. Charles from Wongrass Bungalows will show you the ruins of his great-great-grandmother's village.

Equally interesting are the obelisks and stone stages where chiefs delivered justice, and stone bowls, for mixing kava, piled up at the bases of banyans. Near the large banyan, a carved altar surrounded by seven scooped stones was used by the local sorcerers to pray for a tsunami to wipe out various enemies.

One of the island's more famous relics is a particularly large monolith about 2m across with remarkable petroglyphs that cover al-

most the entire surface. It's in the south, a four-hour walk from Gaua airport.

### Sights & Activities

Pretty **Lake Letas**, thunderous **Siri Falls** and naughty, smelly **Mt Gareth volcano** are the main features of Gaua, but you can do day treks that cover just the falls, or the lake, or maybe the lake and volcano. Charles at Wongrass Bungalows is your best contact to arrange them.

Much less strenuous, but very interesting, are **walks** to villages, ancient ruins, taro and pawpaw gardens, sparkling rivers and deep green bays. Go along the coast in a **speedboat**, stopping at bays and inlets on the way.

There's **snorkelling** out from Lemanaman and Aver – but the best is out from Vatles Rock at Bushman's Bay, which has great **deep-sea fishing**. Chief Richard, who lives by the creek there, will show you around.

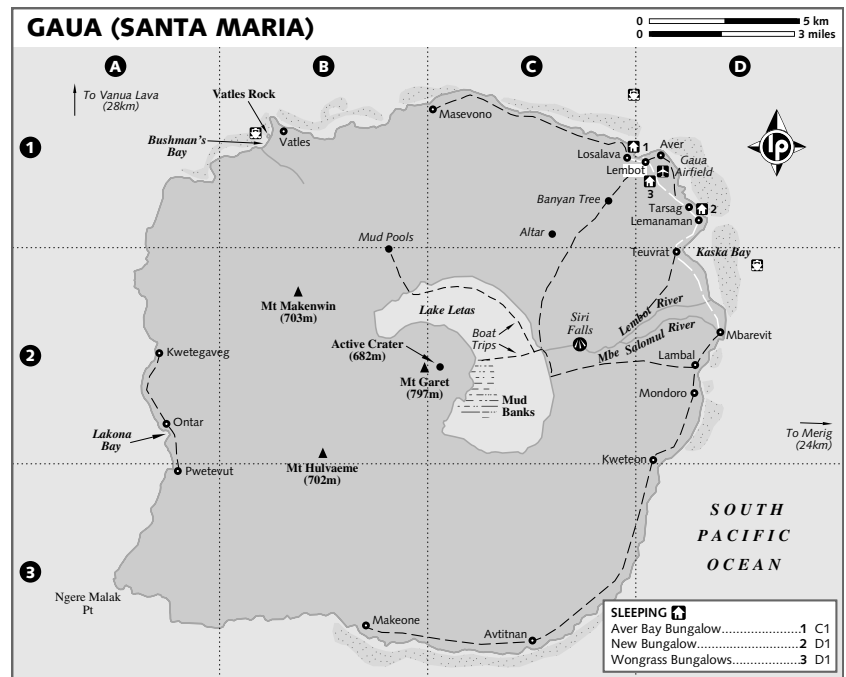
Fun **kastom dances** and magic-trick performances can be arranged with a day or two's notice (per person single/group 6000/2000).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Aver Bay Bungalow** (☎ 38578, 0427 350 599; [the.jacobs@optusnet.com.au](mailto:jacobs@optusnet.com.au); s 1500Vt; meals 150Vt) This cute bungalow for four people sits on the grassy bank overlooking Aver Bay. Your hostess, Adelin, invites you to be part of village life, enjoying their dances, feasts and celebrations. It's just across the bay from the airport.

**New Bungalow** (☎ 38514 in Gaua, ☎ 26576 in Vila; [abann@vanuatu.com.vu](mailto:abann@vanuatu.com.vu); s with all meals 2500Vt) On a rocky outcrop looking across to a deserted island is this large new bungalow for four people. Collette is your host. It's a 15-minute walk along the coast from the airport.

**Wongrass Bungalows** (☎ 38504; s/d with all meals 4000/8000Vt) Two minutes' walk from the airport; has three bedrooms in a thatched building with a connecting sitting area and separate washing and toilet buildings, all set in a pretty garden. The dining room (meals 300Vt) serves excellent food, like crispy fried fish with taro chips. You can also camp in the garden (1000Vt). Charles will look after you very well.



## THE GAUA TRIPLE TREK

This is one grand, difficult, two-day test that visits Gaua's three major sights – pretty **Lake Letas**, **Mt Garek volcano**, and fabulous **Siri Falls** (per person single/double/group 15,000/11,820/9500Vt all inclusive). The path from Lembot winds through a huge banyan for 35m and on past the altar with its seven scooped stones. Keep plodding up through the jungle until it opens out. There's the beautiful Lake Letas, one of the largest freshwater lakes in the Pacific. Hop in a small dugout canoe (2000Vt) to paddle to three boiling-mud pools: grey, brown and blue!

After a picnic lunch you continue by canoe across to Mt Garek. Your guide hacks a way through thick vegetation then it's up a very steep side of red gravel to the rim of the volcano. You need decent boots to keep a grip in the sharp gravel. Peep over the rim – it's a sulphurous mess that seeps orange into the lake and smells disgusting. It's really worth the effort, in an awesome sort of way.

Back to the dugouts to cross Lake Letas again and camp on the sandy shore just south of the overflow into the Mbe Salomul River. If you're awake – unlikely – the guides will cook freshwater prawns for your dinner. Next morning is the vicious trek down to Siri Falls, 120m of roaring power pummeling down through the bush to the sea. The detour back from the falls to the path is steep and difficult, then you finally struggle on down to Lambal. You'll be told a truck will pick you up here. If only. So plod along, wet, cold and weary, back to your bungalow – very, very happy.

## Getting Around

An 8km road runs down the coast from the airport to Mbarevit near the mouth of the Mbe Salomul River. It's 1500Vt by taxi – if the poor battered wreck is not in pieces – or 2000Vt by speedboat if it's high tide.

The best anchorages are at Losalava, Kaska Bay and Bushman's Bay.

## VANUA LAVA

Native fauna is a real highlight here – it's one of the few islands where the Pacific boa is plentiful. Up on Mt Sere'ama, villagers regularly hunt the wild pigs; and turtles lay their eggs in quiet spots along the east coast. More formidable are the saltwater crocodiles that live in the Sulfur River. Some say they were washed down from the Solomons in a cyclone, others that Bishop Selwyn Patterson arrived during the 1800s for missionary purposes with two pet crocodiles. The crocs escaped and were cursed by Bishop Patterson. This curse prevented them from ever attacking or eating humans. It still seems to work most of the time. There are currently perhaps three crocodiles in the river.

Most of Vanua Lava's 2000 inhabitants live along the south coast. The island's highest point is Mt Tola (946m).

## Information

The picturesque village of Sola is the administrative headquarters for Torba province, so it has government offices, a fishery base, co-op, post office, **police station** (☎ 38556)

and National Bank of Vanuatu (NBV). Electricity is available for the whole village from 6pm to 9pm. Sola has a **customs office** (☎ 38540), so you can get your passport stamped. You can also arrange boat trips to Mota, Mota Lava, Ureparapara and around Vanua Lava. Contact **Charles Smith** (☎ 38550) at the provincial offices.

Sola has the only telephones on the island. Remote villages can be contacted by VHF radio.

The Anglican Diocese has a truck and a boat, or walk around the wild coastline with its black-sand beaches and yellow sea.

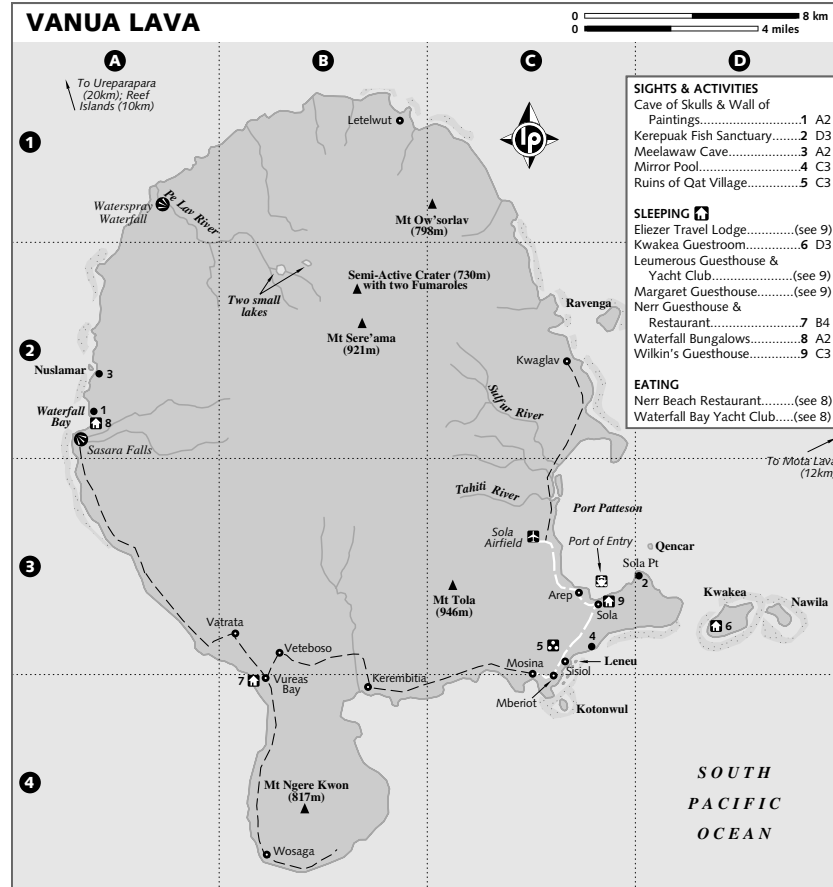
## Sights & Activities

It's a glorious day's return walk to **Vureas Bay**. Set out for Mosina village (one hour) and have a quick swim, then climb up through water taro gardens, over streams and rapids to Veteboso (two hours), overlooking Vureas Bay. Clamber down the steep hill into the bay; stay at Nerr Guesthouse & Restaurant (p168), or return to Sola in the afternoon.

### NEVER SMILE AT A CROCODILE

No swimswims witem ol crocodile  
No givem kae kae long ol crocodile  
No ko long solwota o riva long nae  
No spolem crocodile o mekem hem i kros  
No ko klosap long haos blong mama blong crocodile

## VANUA LAVA



If you've headed off on the waterfall walk, stay on the plateau and continue for four hours over lots more rivers and streams, down and up hills, past a copra plantation, and many villages, over pebbles and rocks until you come to gorgeous **Waterfall Bay** (p168). Arrange for a motor boat to collect you, if you want to boat it back to Sola.

A great two-day **trek** (90 minutes) heads up the coast from Sola to Kwaglav, for refreshments, then along bush tracks to little pools in **Sulfur River** where hot and cold water come in. Sulfur River itself is more than 40°C. Deep in the bush, 730m up **Mt Sere'ama's** eastern side (30 minutes) there are two **fumaroles** spurting steam, plus **geysers** of boiling mud and a view over all the islands and, deeper

into the bush, two small lakes whose water levels change from day to day. Ask your host about a guide (2700Vt, plus tent hire).

Other walks go to red-sand beaches and fascinating **Qat villages**. See the ruins of a Qat village where food was turned to stone, and the **mirror pool** with a canoe that was turned to stone.

It's a 30-minute walk to **Kerepuak fish sanctuary** at Sola Point, in a very small bay. If you have snorkel gear, it's the best spot to see fish.

There are beautiful beaches like **Mosina** for swimming and snorkelling.

Island feast nights (plates 500Vt) can be arranged through Leumerous Yachtclub (p168) for a group.

## BOAT TRIPS

Take a boat to **Kwanglav** (6000Vt) from where you can hike up Mt Sere'ama and down in a day. Or take a 10-minute boat ride to **Qen-car** (4000Vt shared), a picture-perfect little white-sand island with a gorgeous backdrop of Vanua Lava's mountains and bays. There's good fishing off the reef and great snorkelling – bring your own snorkel gear.

Take a motorboat to **Waterfall Bay**. It's a beautiful two-hour ride along the northern coastline, past Ravenga Island, around the north tip then south past 30m-high Waterspray Waterfall and several large caverns and caves, past large red cliffs and finally to Waterfall Bay, through a gap in the reef. You'll almost certainly be entertained by dolphins, and you'll probably see turtles on your way.

The 12 low-lying, coconut- and scrub-covered **Reef Islands** with white-sand beaches and dazzling coral are the only true coral atolls in the country and are an excellent **game-fishing** site. You can get here by speedboat from Sola.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Eliezer Travel Lodge** (☎ 38553; s with all meals 2500Vt) Gorgeous little stone and thatched bungalows in various shapes sit in an amazing tropical garden with tame emerald doves (one flew in with Vanair). Solar power supplements the local supply. The dining room serves excellent meals such as lobster, or chicken, cabbage and rice. Doreen is the manager.

**Margaret Guesthouse** (☎ 38560; s with all meals 2500Vt) Emanuel House stands gloriously tall on the main road. The ground floor is Margaret's Store. Upstairs are seven sparkly new guestrooms, two shared bathrooms with running water, and a modern kitchen. Take your meals out onto the large veranda. Out the back, ducks and chooks remind you that this is a village, not a centre of commerce.

**Wilkin's Guesthouse** (☎ 38550; s/d with all meals 2500/5000Vt) has two twin bungalows, flush toilet and electricity at night. Jeffrey and Kay are delightful, and the bungalows are on a black-sand beach.

**Leumerous Guesthouse** (☎ 38556, 38823; s with all meals 2500Vt, camping 500Vt) Close to the beach and the centre of town, with solar lighting and flush toilet. It has single and twin thatched bungalows set in pretty grounds, with eels, birds and flowers. Robert and Sara will take good care of you. Their Leumer-

ous Yachtclub, right on the sand behind the bungalows, is everybody's favourite spot for all meals (300Vt to 750Vt) and for snacks and drinks.

## Getting Around

A taxi normally meets each flight (600Vt to Sola). A road links the airstrip with Mosina, about 8km south, from which point a footpath mostly follows the coast to Sasara Falls.

Another path heads north from the airstrip to Kwanglav, the starting point for the climb up Mt Sere'ama and a canoe trip out to uninhabited Ravenga Island.

## Around Vanua Lava

The islands Kwakea and Nawila are surrounded by white sand and an extensive fringing coral reef; the lagoon between the two is excellent for snorkelling at high tide. You'll see some huge surf in the wet season. Artefacts found on these idyllic islands are similar to those unearthed in Tikopia in the southeastern Solomons. In the early 20th century, a canoe party from Tonga attempted to settle on Kwakea, but all were killed by Vanua Lavans and their Tikopian allies.

Visit Kwakea from Sola; just check with the **provincial government** (☎ 38550) about permission – the owners may let you stay in the Kwakea Guestroom. A speedboat from Sola costs around 2000Vt.

## VUREAS BAY

It's a lovely village with great people, and gardens along a black-sand bay. There are short walks, canoeing, a full-day waterfall tour, custom dances and other traditional entertainment.

Chief Godfrey Manar runs the **Nerr Guesthouse & Restaurant** (☎ 38550; s/d with all meals 2500/5000Vt), a little thatched pumpkin house on the beach. He'll meet you in Sola and carry your bag on the walk back for 1000Vt. Bring toilet paper, mosquito nets and snorkel gear; the reefs are excellent. **Nerr Beach Restaurant** (meals 300Vt) will do a Melanesian feast with a little notice. There's good anchorage in the bay.

## WATERFALL BAY

This is one of the Banks' most dramatic sights. Two spectacular waterfalls, known as **Sasara Falls** (15m; entry 1000Vt), tumble over the cliff straight into large rock pools

in the bay. The thunder of cascading water can be heard all around – a torrent of water in two fabulous silver sheets. Get here by speedboat or walk from Sola or Vureas Bay with a guide. This is a good anchorage site, and very popular with yachties.

Visit the **cave of skulls**, where locals put their enemies' bodies after pushing them over the cliffside, and the **wall of paintings**, which are currently being restored with traditional paints.

Go by outrigger canoe to **Meelawav Cave**. Inside, towards the back, you can see black coral by torchlight. Spooky. See stunning **Waterspray Waterfall** on the way.

Listen to the water music – where the women create rhythms and music in the sea – and watch *kastom* dances, or join in traditional games.

The pretty, woven **Waterfall Bungalow** (☎ 38550; s/d with all meals 2500/5000Vt) is only a few minutes from the falls. It's so natural and peaceful you'll think you've arrived in paradise. Chief Kerely will organise excellent tours and his wife cooks delicious local food, including lobster if the men have batteries for their dive torches (hint!). Make sure you try the homemade pawpaw and coconut jam. **Waterfall Bay Yacht Club** (meals 400Vt) is in a grand bungalow with artefacts and handicrafts for sale.

Transport by speedboat from Sola is around 18,000Vt return (plus 3000Vt to wait overnight). It's a 7.5m aluminium boat with two outboards, and easily carries eight passengers.

## MOTA LAVA

Mota Lava is a strong centre for traditional activities, especially dancing. Despite their Christian beliefs, most islanders still invoke spirits. At the southwestern end of the island, **Sleeping Mountain** (Mt Tunto; 243m) offers a magnificent panorama to the south from the Reef Islands around to Mota. Megapode birds, so called because they have large strong feet, breed in the warm sands of the southeast coast.

Follow the footpath from the airstrip across to a great new project, **Telvet Conservation Area** (☎ 28550, book through Charles), where tourists can see coconut crabs in their own habitat. Soloman Dini will look after you. There's a natural sea pool with stacks of fish – bring your snorkel gear. Learn about trad-

## TO CATCH A FISH

First you get some red clay and mould into a soft paste. Top it with a spread of the hermit crab's testicles. This is now a tasty bit of red clay that fish can't resist. Tie a line and hook to the end of a bamboo pole, place your tasty clay on the hook, and fish jump on.

itional fishing with bamboo poles. It's a one-hour walk, so you could stop overnight at the little **transit bungalow** (500Vt), where there's water, beds with mattresses and a light.

The *kastom* **Snake Dance** (3600Vt per person) is a colourful performance, here and on Mota, but it's expensive. Your host will arrange it for you but check how long the dances will last before you go.

Activities include treks up Sleeping Mountain and to bat caves, and reef or deep-sea fishing trips.

The airfield is on the volcanic plateau above Ablow. Go down around the coast where there are quaint villages and white-sand beaches.

**Caring Home Bungalows** (☎ 38585, 38502; s with all meals 2500Vt) All bamboo on white sand looking over the harbour at Ngerenigman, with a little shop selling handicrafts. Ask for Franklin when you ring. There's a pit toilet and bucket wash; transport from the airport is 2000Vt.

**Nisa Sunset Beach Resort** (☎ 38500, Vila ☎ 23736, 40140; s with all meals 2500Vt) Grand buildings with great little verandas, at Qerenagde Village, near the beach where you can swim at high tide, but be careful of the current. There's solar lighting in the evening and a truck!

A boat to Mota Lava from Sola is 16,000Vt.

## Getting There & Around

The main southern road goes from the airport to Ngerenigman (2500Vt). A footpath follows the northern and western coastline. Allow at least seven hours for the round-island walk.

## RA

From Ngerenigman you can walk across to tiny Ra – ask the villagers to point out the underwater footpath – or canoe across (100Vt). Ra is an idyllic private world. It has some huge rocks at its southern end and

an old 'devil cave', once used for storing shell money.

The snorkelling here is great, with red, yellow, pink and blue gorgonian fans, large plates and many fish – the big attraction around here is game fishing. There are pleasant guided walks around the gardens, prehistoric shelters and volcanic stones; canoe fishing can be arranged.

**Dori Lagoon Resort** (☎ 38599; s with all meals 2200Vt) What a great place. The sparkling new bungalows have two bedrooms, and the meals are just excellent. There's a pit toilet and bucket shower, a beach at your doorstep, and owners Francis and Charlotte give you the best time.

**John Ralph Bungalows** (☎ 38502; s with all meals 2300Vt) Two smart little rock-and-bamboo bungalows with flower-lined paths are right next door to Harry Memorial, on the good swimming beach.

**Harry Memorial Guesthouse** (☎ 38502, ☎/fax 38552; s/d with all meals 3500/6000Vt) In an exceptionally attractive setting with a fine view across the water, has small, traditional-style bungalows and a large family one; the meals are memorable, served in a dining house overlooking the reef. There's a good beach for swimming here. There's solar power, and bucket water.

## UREPARAPARA

Ureparapara is unique. It's the top of an extinct volcano that lets in the sea to form Lorup Bay. To enter this spectacular harbour, you actually go inside the crater, passing between the immense headlands of Ngeye Byo Point and Ngeye Vet Point. Both tower 300m above the water, while Mt Tow Lap (764m) dominates the scene ahead. It makes an unforgettable introduction to the island. However, yachts anchoring here may find that the strong ocean swells create surprising turbulence.

The 500 people living around the bay will be delighted to show you its attractions. Ask the chief if you want to see *kastom* dancing, or do a guided, very strenuous, walk to the top of the caldera (also with the chief's permission). There's been so little outside influence that villagers even make their own soap from the goo inside vines.

Yet suddenly everything changes. The island is in the headlines. A 300-year old 12-step ceremonial wall of carved granite

bricks has been discovered – it may be given World Heritage status. And Ureparapara will probably have cruise ships calling regularly. Wow.

**Titinson Yacht Club** (☎ 38592; s with all meals 2500Vt), at Lesereplag (Divers Bay), is a friendly place with one-bed bungalows set in a beautiful garden.

A boat from Sola costs 32,000Vt.

## TORRES ISLANDS

pop 1000 / area 105 sq km

Flying over this small archipelago, with its gentle, low-lying terrain and dazzling white-sand beaches, is awesome. From the air you can see the fabulous reefs under an ocean so clear that visibility is well over 40m; it's a rush to get off the plane to go snorkelling.

To the west a huge ocean-floor chasm, the Torres Trench, stretches north into the Solomons – Tikopia is only 215km away. Although contact over time was limited, the locals here have similar eastern-Pacific genetic, linguistic and cultural influences. Betel-nut chewing, an old Solomons favourite, also occurs in the Banks and Torres groups.

The airport is on Linua, which is unpopulated except for the Kamilisa Bungalows. South, across a tidal sandbank, is Loh. Just south is Toga where most of the 130 residents live. To the north, Tegua and Hiu (the group's biggest island) offer excellent snorkelling.

Surfing is great on Hiu, especially when the Southeast Trade Winds are blowing. Locals either make their own surfboards, body-surf, or get the old outriggers lined up. Now that's a challenge.

## History

The Torres Islands are among Vanuatu's oldest landforms, the highest hills having risen from the sea about 22 million years ago. The group is named after Luis Vaéz de Torres, Quirós' second-in-command.

Torres Islanders were never cannibals. Sadly, their peaceful reputation attracted blackbirders. Labour recruiting and epidemics devastated the population. By the 1880s, there were too few people left for recruiting ships to be bothered calling.

## Information

The local tourism council will help you with all your enquiries and arrange accommodation and transport. Call **David Andrew** (☎ 38573) or write him or Whiteley Toa at Loh, Torres Islands.

Fresh fruit, vegetables and seafood are plentiful, but the stores have very limited, and expensive, stocks. There are often no mosquito coils, batteries, soap, toilet paper, Milo etc, and there's never beer or cigarettes.

## Sights & Activities

When you've eaten your fill of seafood, there's extensive coral to view at Lunaragi on Loh, where the water is warm and clear,

and around Linua, and mostly everywhere, so bring snorkel gear.

Metoma is still alive with **coconut crabs** despite their exploitation. Ask at Kamilisa Guesthouse about watching them by spotlight. Your host Whiteley Toa will arrange a boat and guide. But don't get too close to the crabs – those nippers rip apart coconut shells!

Go boating in an outrigger along the lagoon between Linua and Loh. It's pretty, peaceful, and fun exercise. Or sail around the coast of Linua to Honeymoon Beach, both beautiful and deserted! You can hire a boat and visit the other islands, or do a spot of spear fishing.

Trek up the mountains, and if you're not into arduous walks take heart – all the mountains here are actually small hills, but the views are still spectacular.

Hiu is a beautiful island with smoothly shaped hills. From its highest peak, Mt Wonvara (366m), you can see Vanikolo in the Solomons. One of its attractions is Yeyenwu Cave, with interesting stalactites and stalagmites as well as hand stencils. There is brilliant snorkelling here and on Tegua (18,000Vt for a day's return trip). Take a surfboard with you – there are two at Kamilisa Guesthouse (left behind by somebody).

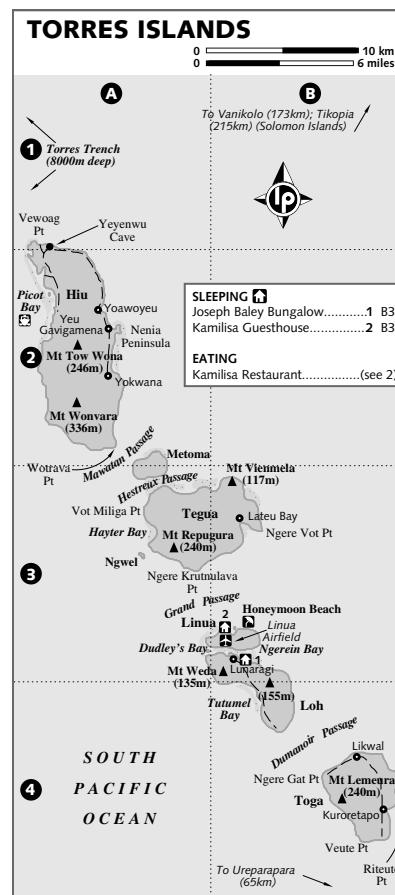
Island teak, as it's called locally, grows abundantly on Hiu. It's an artisan's delight, ideal for quality furniture. The wood is so dense that nails often buckle when you try to hammer them in.

Make sure you see the Torres dances. The men wear amazing painted headdresses, and for the snake dance, they paint their bodies to look like a snake in the sea.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Kamilisa Restaurant** (meals 400Vt) Kick back in this pretty restaurant and enjoy earth oven-baked pork or fish, cooked with coconut and pumpkin, with island cabbage. Ask for Whiteley Toa when you ring. The phone is over the water at Lunaragi so make a time to speak to him. Butterfly-lovers will find this place amazing.

**Kamilisa Guesthouse** (☎ 38573, 38565; s/d with all meals 2900/5800Vt) From the airstrip, walk through delicate rainforest to a lovely white-sand beach with small trees twisting out of the sand. There are four twin



bungalows among a botanical garden with local orchids. Bucket-water showers and toilets are behind the bungalows. There's electricity from 6pm to 9pm.

### Getting There & Around

The Torres group's only airfield is on Linua and there's a Vanair service from Luganville once a week. So if you visit, you'll be

marooned on these fabulous islands for a week.

There are several good anchorages, though most are rather exposed to the Southeast Trade Winds. Picot Bay, off Hiu, is considered the best.

The islands are no more than 4km apart, so the people mainly get around in outrigger canoes.