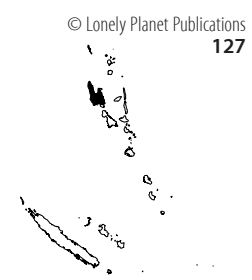


# Espiritu Santo



It's called the Capital of Adventure, the Divers' Mecca, Espiritu Santo – Spanish for 'the Holy Spirit' – and mostly just plain Santo. The adventure starts by zapping down a river from an amazing cave, rounding cattle along the coconut plantations, trekking through the jungle to huddling little villages, searching for the elusive Lysepsep people, and swinging from trees into the brilliant blue waters of a blue hole. The diving is world class, with the magnificent wreck of USS *President Coolidge* accessible to anyone with certification, and the coral reefs often just steps from the shore. And as for the spirit, it may not be holy but it imbues everyone with enthusiasm for the place.

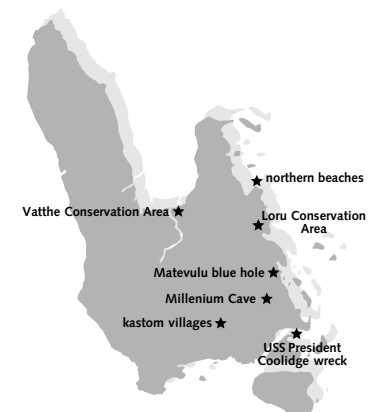
Santo is Vanuatu's largest island and has the country's four highest peaks (all more than 1700m) – Mt Tabwemasana, Mt Kotamtam, Mt Tawaloala and Santo Peak – rising from the mountainous spine that runs almost the full length of the island's west coast. In contrast, the much flatter southern and eastern coastal strips have been developed for cattle grazing and plantations. This is where most of the island's fascinating history has been acted out.

Santo has an interesting mix of city slickers, who live along the southern and eastern seaboard, balanced by villagers who are quite isolated, dress in clothes woven from the leaves of the jungle, and are totally self-sufficient. As *kastom* demands, there are important *nimangki* (grade-taking) ceremonies throughout these villages.

The island draws many travellers and facilities are just fabulous.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Diving the **USS President Coolidge** (p52), the world's largest, accessible luxury liner and WWII wreck
- Exploring beautiful lowland forests in the **Loru** (p137) and the **Vatthe Conservation Area** (p138)
- Swimming in a crystal-clear '**blue hole**' (p136) or relax on picture-perfect northern **beaches** (p137)
- Stepping into the past in Santo's many **kastom villages** (p128)
- Losing yourself in wonder amid the stalactites and stalagmites at **Millenium Cave** (p136)



■ POPULATION: 33,000

■ AREA: 3677 SQ KM

## History

Santo's sandalwood resources were not discovered by the outside world until 1853, then alluvial gold was found and by 1856, 16 traders were resident on the island. Several ships at a time would be moored at various anchorages, taking on sandalwood in return for pigs.

By 1871, blackbirders (see p29) were casting their greedy eyes on Santo. Over the next decade, many sailors were killed in revenge for acts of violence against islanders.

## RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

Many Santo locals were resentful of the Europeans and by the early 20th century resistance movements included the Ronovuru movement. Ronovuru claimed to be able to bring the dead back to life. He told his supporters that his wife had been poisoned by an Englishman and that only by killing this settler could his wife and other dead people be resurrected. He and two friends murdered the unfortunate man, giving portions of the body to his followers.

The European settlers were outraged. Ronovuru, unrepentant, went to the gallows, promising a return to life for all his followers' ancestors. Despite his death, and the fact that no corpses sprang back to life, the cult persisted in Santo's isolated bush villages.

## WWII

Santo played an important role during WWII that few people are aware of. Japan's relentless southward drive in early 1942 meant the Allies urgently needed a secure forward base to buttress their desperate holding action in the central Solomons. Santo's Second Channel was ideal (see the boxed text, opposite).

## JIMMY STEVENS & THE COCONUT REBELLION

In 1963 charismatic Jimmy Stevens formed the Nagriamel movement. Then on 27 May 1980, eight weeks before national independence, he and his supporters staged a coup known as the Coconut Rebellion. Armed mainly with bows and arrows, they occupied Luganville and proclaimed Santo's independence, calling their new country Vemarana. The new nation was short-lived, however; it collapsed with Stevens' arrest on 1 September (see p33).

## Information

There is no tourist information centre but go to the Santo Rotary Club's website [www.santotoday.com](http://www.santotoday.com). **Dave Cross** (☎ 43911), president of the Espiritu Santo Tourism Association, will happily answer your queries, as will your host at your hotel/guesthouse. Find Dave at Beachfront Resort (p134).

## Activities

### SCUBA DIVING & SNORKELLING

Want to dive? Then Santo is the place to be. In fact, you shouldn't come to Santo without trying a dive. See p52 for detailed information on dive sites and p56 for dive centres, which hire out gear and facilitate dives. But if you're over 105, you could always settle for snorkelling as there are so many reefs within clear view.

### GAME & SPORTS FISHING

Pit your skills against the wahoo, bonito, rainbow runners, mahimahi – whatever is out there. The catch is either tagged and returned or donated to local villages – never wasted. It costs around 50,000/75,000Vt for a half-/full day for a maximum of six people. Main operators are **Allan Power Dive Tours** (Map p132; ☎ 36822; [www.allan-power-santo.com](http://www.allan-power-santo.com)) in *The Lady*, a 10m Reefmaster; and **Seascape Charters** (☎ 37379; [islandflyer@vanuatu.com.vu](mailto:islandflyer@vanuatu.com.vu)) in *Island Flyer*, a 7.5m Shark Cat. Bokissa Eco Island Resort (p135) has a 12m Mondoocoe and a 7.5m Sports Fish for guests.

### TREKKING

There are many excellent hikes on Santo. Favourites are through the Vatthe Conservation Area (p138) and the Loru Conservation Area (p137). For die-hard trekkers there are major challenges in the Cumberland Ranges (p139).

**Southern Jungle Adventure** (☎ 54491; [santo@vanuatu.com.vu](mailto:santo@vanuatu.com.vu); per day 6000Vt) is a five-day grand trek through dense rainforest, gardens, rivers, waterfalls and caves, including fabulous Millenium Cave (p136). You spend your nights in little huts, a fire burning nearby to keep away the cold, in traditional villages where MalMal people (pygmy size) live and still use Stone Age equipment. Chiefs of these villages have many wives. Your guide is local guru Glen Russell, who also arranges *kastom* dances for a minimum of 10 people.

## FROM JUNGLE TO CITY TO DIVING MECCA

Second Channel was the Allies' base for their war efforts against the Japanese advance during WWII. For three years to September 1945 more than half a million military personnel, mainly Americans, were stationed here waiting their turn to head into battle in the Pacific. At times there were as many as 100 ships moored off Luganville.

Roads were laid throughout southeastern Santo. There were more than 40 cinemas, four military hospitals, five airfields, a naval repair centre, a torpedo boat base, jetties and market gardens. Quonset huts were erected for use as offices, stores, workshops and servicemen's accommodation; many can still be seen around Luganville.

Over 10,000 islanders came to Santo to work as labourers or servants for the troops. To the ni-Vans, the servicemen seemed fabulously wealthy and generous and to be paid much higher wages than the planters.

Once the fighting was over and the Americans were to return home, there was the problem of all the surplus war equipment. The USA offered local planters and the Condominium government the chance to buy the equipment and supplies. But they stalled, hoping, perhaps, to get it all for nothing. Their plan backfired, because the Americans dumped the lot. Everything from bulldozers, aero engines, trucks and jeeps to crates of Coca-Cola and canned food went into the sea at what is now **Million Dollar Point**. The coral-encrusted equipment, and the wreck of a boat that was trying to nick some of it, make the point a popular diving and snorkelling spot (see p54).

## HORSE RIDING

Beginners and experienced riders can enjoy a superb day at **Bel Mol Ranch** (Map p130; ☎ 36823; [belmolbeef@Vanuatu.com.vu](http://belmolbeef@Vanuatu.com.vu); half-/full day 6000/12,000Vt) among coconut trees, along the coastline, up on the plateau for amazing views, and rounding up some beautiful sleek Santo cattle. Price includes hotel pickup, lunch and gear.

## GOLF

The **Santo Golf Club** (Map p130; ☎ Sat & Sun) at Palikulo Bay welcomes visitors, but you need to bring your own clubs. It's a delightful course running along the sea front with fine views of Aese Island and Palikulo Point. There's a golf tournament at the club on the last Sunday of every month.

## Tours

Tours cost upwards from 2000/4000Vt per half-/full day, depending on the distance, fees to be paid and the number of people. A typical day trip includes visiting Fanafo, Matantas or Champagne Beach, and the Matevulu Blue Hole. Whoever you book with, be sure to agree on where you will go: not all guides have access to Champagne Beach due to *kastom* disputes, but you can walk across to it from Lonnoc Beach.

An absolute must-do is Millenium Cave (p136) high in the hills inland from Luganville. It was discovered by Glen Russell

in 1999, and took five years to open up for tourists to explore. Nearby is Nampauk. A tour to this fascinating village includes a scary fire-dancing ceremony, usually performed to welcome a new chief or to bless the yam crop. Book with Luke of **Paradise Tours** (☎ 37159), which offers a full range of tours.

**Heritage Tours** (☎ 36862, 40968) Offers a range of half- and full-day tours including the Vatthe Conservation Area and can tailor trips to your interests (eg hiking, WWII touring).

**Little Paradise of Port Olry** (Map p130; ☎ 37661, 37606, 43776; PO Box 115) Tarcisius runs a day tour, which includes his home village at Port Olry and its gorgeous beach. On the way you stop to swim at the Blue Hole, and visit Fanafo.

## Getting There & Away AIR

Luganville's Pekoia Airport is the feeder airport for the following northern islands: Ambae, Ambrym, Epi, Maewo, Malekula, Paama, Pentecost, Banks Islands and Torres Islands. Contact **Vanair** (airport ☎ 36506; town Map p132; ☎ 36421).

There are at least two return flights daily between Santo and Vila. The island's other commercial strip is at Lajmoli, on the northwest coast. Vanair stops there on some flights; include it if possible as it takes you over the awesome central mountains.



**Luganville Stationery** (Map p132; ☎ 36144; per min 25Vt; 🕒 7.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 11.30am Sat)

**LAUNDRY**

Most accommodation places offer a laundry service, or do your own at Beachfront Resort (wash/dry 500/500Vt). Keep an eye out for the fantastic 'VCP soap' – these great white, hand-carved slabs, good for skin and clothes, are produced in Luganville.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Northern District Hospital** (Map p132; ☎ 36345)

Perched above the town in Le Plateau.

**Pharmacies** (☎ 36213) One at the hospital and two

small chemist shops in town with a good range of deodorants. Bring anything more serious with you.

**MONEY**

Luganville is the only town outside Vila with commercial banking facilities. They're all on the main street.

**ANZ Bank** (Map p132; ☎ 36711; 🕒 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM.

**Club de Sanma** (Map p132; ☎ 36039; Main St; 🕒 9am-midnight) The money exchange here offers good rates.

**National Bank of Vanuatu** (NBV; Map p132; ☎ 36441; 🕒 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat)

**Westpac** (Map p132; ☎ 36625; 🕒 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri)

**POST**

There's a **post office** (Map p132; 🕒 7.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat) with a cardphone outside.

**THE HIGH PRICE OF...**

Yu usem toilet pepa yu pem 30Vt  
Bisbis no mo yu pem 20Vt  
Swim yu pem 30Vt

**TELEPHONE & FAX**

**Telecom Vanuatu** (Map p132; Rue La Pérouse; 🕒 7.30-11.30am & 1.15-4pm Mon-Fri) has public telephone and fax facilities. This is where most of the town's public telephones are, including two internal, private phone booths.

**TOILETS**

**Market** (Map p132; admission Vt30) There are two toilets at the market – one at the front and one at the back.

**Unity Park** (Map p132; admission Vt30) Use the toilet or take a shower.

**Sights**

There's lots of **WWII remains** like the corrugated iron **Quonset huts** at Main Wharf (Map p132) and near Unity Park (Map p132), and the rusting steel sea walls that are evidence of busier times. Million Dollar Point (p54), where hundreds of tonnes of US military equipment was dumped, now shows its coral-encrusted machinery to snorkellers and divers. At low tide you'll find metal objects littering the beach for a kilometre in either direction. The entrance fee is 500Vt per car. Don't leave your valuables around while you dive.

About 16km out of Luganville heading towards Fanafo, you'll see some old lumps of concrete that were **ammunition bunkers** (Map p130) with roads on either side that were once part of a huge WWII complex (see the boxed text, p129).

Like the leprechauns in Ireland, the Lysepep people were the first inhabitants of Santo. They live a reclusive life in banyans and caves. Most people have never seen them, but spend time in the central jungle and impenetrable mountains of Central Santo, and you may find them watching you. About a metre tall, they grow their hair very long and use it as a screen. The **Lysepep Culture Park** (Map p130) will show you many of their unusual customs. You can also see local food preparation, and special dances are performed throughout June and July. Book, or join, a group (six or more people) at least a day before, through your hotel.

Villagers come from all over southern and eastern Santo to sell their produce at the **market** (Main St; 🕒 24hr) near Sarakata Bridge.

There's a small **Coconut Oil Factory** (Map p130) that operates most weekdays, and the obliging manager Ron Hawkins will be happy to show you around (probably for free if you buy some of his natural skin-care products based on *nambagura* plant oil). It's an interesting enterprise. Take the turn-off to Nambel and cross the disused Lambue wartime airfield. The factory is at the back of the house on the left about 1km past the old strip.

**Activities**

The best place to **swim** near Luganville is at the beach in front of **Beachfront Resort**, where you're most welcome. Or head out to the beach on the way to **Palikulo Point**. A taxi ride out here will cost around 1200Vt return; fix a time with the driver to collect you (and offer a strong incentive to ensure he returns).

**Massage** may not be very active, but it's a great part of an activity. Try the outside table of Coral Quays Fish & Dive Resort (p135) with a one-hour Melanesian massage for 3000Vt or Bokissa Eco Island Resort (p135) with coconut body scrubs from 2500Vt.

**Unity Park**, which runs from the market to Rue La Pérouse, has a kids playground and lovely shade trees. Lie on the grass and look at the ocean. **Rotary Park** where boats leave for Bokissa has barbecues and plenty of grass.

**Festivals & Events**

The Luganville to Aora swim is making it big in the grand ocean swims (see www.pacificswims.com/espirtu\_about.html). It's a 2.6km swim in pretty tough ocean, held every year in June. People from Fiji, New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere battle against the locals.

**Sleeping BUDGET**

There's a fabulous range of places to choose from in Luganville. Two basic options are **Riviere Motel** (A River View; ☎ 36782, fax 37601; s/d 1800/2400Vt) and **Bamboo Garden Motel** (☎ 36837; valiant@vanuatu.com.vu; s/d 1500/2800Vt).

**Beachfront Divers Lodge** (☎ 36881; fax 36882; bfresort@vanuatu.com.vu; dm 2500Vt) Custom built for divers, with secure scuba gear wash area, this cottage sleeps eight people and has a

**LUGANVILLE**

<b>INFORMATION</b>	Ocean King Café & Restaurant.....32 B2	<b>SHOPPING</b> 🏪	LCM Store.....40 C2
ANZ Bank.....1 D2	Santo Bakery.....33 C2	<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
Computer & Network Services (CNS).....2 D2	Santo Chinese Restaurant.....34 D2	BP Wharf.....41 D3	
Computer Net.....3 D2	Won Sing Sing Take Away Restaurant.....35 D2	Main Wharf (Quonset Huts).....42 C4	
Customs & Quarantine.....4 C4		Santo 4WD Rental.....43 B2	
Immigration Office.....5 B4	<b>DRINKING</b> 🍷	Simonsen's Wharf (to Bokissa Eco Island Resort).....44 C4	
Luganville Stationery.....6 D2	Camillo's Kava Bar.....36 D2	Unity Shell Garage.....45 D2	
National Bank of Vanuatu (NBV).....7 C2	Nabouru Kava Bar.....37 C3	World Car Rental.....46 D2	
Northern District Hospital.....8 B3	Totel Kava Bar.....38 C3		
Post Office.....9 D2	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> 🎪		
Samra Provincial Council Office.....10 C3	Club de Sanma.....39 C2		
Telecom Vanuatu.....11 C2	Club Narcosis.....(see 20)		
Vanair.....12 D2			
Westpac.....13 D2			
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>			
Allan Power Dive Tours.....14 C2			
Market.....15 B2			
Rotary Park.....16 D4			
Unity Park.....17 C2			
<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏			
Bamboo Garden Motel.....18 B2			
Beachfront Divers Lodge.....(see 19)			
Beachfront Resort.....19 A4			
Deco Stop Lodge.....20 B4			
Hotel Santo.....21 C2			
Kalmer's Guesthouse.....22 D4			
Le Nemo Hotel.....23 D2			
Migotty Motel.....24 D4			
Natapoa Motel.....25 C2			
New Look Motel.....26 D2			
Riviere Motel.....27 A4			
Unity Park Motel.....28 C2			
<b>EATING</b> 🍴			
Island Chicken & Fish.....29 B2			
Market Meal Booths.....30 B2			
Natangora Café.....31 D2			

To Resort Head Office (500m);  
 To Pekaia Airport (6km); Palikulo Bay (12km)  
 To Sarakata (7km);  
 To Fanafo (20km); Bay (50km);  
 Port Ciry (60km)  
 To Bokissa Island (11km)

ESPIRITU SANTO

ESPIRITU SANTO

**BABY DOCS**

There were 18 baby docs at the Santo Hospital. So you're thinking, that's amazing, to have a neonatal conference in Santo. Wrong. Baby doc is Bislama for medical student, and they come from all over the world for six-week placements, arriving with suitcases full of surgical tape, gloves, medical books and antibiotics. One student brought an incubator in his luggage. It's a hands-on experience they won't get at the big hospitals in the West.

One baby doc from the UK scrubbed up to assist at an emergency caesarean in the Place Blong Katem Man. The surgeon, a volunteer, only spoke Chinese, the student only spoke English and the theatre staff only Bislama. The result? A healthy baby boy. Other baby docs blow up the surgical gloves – OK, we know they're scarce – to make toys for the kids. Then the young patients go out to play among the chickens and dogs in the hospital grounds.

The baby docs' rooms at the hospital are a social centre. Young tourists should wander up there to find out what's happening. And if you have a suitcase full of condoms to donate, they'll be gladly received – there's a big push on safe sex in the islands.

kitchen and barbecue facilities. You can camp in the grounds.

**Unity Park Motel** (☎ 36052; locm@vanuatu.com.vu; Main St; s 1350Vt, shared d/tr/q 2100/2400/3200Vt, private r from 2400Vt; 🚻) Upstairs there's lovely airy rooms along a sparkling hallway (ask for a front one with air-con for 3500Vt). Downstairs is more basic. The shared kitchen and bathroom facilities are great, large and with the best showers in town. There's a laundry, a communal sitting area, and a rotunda in the garden, for kicking back. Book, as it is popular.

**New Look Motel** (☎ 36440; newlook@vanuatu.com.vu; Main St; s/d 2820/3940Vt) It's a plain grey door right on the street in the centre of town. But walk up the stairs and you're in another reality – three attractive lounge rooms, a large courtyard, a veranda looking out over Segond channel. All rooms have ensuites – ask for room 8 or 9, which have private verandas – and there are two sparkling clean kitchens for guests.

**Migotty Motel** (☎ 36494; migotty@vanuatu.com.vu; PO Box 40; s/d 3380/4500Vt; 🚻 🚿) Hike up the hill, or hop on a bus, because this place is great. The balconies have good coastal views (ask for a front room), there's a pleasant sitting room, all rooms have ensuites, gardens are pretty and the bright new swimming pool is inviting. The snack bar serves a good breakfast for 500Vt and dinner for 250Vt to 800Vt.

**MIDRANGE**

**Kalmer's Guesthouse** (☎ 36108, 45712; fax 36141; r 4000Vt, whole apt 6000Vt) An inviting, rambling English-style beach house, with a large

closed-in veranda (and a kava bar within stumbling distance).

**Natapoa Motel** (☎ 36643; PO Box 107; jllauret@vanuatu.com.vu; budget s/d 3000/4000, s/d/tr/family 4000/5000/6000/9000Vt; 🚻) A very attractive modern motel, with spacious units with ensuite and kitchen. It's set back a block on a quiet street, yet only a two-minute walk to Unity Park. It's ideal for families, and your friendly hostess will make you feel like part of a family.

**Le Nemo Hotel** (☎ 37991; PO Box 520; d/tr 6000/8500; 🚻) Swish up the beautiful staircase to these spacious rooms with lots of mod cons. All have a dreamy balcony, and you're in a great location. Ask about special deals for families.

**Beachfront Resort** (☎ 36881; fax 36882; bfredort@vanuatu.com.vu; s/d/tr from 4500/6500/8500Vt, family unit 10,000Vt) A friendly, low-key spot with motel-style bungalows, all with kitchenettes. Walk across the lawn to an excellent black-sand beach. It's the best place to swim, even if you aren't staying. Come here too for the best pizzas in town – hotly disputed by Hotel Santo – in the pleasant restaurant. Owner Dave Cross (☎ 43911), is the person to talk to about tourist activities.

**Hotel Santo** (☎ 36250; hotelsanto@vanuatu.com.vu; s/d 6500/7500Vt, upstairs s/d/tr 11,000/12,000/13,000Vt; 🚻 🚿) It's like Vanuatu's own Raffles. The place to see and be seen, this retro '70s building with its fabulous huge slit gong in the foyer, and deep plush lounge chairs. Sit out on the patio with a G&T and watch life come your way, or take your drink out to the gazebo. Comfortable, spacious rooms open onto the pool area; more luxu-

rious rooms are upstairs. Guests can rent hotel cars; Visa, Amex and MasterCard accepted.

**Deco Stop Lodge** (☎ 36175; deco@vanuatu.com.vu; dm/s/d incl breakfast 4300/9500/9500Vt; 🚻) High on the ridge behind Luganville overlooking Segond Channel; its huge deck floats around the inviting swimming pool. There's a great social atmosphere and a large sports facility. Many rooms are set up for divers, with secure wash areas right behind. Transfers are 1200Vt.

**TOP END**

**Coral Quays Fish & Dive Resort** (Map p130; ☎ 36257; www.coralquays.com; stay@coralquays.com; s/d incl breakfast from 8500/9800Vt; 🚻) Eighteen bungalows with soaring ceilings, all sparkling clean and luxurious, set in a tropical garden carved out of the jungle. Over the road is your jetty. Snorkel over coral and bits of planes; the *Tui Twaite* shipwreck is 800m from the jetty. A secure wash and dry room is available for divers. Under-12s are free. A minibus/taxi from town costs 100/300Vt; transfers are 600Vt each way. Kayaks, bikes, snorkel gear and laundry service are available.

**Aore Resort** (Map p130; ☎ 36705; fax 36703; www.aoresort.com; aore@vanuatu.com.vu; s/d/tr incl breakfast from 16,540/20,360/25,590Vt; 🚻 🚿) Spacious bungalows with fabulous timber floors look out over moored yachts. Diving can be arranged, and guests can use the snorkel gear, kayaks and mountain bikes (visitors can hire them). Transfers are 2500Vt. The resort ferry leaves from BP Wharf (Map p132; ask for the schedule when you book). Non-guests are welcome at the resort (1000Vt a day) but the rest of the island is privately owned.

**AUTHOR'S CHOICE**

**Bokissa Eco Island Resort** (Map p130; ☎ 36913, fax 36855; www.bokissa.com; holiday@bokissa.vu; s/d incl all meals 10,000/20,000Vt; 🚻 🚿) Lights twinkling as the boat whumps towards the island; a lei around your neck; coconut drink in hand, walk over the little bridge. Yep, it's paradise. Meet other guests in the *nakamal*, then eat together and everyone's buzzing about their dives. The traditional bungalows are fluffy-white-towel luxurious. But you're up and out early because 10 footsteps away is astounding snorkelling over plate corals piled high, schools of pipers, little rays, swaying branches of soft coral and anemones with their Nemos. The hammock calls from the shady old trees, but there's kayaking up a river to Malo's blue hole, an introductory dive, walks, turtle watch, pool with swim-up bar, library, darts. Perhaps the hammock tomorrow... Transfers from the mainland (3000Vt return) leave from Simonsen's wharf (Map p132).

**Eating**

**Santo Bakery** (Map p132; ☎ 42999; 🕒 7.30-11am & 1.30-3pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Pop into the bakery for yummy French rolls (40Vt).

**Won Sing Sing Take Away Restaurant** (Map p132; mains 200-850Vt; 🕒 7am-3pm) Bench tables under a grand traditional roof give this little café a happy atmosphere. The chef is very good – check out the cakes! Come for breakfast. It will set you up for a cheerful day.

**Ocean King Café & Restaurant** (Map p132; ☎ 36929, 46929; Cook St; mains 250-480Vt; 🕒 lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sun) Fabulous fun place serving tasty meals like barbecue pork with fried rice, or garlic chicken fillet, served in the large dining room or out on the veranda. Very popular, as are your hosts Sharyn and Hilton. Go for the lunch special (250Vt).

**Island Chicken & Fish** (Map p132; ☎ 36601, 42151; Cook St; meals 300Vt; 🕒 7am-9.30pm Mon-Sat) A charming little yellow place with blue tablecloths. Choose from steak, fish, chicken, pork or egg, served with rice, manioc, yam and salad. Of course, with Santo beef the steak's just too good to pass.

**Natangora Café** (Map p132; ☎ 36811; Main St; meals 350-700Vt; 🕒 7.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Specialises in breakfast, home-roasted coffee, hamburgers, salads, and sandwiches and cakes. Sit out the back on the deck, for garden and canal views. The pleasant alfresco setting and reasonable prices make it popular with expats and ni-Vans alike.

**Santo Chinese Restaurant** (Map p132; ☎ 36452; mains 480-1800Vt; 🕒 lunch & dinner) This is a no-frills place with plates heaving under the generous serves.

**Hotel Santo Restaurant** (Map p132; meals 900-1600Vt; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's pleasant, old-fashioned-comfortable, with an excellent menu which combines Western and

**AUTHOR'S CHOICE**

**Market Meal Booths** (Map p132; meals 300Vt; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) This is the life, a million miles from your reality. Sit at a bright little table beside the market, and a cheery face appears at the booth window to pass you your orange cordial – there'll be no red cordial nonsense here. Nothing starts a meal like the smile of a ni-Van, then a choice of five dishes. Steak's the best. Watch it being cooked on a gas burner in the little booth. A flick and twist, a spoon of this and that from sealed plastic containers, and the meal is delicious.

local foods, so you can enjoy coconut-coated prawns, or Santo beef with mash.

**Aore Restaurant** (mains 950-1450Vt; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A grand, open area with views and friendly staff. Check out the Melanesian feast (2500Vt), which is held quite often, with *kastom* dancing and string band entertainment.

**Deco Stop Restaurant** (Map p132; mains 1500Vt; ☎ 7am-9pm) You're on top of the world, sitting around the beautiful pool, gazing way out over the channel, and looking through an excellent menu. But don't go past the poulet fish fillets, with Deco's secret sauce. And check for the curry night with a magic show.

**Coral Quays Resort** (Map p130; ☎ 36257; mains 1600-2400Vt; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The broad veranda is a good spot to enjoy the gourmet food that the chef is famous for, and you sit at timber tables made locally from *natora* wood. Some buses run into town till 11pm, or pre-arrange transport if you come for dinner.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Apart from eating out, the entertainment scene is pretty light-on in Luganville.

**Club de Sanma** (Map p132; ☎ 36039; clubdesanma@vanuatu.com.vu; PO Box 442; ☎ 9am-midnight) There are pool tables, and TV screens show all major international sports. It's a good spot for a beer on the balcony (shame about the poker machines) with happy hour from 5.30pm to 7.30pm. If you want to kick on, it's open till 3am Friday – jazz and blues night.

**Club Narcosis** (Map p132; ☎ 36175) At the Deco Stop Lodge; it's good fun, especially

if you're into pool – there's a comp every Friday from 7.30pm.

**Nabouru Kava Bar** (Map p132; ☎ 37401) Has a pleasant sitting area in a pretty garden, and the kava is fresh and strong. Across the road is **Total Kava Bar** (Map p132), if you like a traditional place. **Camillo's Kava Bar** (Map p132) is also worth a visit. You'll be welcome at most of the 40 kava bars around Luganville – look for a red or green light outside.

The **Santo Golf Club** (Map p130) has a function once a month, with a great buffet, much noisy dancing, a romantic outdoor area and friendly people everywhere.

**Getting Around**

You'll have no difficulty finding a minibus between 7am and 5.30pm, but it's a different story outside these hours. The standard rate to anywhere around town is 100Vt. Ring **Erick** (☎ 42178) or **Simion** (☎ 40718) to organise your own bus.

Taxis and public-transport trucks wait at the market (on market days) or cruise up and down Main St. The market is the best place to find them after 5.30pm, or ring **Kal** (☎ 41287).

If walking around Luganville at night, take a friend, and carry a torch (flashlight) so you can see the holes!

**AROUND LUGANVILLE**

The north road has a good surface and leads out to many top spots.

**Matevulu Blue Hole**

You must take a plunge. It's something unique, looking through crystal at your pretty blue legs. Swim across to the old tree, the place to dive. Scuba-diving photography is a buzz here, as the blue filter produces unusual effects.

There are several 'blue holes' on Santo, but this is the largest and best – about 50m across and 18m deep.

**Millenium Cave**

Trek through the jungle, across creeks and cascades, to this massive cave, some 20m wide and 50m high. Climb down a bamboo ladder to a crystal pool, small cascades, sparkling stalactites and stalagmites, and little bats – yukk (see p340 for a health warning about Millenium Cave). Walk through to the sunlight and eat lunch on the river bank,

then take a kid's little floaty thingy, hop into the icy water and zap down the rapids past amazing towering rocks, gorgeous rainforest and waterfalls. A Disneyland tour. Scramble out all wet and shivery and start the climb back up to your bus. Totally, absolutely grand experience, not to be missed.

**Oyster Island**

A track heads down from the main road to a landing area where you catch the boat across to nearby Oyster Island – so named because there are lots of oysters in the waters. It's a charming place to kick back with a drink, or enjoy a meal.

**Oyster Island Resort** (Map p130; ☎ /fax 36283; oysteril@vanuatu.com.vu; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast 5300/5300/7300/9000Vt) hideaway has seven cute dumplings of bungalows in a beautiful waterfront setting. The over-the-water family bungalow is particularly special. There's deep-water fishing, lobster fishing and scuba diving available. Trek to a local village or canoe up the Matevulu River. Any tours can be arranged here. **Oyster Island Restaurant** (mains 950-2500Vt; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a rambling rustic place, where the French owner-chef specialises in seafood – you must try the oysters of course – and Santo beef; reservations are advisable.

Getting there costs 300Vt by the regular Luganville–Port Olry minibus service (see p131) or 980Vt by taxi (minimum two people). To summon the boat, bang on the gas cylinder.

**Fanafo**

You need to join a tour to visit this interesting group of villages (it's cool, there are no flag-carrying tour guides, just a little bus) unless you have special arrangements. Your guide will show you the grave of Jimmy Stevens, only partially filled in so that his spirit can escape to complete his work. Many traditional supporters of Jimmy Stevens left Fanafo after his death to live in Butmas, up in the hills. The Chief at Fanafo has a basic guesthouse that you might use as a base for a day-return walk up there.

Your guide will show you some *nagriamel* leaves: yellow *namele* 'mother plant' and mauve *nagria* 'father plant'. The two leaves are always present during Santo's traditional ceremonies; for Nagriamel people they demonstrate their belief in the primacy

of *kastom*. Fanafo's Christians wear ordinary fabric clothes, while *kastom*-oriented males wear a *mal mal*. You may also see small girls wearing leaves, and women in grass skirts.

**NORTHEAST SANTO Loru Conservation Area**

Covering 220 hectares, this fine **park** (admission 500Vt) contains one of the last patches of lowland forest remaining on Santo's east coast. There are several excellent **nature walks**, many **coconut crabs** and a **bat cave**, which the villagers use as a cyclone shelter. If you've come without a guide, ask for one at Kole 1 village.

For more details about this project, see [www.positiveearth.org](http://www.positiveearth.org).

**Lonnoc Beach**

In a beautiful coastal setting is this lovely sandy swimming beach, all white and turquoise, with large shade trees growing by the water's edge and a stunning view of **Elephant Island**.

A guide (500Vt) from the village will take you to visit local gardens or Hog Harbour, to swim at Blue Hole, or arrange a canoe for you to fish or view the turtles. If you're staying the night, go on the kava-drinking experience (100Vt per shell), or for a night-walk through the forest to a scenic lookout.

Traditional **Lonnoc Beach Bungalows** (☎ 36141; ☎ /fax 36678; PO Box 293; s/d incl breakfast 3380/5600Vt) are in the perfect place to drop out for a few days. Each has an ensuite and cute porch, but there's no electricity, except for the restaurant. Spend your evenings at the bar, or take a kerosene lamp down to the beach. Tough choice. **Lonnoc Beach Bar & Restaurant** (mains 400-1200Vt; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) combines Western fare with local food – *kumula* (sweet potato) chips are yumm. If you're here with a tour group, you'll quickly decide to forget your packed lunch. Plus the drinks are cold.

A daily return bus service to Luganville leaves at 6.30am and returns around 4pm (500Vt each way).

**Champagne Beach**

The road past Lonnoc Beach ends at Champagne Beach. It's the one the photographers love to love. You're likely to have this pretty horseshoe of fine white sand and turquoise water to yourself, but make sure you've paid the entry fee – per person/car 400Vt/700Vt. There's a land dispute over the beach, so your

guide may not have access depending on his family connections, but it's a very easy 10-minute saunter across from Lonnoc Beach.

### Golden Beach

Between Hog Harbour and Port Olyri is the lovely **Golden Beach** (admission per car 500Vt). This white-sand beauty has plenty of shade provided by huge *Calophyllum* trees and towering native hardwoods adorned with orchids, mosses and other epiphytes. A single tree can have as many as eight species of orchid growing on it.

### Port Olyri

This is indeed a little paradise. A gorgeous beach, a pretty village, and villagers who do *kastom* dances and teach basket-weaving. There's good snorkelling, and you can walk over to a little deserted island near Dolphin Island.

**Little Paradise of Port Olyri** (☎ 37661, 37606, 43776; s/d incl breakfast 1150/2300Vt) is a bungalow of all-natural jungle materials with two bedrooms and an outside eating area. It's a dream, to stay on this lovely beach, or ask at the village for Tine Viney, a tour guide, to lead you through the bush to a blue hole. There's a water-seal toilet and bucket shower; transfers are 1000Vt each way. Meals (lunch/dinner 400Vt/800Vt) can be brought to you by the villagers. Or join them in the *nakamal*, and stay on to eat in the village.

### Big Bay Highway

This 28km road takes you to Malao village on Big Bay. One of the road's major features is a truly magnificent panorama of the rugged **Cumberland Ranges** as you wind down to the fast-flowing Lape River. There are some large holes to cool off in and a nice picnic spot on the western bank. The river is often ankle-deep over the causeway – it is possible to hire a car and travel through the centre, but it's better to take a car with a driver who knows the roads and the danger spots. There are no signposts and at the edge of a high scarp where you enter the Vatthe Conservation Area (there's a sign, but it's not always standing) is a very steep one-way track. Honk your horn as you descend to warn any traffic coming up – the road drops off sharply on the right-hand side and there's nowhere to pull over. Besides, it's hard to tell where the

ground ends and the vines just continue out over air.

### Vatthe Conservation Area

This is one of Santo's highlights, which visitors either love or hate. So check it out – see what you think. Covering about 45 sq km, it stretches along the coast from north of Matantas to the Jordan River, and inland to the top of a 400m-high limestone scarp. Half of the park is covered by Vanuatu's largest alluvial lowland forest, which was the main reason for its protection in 1996.

**Forest walks** (a two-hour stroll, or a two-day trek to the highest point on the scarp) and **bird-watching** (see most of Vanuatu's native land and freshwater bird species) can be arranged through the information centre, on the left as you arrive. If there's no-one there, bang on the bamboo *tamtam* or walk farther into Matantas and ask for Purity.

**Vatthe Lodge** (☎/fax 36153; vatthe@vanuatu.com.vu; B&B 2400Vt; meals 500-1500Vt) is next door to the information centre. There are several basic, very cute bungalows with pebble floors, hurricane-lamp lighting and mosquito nets.

A transport charter to Matantas from Luganville costs 6000Vt one-way, but if there's a truck going that way it will cost only about 500Vt per person; contact the Vatthe Lodge to enquire.

### WEST SANTO

About 5000 people live in tiny villages that interrupt the thickly wooded mountains tumbling abruptly into the sea. There are no telephones and only a few teleradios. *Kastom* reigns supreme from the southwestern foothills to Cape Cumberland in the north.

Southwest Santo has Vanuatu's highest mountains: Mt Tabwemasana (1879m), Mt Kotamtam (1747m), Mt Tawaloala (1742m) and Santo Peak (1704m).

### Santo Peak

It's a grand trek to the summit of Santo Peak, a misty, cold, wet spot with cloudy views. One route sets out from **Tasiriki**. It's steep and slippery and there is no well-defined path – you follow the guide as he hacks through the vegetation with his bush knife! The return 'walk' takes two to three days.

The route from **Ipayato** takes two days to walk up a path that generally follows a spur to the summit, through mossy cloud-forest.

### THE POTTERS OF SOUTHWESTERN SANTO

The small villages of Wusi and Linduri huddle against the mountains beside a long black-sand beach. They are the last places in Vanuatu where traditional women's pottery, known as Lapita, is still produced in any quantity.

At **Wusi**, the *groanpots* (their Bislama name) are moulded flat without using a potter's wheel. At **Linduri**, the layers of clay are built up on a bamboo framework. After being shaped the pots are dried for several days before firing takes place.

In the firing process, the pots are first placed on a platform of volcanic rocks that have been heated in a hardwood fire. Then the women quickly build a tepee-like kiln of dry bamboo over the top and light it. The resulting inferno creates temperatures of 700°C. When the fire has died down, and before the pots have a chance to cool, the potter lightly whips them with leafy twigs that have been dipped in salt water. This treatment gives the pots a matt glaze that strengthens them.

Regardless of which village you start from, allow at least a day there to organise your guide. Carry warm clothing, wet-weather gear, a sleeping bag and a tent.

### Other Treks

With many peaks higher than 1000m, the Cumberland Ranges are a daunting barrier. However, hard-core hikers may enjoy the challenge of the two cross-peninsula routes: from Pesena to Penaoru and from Malao to Elia.

If you're fit and determined, it's possible to do each in a day; there are no decent camping spots along the way. Take a guide, map and compass as the paths are often erased by pigs and storm damage.

Alternatively, fly to Lajmoli and walk down the coast to Wusi, from where you can go by boat to Tasiriki. This will take about two days and is often a hard slog over stones and soft beaches. You can stop overnight at Tasmate's simple **Tasmate Resthouse** (beds incl all meals 1500Vt).

**Wusi** is the usual starting point for the trek up Mt Tabwemasana, but you'll need to organise an expedition. It's a very difficult walk. Wusi is also one of the last places in Vanuatu where much traditional pottery is made (see the boxed text, above).

Tourists are rare, so you'll be assured of an extremely warm welcome, but give notice of your visit through the **Sanma Provincial Council office** (☎ 36712; ☎ 8am to 4pm Mon, Tue & Fri) in Luganville. The one-way taxi fare from Luganville to Tasiriki is 8000Vt. A boat from Tasiriki to Wusi costs 10,000Vt return.

As always, ask the chief at each village if you can walk through his area. He will help

you with guides, food and accommodation. In return, you should offer gifts such as canned food or rice.

### MALO

pop 5000

Malo was Vanuatu's first island to be settled permanently, back in about 1400 BC when Lapita people were moving southwards towards New Caledonia and Fiji. In time a trade route was established, connecting northern Malekula with Santo. Malo people purchased pandanus leaves from Tangoa Island, which were then traded for Malekulan shell money. Malo is still a big producer of pigs, copra, cocoa beans and vanilla beans. Malo's god is Toho Taitai; other northern islands have Manaro as god.

Avunatari is the island's largest centre, with a population of 600. A 9km **coral reef** extends from Avunatari to just beyond Nanuku. The reef offers excellent diving and snorkelling. More coral gardens abound at Anaone Paravu Bay, off the island's east coast, where there's 6km of beach right down to Malokilikili Island.

Off the west coast lies the sunken wreck of the WWII destroyer **USS Tucker**, a popular dive site. It hit a US-laid mine, just like the **USS President Coolidge**, and now lies in two parts on the sea bed.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Vanilla Guesthouse** (☎ 37161; Avunatari; beds 1000Vt, meals 200Vt) A new, pretty bungalow with four rooms and shared facilities has a basic kitchen and solar power. It's in a sheltered spot by the beach and close to the shops.

Go snorkelling, or hike up the hill to some interesting caves.

The **Avunatari Resthouse** (☎ 36639; beds 1000Vt) has two bedrooms and cooking facilities. Nearby, the **Presbyterian Mission** (teleradio YJT326; Avunatari; beds 1000Vt) also has some rooms.

There are regular speedboat crossings from Santo to Avunatari. The boat leaves from Malo Landing at Point Ratard, southwest of Luganville (regular/charter 200/1500Vt). Public-transport trucks charge 800Vt from Luganville to Malo Landing.