

Vanuatu

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Vanuatu Snapshots

Things change rapidly in Vanuatu, what with Mother Nature's powerful displays: cyclones, hailstorms, volcanic eruptions. From 2005 into 2006, 10,000 people were on red alert on Ambae as sulphurous vapours steamed up from the Manaro Crater Lakes and 15 villages risked being drowned in lava. The good news is that they've been left with one almighty geyser in the middle of the lake.

As individuals the ni-Vanuatu are independent, relying on their agriculture, with their social structure and traditional culture giving everyone a keen sense of belonging. As a country, however, Vanuatu is unable to finance the developments it needs, so it is forced to rely on grants and aid programmes.

Government affairs have stabilised lately, after a few years with way too many political parties. President Kalkot Matas Kelekele and Prime Minister Lini have led a quiet revolution in the higher ranks. Transparency International, a respected watchdog, has been impressed with their commitment to zero corruption. The government has gone to great lengths to be free and open, and in 2005 Vanuatu was the only South Pacific country to qualify for the US Millennium Challenge (www.mca.gov), receiving a US\$40 million grant from the United States for infrastructure to help the economy. Repairing roads is a major consideration for the money, and the outer islanders have shown the grant administrators a few doozies.

Vanuatu's fertile volcanic soil is among its greatest assets – agriculture earns around 85% of the country's export income. Copra (dried coconut meat), beef and cocoa are the major export earners. The huge domestic demand for kava has made it the fastest-growing agricultural commodity. Another local crop, devil's apple, is being used to produce a radical medicine for skin cancer.

Sandalwood oil is a developing industry, with licensed farmers planting thousands of trees. Each licence holder must establish a plantation, process the timber locally and export only sandalwood oil.

Tourism has mushroomed lately, as the Internet shows the world images of this amazing country. Over 100 scientists are currently researching the caves around Espiritu Santo, some using hot-air balloons to get into the jungle. It is expected that 3000 hectares of rainforest around the caves will be declared as protected, because of the rivers, waterfalls, mountains, caves, bird species, ferns, tunnels, blue pools, swallows, bats, orchids, minerals and century-old trees.

A vital part of the national economy is Vanuatu's status as a tax haven. It offers ways to invest that don't involve paying the investor's own government double tax. It's been set up to be squeaky clean, and the Financial Action Task Force in Europe has given the industry a big tick. Nearly 2000 overseas businesses are registered, generating about 12% of the GNP.

Hi tech is the buzz around town. The company that has bought the eyesore on the harbour is planning an Internet club with state-of-the-art computers linked to TV screens and satellite, and wi-fi for laptops. The Iririki development is planning fibre-optic IT services to the strata titleholders. Cyber Village out in Nambatu has a 24-hour hot spot and biometric fingerprint security. Internet cafés, new and old, have become major centres of activity.

FAST FACTS

Population:	206,000
Population growth:	1.52%
Migration rate:	zero
Life expectancy: male/ female	61/64 years
Sex ratio: men/women	105/100
Total area of Vanuatu:	860,000 sq km
Area that is land:	12,200 sq km
Arable land:	2.5%
Number of tourists in 2004:	60,700
GDP:	\$580 million
Unemployment:	zero

HISTORY

The Lapita people made fine pottery. They also made long canoe voyages, leaving their lovely pottery at sites from northeast Papua New Guinea to Samoa. There is evidence of their occupation of Vanuatu in many places.

Pottery found on Malo showed they settled there about 1400 BC. In July 2004, an archaeological dig at Teouma, near Port Vila, unearthed Lapita pottery, and skeletal remains of nine Lapita people as well as chickens and pigs, dated at 3200 years ago: especially exciting because it shows that the people brought animals with them along with yams, taro, and a considerable appetite for shellfish.

Between the 11th and 15th centuries AD, Polynesians arrived from the central Pacific in sailing canoes holding up to 50 people, live animals, and gardens growing in the canoes. Vanuatu's traditions tell of cultural heroes arriving around this time from islands to the east, bringing with them new skills and customs.

EARLY NI-VANUATU SOCIETY

People lived in small clans, separated by deep ravines, impenetrable jungle and broad stretches of sea. Everyone lived in the shadow of their ancestral spirits. Some ghosts were benevolent, while others were hostile, quick to harass the living with famines, natural disasters or military defeat. Magic was widespread. When anyone suffered a serious misfortune, sorcery or spirits were blamed.

In the north, a man's status within the clan was earned through grade-taking ceremonies. Each grade took a man closer to becoming a chief and finally a paramount chief. On a supernatural plane, the more grades a man had earned, the more powerful would be his defences against sorcery while alive, and the more potent his spirit after death.

Skirmishes between villages were frequent and usually the victor captured one or two males for the men of high rank to eat. The victims' relatives would mount reprisals so hostilities continued indefinitely.

The women attended to the gardening and cooking and, most important, to the husband's pigs. Men considered their pigs more important than their wives.

The culture is steeped in agriculture. Yam cultivation decides the cycle of the year, with months named after yams.

EXPLORERS ENTER THE SCENE

In 1605, Pedro Fernández de Quirós, a Portuguese in the service of the Spanish crown, was commanded to find the missing continent Terra Australis. The Spanish expedition left Callao in Peru on 21 December. Four months later the lookout spied the tall peak of Mere Lava, and on 3 May 1606, the fleet sailed into Big Bay in northern Espiritu Santo. Quirós believed he had at last found the great southern continent and named it 'Australia del Espiritu Santo'.

Quirós claimed Santo and *all* lands south of it to be under Spain's rule, and attempted to settle at Big Bay. This lasted 49 days. The mutinous crew, fed up with Quirós' dominating nature, deserted.

Early travellers in their longboats had a neat navigational method – jump out of the canoe and feel the current against their testicles. Then they'd know which way to go.

Lavishly illustrated *Arts of Vanuatu*, edited by Joel Bonnemaison et al, discusses the diversity of Vanuatu's cultural identity in terms of historic and contemporary contexts.

Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides by John Layard is the most informative study on Malekula's south.

Next, the French nobleman Louis-Antoine de Bougainville sighted Maewo and Pentecost on 21 May 1768. He landed at Ambae and Malo, sailed between Malekula and Santo (proving Santo was not the fabled Terra Australis) and visited Big Bay.

Commander James Cook of the HMS *Resolution*, on his second Pacific expedition, gave his own names to the islands. Many are still used today, including Tanna, Erromango, Ambrym and the Shepherd Islands. He named the archipelago the New Hebrides.

In 1788 the Frenchman La Pérouse and his two ships, the *Boussole* and *Astrolabe*, passed through the New Hebrides. However both ships were lost in the southeastern Solomons and later sought by D'Entrecasteaux in 1793, followed by Dumont d'Urville.

William Bligh arrived in 1789 while on his epic longboat journey to Timor in the East Indies after the mutiny on HMS *Bounty* in Tongan waters. He sighted several previously unrecorded islands in the northern Banks group. Bligh returned later to confirm these discoveries.

SANDALWOOD TRADE

Irish explorer-trader Peter Dillon set the markets buzzing in 1825 by reporting huge numbers of sandalwood trees on Erromango. There was a great demand for sandalwood in China where it was used for incense, so traders were quickly on their way.

Initially, traders would exchange a hooped piece of iron for a longboat full of sandalwood, so there were enormous profits to be made. But as the supply of slow-growing sandalwood dwindled, islanders demanded guns, ammunition and tobacco, or men from enemy villages to be eaten at ceremonies. Sometimes islanders would persuade the traders to use their ships' guns to lay waste their enemies' villages.

There were many attacks on ships' crews, often in retaliation for previous trader atrocities. If a ship cheated some villagers or fired its cannon at them, the next Europeans could expect a violent reception.

The sandalwood trade virtually ceased in 1868 with the removal of the last accessible stands.

BLACKBIRDING

As the sandalwood trade declined a more insidious one, blackbirding, developed. Cheap labour was needed for the sugar-cane industries of Fiji and Queensland, the nickel mines of New Caledonia and the coconut plantations of Western Samoa. Blackbirders covered the cost of a ship in two voyages; vessels made several trips a year, earning huge sums for their owners.

Whole villages were enticed aboard ship by the promise of trade, or a blackbirder might dress as a priest, hold a service and kidnap the worshippers. Ships were overcrowded, with poor and limited supplies of food, so many ni-Vans died at sea. If they reached Queensland or Fiji, they'd be lined up and sold to the highest bidder.

All a blackbirded islander would have after three years' overseas labour were a musket and European clothes. Some returned labourers were dropped off at the wrong island, where they would be promptly robbed and sometimes killed and eaten.

To Kill a Bird with Two Stones by Jeremy MacClancy, available at the National Museum in Vila, is a really good history from Vanuatu's earliest beginnings through the Condominium period (the 'two stones' of the title) right up to independence.

The best study of the turbulent times of the 19th-century sandalwood trade is Dorothy Shinberg's *They Came for Sandalwood*.

TIMELINE 1400 BC

Lapita people arrive in longboats, with animals and gardens

11th century AD

Polynesians arrive

3 May 1606

A Portuguese explorer, Pedro Fernández de Quirós, sails into Big Bay in Espiritu Santo

1825

European explorers discover sandalwood trees on Erromango and quickly set up trading routes

Scientists are running DNA tests on the skeletons found near Vila in 2004, to see if any of the people in the burial chamber had malaria when they died.

Labour ships became targets for reprisals into the 20th century, but British and Australian officials only attempted to regulate the trafficking, not ban it. When sailors from the *Carl* in 1872, and the *Hopeful* in 1884, were tried in Sydney for committing multiple murders, Australian public opinion was on the sailors' side.

The most persistent and effective lobbyists against the blackbirders were Presbyterian missionaries. They campaigned relentlessly in Britain and Australia. Finally – aided by the White Australia Policy legislation of 1901 – they secured the banning of overseas labour recruitment to Queensland (in 1904), Fiji (in 1911) and Western Samoa (in 1913).

MISSIONARIES

The first missionaries arrived in Erromango in 1839. However, after two of their number were killed and eaten, the churches decided to move carefully, depending more on Polynesian teachers, whom the churches hoped would be more acceptable to the islanders than Europeans. But Polynesians had no status in Melanesian society. Consequently, several were devoured. Others were devastated by malaria.

Presbyterianism became the major Christian denomination in Vanuatu. The missionaries took an uncompromising stand against many time-honoured Melanesian customs such as cannibalism, grade-taking, ancestor worship and polygamy. Some barred their converts from smoking, drinking kava and dancing.

The less dogmatic Anglican Diocese of Melanesia (DOM) arrived in 1860, and the Roman Catholics in 1887. Unlike the more fundamentalist Protestant churches, the Catholics proved to be tolerant towards ni-Vanuatu traditions.

The ni-Vans mingled Christianity with their traditional beliefs and they found the rivalry between the various denominations hard to understand.

EPIDEMICS

The infection-ridden vessels of traders, missionaries and blackbirders brought diseases to which the peoples of the Pacific had little resistance. Cholera, measles, smallpox, influenza, pneumonia, scarlet fever, mumps, chickenpox, whooping cough and dysentery all took a terrible toll. Even the common cold proved capable of wiping out whole populations.

Often the missionaries' new converts succumbed first, being more exposed to the new germs. This was seen as proof that the new religion was particularly malevolent, since illness came from sorcery. Several missionaries were killed by vengeful islanders following epidemics.

Some estimates put Vanuatu's population at about one million in the early 19th century. By 1870 the number was down to 650,000, and in the next 20 years it fell to around 100,000. This gloomy trend continued until 1935 when the population numbered a mere 41,000. The worst-affected islands were Aneityum and Erromango, both of which lost 95% of their original populations.

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

Although there was a sandalwood station on Aneityum by 1843, and missionaries were there from 1848 onwards, the first true European settler

LAST MAN STANDING

When Presbyterian missionaries in South West Bay insisted villagers settle old scores and put an end to cannibalism back in 1887, it took weeks for the chiefs to tally who was owed favours, balanced against those with debts. Finally, just one man was owed to a village, to square off the past. The man was selected, his legs broken to prevent escape, and he was carried off dangling from a pole. Unfortunately, relatives of the man lived in that village, so he could not be offered for the sacrifice and had to be taken on to a different village where he was traded for several pigs. And so cannibalism ended in that area.

was a cattle rancher who arrived in 1854. Other settlers from Australia followed in the 1860s to grow cotton when its price was high during the US Civil War. Cotton gave way to coconuts and cocoa when peace in the USA brought a slump in the price.

After France annexed New Caledonia in 1853, the Presbyterian Church unsuccessfully petitioned Britain to proclaim Aneityum a protectorate. Six years later it tried again, extending its appeal to cover all Vanuatu. But the British government refused to act.

Neglected by their government, most British settlers (including the Australians) were near bankruptcy by the early 1880s. Meanwhile, large numbers of French people had settled and prospered. With the benefit of France's official support they now dominated Vanuatu's fledgling economy.

In 1882 a French land speculator, the Irish-born John Higginson, founded the Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CCNH), which purchased more than 20% of the country's agricultural land from settlers and local chiefs, not necessarily the true *kastom* (traditional) owner but often the first islander who came along. Ten years later the company owned 55% of Vanuatu's arable land.

French settlers now outnumbered the British three to one and there was intense rivalry between them. Brawls were common as settlers took advantage of the absence of law and order. And, thanks largely to the sale of alcohol and firearms to islanders, native attacks on settlers continued.

THE CONDOMINIUM – TWO-FELLA GOVERNMENT

In 1906 the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides was created. British and French nationals had equal rights, and retained their home country's citizenship. Ni-Vans were officially stateless. To travel abroad, they needed an identifying document signed by both the British and French resident commissioners.

Both British and French courts existed to pronounce judgments in cases involving their nationals; a Joint Court decided disputes between British and French, and Europeans and ni-Vanuatu; another court was for ni-Vans themselves. The British carried out their last capital punishments in 1924, when three Espiritu Santo men were hanged for the murder of a British settler. The French guillotined six Tonganese men in 1931, for the murder of a French settler.

Cynics called the Condominium 'the Pandemonium', as the dual administration produced amazing duplication. There were two police forces

Ethnology of Vanuatu: An Early Twentieth Century Study by Swiss University Professor Felix Speiser explains every aspect of the culture and history after a scientific expedition in 1910–12. It's illustrated and well laid out for easy access.

Several biographies have been published about late-19th-century missionaries who were active in Vanuatu. *Peter Milne of Nguna* (Foreign Missions Committee, New Zealand) by Alexander Don is insightful.

1839

Missionaries try to bring Christianity to the heathens

1868

With the last sandalwood gone, blackbirding takes over, to supply cheap labour to nearby countries

1906

England and France decide to set up the Condominium

1942

A US fleet sets up base on Espiritu Santo

During the Condominium half the population (English) drove on the left, the other half (French) on the right. And yes, that caused a bit of a problem.

After the New Zealand Commonwealth Games in 1950, the royal party sailed to Aneityum. The only white person there, a rough diamond, looked out over the bay and said, 'Well, bless my soul if it isn't the Queen.' He wandered down and spent the day with them.

with their own laws, including road laws, two health services, two education systems, two currencies and two prison systems.

Overseas visitors had to opt for either British or French authority. British law was stricter, but British prisons were considered more humane. French jails were very uncomfortable, but the food was better.

WORLD WAR II

Japan's lightning-fast advance through the Pacific, reaching the Solomon Islands by early 1942, convinced Vanuatu's settlers that invasion was imminent. However, in May of that year a US fleet arrived, constructing bases on Efate and southeast Espiritu Santo. Over three months Luganville became a city of 50,000 servicemen. In all, 500,000 Allied soldiers passed through the archipelago.

Many islanders either joined the small local regiment, the New Hebrides Defence Force, or went to work at the US bases. All were astounded by the apparent equality between white and black military personnel. Moreover, no ni-Van had ever been paid such generous wages before.

With Japan's defeat in 1945, the Americans withdrew and abandoned huge quantities of equipment, some of which was sold at bargain prices. The rest was dumped into the sea (see p129).

TOWARDS SELF-RULE

Land ownership became Vanuatu's central political concern in the mid-1960s. It was the spark that finally spurred the country to take the path to independence.

Europeans viewed land as a commodity. But to the ni-Vans this was contrary to ancient customs, in which land is held by the present generation in trust for future ones.

White settlers owned about 30% of the country's land, and cleared it for coconut production. When they began clearing more land for cattle ranching, it led to ni-Vanuatu protests in Espiritu Santo and Malekula.

A *kastom* movement called Nagriamel arose, led by charismatic Jimmy Stevens (p128). Operating from Santo, its aims were to protect Melanesians' claims to their traditional land. Incensed by reports of US developers buying large blocks of land, Nagriamel had expanded to other islands in northern Vanuatu by the late 1960s.

In 1971 Stevens petitioned the UN for Vanuatu's early independence. In the same year, the New Hebrides National Party, later called the Vanua'aku Party, was formed by an Anglican minister, Father Walter Lini. The Vanua'aku Party sent a petition for independence to the UN in 1974. It drew its support from English-speaking Protestants, whereas Nagriamel became clearly identified with the French. The Francophones became known as the *Modérés* or 'Moderates'. They wanted the Condominium to remain as it was or be replaced by French rule, and they supported the idea that individual islands should have greater autonomy.

The Condominium authorities set up an assembly that allowed minority parties to govern until the promised election in November 1979. This first election produced a clear winner: the Vanua'aku Party, with the founder, Father Walter Lini, as the chief minister.

However, the Vanua'aku Party was extremely unpopular in some areas, particularly on Espiritu Santo and Tanna. Nagriamel had been calling for secession since 1976 and most of Santo's French community now joined in.

Meanwhile, independence for Vanuatu was fixed for July 1980. The French government, seeing its influence declining, began to support the *Modérés*.

INDEPENDENCE

July was too far away. Espiritu Santo and Tanna were screaming secession. The UK wanted to send troops, but France said *non*.

In late May 1980 an insurrection on Tanna split the island between government supporters and rebel *Modérés*. On Santo, secessionists seized Luganville and hoisted the flag of the independent republic of Vemarana. The Lini government responded with a blockade of Santo.

Modéré supporters on northern islands proclaimed their own secessions. Jimmy Stevens brought them together and announced a provisional government of the Northern Islands. Lini's government had Papua New Guinea troops on stand to break them up, but he wouldn't have the power to send the troops to Santo until after independence.

France and England despatched a small joint military force to Santo, but failed even to stop the rebels from looting Luganville's shops.

The moment independence was declared, the new Vanuatu government brought in the soldiers from PNG, order was restored and the secessionist ringleaders, including Stevens, were arrested.

THE NEW NATION

The Republic of Vanuatu. What a sweet sound for the ni-Vans. The thirtieth of July is a public holiday with celebrations every year in every village over the entire nation. Vanuatu has remained in the South Pacific Commission, and joined 28 other international organisations including the UN, the Commonwealth and the French League of Nations.

The ni-Vans set up a Westminster-style constitution; the single legislative chamber, or parliament, sits in Vila. Its 50 members are elected for a four-year term. The prime minister and the council of ministers are the executive, or cabinet. All ministers must be members of parliament.

The head of state is the president, who is elected by parliament and the National Council of Chiefs (*Malvatumauri*) for five years. The *Malvatumauri* is powerful, and advises parliament on all constitutional matters relating to traditional customs and culture. Chief Paul Tahi of Pentecost is the current head of the *Malvatumauri*.

Each of the six provincial governments has a president. So far there have only been four women with a seat in parliament, two of them serving in 2005. Father Walter Lini, the first prime minister, died in 1999. His younger brother, Ham Lini, was appointed Prime Minister in December 2004. President Kalkot Matas Kelekele was elected in August 2004.

Vanuatu has established diplomatic relations with over 70 countries, signed the General Agreement on Tariffs & Trade, and declared itself a nuclear-free zone. Its desire has been for development that benefits everyone equally, while preserving customs and traditions.

An illuminating account of the 1980 rebellion in Luganville is *The Santo Rebellion: An Imperial Reckoning* by John Beasant.

The British High Commissioner wore a feathered hat to an official colonial function. The hat was described on Bislama radio as 'wetem grass blong ass blong cockeral'.

Wikipedia has in-depth information on all aspects of Vanuatu's history, neatly cross-referenced at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Vanuatu.

1969

The last ritualistic cannibal killing occurs

1972

Cruise ships start visiting, marking the start of Vanuatu as a tourist destination

30 July 1980

Independence Day – New Hebrides becomes Vanuatu

8 November 2005

Vanuatu qualifies for the US Millennium Grant of US\$40 million

ISLAND FUEL TO THE RESCUE?

Did that truck smell like a snack bar? Sure did. It's running on island fuel, a biofuel that's putting Vanuatu on the map as a leader in the field. Coconut oil (from copra) is a clean fuel that does not contribute to the greenhouse effect. It emits 50% less particle matter than conventional diesel and is biodegradable. It also yields more kilometres per litre than fossil fuel and costs less. Problem is, it solidifies below 22°C. So island fuel is 67% coconut oil and 33% diesel-kerosene mix. Unelco, a utility, is running some of its diesel equipment on island fuel, and it's been trialled on minibuses. The results are all very positive.

Government representatives from all the Pacific countries are looking at how they can reduce their national spending on fossil fuel with biofuel development. It's a very exciting prospect for them, as it also means a new market for their copra farmers.

The first decade of independence was reasonably stable. The next decade, however, was a very different, chaotic story: charges of nepotism and other political crimes, rivals becoming allies and vice versa, splits within parties and leaders being ousted were all commonplace. Of concern in 1998 was the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF) riot, when members of the VNPF discovered that their superannuation funds were allegedly being 'borrowed' by leading politicians. A two-week state of emergency followed and more than 500 people were arrested.

The police mutiny in 1998 was an action adventure – fed up with the lack of response to demands of a salary increase, the Vanuatu Mobile Force kidnapped President Jean Mari Leye, commandeered a plane, and flew him to Malekula to consult with the Prime Minister. After the meeting they brought him back to Vila. Most of the VMF were dismissed. They appealed, and won, and asked for compensation for the stress they'd suffered in carrying out the daring manoeuvre. Fortunately, a large amount of illegal money had been confiscated on its way through the tax haven, so the men were paid.

In 2001 a minister (he had been Prime Minister) was sentenced to three years' jail after being convicted of forgery worth US\$23 million. He was given a presidential pardon due to health issues, then re-elected.

Vanuatu's imports are way more than its exports. The principal imports are rice, clothing, processed food, electrical goods and vehicles; also important are medical supplies, fuel, lubricants, machinery and industrial materials. The principal suppliers are Australia, New Zealand, Japan, France and New Caledonia.

Australia, Japan, New Caledonia, the European Union and New Zealand are Vanuatu's main export destinations. Most beef exports go to Japan, and live cattle are exported to Indonesia.

Despite Vanuatu's financial hiccups, President Kelekele says that its greatest achievement is its unity, considering that it has come from such a divided economic, social and political system. He urges the politicians to also unite for the common good of the country, as the fragmented coalition governments have seen a period of economic downturn and instability.

THE CULTURE

Pigs are money. Even today they are used in traditional ceremonies to represent wealth, and the tusk is a symbol of remembrance. A double-circle pig's tusk at the Cultural Centre was presented to Queen Elizabeth

on her first official visit to the islands in 1974. Tusks are shown in Vanuatu's flag, on the banknotes, in logos and on Tusker beer labels.

A recent trend is the drift into towns, particularly Vila, by young ni-Vans in search of jobs. However, jobs are hard to find and survival often depends on family generosity.

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

With a past that fascinates Westerners, geological and meteorological features that dominate life, and Mother Nature's bountiful provisions, it's little wonder that ni-Vanuatu are refreshingly different, both intriguing and frustrating, to Western visitors and expats.

Firstly, they are such keen hosts, so anxious to please, that they will say 'yes' to everything you ask. This is decidedly confusing, as it doesn't actually mean yes. The other confusing thing is that they are both very hospitable and totally absent-minded. So you will be offered everything they can possibly provide, and served that scrumptious meal, taken on that night walk, or maybe not.

Then there's the charming handshake. Palms touch, but no knuckle-grinding grip, squeeze and pump. Everyone shakes hands from age, say, two. So friendly. But should a woman look a young man in the eye he may well believe she has invited him home. A bit too friendly.

There is very little interest in food, out in the villages. Perhaps one's enthusiasm is dampened when you have to grow or catch everything you eat. Attend a local feast, however, and it's a lavish spread.

The ni-Van attitude to time may surprise the tourists, but it drives employers balmy. Arrange to meet your guide at 9am and he may arrive exactly on time, at 6am, or even at 3pm. This could depend on tides, the need for an early start, or no reason at all. Strangely, after a few days you will find it releasing to accept a day that moves at its own pace.

LIFESTYLE

It's a different world. Ni-Vans are deeply spiritual, with both Christian and pre-Christian beliefs totally part of their culture. It's been said that when you have everything you need provided by Mother Nature, you must develop challenges so your men have ways to prove themselves. Well, in Vanuatu men must acquire pigs so they can throw feasts so that the people who eat at their feast are beholden to them. The ultimate challenge was to provide a human, making a much greater debt for those who partook. So the men must be powerful warriors to acquire the sacrificial feast components, and not end up the main course themselves. Look at the men. They're powerful, proud, healthy.

The women work hard tending to the men, the children, and especially to the pigs. Most of the islands don't have electricity, so they struggle to prepare food and to keep their families clothed, fed and clean. Spend just one hour with your children in a village, and discover how hard that is. So they work as a group, outside the male bastion.

The children are responsible for the younger ones. They are safe in the villages, and their endless play trains them for later life. Watch a toddler with a bush knife, an anklebiter leaping from a boulder into a pool, a preschooler with a baby on the hip.

Families share their children, raising nephews, sending their own to live on a different island, adopting a teenager. It makes a network of brothers, fathers and aunts throughout the islands. Everyone speaks dozens of languages: French, English, Bislama, local language, and the local languages of all the close family members.

www.presse.com.vu *Port Vila Presse*, the local rag, went on the Web when the paper closed. Get the latest news as it comes to hand.

www.vanuatugovernment.gov.vu is full of facts about who's in and out of office, plus many links to government departments and Vanuatu industries, including the tourism industry.

An expat rascal started a rumour that Charles Manson had escaped and was in Aneityum. When a contingency of police chartered a plane to go and capture Manson, the expat rushed to the airport to own up.

www.pacificmagazine.cc has interesting articles about news and events in the Pacific region.

Vanuatu's yummy *nangae* nuts, which grow wild, are worth A\$5000 a tonne on the export market. At present half a million tonnes fall on the ground. Expensive compost!

Land Ownership

There are 69 inhabited islands. On most islands the people live along a narrow coastal strip, or on tiny offshore islands, while the mountainous forested interiors are uninhabited. Atchin, off Malekula and Ifira, off Efate, are bursting at the seams with about 1000 people per square kilometre. This is in striking contrast to the national average of 15 per square kilometre.

Melanesians believe they are nurtured by their land in the same way plants and trees are. Families have the right in customary law only to occupy specific sections of land, not to sell them. These rights go back to the first ancestors who settled each district. The only way for a man to acquire territorial rights outside his own clan is to marry into another group.

Rights to reefs and boat-landing places are similarly inherited. Fishing rights extend out from the beach or rocks as far and as deep as shoreside angling and free diving for seashells are possible. It's all *kastom* – the traditional ownership of a piece of land, object or stretch of reef and the associated cultural legacies and ancient ancestral religions and customs.

Since independence, only *kastom* owners and the government are permitted to own land, although identifying the true *kastom* owner can be difficult. Other islanders and all foreigners may lease land for a maximum of 75 years, which is the productive life of a coconut tree.

Village Life

Subsistence farming, with hunting and fishing, keeps everyone happy and healthy. The forests are a major resource, providing medicine, food, building materials, and timber for boat building and artefacts. Water is often fresh, crystal clear, bubbling from a deep spring and gravity-fed into the village through a plastic pipe. Sadly other areas have only rainwater that's almost always in short supply.

Each village is a group of extended family members, their small houses set around a *nakamal* (men's clubhouse). Before the sun rises, the wives light the family's fire, food is prepared, and then family members go to the gardens, the young children to school. Teenagers leave the village to attend boarding school, or to live with maternal uncles perhaps. Many young people head for Vila, but just as many move back to their traditional homes: they can grow food, hunt pigs, and there's no crime.

Life could be bliss: women in the garden, men discussing matters in the *nakamal* over kava. But then there's the school fees. A secondary education is expensive. So cargo boats go around the islands collecting copra just before the school fees are due every three months, because they know the men will have been working. Coffee beans are harvested from the bush just before the school fees are due. So are the cocoa and vanilla beans.

The other driving force for tending to cash crops is the need to provide a huge feast for the boys' circumcision rites. If you have five sons, you'll be a very busy man indeed.

Tabu

From it comes the English 'taboo', and it means 'sacred' as well as 'forbidden'. In its simplest form, it can mean 'no entry' when written across a doorway. Failure to observe *tabu* could require the payment of pigs, or even the death of the transgressor.

Many *tabu* relate to traditional ceremonies, where women and uninitiated men are barred from seeing certain parts. In some areas a woman may not stand higher than a male; nor may she step over a fire, as its smoke – while she's standing in it – may rise higher than a man. Men may

not deliberately place themselves below a woman, and are also excluded from certain activities.

Menstruation and birth are surrounded by *tabu*. Most traditional villages have an area set aside for both childbirth and menstruating women. For a woman in a *kastom* village to go fishing while pregnant is a serious breach. The penalty could be a hefty fine (paid in pigs to the chief) or expulsion from the village. In the past the transgressor would have been killed. It's forbidden for men to visit the women's *tabu* part of the village. Ablutions are the same: each sex has its own area.

Magic

Ni-Vans believe that their world is populated by ancestral spirits and demons. The ghosts of the recently dead are considered especially potent as well as being potentially malicious, even towards their own family.

The practice of magic is generally *tabu* for women, but most adult men in the traditional parts of Vanuatu know a few useful spells. These may be used to further love affairs or to produce good crops. A practising magician is employed for more specialised tasks such as raising or calming storms, healing the sick, banishing spirits or controlling volcanoes.

Because of their specialised knowledge, magicians feel superior to the average person. If a man refuses to shake your hand when everyone else does, it could be because he's the local sorcerer.

Dances & Ceremonies

Watch the village dances – the earth vibrating under stamping feet, the beat, the gyrations, the sheer delight of men, women and children caught up in the dance. No wonder the people are happy. There are two types of dances. In the first, each dancer becomes an ancestor or legendary figure, not human, so the dance and dress are similarly nonhuman, and involve elaborate masks or headdresses, such as in the Rom dances of Ambrym.

The second type of dance has themes such as gathering food, hunting, and war or death, as in the extraordinary Toka celebrations of Tanna.

All dances require constant rehearsals. The timing is exquisite, the movements regimented – everyone turning, leaping, stomping together, so harmony and cooperation develop between people and villages.

Male dancers perform wearing either *nambas* (penis wrappers) or *mal mal* (T-pieces), while women wear grass skirts. On Polynesian-influenced islands like Futuna, men and women may wear small mats around their hips.

Traditional Culture

Some villages in Vanuatu have retained their traditional lifestyle, dress and religion. They are in the least accessible parts of the larger islands, but there are guided tours now. Villagers put on their ancestral dances for tourists: the Toka dance of Tanna; the canoe dance of Gaua; the snake dance of Vanua Lava; the Rom dance of Ambrym; the Hawk dance of Malekula – these are just a few. The atmosphere won't be as good as the real thing, which might feature pigs being bashed over the skull with a club, but you can always imagine. Many tourists are now able to see the land-divers of Pentecost (p143), a truly gut-wrenching experience.

CHIEFS

A ni-Vanuatu chief acts as a justice of the peace and as a delegate for the people of the village. His word is law. Politicians must do what the chief says when they go back home.

www.tve.org details of the development of island fuel, test runs, workshops and Pacific involvement; navigate through 'hands on'.

The Story of the Eel & Other Stories, from Uripiv Island, contains delightful myths and local legends.

When the Epi Island boys went to Sydney they were asked, 'What do you want to see?' After a hurried consultation, it was agreed, 'The Sydney Copra House.'

A most important and insightful book is *Stonemen of Malekula* by Bernard Deacon, a young British anthropologist active in southern Malekula in the late 1920s.

Vanuatu's largest vanilla bean, grown in Malo, weighed almost 500g.

LAWYER OF THE DANCE *Ian Byles*

I had certainly expected to find dancing on Vanua Lava, one of the Banks Islands. Among the most northerly islands in Vanuatu, the Banks Islands are known for their customary Melanesian dancing. Swish resorts in Port Vila hire troupes of Banks Islanders to perform every Thursday night outside bars, with five minutes afterwards for 'me with the dancers, Vanuatu' photographs and video footage. But not ballroom dancing.

One Sunday I attended a farewell ceremony for a foreign anthropologist, who had spent the last year in the village. A cow had been slaughtered for the communal lunch. The day before I'd seen its head, suspended from a pole, being carried away – an improbably long tongue swinging pendulously from its mouth. The flesh had been boiled in several large vats and baked in earth ovens overnight.

This afternoon, each family laid a bowl of some description on the ground around the cooking vats, creating a motley carpet of battered plastic, aluminium and glass bowls into which villagers, with an acute eye for equality, ladled the cooked meat. Within half an hour it was gone and the dancing began.

Most dancing in the Banks is neither extravagant nor passionately dramatic; its patterns are simple and iterative, lulling the participants into abandonment with subtly developing percussive rhythms and the shared swaying of bodies. Dances for men and dances for women were soon followed by 'public' dances where all joined in the heady, giddy tumult that continued until dusk.

Then the tone changed. After dark, a group of youths set up a 'string band' – consisting of a tea-chest bass and homemade ukuleles and guitars that ply a very limited range of chords in strict four-four time.

I expect that when the anthropologist asked, out of the blue, whether I had ever learned ballroom dancing, she wanted to relieve the monotony rather than conduct an impromptu survey of cultural affiliations. Doubtless, she didn't expect me to reply that I had. Possibly she regretted asking, for having established that we could get up and take to the floor, there was now the uncomfortable feeling that we probably *should*.

One song ended. We stood and moved into the lamplight. All talking ceased, replaced by excited whispers and much gesturing in our direction. The locals remained silent for barely a moment after we started a foxtrot, sweeping (we hoped majestically) across the packed earth, then as one they erupted into laughter. They laughed and laughed. Their laughter brought others from the village until there were hundreds of people around the dancing ground, falling over, holding themselves, collapsing against each other. It was the most rewarding sound I have heard. No ridicule or malice, just untrammelled delight that two white people would be prepared to do their own bizarre custom dance on the mud, under a mango tree, by the light of a kerosene lamp.

Volunteering in Vanuatu has brought many challenges. Accomplishing spin turns on slippery mud on Vanua Lava was one of the easier ones. While we were struggling to execute a poised quickstep – and many more times since – a quote from Nietzsche came to mind: 'We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once. And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh.'

Ian Byles worked as a case investigator with the Office of the Ombudsman in Vanuatu through Australian Volunteers International (see p75).

In most northern areas chiefs achieve this status through the *nimangki* system, which allows men who can afford to hold pig-killing ceremonies to gain authority in the village.

Fellow villagers are indebted to the chief when they consume his food at a feast, thus becoming a party of supporters who look to him for leadership and guidance when their interests are threatened.

From the Shepherd Islands southwards, chiefs are elected or inherit their titles.

NIMANGKI

Only men wealthy enough to own many pigs for several years can reach society's highest levels and ensure that their spirit commands due respect when they die.

Usually when a youth has passed his teens he'll borrow five to 10 boars to pay his bride-price. As soon as he can, he buys some sows, which become the source of his future wealth and status.

To clear the debts he incurred for his wife's bride-price and his sows, the young man lends out male piglets, but it can take several years to pay off his initial debt. Then he celebrates with a special yam feast, usually followed two years later by a *nimangki* ceremony.

PIG KILLS

The higher a man rises in his grades, the greater must be the number and value of the pigs he kills. To become valuable, a boar is first castrated and its upper teeth removed. Then it is hand-fed – and kept tied up to prevent it foraging or fighting – for seven years, when its tusks complete a circle and penetrate the jaw (very painful). Boars with full-circle tusks are worth up to 40,000Vt each.

A double-circling tusk takes about 14 years to grow, and is extremely valuable. Should the animal's tusks grow a third circle, which happens very occasionally, just looking at it costs one pig. Once the boar has been killed, the owner wears the curved tusk around his neck as a sign to others of his great wealth.

NAKAMAL & NASARA

The *nakamal* corresponds to a men's clubhouse. It's a long enclosed building that is made up of two rooms: one where men meet at the end of the day, the other room often containing ancestral skulls and other sacred objects.

In places like Tanna, the *nakamal* is where men meet at sunset to talk and drink kava. It may be an open-ended hut or a shelter beneath a banyan.

You should never enter a traditional *nakamal* without the permission of one of its members. They are often strictly *tabu* to women, although these days many are just kava bars.

A *nasara* is owned by the chief. It is a sacred area where business deals and ceremonies take place. Originally, when Tagaro created Vanuatu, his magic stones travelled between the islands and talked to each other in a *nasara*. When people arrived, they followed the stones and traded in these areas.

INITIATIONS

Initiation takes a child straight into adulthood. Boys, usually aged from 10 to 12, are secluded in a special hut for several weeks, during which time circumcision takes place. When their wounds have healed, they return to their families amid much feasting. In southern Malekula, special puppets and masks record each boy's progression to maturity.

Once a boy has been initiated, he has the status and duties of a man. He can no longer be chastised by his mother, and he can wear a *nambas*, and start acquiring some pigs.

A young man cannot look for a wife until he has built a house. In the past he might have paid up to 100 pigs for a wife. Nowadays the maximum bride-price for the entire country has been set by the council of chiefs at 80,000Vt. The cost is significantly less in some areas.

Laef Blong Mi – From Village to Nation by Sethy John Regenvanu, an autobiography, looks at the effort involved in getting an education and being in local government with great insights into the Nambas and independence.

Paying your way can be tricky with hospitable nimbans. Trading a trinket for a lobster isn't fair – our ancestors did that! Offering money isn't always the answer. Phonocards make an excellent item of trade.

RAMBARAMP

About eight months to a year after a chief's death, the Small Nambas in south-central Malekula would give him a new body, or *rambaramp*. This was built by overmodelling – covering a frame with vegetable fibre and clay. To ensure the *rambaramp's* face looked like the dead man, the skull was removed from his decomposing body and overlaid with clay.

The *rambaramp* was painted all over in red, white and black, and fitted with armbands, feathers, armlets, a *nambas* and a bark belt.

Finally it was displayed for one day only. The men danced before the *rambaramp* dressed as spirits, covered with strands of smoked ferns, their heads shrouded in spider webs or green moss. Then the *rambaramp* was returned to the *nakamal*, where it remained until it fell apart. Few tribesmen reached a high enough *nimangki* grade for a *rambaramp*.

The ritual of *rambaramp* died out with conversion to Christianity, although you'll find good examples on display in Vila's Cultural Centre.

FUNERALS

When an important man dies, ceremonies and feasts are held at regular intervals, sometimes continuing for more than a year. The aim is to appease the man's spirit.

EDUCATION

Vanuatu inherited a dual-education system from the Condominium, with lessons conducted in either English or French. Bislama is confined to the playground. About 55% of pupils receive an English education; the remainder French.

Over 90% of ni-Van children have primary education, but many don't continue because they can't afford the secondary school fees and places are limited; grade six exams place a great deal of pressure on young students.

Vanuatu has four tertiary institutions: the Malapoa Teachers College, the Tagabe Agricultural School and the Institut de Technologie (INTV, a tourism school) in Vila; and annexes of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Vila and Espiritu Santo.

POPULATION

Back in 1906, when France and England formed the Condominium, there were only 65,000 ni-Vanuatu in the country. In 2005, Vanuatu's population was estimated at around 210,000, of which 98.5% were ni-Van. Most people live in rural areas and about half the population is under 15 years; only 2% is over 60. This baby boom has been related to the people's change in outlook since independence.

MULTICULTURALISM

Ni-Vanuatu have two ancestral lines – Melanesian and Polynesian. As well, there are currently about 1500 Europeans living permanently in Vanuatu, down from about 2000 in 1906. There has always been, and still is, a small number of Asians and Pacific Islanders.

Melanesians

Melanesia comes from the Greek words *melas* (black) and *nesos* (island). Anthropologists have identified genetic links among Melanesians with Papuans, Polynesians and Australian Aborigines, but cultural values, traditional ceremonies and rules about hierarchy differ considerably between individual groups of islanders, and even between neighbouring villages.

Polynesians

Polynesia comes from the Greek word *poly* meaning 'many'. Polynesians are the people from the many islands in the central and eastern Pacific.

Most came from France's Pacific territories prior to independence or are descended from those who arrived centuries ago, including the residents of Ifira and the village of Mele, both near Vila, and of Aniwa to the south, and Emae in the Shepherd Islands. These people speak a Polynesian dialect and are dark-skinned like Melanesians. Polynesians from Futuna are tall, with yellow-brown to fair skin and straight, light-brown hair.

Expatriates

Most Europeans live in Vila and Luganville. Just a few missionaries, doctors, overseas-aid volunteers and planters live elsewhere. Australians are the principal new arrivals, mainly working in tourism in Vila.

The small Asian community, largely descendants of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants, supplies many of the country's entrepreneurs.

RELIGION

The early Christian missionaries' eventual successes in Vanuatu were partly due to Christianity having some similarities to local legends.

Southern island mythologies had a snake god who was associated with death. Other parts of the country had similar stories to those of Adam and Eve, including one about the first ni-Vans being tempted to eat the forbidden fruit of a sacred rose-apple tree. Tagaro, the genial creator of the heavens, was sometimes called Tahara, a name that islanders felt sounded remarkably like Jehovah. Likewise Sem-Sem, also called Saratau, a name reminiscent of Satan, was a legendary pre-Christian demon who traditionally hindered local people from enjoying a rewarding life after death.

Cargo cults appeared on several islands as villagers sought to secure the kind of wealth they'd seen. But these movements generally waned when riches failed to materialise. Most durable has been the Jon Frum cult (p97) of Tanna, which remains an active religion.

These days many Jon Frum and *kastom* village chiefs don't value either Western medicine or education. Other villages have turned to Christianity upon the death of the chief – the mothers wanting an education for their children.

Over 90% of the population is Christian. Every village of reasonable size has a church of the denomination of the mission that established itself there. Non-Christians are largely Jon Frum worshippers and adhere to *kastom* religions.

A village can also be divided between Christian denominations (Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist), or with some residents following traditional religions. It can be physically divided so that the particular groups live in separate areas.

WOMEN IN VANUATU

Women are often treated as inferior, although some provinces have female grade-taking towards becoming a chief with the right to organise women's ceremonies, and meetings. Today there are two female MPs, both from Epi where they outshone the male candidates. Vanuatu's new public prosecutor is Kayleen Tavoia, a local lawyer.

Traditionally, a woman's role centres on assisting her husband to improve his social position and increase his assets. Fortunately, she no

You always need to carry at least 500Vt with you, to any activity, as you never know when a villager will ask you to pay the fee for swimming, fishing, looking or walking on their property.

Most people will be delighted to have their photo taken, though there are exceptions, so always ask. Sometimes there's a fee, and video cameras attract the highest fees.

Journey to the End of the World, by Charlene Gourguechon, includes delightful tales of daily life with traditional tribes in Malekula, Pentecost and Ambrym, as well as the inward-looking, pre-independence European community in Luganville.

Pacific Creative Writing in Memory of Grace Mera Molisa, edited by Shirley Randell, is an anthology of affirmation and determination among Pacific women.

Islanders do not wear scant or revealing clothing, and women's thighs are always covered. Try to ensure that what you wear shows due respect.

longer has her front teeth knocked out to show that she's married. These days, increasing numbers of educated women are seeking alternative ways of living.

Women have always clothed themselves in art. See their woven skirts, made from hand-dyed jungle leaves. Mother Hubbard dresses are expressive: colourful floral patterns decorated with ribbons and lace. Vanuatu's independence celebrations included a competition of Mother Hubbards. Women from every island entered – the winning dress was a gorgeous dusty pink affair.

Of course, maintaining social harmony in a village of family members in a remote area is an art in itself.

ARTS

With 83 islands, it's not surprising that Vanuatu's art and traditions vary from island to island, and this diversity contributes to the country's unique cultural identity.

Ni-Vanuatu art focuses on the human form and traditional interpretations of what ancestral figures looked like. The most important ni-Vanuatu artefacts are made in preparation for *nimangki* grade-taking ceremonies. The island of Malekula produces some of the country's most colourful and dynamic examples. Dancing masks worn by men of high rank are carved from tree ferns, as are masks for funerals, *nimangki* ceremonies or boys' initiations. Other ceremonial head-dresses are overmodelled and surmounted by tall feathers. Some have a small model of a man on top. Others have two or four faces on each side. Lastly, spider webs are sometimes used at the back to give the appearance of hair or a wig.

The National Museum in Vila is an excellent place to learn more about the arts in Vanuatu.

Carving

While wood is the main carved material, objects are also formed from tree fern, stone and coral. Serious carving is almost entirely undertaken for ceremonies, while items for sale are usually small copies of the real thing. The best carvings come from north Ambrym.

CLUBS & WEAPONS

Carved bows and arrows, and traditional ceremonial spears, are most easily found in the village of Mele and on the island of Ifira, both near Vila. War clubs are made to designs attributed to an ancestral cultural hero. To alter a basic shape is considered a breach of *kastom*. Pig-killing clubs are shaped like mattocks, with two stylised faces carved on either side.

BOWLS, POLES & WALKING STICKS

Large platters and bowls are used to pound yams and kava in, or to serve *laplap* (a doughy mix). Some, such as those from the Shepherd Islands, are carved like birds or fish.

Some chiefs use carved wooden staffs as badges of office and walking sticks are made with figurines in place of handles.

CANOES

Exquisite model canoes with sails fashioned from dried pandanus leaves come from Makura in the Shepherds. Atchin islanders carve their miniature canoes complete with figureheads.

FERN FIGURES

Tall statues made from tree ferns, or black palms, are made on Ambrym, Malekula and Gaua. They represent both male and female ancestral figures and are carved for *nimangki* ceremonies. They're often painted in different colours using tints extracted from vegetable dyes and crushed shells; the choice of colours depends on the grade being taken.

If buying one as a memento, be sure that it's fumigated and has a CITES exemption form (see p75).

Musical Instruments

Young ni-Van men make their own instruments, then join together to form a local string band. If you are fortunate enough to buy, say, a home-made guitar, you will be surrounded by interested strangers asking if they may 'play it for you' at mostly every café, bus stop or airport. The down-side is when your waiter tells you there's no fish on today's menu as the fishermen have all left to play in a string band.

Ni-Van women have not, to date, been encouraged to play musical instruments, but the women of Gaua use the ocean, to play water music (p164). You can watch them play at Aver Bay, near Gaua airport.

TAMTAM

Vanuatu's unique musical device is the huge *tamtam*, or slit-gong, from Malekula and Ambrym. It is a carved log with a hollowed-out slit that enables it to be used as a drum. Originally used to send coded messages as well as forming drum orchestras for festivities and celebrations, it is traditionally made from the breadfruit tree, which gives the best sound.

The typical *tamtam* has a representation of a human face carved above the drum part – some in north Ambrym have rooster faces. Faces on Malekulan drums are generally very simple, but those from Ambrym can be ornate. It takes about 160 hours to produce a 2.5m *tamtam* with a single face.

On Ambrym, designs belong to particular families and can only be used if a fee is paid. Some carvers have produced copies in Vila. Ambrym chiefs look out for such transgressors – they are no longer executed, but they are fined.

FLUTES & CONCH SHELLS

Panpipes, usually with seven small bamboo flutes, are found all over Vanuatu. Ambrym people play a long, geometrically patterned musical pipe, while in Espiritu Santo a simple three-holed flute is used.

On many islands, large triton shells are blown as a means of communication.

Painting

Styles of painting practised in Vanuatu include bark art in the Banks Islands. Body painting is popular throughout the country as part of various traditional ceremonies.

Petroglyphs and rock paintings are the country's most ancient forms of pictorial art, though the carvings' meanings and traditions have been lost. Several islands have caves whose walls are decorated with hand stencils and paintings of animals.

Sand Drawing

Ni-Vans create beautiful sand drawings to leave messages or illustrate local legends, songs or ceremonies. The most elaborate and picturesque versions

Havelock Ellis said, 'Dancing is the supreme symbol of spiritual life. If we are indifferent to the art of dancing we have failed to understand.'

Jl Wheatley's *A Guide to the Common Trees of Vanuatu* includes a field key, illustrated descriptions and some traditional uses of 100 species.

are made in Ambrym, though it is practised as far north as the Banks Islands. Drawings may be public or sacred, and have World Heritage status.

The artist first draws the foundation design, usually a sequence of squares or rectangles, in the sand. Then he or she begins to circle with a finger, making many delicate loops and circles without raising the finger until the design is finished. Many are linked to games, songs, and dance or mask patterns; others depict objects.

At sand drawing festivals and competitions, the artists tell the story as they complete the drawing, then repeat the pattern using string twirled between the fingers.

Pottery

Many finds of ceramics dating back to around AD 500 have been found. Today, however, the only remaining traditional potters live in Wusi and Linduri, in southwestern Espiritu Santo (p139).

Weaving

Mostly undertaken by women, weaving is always done by hand. Pandanus leaves and *burao* stalks are the most favoured materials. Wicker, coconut leaves and rattan are used for more robust items.

Pandanus shopping baskets are made on a number of islands: the artisans of Mataso (in the Shepherds) and Futuna are noted for their intricate wares.

Locally made red pandanus mats are traditionally used as currency in Ambae, Maewo and northern Pentecost. These mats are presented at weddings, grade-taking ceremonies, births, funerals and for the payment of customary debts. They were used as everyday clothing, but nowadays are only worn during ceremonies.

Fish, bird and shellfish traps are also manufactured, as are furniture and Panama-style hats.

Literature

In *Beyond Pandemonium: From New Hebrides to Vanuatu*, Father Walter Lini, the first prime minister, tells of his early life and the role he played in the lead-up to his country's independence.

New Hebrides: the Road to Independence, by Kalkot Matas Kelekele and others, includes contributions from young ni-Van writers.

For *Ni-Vanuatu Memories of World War II*, Margaret and Bruce Moon recorded the thoughts and feelings of villagers as the war changed the face of Vanuatu.

James Michener's novel *Tales of the South Pacific* depicts life in Espiritu Santo when US forces were garrisoned there during WWII.

Beachmasters by Thea Astley has many interesting parallels to the events of the 1980 Santo rebellion.

Gwendoline Page's very readable *Coconuts and Coral* is a detailed and often amusing account of life in the New Hebrides during the 1960s as seen by a young English family.

The Talking Tree by Fepai Kolia is a poetry book that takes a stark look at ni-Van life.

Music

String bands developed in WWII, when ni-Vans heard the US soldiers playing bluegrass. Local lads added the bush bass, made from a converted tea chest, the bongo, the tambourine, and a ratchet made from bamboo. Some bands use a xylophone of water-filled bottles. The singing is done

with a pinched throat, forming a high-pitched lyrical note. Songs are improvised about life. For example, when Nguna's local band sings, 'Poor Saykem, caught in a current, canoe is filling, sharks are swimming, Poor Saykem, Poor Saykem', it captures a dramatic moment when an old fisherman had to be rescued. String bands play at most Melanesian feasts, which also feature *kastom* dancing.

Musicians have contributed to the country's economy and are getting recognition, with sound studios and training rooms being established on many islands.

Nauten Boys of Tanna sing a mix of reggae, country and rock in Bislama, English and local language, with an off-beat that is a typical Toka dance rhythm. Singing about life and culture, the band's big hit is *Jewel in a Crown* (Vanuatu being the jewel). They have released two albums to date.

Vanessa Quai, an international award winner, blends hip-hop with a tap rhythm. She has many CDs, like *The Best of Vanessa Quai*.

ENVIRONMENT

THE LAND

Vanuatu is a Y-shaped chain of 83 islands, spread between the equator and the tropic of Capricorn. Its nearest neighbour is the Solomon Islands to the north. New Caledonia lies 230km to the southwest.

Most islands are the summits of mountain ranges rising from the deep ocean floor, so dissected by gullies and covered with lush forest and secondary growth that they're impenetrable. Mt Tabwemasana (1879m) on Espiritu Santo is the country's highest peak, and many others are higher than 1000m. Coconut plantations and other agriculture dominate the narrow coastal plains.

Volcanoes & Earthquakes

Vanuatu lies squarely on top of the Pacific Ring of Fire. In fact, it is on the edge of the Pacific tectonic plate, which is being forced up and over the Indo-Australian plate. This action causes frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Some areas of Vanuatu are being uplifted at a rate of 2cm a year, while others are subsiding. Earthquakes in 1994 and 2002 rated more than seven on the Richter scale and caused extensive damage. Others, in 1875, 1948 and 1999 created tsunamis that destroyed villages.

Vanuatu has nine active volcanoes – seven on land and two under the sea. The most famous is the easily accessible Mt Yasur on Tanna. Mt Garet on Gaua is potentially the most dangerous because of the thin layer of rock that separates its crater lake from magma. Both Mt Marum on Ambrym and Mt Lombenben on Ambae had locals ready for evacuation throughout 2005 into 2006.

Active fumaroles and thermal springs are often used for cooking food.

WILDLIFE Animals

Apart disease-carrying mosquitoes, Vanuatu is free of dangerous land creatures (no matter what they said on *Survivor*). Due to the relative youth and isolation of the islands, the only native land mammals are four species of flying fox and eight bats. Only one of these – the white flying fox – is endemic.

Edward Rice's *Jon Frum, He Came* is the only book-length work about the Jon Frum movement of southeastern Tanna.

Islands Won by Blood (Covenant Press, Strathpine, Queensland) by AK Langridge vividly records the courage of missionary couples on Erromango in the mid-19th century.

Different local musicians are featured on www.kaivitimotel.com which is always interesting.

An Australian volcanologist and adventurer has stacks of info and pictures on Vanuatu volcanoes on www.volcanolive.com. Start at Most Active Volcanoes.

The www.positiveearth.org/vanbirds website will keep even nonbird-watchers enthralled. Features pictures and sounds of the birds of Vanuatu, with their habitat and maps.

Heinrich Bregulla's *Birds of Vanuatu* is required reading on the country's 121 bird species, but it's too large to take with you.

www.british-friends-of-vanuatu.com Articles are about agriculture in Vanuatu – where plants come from and how they influence the culture can be found.

Cats, dogs, cattle, horses, pigs and goats were all introduced to Vanuatu and have now gone feral. Rats are the bane of village life; they cause much damage to the copra (dried coconut meat) industry as well as to nesting birds.

The country's largest resident mammal is the dugong, or sea cow (p86).

Several species of sea turtle live and breed around the islands, but turtle meat and eggs are considered a delicacy by the ni-Vans and populations are dwindling. Many chiefs have created sanctuaries, and there's an official breed-and-release programme at Tranquillity Island, off Efate.

Vanuatu's waters contain a huge variety of fish, with brilliantly colourful schools of small species, a feature of the country's many coral gardens and reefs. Large fish include bonito, yellowfin tuna, sailfish, barracuda and swordfish.

BIRDS

Vanuatu's 121 bird species include 32 seabirds. Espiritu Santo has the richest bird fauna, with 55 species including all seven of the country's endemics. The Santo mountain starling is found only in Santo's higher mountains. In contrast, the native white-eye is widespread and common throughout Vanuatu.

The most interesting of the country's birds is the megapode, which lives close to active volcanic areas, and lays its eggs in the hot soil. Its young, which emerge fully feathered, can run immediately after hatching and can fly within 24 hours.

The swamp hen, or purple gallinule, is the most common ground-dwelling bird. You may glimpse the bright red beak, purplish-blue feathers and yellow feet as it scuttles off into the bush.

REPTILES

Vanuatu has 19 lizard species including the banded iguana on Efate. It grows to 1m long and has an emerald-green body with black bands.

The two types of land snake are perfectly harmless: the burrowing snake and the Pacific boa, known as the 'sleeping snake' from its habit of lying absolutely still when threatened. The boa grows to about 2.5m, coloured from silver to orange-brown. It's fond of rats, mice and chickens so it lives close to villages.

The only venomous snakes are the yellow-bellied and banded sea snakes. These graceful creatures are often curious, but rarely aggressive. They only have small mouths and teeth that aren't at all suitable for savaging humans.

Over the years saltwater (or estuarine) crocodiles have appeared around Vanuatu's northern islands. The 'salty' population stands at three, on Vanua Lava.

Plants

Much of the country is a botanical wonderland with 1500 species of flowers, ferns, shrubs, vines and trees. Lord of the forest is the banyan. The largest is on Tanna, and is as big as a soccer field. There's forests of mighty kauri trees up to 4m in diameter on Erromango.

Vanuatu palms include the decorative snakeskin palm and the very beautiful Carpoxyon palm; both are rare and confined to southern Vanuatu. Another is the lovely natangura palm.

Orchids festoon the trees in many areas, such as along the beaches in northeastern Espiritu Santo. Vanuatu has 158 species of orchid, of

which about 40 are native. The best place to see them is Aneityum. Also of interest are the ferns – all 250 species of them.

Less enchanting are the introduced weeds. Lantana and the widespread American 'mile-a-minute' vine are the worst. The latter was brought from the USA as a camouflage plant during WWII; it's been left to overrun everything.

NATIONAL PARKS

Vanuatu has four official conservation areas: Vatthe (p138) and Loru (p137) on Espiritu Santo, the kauri reserve (p104) on Erromango and the cloud-forest area around Lake Manaro (p148) on Ambae. For information, see the relevant chapters or contact the **Environment Unit** (Vila ☎ 25302; Luganville ☎ 36153; PMB 9063, Port Vila).

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The Environment Unit identifies many challenges facing Vanuatu, including invasive introduced species (eg the Indian mynah bird), degradation of freshwater habitats, and the exploitation of many plant, animal and marine resources. But the greatest problem is the scarcity of fresh water on some islands.

Japanese longline nets are strung in Vanuatu's waters, and Korean fishing boats hlep themselves. Owners of the waters and reefs stand helpless on the rocks, waving bush knives – there's no coastguard to call on.

Global warming is raising sea levels, which threatens arable coastal land, and climate change caused by global warming is throwing the seasons out of whack, resulting in reduced agricultural harvests and smaller-sized root crops.

The University of the South Pacific (USP), with Canadian support, started a three-year Coral Reef Monitoring Project in 2002. Its main aims are to watch reef-stress indicators such as numbers of sea urchins. Interestingly, a new industry has developed, where panels of rock are stuck with pieces of staghorn coral, which grows and can be sold.

Steps to help the environment include dedicating resources to the marine environment, fisheries and reforestation. At least two million trees have been planted, a code of logging practice has been established and the country has joined the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO), a group which fosters sustainable forest management. Plastic bags are also to be banned throughout the country, soon, hopefully.

The Vanuatu government unfortunately was seduced by the multinational aquarium trade, and allowed it to collect tropical fish from Devil's Point on Efate. The area has been quickly ravaged. Disney's *Finding Nemo* added to the problem, with children everywhere desperate to own a clownfish. Shefa's council of chiefs stepped in to stop the trade. Grazing

Orchids of Vanuatu by B Lewis & P Cribb covers all 158 species of orchids.

www.positiveearth.org is a great newsletter about ecotourism projects and Vanuatu, including pictures and details of island bungalows and tourist attractions.

CORAL & GLOBAL WARMING

Coral looks like a flower, but it's an animal with a skeleton and a tiny fleshy tube that looks like its close relation, the anemone. The colourful surface consists of algae that supply the polyps of coral with oxygen and nutrients. If the polyps get overheated, they expel the algae, and oops, there goes their food source. Within a month the corals are bleached white bones.

Vanuatu had a serious bout of coral bleaching in 2002. There's a lot of new growth around, and many villages are transplanting pieces of live coral onto reefs and watching them bud. But keeping our coral reefs healthy requires major national efforts worldwide to control global warming.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Turtles and sharks are seriously endangered. Village traditions expect that turtles are part of celebratory feasts. Village chiefs, faced with the problem of helping turtles survive while maintaining traditional practices, now agree on the number of turtles allowed for each feast, and the villagers stick to this number.

Meanwhile, far away, celebrations in Japan traditionally include shark-fin soup. Fishing for sharks in Vanuatu's waters is prohibited, but fishermen come in, hack the sharks' fins off, and disappear quickly. The sharks are helpless, and die over the next few days. This is the top of the food chain that's being decimated – a species, beautiful in its natural habitat, that's evolved over 70 million years.

fish such as angelfish and sea stars keep the balance of algae correct, so the problem is far more than one of stock numbers.

FOOD & DRINK

It will take you weeks to eat your way through the extensive menus in Vila, Luganville, Tanna and Malekula. Main meals range from 800Vt to 2800Vt – not expensive when you're thinking organic veg, best beef in the world, seafood direct from the ocean to your plate, great ambience and views to die for. There again, you can get meals for 200Vt that are cooked as you wait, and taste great. If you want to cook for yourself, supermarkets carry local and imported foods.

Outer islands have restricted menus; usually a set meal for that day, and the restaurant closes when it's all gone. But since there's no refrigeration, well, you're happy to know the chicken was clucking that very morning. Villagers eat when there's food, a bit opposite to us.

Markets sell produce grown in village gardens: coconuts, bananas, pawpaw, yams, cucumbers, grapefruit and tomatoes, as well as cooked foods such as the national dishes *laplap* (a doughy mix) and *tuluk* (smaller parcels of *laplap*).

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Vanuatu's national dish is *laplap*. Manioc, taro roots or yams are grated into a doughy paste. The mixture is put onto taro or wild spinach leaves and soaked in coconut cream. Pieces of pork, beef, poultry, fish, prawns or flying fox are often added. Leaves from the *laplap* plant (similar to banana leaves) are wrapped around the doughy mix, tied up with strands of vine and then placed in a ground oven, with hot stones above and below.

Tuluk is very similar to *laplap* but the parcels are smaller. *Nalot* is a vegetable dish made from roasted taro, banana or breadfruit mixed with coconut cream.

Then there's the coconut. It has five stages: the first is for drinking; the next has a tasty jellied flesh; the third, when the flesh is firm but succulent, is the best eating; the fourth is for drying into copra; and the fifth is when the nut sprouts while the milk inside goes crispy, making 'coconut ice cream'.

Other edible fruits include *nakatambol*, clustered cherry-sized fruits that turn yellow when ripe, and *naus*, similar to a mango.

You'll probably see the rose-apple tree; its small pink-and-white fruit has applelike flesh beneath its skin. Villagers flavour their food with its blossom, the *kae kae flaoa* (food flower).

For a starting point for researching many of Vanuatu's programmes, its news releases, and regulations such as size and type of fish it's prohibited to catch checkout www.vatu.com.

The nets on soccer goals, and fine open-mesh fences around the outer islands, were Japanese longline nets the locals have dragged from the sea.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

There's very little to be excited about when basic meals are chicken, beef or fish with rice, but then – wow, a few home-grown herbs, a bit of coconut milk and you're having a gourmet feast in a tiny village of bamboo and black sand. The big problem for your tastebuds is the times when you're to feed yourself. The village store might carry tinned mackerel, sweet biscuits and guitar strings – it's a surprise when you find you've no way to feed yourself, it's dark and you're hungry. Then you remember the cracker biscuits and peanut butter in your bag. Heaven.

Several edible nuts are grown: cut-nuts, also called *narli-nuts* or island chestnuts; and *nganae*, an oval, nut-containing fruit that tastes like an almond.

The *palolo* worm, collected from coral reefs where it swarms every November, looks like green caviar when served on toast.

DRINKS

Fresh coconut juice is a refreshing drink. If you want to drink coconuts straight off the tree ask the *kastom* owner or your guide. They'll hold it in their open hand; whack, whack with the bushknife and it's yours. Watch an eight-year-old open one. Don't even think about the hand flying off if they miss.

Vanuatu's main locally produced beer, Tusker, is a fine brew and widely available, including in Vila's supermarkets. Enjoy it at the Office Pub, Anchor Inn, and any number of bars and restaurants. Spirits and wine are costly though.

The major supermarkets carry a good range of French and Australian wines and spirits, and Australian and local beers. Some village stores also sell alcohol, but no-one sells it after noon on Saturday except a few AM-PM joints in Vila.

CELEBRATIONS

A magnificent feast is provided by a man taking a *nimangki* grade. He lines up scores of pigs and walks along killing selected animals with blows to the head, touching others to show that they'll be slaughtered later. He then presents woven mats and sufficient yams and taro for the lavish meal.

For a lad's circumcision celebration, the father holds a grand feast. Villagers dress in wildly colourful costumes, face and body paint, and amazing head pieces. Miles of bright material form shade-screens, and peacock feathers are used as decorations. There's dancing all through the night to

THE COCONUT CRAB: A CONSERVATION ISSUE?

Krab kokonas, the coconut crab, has always been a part of local cuisine. It climbs palms and breaks off the coconuts, which split when they hit the ground. The crab scuttles down and feasts on the flesh. It's the world's largest land crab and matures very slowly, taking 15 years to reach harvesting size. Sadly, there's been a serious decline in crab numbers and strict conservation measures are in force.

Coconut crabs start in the ocean, then move into shells on the shore. As hermit crabs they move into bigger shells until they are large enough to move inland.

Adult crabs generally live in forested areas near the sea. Villagers catch them by fixing split coconuts to the ground, then going back with a torch at night. While locals can pick the crabs up without losing a finger, don't try it yourself.

Island Edibles by Judy MacDonnell is an illustrated and informative work with great recipes (island cabbage *dolmades*, Tahitian sushi) and translations from Bislama to English.

In times of plenty Futuna islanders wind-dry a mash of bananas or breadfruit, wrap it in *laplap* leaves and bury it in dry ground, which provides a food reserve during cyclones or drought.

KAVA CULTURE

It's called the peace drug. Its hallucinogen properties make your mind happy and you feel clever. You love the rhythm of talk. Many people wouldn't consider a day complete without a couple of 'shells' of the stuff.

Kava has a pungent, muddy and slightly peppery taste – it looks like dirty dishwater, and many say it doesn't taste much better. But it's not *that* bad. Your lips go numb and cold, your limbs become heavy and you'll probably want to do nothing more than think about life. Also, your eyes become sensitive to light, so flashbulbs are intrusive.

A kava ceremony is held to welcome visitors, seal alliances, begin chiefly conferences, and commemorate births, deaths and marriages. For such occasions, there are strict rules for preparing and drinking kava. On Tanna, for example, pre-pubescent boys prepare the roots by chewing them into a mush that is mixed with water and filtered through coconut fibres (don't worry, just ask which *nakamals* use a grinder). First the chief drinks, followed by any honoured guests, then other men in order of precedence. Etiquette requires drinking each shell in a single gulp. Also, it's drunk in a quiet atmosphere.

Kava drinking was an exclusively male activity surrounded by all sorts of *tabu*. However these days all the islands have places where women are welcome. If you're asked to join kava drinkers consider yourself honoured, as the invitation amounts to a formal welcome.

Known botanically as *Piper methysticum*, a relation of the pepper plant, kava is grown in damp places, often around the edge of a taro paddy field. Some types are used locally as pain and appetite suppressants, or as antibacterial, relaxant, diuretic and decongestant medicine. Kava-based herbal medicines are gaining popularity overseas for alleviating stress, anxiety and insomnia. It is an increasingly lucrative export market, and Ambae is setting the standard for quality kava: workers wear lab coats and follow strict hygiene procedures while the kava is prepared; rainwater is conserved on the island so it's always available for the preparation.

Kava has been marketed in powder form, as capsules and in cookies, but the newest product is instant kava powder – just add water and drink. Looking good.

celebrate the rite of passage of the boy. Adding to the colour are huge piles of gifts – food, mats and baskets – paid to the paternal extended family.

Feasts are prepared for every festival and anniversary, for a new house, for someone arriving or leaving, births, deaths and many other reasons. The women work together throughout the day, preparing *laplap* and *nalot*. The men catch fish and a pig is slaughtered. For a large gathering, a cow may be slaughtered.

Everybody calmly wanders around selecting food and sitting on the ground in small groups to eat it with their fingers.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Vila is by far the best place in Vanuatu for eating out in style, although there are also places on Espiritu Santo, Tanna and Malekula that stand out. Beef, from those contented Charolais and Limousin cows wandering around the coconut plantations, is excellent. River prawns are delicate, and best of all is Tahitian fish salad: the fish is marinated in lime juice, then sweetened with coconut milk.

Local specialities include *roussette* (flying fox or fruit bat), *nautou* (green-winged ground pigeon), and poulet fish (it tastes like chicken). *Roussette* and *nautou* are almost edible when served *au vin* (in red wine). Poulet is delicious.

If you're vegetarian, you'll love the organic, just-out-of-the-garden, full-of-flavour vegies. *Laplap* has to be a vegetarian's dream dish. Eggs are hit and miss – double yolkers, fertilised, rotten. But when they're good they're very good.

One hermit crab found the perfect house – a baby-bottle teat, which it lived in with great dignity.

The A to Z of Vanuatu is at www.vanuatuatoz.com. All you wanted to know and didn't know who to ask.

VANUATU'S TOP FIVE

Ameltoro Restaurant (p114) Rona gives a gourmet twist to the local dishes of Malekula.

Deco Stop Lodge (p135) Best curry night in Espiritu Santo, with a magic show and magical views.

El Gecko (p73) For delicious meals, right in the centre of everything.

Rossi Restaurant (p73) You realise you're truly on holiday, with happy food and a happy ambience.

Vila Chaumières (p73) A romantic place where the food is romanced too.

And as for the kids, they'll get used to not having takeaway, but keep snacks on hand because meal times can be rather unpunctual.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Ni-Van families have their first meal of a chunky slice of bread around the open fire as the sun comes up. Bread has been baked in the small metal wood-fired ovens that you see throughout the countryside, or in a pot over an open fire. The children take a banana leaf-wrapped bundle of rice with them to school. The evening meal will be vegetables from the family's garden. Many days may pass without them eating protein. If the yield from the garden is inadequate, the family eats very little.

There is no wastage. Even the guts of a lobster are eaten. And coconut adds a touch of magic to almost all dishes.

Diving in Vanuatu

Jean-Bernard Carillet

What draws divers to Vanuatu? In a few words: the USS *President Coolidge*. The quintessential wreck dive, the *Coolidge* will make you gasp into your regulator. In all, Vanuatu is a mecca for wreck enthusiasts and, although it's difficult for any wreck to compete with the iconic *Coolidge*, there's a wide assortment of attractive vessels.

But wrecks are not the only reason to dive in Vanuatu. Like most South Pacific destinations, Vanuatu boasts majestic reefs and prolific marine life, with warm water year-round, but it also has uncrowded sights, plus something less tangible: a sense of adventure. Enjoy!

DIVING CONDITIONS

Vanuatu's weather is fickle. Although it is diveable year-round, the best season for diving is from April to October. November to March is the wet season, with heavy rain and occasional cyclones.

Visibility varies a lot, from a low of 10m at certain sites to a maximum of 40m.

Water temperatures range from a low of 24°C in August to a high of 29°C in January. You won't need anything more than a thin neoprene or 3mm wet suit to protect you from the cold and the coral, which you aren't going to bump into anyway! Don't be overweighted, and photographers take care, don't destroy what you're photographing. Fifty years of coral growth can be bumped off in a second, or the coral's protective covering wrecked by the sunscreen on your hands.

DIVE SITES

ESPIRITU SANTO USS President Coolidge

The *Coolidge*, the *Coolidge*, the *Coolidge*. Yes, she's there! This underwater behemoth is regarded as one of the most famous wrecks in the world. Be prepared to run out of superlatives. The *Coolidge* is simply humongous, mind-boggling and gobsmacking. To top it all, she's shrouded with an almost palpable historic aura – much has been written about her history of the ship (see below).

The USS *President Coolidge*, a WWII carrier, was entering what the captain thought were safe waters in the Santo harbour. But the ship struck two mines and sank very close to the shore.

USS PRESIDENT COOLIDGE: A DATE WITH DESTINY

On the morning of 26 October 1942, the USS *President Coolidge* sank after hitting two 'friendly' American mines in Segond Channel, just east of Luganville. A luxury liner, she had been refitted as a troopship and was carrying over 5000 men. The captain tried to run the stricken ship onto the nearby reef, but it slid backwards into deep water.

It took 85 minutes for the ship to sink, which, amazingly, was enough time for all but two of the crew to reach shore safely.

For more background to this story, you can pick up a copy of *The Lady & the President: the Life & Loss of the SS President Coolidge*, by Peter Stone, from Stop Press in Port Vila (5000Vt).

The site rundown in this section is by no means exhaustive – many other opportunities exist in Vanuatu's waters.

Divers couldn't dream of a more easily accessible playground. It's usually reached by minibus on a road that runs up to the shore – just minutes away from Luganville dive shops. Divers get equipped on a cement platform in the shade and walk across the reef top for about 100m until the mooring line attached to the bow.

Amazingly, more than 50 years after its demise, the ship is in surprisingly good shape. You'll be awestruck by its proportions: it's 200m in length, 25m in width and rests on its side in 20m to 67m of water. It's not ablaze with marine life but there are numerous vestiges and artefacts, including ammunition, gas masks, trenching tools, cannons, jeeps, helmets, trucks, chandeliers, a mosaic tile fountain, rows of toilets, a pool and personal belongings abandoned by 5000 soldiers, plus all the fixtures of a luxury cruise liner. It's a bit like diving in a museum. One of the nicest items is the **Lady**, a ceramic porcelain statue hidden in the bowels of the vessel, at 42m.

In addition to the *Lady*, at least 10 different dives are on offer. Each one focuses on one or several individual parts of the vessel. Penetration is easy and safe provided you dive under the guidance of a divemaster. **Coolidge Bow** (maximum depth: 25m), just under the mooring, is the easiest of all and is generally used as an assessment dive. Swimming around the bow, you'll have plenty of time to ponder over the enormous size of the vessel. **Promenade Deck** (maximum depth: 34m) is another fave, as is **Cargo Holds 1 & 2** (maximum depth: 36m), chockers with military supplies, including large trucks, jeeps and tracked vehicles, all parked for eternity in these holds – a poignant vista. Cargo Holds 1 & 2 is also an unforgettable night dive. Turn off your torch and hordes of flashlight fishes will lead the show.

As the name implies, you'll see numerous syringes, vials of medicine and intravenous drip bottles at **Medical Supplies** (maximum depth: 36m), as well as the barber shop with the barber chair still intact.

The deeper **Engine Room** (maximum depth: 48m) is another exciting site. Look for the impressive temperature and pressure gauges. Fancy a deep dip? The **Swimming Pool** (maximum depth: 57m) will captivate you.

Other sections high on atmosphere include the **Galley**, the **Captain's Bathroom**, the **Soda Fountain**, the **Stern**, etc – not to mention tailor-made dives. The opportunities are endless!

Other Sites

Not surprisingly, the legendary *Coolidge* has stolen the spotlight and overshadowed the island's other dive sites. But savvy divers shouldn't miss the chance to expand their diving beyond the *Coolidge*. Santo has a great variety of sites, including other wrecks that are also worth exploring. The **USS Tucker** is a US destroyer that rests in 15m to 22m of water on a sandy bottom. Again, as with the USS *President Coolidge* a few months later, she hit a mine and sunk off the southwest corner of Malo Island. The ship is broken into two segments. Penetration is not advisable. With good visibility and copious fish life, it's a good lead-up or refresher dive prior to a more challenging *Coolidge* dive, but be prepared to cope with a 30- to 40-minute boat ride from Luganville. Another recommended wreck is the **Tui Twaite** (maximum depth: 45m), a perfectly intact tug that was sunk in the mid-'90s. It's a challenging but rewarding dive, with great fish life and healthy corals.

Off Bokissa Island, make a beeline for the **Henry Bonnaud** (maximum depth: 45m), a 47m-long interisland trader that was scuttled in 1989. Visibility is usually top-notch at most times because she does not lie in a channel. Penetration is easy and some say this is the best night dive in Santo, with scores of flashlight fish.

A light is necessary to explore the interior areas.

A comprehensive website dedicated to the history of the *Coolidge* is www.michaelmcfadyenscuba.info.

Don't hesitate to skip a couple of dives on the *Coolidge* to experience some other dives in Santo or Efate – that makes for a welcome change.

A WRECK FOR ALL

Novices, rejoice: although nearly all dives on the *Coolidge* are deep (more than 30m) and involve deco stops, she is accessible to all levels, even for OW divers. The water is warm and clear, there's no current and all dives are led by well-trained divemasters who follow a strict code of practice. You'll start at shallower depths and, as you become more familiar with the diving (air consumption being a key factor), you might be taken down to the Lady (-42m).

Deep diving equates decompression diving. Deco stops, ranging from a couple of minutes to up to 30 minutes or more, are done in a shallow section of the reef where healthy corals and varied fish life will keep you entertained – a very pleasurable and safe way to finish your dive.

One of the quirkiest species you'll encounter on a night dive is flashlight fish. Light is biochemically generated in a sac under each eye, sending flickers of light into the black water. When active, the school resembles a group of fireflies.

Once you've had your fill of wrecks, you might want to explore some good old reefs. In this respect, **Cindy's Reef** is hard to beat. Just 10 minutes by boat from Luganville, this relaxing dive features coloured corals in less than 20m. It's an excellent training site as well. **Chails Reef** is another uncomplicated, fun dive on a lively reef. Some divers swear by **Tutuba Point**, but the coral is not as healthy as it once was. The main draw is the topography, with numerous swim-throughs, clefts and chasms. Fish life is also pretty varied. Keep your eyes peeled for crayfish. An excellent wall dive, **Aore Wall**, about 2km west of Aore Resort, is festooned with swaying gorgonians, as well as colourful soft and hard corals. If there's current, it can be dived as a drift dive.

And what about **Million Dollar Point**? We do recommend this dive site; it's one of the island's quirkiest dives. It's an undersea junkyard. When the US military left at the end of WWII, they dumped thousands of tons of military equipment into the sea off the point. Named for its worth, there is an assemblage of bulldozers, cranes, fork-lifts and trucks piled higgledy-piggledy upon one another on a sloping wall, in about 10m to 30m. Divers usually finish their dive exploring the *Dedele*, a diminutive yet atmospheric wreck in the shallows.

There are also a couple of spring-fed inland **blue holes** that are worth exploring – a truly amazing experience.

EFATE

Although less charismatic than Santo, Efate can provide some wonderful surprises. Sure, the *Coolidge* is matchless, but there's more to diving in Vanuatu than this legendary wreck. Efate's dive sites are good for beginners to sharpen their skills, but even the 'old pros' enjoy them for a hassle-free, relaxing way to see the undersea world.

In 2004, a cyclone wreaked havoc on the coral reefs located on the western side of the island, but they are in the process of recovering.

About two miles off the north side of Efate, **Hat Island** is a must-see. It has it all: canyons, walls, good visibility and decent fish life – not to mention a sense of wilderness. It's not uncommon to spot whitetip sharks and schooling reef fishes. There are at least four dive sites off the island.

On the north side of Efate, **Paul's Rock** is riddled with swim-throughs, passages and faults. For a site that was severely hit by the 2004 cyclone, we found sea life pretty diverse – we saw lionfish, red sea bass, surgeonfish, bannerfish, parrotfish, turtles and fusiliers. Look for healthy soft coral in the passageways.

The **Cathedral**, off the tip of Pango Point, is a warren of underwater holes, flutes, elevations, stipples and tunnels. About 20m down, it looks remarkably like an underwater cathedral and it's an interesting dive in Mele Bay.

The *Coolidge* is like a huge puzzle. You need to dive various segments to get a glimpse of the whole vessel. Five dives are a minimum. If you want to do it proper justice, consider taking around 10 dives.

TAKE THE PLUNGE!

You've always fancied venturing underwater on scuba? Now's your chance. Vanuatu is a perfect starting point for new divers, as the warm water in the shallow lagoons is a forgiving training environment. Most resorts offer courses for beginners and employ experienced instructors, most of them competent in English.

Just about anyone in reasonably good health can sign up for an introductory dive, including children aged eight and over. There are various programmes on offer, including Discover Scuba, which takes place in a pool, and Discover Scuba Diving, which is a guided dive in open water.

If you choose to enrol in an Open Water course while in Vanuatu, count on it taking about three days, including classroom lectures and open-water training. Another option is to complete the classroom and pool sessions at home and perform the required open-water dives in a PADI- or SSI-affiliated dive centre in Vanuatu. Once you're certified, your C-card is valid permanently and recognised all over the world.

Mele Reef, which surrounds Hideaway Island like a horseshoe, has coral growths, small tropical fish and large pelagic creatures. See black coral whips and black gorgonian fans on the walls.

Paul's Reef, offshore from Mangaliliu and only 2m below the surface, has grown around an extinct submarine volcano; it features tunnel swim-throughs, sheer plunging walls, coral gardens and abundant fish life.

Efate also features several interesting wrecks, including the **Konanda** and the **Federsen**, in about 20m. The wreck of the iron-hulled, 81m schooner **Star of Russia** lies upright 33m down, with masts and hull still intact. She's now the home of thousands of colourful fish and a large, amiable groper.

Coral and fish life are not the strong points of these dives but they make for excellent training grounds if you want to refresh your skills before taking on more challenging wreck dives in Santo.

DIVE CENTRES

FACILITIES & SERVICES

Efate and Santo are the only islands with diving facilities. Dive centres are open year-round, most of them every day. Most operators are land-based and some of them are attached to a hotel. It's a good idea to book at least a day in advance.

They offer a whole range of services and products, such as introductory dives (for children aged eight years and over, and adults), night dives, exploratory dives, and certification programs. Most dive centres are PADI- or SSI-affiliated, two certifying agencies that are recognised internationally. Vanuatu is not generally DIN-friendly. It's all YOKE equipment.

Diving in Vanuatu is rather good value, especially if you compare it with other South Pacific destinations. If you plan to do many dives on one island, consider buying a multiday package, which comes much cheaper.

Generally, prices don't include equipment rental, so it's not a bad idea to bring all your gear.

Most dive shops offer free pick-ups from your accommodation and accept credit cards.

There are also live-aboard dive boats operating out of Vila to access more remote locations.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

The islands of Vanuatu are ecologically vulnerable. By following these guidelines while diving, you can help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- Encourage dive operators in their efforts to establish permanent moorings at appropriate dive sites.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body and equipment.
- Take great care in underwater caves, as your air bubbles can damage fragile organisms.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals.
- Take home all your trash and any litter you may find as well.
- Never stand on corals, even if they look solid and robust.

There's a decompression chamber for divers in Vila (see p61). **DAN** (Divers Alert Network; www.danseap.org/index.html) provides insurance, emergency evacuation and dive-medicine hotlines for travelling divers.

HOW MUCH?

Introductory dive: about US\$95

Single dive: US\$45 to US\$50 (including equipment rental)

Open Water certification course: about US\$350

DOCUMENTS

If you're a certified diver, bring your C-card; it's a good idea to have your dive logbook with you as well. Centres welcome certification from any training agency (CMAS, PADI, SSI, NAUI etc), but may ask you to do a check-out dive to assess your skills.

CHOOSING A DIVE CENTRE

There aren't many dive shops in Vanuatu – not even 10. All of them are affiliated with one or more internationally-recognised certifying agencies, usually PADI, SSI or NAUI. In general, you can expect to find well-maintained equipment, good facilities and knowledgeable staff members, but standards may vary from one centre to another. It's wise to do your research and opt for the dive centre that best suits your expectations.

Espiritu Santo

Prices are fantastic, and all the dive operators are extremely regimented and professional. With daily deep dives, there's no way they can be lax for a moment. Gear hire is about 1500Vt, and a single shore/boat dive starts at 4000/6000Vt with multiple dive packages making it even cheaper. You might even get a free night dive thrown in.

Allan Power Dive Tours (☎ 36822; www.allan-power-santo.com; apower@vanuatu.com.vu; Main St, Luganville) In 2005, the team uncovered the embossed port of registration on the stern of the *President Coolidge*. Much celebrating.

Aquamarine (☎ 36196; www.aquamarinesanto.com; dive@aquamarinesanto.com; Luganville) On the water's edge, with a great deck to sit and study your dive course notes.

Bokissa Island Dive (☎ 36913; www.bokissa.com; reservations@bokissa.vu; Bokissa Island)

The Bokissa North reef is an especially colourful and healthy reef system.

Coral Quays (☎ 36257; www.coralquays.com; Luganville)

Efate

Big Blue Scuba Dive (☎ 44054, 40104, ☎ /fax 27518, bigblue@vanuatu.com.vu; Port Vila)

Dive from a trimaran or dedicated dive boat, morning or afternoon.

Hideaway Island Marine Sanctuary (☎ 22963; www.hideaway.com.vu hideaway@vanuatu.com.vu) On the beach at Hideaway Island.

DIVING AND FLYING

Most divers to Vanuatu get there by plane. While it's fine to dive soon *after* flying, it's important to remember that your last dive should be completed at least 12 hours (some experts advise 24 hours) before your flight, to minimise the risk of residual nitrogen in the blood that can cause decompression injury. Careful attention to flight times is necessary in Vanuatu because interisland transportation is by air.

Nautilus Scuba Diving (☎ 22398; www.nautilus.com.vu; nautilus@vanuatu.com.vu; Lini Hwy)

Great resources. Ask about the bunkhouse accommodation.

Sailaway Cruises (☎ 25155; www.sailawayvanuatu.com; sailaway@vanuatu.com.vu; Port Vila)

Dives at Hat Island and Paul's Rock on its day tours. Has a 44ft catamaran.

Tranquillity Island Dive (☎ 25020; www.southpacdiverise.com.vu; drewco@vanuatu.com.vu; Lini Hwy) Dives off Tranquillity Island. There's day tours and diving packages.

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