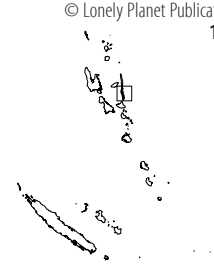


Pentecost, Ambae & Maewo



Pentecost has the *naghol*, the most remarkable custom in all of Melanesia, where men make spectacular leaps of courage from high towers as a gift to the gods, to ensure a bountiful yam harvest. Ambae has beautiful crater lakes: one grey blue, the highest lake in the Pacific, the second lime green and boiling hot, the third dry with a central spring. Maewo is an island of waterfalls and cascades, created by volcanic eruptions 18 million years ago. It was the first island to be seen by Bougainville and Cook, and is often called the most beautiful of Vanuatu's islands.

Dances in this region are great fun, with feathers, exotic headgear, and *fange*-tree seeds that make rhythmic rattles. Penama Day is celebrated on 15 September, with *kastom* dances and feasts. Small red pandanus mats are still worn in *kastom* villages, and are used in ceremonial dances, as currency, as presents at births or funerals and when grades are taken.

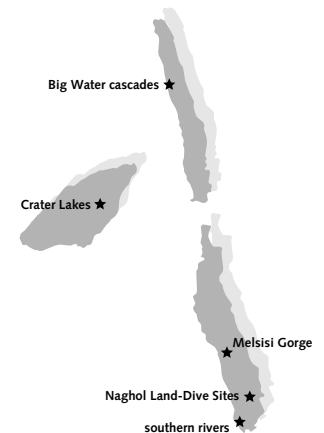
Yet these islands have had little involvement with tourists, except on Pentecost in the land-diving months. If you haven't booked, somebody at the airfield will look after you. No worries. But if the phones work, leave a message about when you're arriving. It will be passed on. And bring emergency supplies of food – shops are dim little affairs with rather rusty tins of things that might be beans.

The islands have high rainfall, due to the local rainmakers who invoke rain for dances, feasts, deaths or festivals. Sceptical Westerners say it's because the islands' mountainous spines catch the southeasterlies, causing precipitation.

PENTECOST, AMBAE & MAEWO

HIGHLIGHTS

- Scaring yourself senseless watching the remarkable custom of **naghol** (land-diving, p143)
- Getting your boots on and slithering down from stunning cliff tops into **Melsisi Gorge** (p144)
- Cheering as your host wades into a tumbling **southern river** (p145) to catch river prawns for your dinner
- Hiking through a cloud-forest to the amazing blue and green **crater lakes** (p148) on Ambae
- Swinging into icy pools, gasping under the **Big Water cascades** (p152) and wading into sea caves on the 'Island of Water'



PENTECOST

pop 12,200 / area 438 sq km

Pentecost was first seen by Europeans on Whit Sunday, hence its name. People live mostly in the highland centre or along the west coast, split into three groups: Anglican in the north, Catholic in the centre, and Church of Christ in the south. French settlers brought Catholicism to southern and central Pentecost, while the Anglicans soon dominated the north. The Danielite movement formed in 1931, its leader, Daniel Tambe, calling for the abandonment of traditional customs, so the islanders could rule over Europeans. One follower predicted war and huge numbers joined when WWII broke out, but the movement soon withered.

Local mythology tells how the first male children evolved from coconuts. Then one lad hurled a coconut at his younger brother. The coconut stuck fast to his penis. When it was finally pulled off his male organs came away too. So he became a she!

Local Customs

In northern Pentecost, people inherit land through their aunts, a unique form of matrilineal descent. The child's maternal uncle is considered the nearest male relative, rather than the natural father.

SAND DRAWING

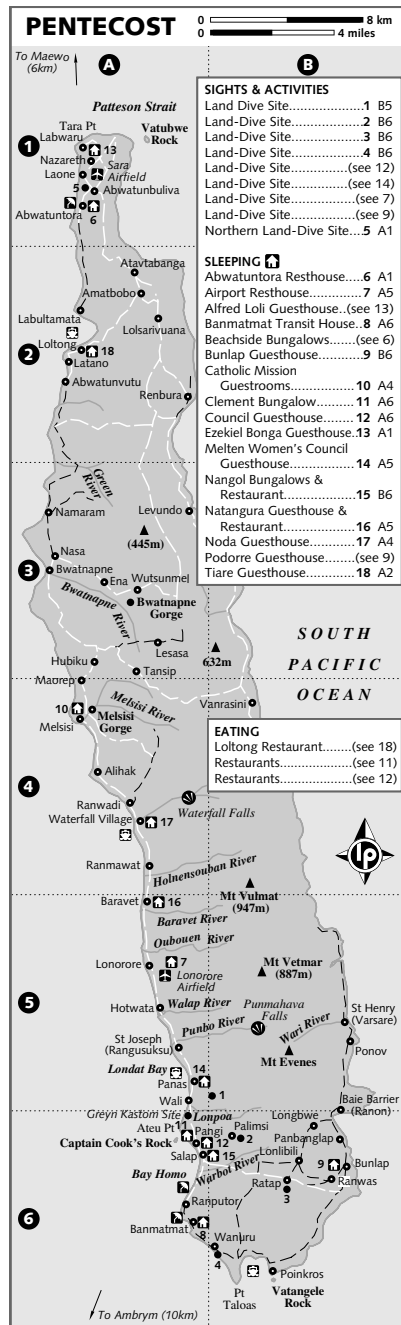
Pentecost specialties include an elegant, roselike drawing of Vatangele Rock. According to legend, the spirits of the newly dead must jump from two rocks at either end of Pentecost and execute two sand drawings: one of the legend of Vatangele Rock, onto which they must leap, the other a good-luck design. If they fail, they are condemned forever to wander the island as ghosts.

NIMANGKI CEREMONIES

Grade-taking here is an expensive business – to become a chief, an aspirant might slaughter over 100 pigs, then provide taro and yams for the guests at the subsequent feast, as well as enough red pandanus mats for everyone to sit on.

Arts

After pandanus leaf has been woven, it is rolled around a printing block made from



LAND-DIVERS OF PENTECOST

The men of Pentecost spend many weeks building towers using tree trunks, saplings and branches that they bind around a tall tree with vines. The towers are the shape of a man and up to 35m high. As the tower bends in the wind it sighs; this indicates that Tamalié's spirit will occupy the tower until the ceremony is finished.

Tamalié, legend says, was the first man to dive from a tower. Centuries ago, Tamalié had pursued his wife up a huge banyan. Some say she was trying to escape a beating, others that she didn't wish to consummate their marriage. Well, it was a long time ago, but as he went to grab her she leapt from the banyan. He leapt after her realising, too late, that she had tied vines to her ankles.

Ever since that first horrific event, the men have re-enacted the dive. It is a spectacular leap of courage, made to appease the spirit of Tamalié that sighs over the centuries. It is a gift to the gods to ensure a successful harvest.

Each diver carefully selects his own liana vines then an experienced elder checks to ensure the vines are strong and elastic enough. Fathers teach their young sons to dive from their shoulders. Boys practise diving from boulders into the sea. At age eight they are circumcised; then they can make their first jump.

Women must not see the tower being built. On the day, they must remain at least 20m away. Despite such precautions, bones have occasionally been broken or a spleen ruptured.

Between 20 and 60 males per village dive. The soil in front of the tower is cleared of rocks, then loosened. The women sing and dance around the periphery. The divers are ready. The youngest go first, leaping from as high as 9m. Each man prepares while his friends tie his vines. As he raises his hands he tells the crowd his most intimate thoughts; the people below stop their singing and dancing, and stand quietly – these could be his last words.

Finally the diver claps his hands, crosses his arms and leans forward. In slow motion, falling, he arches his back. The vines abruptly stop his downward rush. Only his hair will have touched the soil, to fertilise the yam crop. The crowd roars its appreciation, dancing, stomping and whistling in tribute.

The final dive, from the tower's narrow pointed peak, is the responsibility of the 'chief of the tower'. He must lunge far enough outwards to avoid hitting any parts jutting out below him.

It is awful to watch, gut wrenching yet mesmerising. The colour and sounds that accompany the dives add to the atmosphere. Men wear small red-dyed *nambas*, clearly visible so high above. Below, the women wear white grass skirts made from wild hibiscus. They dance, spinning, twirling their skirts, a sea of swirling white grass. It is powerful, awesome.

banana bark and dipped in a tub of red plant dye. *Nambas* and mats are coloured this way, as are the decorated baskets and delicately bound combs. The squarish baskets are *kastom*, and are the standard gift for someone who is leaving or being honoured. Men carve masks to represent ancestral spirits.

The Naghol

Every year in early April, as soon as the first yam crop emerges, the islanders in the south build tall wooden towers. From April to early June, men and boys dive from these rickety structures with only two long, springy lianas (vines) to break their fall. Before the dive, there are many rituals of purification and protection, to ward off evil spirits.

South Pentecost has many land-diving sites. Two in the hills behind Bay Homo

are mainly for tourists, with jumps each Saturday during the season. Lately, southern men have built a site in the north near Laone.

Many tourists come on day trips during April and May to see the *naghol*. Packages (1-3-day from 45,000Vt/70,000Vt) are available through several travel agents in Vila (p64). A new idea is to travel overnight on the passenger boat *Pelsaert* (☎ 22743; return with breakfast & snacks 22,500Vt) arriving at Pentecost for a day of land-diving, then returning to Vila by 3am (see also p184 for other types of boat travel).

To organise your own tour, choose your accommodation then work through your host. The VTO (p64) can provide a dive programme, and the Cultural Centre (p64) has information on the diving at Bunlap.

Getting There & Around

Pentecost has two airfields: Lonorore in the southwest and Sara in the north. **Vanair** (☎ 25025) has three return flights every week to both of these airfields from Vila and Luganville.

Lonorore airfield is often closed by rain. If you're stuck, you can get to Sara airfield by truck up the west coast road, a set of ruts hanging onto cliff faces (30,000Vt); or to Craig Cove in Ambrym by speedboat (20,000Vt).

For boats that call at Pentecost, see p185. The route usually takes them from Laone south to Pangl, an interesting way to travel south with fantastic views of the coastal villages.

Pentecost has good protection from the Southeast Trade Winds along the west coast, with many anchorages and landing places. Panas and Lolong are popular.

A speedboat across Pattenes Strait between Laone on Pentecost and Asanvari on Maewo is around 5000Vt. However, there's a fierce current and you can't cross in bad weather.

NORTHERN PENTECOST

Just 1km west of Sara airfield, down a steep road, **Laone** has a pleasant white-sand beach and a coral reef ideal for snorkelling. Just north, Tara Point thrusts out of the sea. East of this headland is Vatubwe Rock, which the spirits of deceased people must pass to get to paradise.

Back up the hill, at **Nazareth**, is the Lini Memorial College where Vanuatu's first prime minister is buried. There are stores, a National Bank of Vanuatu (NBV), a market, and a local disco that fires up on Friday and Saturday nights at the Abwatuntora Youth Centre.

Lolong is the island's principal administrative centre. It has an excellent anchorage, and you can hire taxis here. It also has a festival of music and dance in mid-September. Wherever you stay, your host will arrange for one of the locals to look after you and arrange transport. Ask about the lovely beaches where you can snorkel and possibly swim with dolphins.

Sleeping & Eating

Alfred Loli Guesthouse (☎ 38312; Angoro; beds 1000Vt; meals 250Vt) Has more convenient con-

veniences than some, and you don't have to cook.

Abwatuntora Resthouse (☎ 38304; beds 1000Vt) High on the point looking down at the sea, in a lovely spot where this resthouse looks sadly plain. Then again, who's looking at the building with these views? It has two bedrooms, a gas cooker, and a pit toilet, but no shower.

Tiare Guesthouse (☎ 38394; Lolong; beds 1000Vt) Has basic cooking facilities. Lolong Restaurant (meals 300Vt) sells island-style meals, kava and handicrafts.

Beachside Bungalows (☎ 38280; Abwatuntora; s/d with all meals 2000/4000Vt) Sitting pretty on the white-sand beach, 2km down the coast. Locals hit their canoes with bamboo to make the dolphins leap in play. Ask for Leslie Rono when you book.

Ezekiel Bonga Guesthouse (☎ 38388; Nazareth; beds 1800Vt) Pleasant rooms above a shop but the squat toilet is down through the village. You must bring all your food, coffee etc – a kettle of water is supplied.

CENTRAL PENTECOST

Melsisi

This haphazard village is on a hillside overlooking a long coral beach. There is a bank and an amazing Catholic **cathedral**. A large, Italianate Catholic mission, complete with colonnades, stands to one side. You can stay at the **Catholic Mission Guestrooms** (☎ 38392) at Melsisi for a small donation.

Inland 3km is striking **Melsisi Gorge**, which has a well-defined walking circuit. It's steep and slippery in spots but the views from the top are magic. You won't get overheated as the path takes you over, into and out of the white water of the river and many small swimming pools. There's a path to the gorge, or ask at the village for Freddy Barang who will happily act as guide.

You can hire 4WD taxis in the village if you want to explore the mountains. The one-lane road up to **Hubiku** will give you an adrenaline rush – magnificent views, but don't look down.

Waterfall Village

This area is backed by the spectacular Waterfall Falls, which tumble down the mountain in one long drop, then continue via cascades and pretty swimming pools to the

sea. It's the best place to play, and there are fabulous walks through the waterfalls and along limestone formations.

Waterfall Village provides a good anchorage at a pleasant white-sand beach. There are great walks to springs, streams, a large cave and the top of the range. This is a good area for mountain bikes – just keep out of the ruts. It's customary to join villagers for kava in the *nakamal* (clubhouse).

The splendid Ranwadi High School is set in attractive grounds above the village.

Taxis (☎ 38308, 38141) to/from Lonorore Airport cost 2000Vt.

Sleeping & Eating

Noda Guesthouse (☎ 38141; fax 38387; Waterfall Village; Branwadi@vanuatu.com.vu; beds 1000Vt) A clean concrete place with four bedrooms, electricity in the evenings, spacious kitchen and a flush toilet. Guests can self-cater or the local women will prepare meals. Chief Zachari will make arrangements for you and provide details of bicycle and walking tracks, and visits to *kastom* villages.

Natangura Guesthouse & Restaurant (☎ 38107; Vanaia; s with all meals 3000Vt) Set a little back in the rainforest in a small village, it's a thatched bungalow with three main rooms. Pastor Winston Bulei is your charming host and meals include prawns straight from the river. It's about 5km north of the airport (transfers 1800Vt).

SOUTHWESTERN PENTECOST

A sandy beach extends 12km from just before Lonorore airfield south to Ranputor. Coconut plantations occupy the narrow plains between mountains and sea. Mt Vulmat (947m), the highest mountain on the island, and Mt Vetmar (887m) are immediately behind Baravet and Lonorore. They are home to many wild pigs that the villagers like to hunt.

There's a snack bar and cardphone at the airport, a post office and clinic nearby, and the very pleasant **Airport Resthouse** (☎ 38356; beds 500Vt), with a flush toilet and washing room, in case you are stranded. A land-dive tower is built on a hill near the end of the runway each year.

For transport around the south, give **John** (☎ 38444, 38399) or **Clement** (☎ 38814, 38120) a call.

Panas & Wali

Two land-dive towers are erected annually on the hills between Panas and nearby Wali. Another tower is built at St Joseph (Rangusuksu).

The two large creeks near Wali are ideal for **swimming**; Wali means 'waters' in the local Sao language. Luke Vago arranges land-dives here every Saturday during April and May (10,000Vt entry, extra for cameras).

After fording the second waterway (Lonpoa River), bear west off the path onto a narrow track leading to a small *kastom* site called Greyn, where local chiefs meet. From here, you come out at Ateu Point beside small coral **caves** and rock islands; the largest is called Captain Cook's Rock. On the coral cliff nearby is a small slab of cement, inscribed by finger: 'CNH TOAD STOOL 1888'. It probably indicated the boundary between coconut plantations.

Melten Women's Council Guesthouse (☎ 38327; beds 1500Vt) has three twin rooms in a pretty village across from a white coral beach; rates include meals. The swimming is good, but beware of sharks as there's no protective reef. The phone is in Pangl – leave a message for Evelyn.

Pangl & Salap

These villages spread along the stony shore of peaceful Bay Homo. Pangl has a kava bar, ANZ bank, clinic, and John's store, and you can hire taxis and speedboats. **Swimming** and **snorkelling** are safe because of the reef.

Land-diving, organised at Nangol by **Chief Willy** (☎ 38444; all inclusive 23,000Vt), occurs twice, in April and May. Up to 50 men jump.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

If you're very fit, you can hike from Salap to Bunlap, spend a night at Bunlap, then return along the 4WD road. Walking conditions are difficult and strenuous – ask in the village for a guide.

Visit the **Black Cave** and the *kastom eel pond*, where you can 'touch' the giant eel.

Take **adventure walks** to waterfalls and banyans and the stone ruins of a feasting hall, where 100 people were killed by the eel spirit. Other tours include *kastom* dances and the *kastom* villages **Ratap** and **Lonlibili**. Or walk up a river with your host and help him catch **river prawns**. How fresh will they be!

From Salap to Ranwas costs 4000Vt by speedboat or taxi.

SLEEPING & EATING

Clement Bungalow (☎ 38814, 38120; Pang; s 1500Vt; meals 200Vt) A very new little bungalow of bamboo and sago palm is on the beach in Pang near the store and restaurants. It can sleep five people. Ask for Clement and he'll look after you – he also has a truck!

Council Guesthouse (☎ 38444; Pang; s 1500Vt) Small and basic, right in the village next to John's store and restaurant.

Nangol Bungalows (☎ /fax 38448, ☎ 38444; Salap; s/d with all meals 5600/9000Vt, camping 500Vt) Just south of Salap. Has a relaxing setting by the bay with several spacious bungalows and good shared facilities. The dining room (meals 500Vt to 1000Vt) is on the beach. An island feast with a local string band can be arranged for six or more people. Enjoy bread baked on the open fire or river prawns and chokos in coconut cream. It's Chief Willy's island-style resort and there's even a volleyball court.

Pangi is the tourist hub of South Pentecost with four **restaurants** (☎ 38120, 38327; meals 150-300Vt; ☎ 6am-9pm Mon-Fri). Breakfast of tea and bread is 60Vt; the bread's straight from the central bakehouse. Each owner cooks the one dish, perhaps vegetables and rice or curried fish and rice, and stays open till it's all sold.

Transport from Lonoroe Airfield to Pang by truck or boat is 3000Vt.

Ranputor & Beyond

Attractive Ranputor is on a white-sand beach. The road finishes here, but the cliff-hanging path through the rainforest to Banmatmat is one of the world's most stunning coastal walks, with vivid blue and white bays sparkling through the vines. The trail brings you down into a beautiful bay where Vanuatu's Bible College is set in colourful grounds.

Banmatmat Transit House (☎ 38444; beds 1000Vt) On the grassy beachfront, it's just concrete and iron, but the surroundings are so gorgeous you won't care. Besides, it has a flush toilet and power in the evenings. The reef has turtles, harmless sharks and an abundance of fish (fishing is *tabu*).

The path continues to Poinkros, or arrange a boat (☎ 38409; Tatau Store) to go to Wanuru, a beautiful village and land-diving site.

SOUTHEASTERN PENTECOST

Ranwas is a charming village perched on a high ridge with distant views of the sea. From here a slippery path heads north to Bunlap or Baie Barrier. Chief Willy can arrange a tour to the two *kastom* villages **Lonlibili** and **Ratap** on the way to Ranwas. There's very traditional land-diving at Ratap.

Bunlap is a large, full-*kastom* village on a steep hillside with three *nakamal*, two ceremonial dancing areas ringed with coral stones, and traditional leaf houses that are built so low their roofs almost touch the ground.

Bebe Mulgal runs the **Bunlap Guesthouse** (☎ 38834; beds with meals 2000Vt) and Daniel Watas runs the **Podorre Guesthouse** (☎ 38834; beds with meals 2000Vt). These offer an exceptional opportunity to stay among these traditional people.

The men build two or three land-dive towers here each year but there's no guarantee that you'll be invited to watch. *Kastom* fees are about 20,000Vt.

Baie Barrier is also called Ranon, which means 'white-sand beach'. The people here build their own land-diving site each year. They have four *nakamal* and a Roman Catholic mission.

The southeast is largely unpopulated north of Baie Barrier. **St Henry** (Varsare), 5km along a twisting path via Ponov, has land-diving, and you start a challenging trek up to **Mt Evenes** from here. Ask at Salap, or contact **Nangol Bungalows** (☎ 38444) for details.

AMBAE

pop 10,700 / area 405 sq km

Ambae lies dreamily in a mist. Its upturned-boat shape gave James Michener his vision of Bali Hai in *Tales of the South Pacific*. Movement and trade along Ambae's coastline are relatively easy, so the culture has become homogeneous.

The people are known as intellectuals; most of the business directors and managers and 80% of university students in Vila are from Ambae, and the villages look prosperous, although no-one's solved the rutted-road problem. The population lives mainly along the southwestern and northeastern coasts, where straight hedges and occasional dry-stone walls separate the gardens.

The island is rugged; the land rises steeply to an upland plateau and Mt Lombenben (1496m) on the rim of a semiactive volcano where the mountain's three famous crater lakes get heated by thermal activity.

History

Ambae was the traditional home of Tagaro (Tangaroo of Polynesian mythology), the cultural hero of both Ambae and Maewo. He arrived in Ambae from Samoa in about AD 1400 and villagers from nearby islands made pilgrimages here to pay homage to him.

Ambae's legends also tell of a chief called Vevineala, a man of great wealth, with many pigs and 10 wives but no children. One day Vevineala accidentally let his clothes slip, revealing that 'he' was really a woman! The wives scattered, mortified.

In 1768, the French explorer Bougainville visited Ambae and claimed the island for France. He named it Lepers Island, thinking the people's heavy tattoos were signs of leprosy. The disease did in fact appear in the mid-19th century – at one time there was a leprosarium near Lolowai.

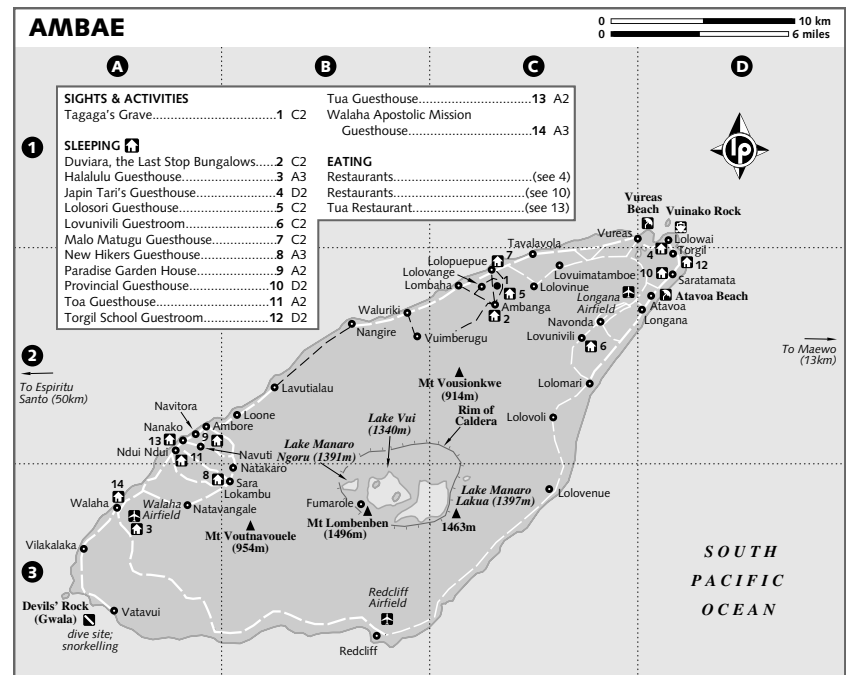
Many Ambae locals were employed on Santo, where they helped the Americans dump equipment at Million Dollar Point, returning at night to recover what they could. A 'cargo cult' developed. Adherents believed that aircraft and vehicles were being manufactured underground on Ambae near the crater lakes. When the cargo failed to arrive, the cult died out.

In 1980, during the turbulence following national independence, Ambae proclaimed its own secession and formed its own government. The uprising collapsed when 130 local people were arrested and charged with sedition.

Local Customs

The men of Ambae only take four grades in the grade-taking *nahunguwe* ceremonies. Each aspirant kills up to 25 pigs, and provides a feast for men at a higher level. A chief has to pass through all four grades.

Sand drawing is common. One of the best works is a roselyke design representing *laplap* (a doughlike food), although it is less intricate than drawings on Ambrym,



and does not have the layers of petals that make the Pentecost drawing of Vatangele Rock so special.

Independence Day is celebrated with a week's festival that starts with Children's Day on 24 July. The children march and dance, there are stalls set up and kava is drunk all week.

In mid-October a weeklong Arts Festival celebrates ancient cultural heritages such as slit-gongs, sand drawing and dancing. Ambae's *kastom* dances are lively and imaginative.

Manaro Crater Lakes

Lake Manaro Lakua spreads blue grey around the island's centre. It is the highest lake in the South Pacific. A few metres away, and 57m lower, beautiful lime green, hot Lake Vui sends vulcanologists into a frenzy whenever it starts to boil. Lake Manaro Ngoru, 6m lower than Lake Manaro Lakua, is dry with a central cold-water spring. There are plans to make the whole area a World Heritage site. Many travel agents in Port Vila arrange all-inclusive tours to the lakes.

The routes to the top, from Ambanga in the north (p150) and Natakaro in the southwest (opposite) are steep and slippery, carved through misty jungle. Allow a day for the return walk. Campsites are extremely limited, so don't leave it too late if you want to camp.

Getting There & Around

Ambae's airfields are at Longana in the north, Redcliff in the south and Walaha in the west.

Vanair has three return flights a week between Vila and Luganville, via Longana and Walaha. There is also one flight from Luganville to Redcliff. Taxis often come to meet incoming aircraft. You can usually hire speedboats at most of the larger coastal villages.

For boats that call into Ambae, see p185. There's a secure anchorage at Lolowai and Redcliff offers some protection from the Southeast Trade Winds.

A network of 4WD roads (a loose term referring to connected holes, boulders, tree roots and mud pits) means that you can drive slowly, bone-breakingly, around most of the island, except for a short length of footpath on the rugged northwestern coast. Transport trucks can be flagged down – not difficult as they're moving at 4km an hour.

SOUTHWESTERN AMBAE

The west coast has stunning cliffs and caves, while the southern beaches offer good snorkelling and diving. But be careful. The spirits of recently deceased people are believed to come to Devils' Rock (or Gwala), where they leap into the sea and turn into sharks. And yes, the waters are shark-infested.

Ndui Ndui is the commercial centre of west Ambae, with a library, clinic, post office, Vanair agency, small co-op, market and NBV bank. Friday night is dance night, with either a string band or rock group. Kava bars provide a central place to talk. There's a hospital further along the same road at **Navitora**.

Sights & Activities

This is the southern entry point to the **Manaro Lakes**. Specialist hikers accommodation is being built at **Sara Lokambu**, as close as possible to the track (ask if it has opened yet); Toa Guesthouse and Paradise Garden House both arrange treks, with guides, tents and food, but you need to give about three days' notice.

Bush walking in the area will take you to a *kastom* eel pool.

The black-sand beaches are good for swimming, with rocky cliffs to dive from, or try some spear-fishing. There are stacks of fish.

Kastom dances can be arranged. They're fabulous, colourful and significant.

Sleeping & Eating

Halalulu Guesthouse (☎ 38330; beds 1000Vt) About 1km southeast from the Walaha airfield. Has four spacious bedrooms at the large Apostolic Mission that sits in a grassy field. The local people will cook for you. Ask for Jethro Moli or Pastor Levi.

Paradise Garden House (☎ 38345, 38360; Navitora; beds 1000Vt) A 20-minute walk from Navitora, up an impossible drive, is Rose and Jeffrey's Western-style house which has attractive bedrooms and an excellent kitchen. Bathroom facilities are a major hike out the back. Bring your own food to cook, or walk into Navitora where there are two small food stalls.

Walaha Apostolic Mission Guesthouse (☎ 38354; beds 1000Vt) About 1km from the airfield on the Ndui Ndui Rd is this large Western building, orange no less, looking down on the road. There are two bedrooms and a large sitting room.

Toa Guesthouse (☎ 38405; toa@vanuatu.com.cu; Ndui Ndui; dm/s/tw with breakfast 1700/2200/4400Vt) A happy brightly painted house, two traditional bungalows and modern shared facilities all in a little garden that's ideal for thinking about trekking to the Lakes or taking an easy garden and bush walk. Snorkel gear is available, and the beach is just down the road. It has a kitchen or meals to buy (400Vt). There's electricity till 9pm.

Tua Guesthouse (☎ 38401; Ndui Ndui; beds 1200Vt) A modern building, very new, with spacious bedrooms around a central kitchen and cosy sitting room. There's electricity and a flush toilet, and you're two steps from

a little store. At the front, on the main road, is the restaurant (open 7am to 8.30pm Monday to Saturday, meals 150Vt to 250Vt), a gorgeous place, all orange and green plaited bamboo with a thatched roof. It has just opened, an oasis along a desert road.

Transport from Walaha airfield is 2000Vt.

NORTHERN AMBAE

The coast around the north is stunning, rocky and black with a few bathing spots. There are guided treks to the crater lakes and tours to *kastom* villages, dances and historical sites. Ask the friendly villagers to help you explore.

The provincial government centre is in Saratamata, a 600Vt taxi ride from the airstrip. The road continues past the Torgil School and down to the fabulous Vureas Bay, a beautiful pea green surrounded by green cliffs. Sprawled around the bay is Lolowai, with a **hospital** (☎ 38302) and store at one end, an NBV bank and Vanuatu's principal centre for the Anglican Diocese of Melanesia in the middle and a post office and wholesale store at the other end. String bands play at the hospital every evening Monday to Saturday and the **Pilly Club** (entry 100Vt) has discos and live UPP bands with pop music on Friday.

The high rock Vuinako, just beyond the inlet at Lolowai, is the female companion of Devils' Rock (Gwala) on the west coast. In legend, they lived together near Vureas. However, they fell out one day, and Gwala fled to the west to escape Vuinako's wrath.

On one side are two lovely lakes – one green, one chocolate brown. A short scenic walk the other way is an exceptional black-sand beach at Vureas with excellent snorkelling and spear-fishing year-round.

For transport around the area contact **Charlot Sese** (☎ 38411) who will also organise a boat if you need to get across to Nasawa, on Maewo.

Sleeping & Eating

Across the square in Saratamata is a wind-swept beach with amazing driftwood, and the **Provincial Guesthouse** (☎ 38348; Saratamata; beds 1000Vt). It's quite grotty but there's a gas stove and electricity until 10pm. The generator next door drowns out the scuttling of rats in the ceiling.

MT LOMBENBEN'S COLOURFUL LAKES

There are several legends about Mt Lombenben and its colourful, freshwater lakes. One tells how Tagaro removed the volcano and planted it on Ambrym, then drowned the fiery vents making the lakes, two representing Lombenben's eyes.

The mountain is blanketed by mist, creating some of the finest cloud-forest in Vanuatu. The villagers don't spend the night here for fear of devils, and it's *tabu* to camp at the summit, which is sacred ground.

Lombenben probably hasn't erupted for more than 300 years, but the layer of rock between the lava and the water in Lake Vui is not very thick. Too much activity could cause a crack, and if water got into the lava there'd be quite a bang. So when Vui starts to boil, there's a frenzy of activity among vulcanologists worldwide.

The waters have healing qualities for those afflicted with skin complaints, but check the temperature before diving in. Blue Manaro Lakua is cold and full of prawns, which you can catch and cook in green Vui.

Halfway between Saratamata and Lolowai is **Torgil School Guestroom** (☎ 38348; Torgil; beds 1000Vt) where the students can practice their hospitality skills. It's a clean spacious room, with a grand veranda and electricity till 10pm. Cook your own meals, or walk either way to the restaurants at Saratamata or Lolowai.

Behind the store in Lolowai is **Japin Tari's Guesthouse** (☎ 38347; Lolowai; beds 1000Vt). It's seedy, with tiny rooms, a flush toilet and a grubby but well-equipped kitchen. At least you'll be sharing with interesting people, like overseas volunteers from the hospital.

The two **restaurants** (plates 150Vt; ☎ 7.30am-8pm Mon-Fri) in Lolowai serve fish or steak with rice, and *laplap* (50Vt). One is at the commercial centre, the other next to Japin Tari's guesthouse.

Past the generator beside the Provincial Guesthouse in Saratamata is a cute **restaurant** (Saratamata; plates 200Vt; ☎ 8am-8pm) which serves the one dish, like chicken wings with rice, throughout the day. A **new restaurant** (Saratamata; plates 200Vt; ☎ 8am-6pm) has opened beside the soccer field. Chicken or beef meals are served with yam in coconut milk, or you can buy a slice of *laplap* (50Vt).

Towards the Crater Lakes

Ambanga, 12km inland from Lolowai, is the northern base to visit the lakes. It's a conservation area in the midhigh rainforest, with 12 endemic species of orchids, ferns of every size, three types of flying fox, four species of frogs and no mosquitoes.

Taremulimuli, an important Ambae chief, is buried overlooking the sea on the cliff top at **Nangire**. His large burial enclosure is marked by tall stones and has an inner section shaped like a boat. Another large grave is inland from Lolovange, where Tagaga, the highest paramount chief of Ambae, is buried with his many wives. Tagaro slit-gongs, in stone, stand by huge banyans overlooking the grave.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **Lake Manaro trek** (with lunch 6000Vt) is a challenging, stunning, four-hour trek each way. Fortunately the path is kept clear for vulcanologists, and you see both main lakes at the one time. Take a change of clothes, as you'll get cold and wet.

Paul Vuhu (☎ 38368) arranges lake treks. Your host will arrange a day of *kastom* dances,

string bands and sand drawing (5000Vt); tours to *kastom* villages and historical sites; walks through the jungle and cloud-forest to see wildlife and local plants; kava tasting; visits to local schools; and even a pig-killing ceremony for six or more people.

Several caves and dancing sites at Lom-baha are associated with gods, especially Tagaro, who lived close by. Villagers believe he and his rival Merabuto still appear.

Charlot Sese (☎ 38411) will take you to see the grave of Tagaga and the Tagaro slit gongs that stand watch there.

SLEEPING & EATING

Malo Matugu Guesthouse (☎ 38398, 38411; Lolopuepue; B&B 1200Vt; meals 200Vt) A concrete house, cheerily painted, with kitchen, living room and shared outside loo. You can swim in the volcanic black-stone pools, snorkel and bungee jump using vines, or lie in the hot springs on the shoreline at Tavalavola. Ask for Pascal Sese when you ring.

Duviara, the Last Stop Bungalows (☎ 38368, 38378, fax 38335; beds 2000Vt; meals 200Vt) Owned by Paul Vuhu, a field worker for the Cultural Centre. The pretty bungalows and guesthouse are built with local materials. You'll meet an interesting mix of people staying here. Meals, like river prawns on rice, are available.

Lolosori Guesthouse (☎ 38411; B&B 1200Vt; meals 200Vt) This pretty blue two-storey house has a large first-floor patio from which you can see the ocean. The family will treat you as honoured guests, and allow you a glimpse into traditional French-speaking village life.

Transport to the area from the airport is 3000Vt each way.

South of Longana

The best beach on eastern Ambae is at Atavoa. Inland from here, at the pretty mountain village of Lovunivili, there's a **guestroom** (☎ 38451, 38466; beds 1000Vt) at the end of the community hall. It's clean and spacious, but there are no cooking facilities. Leave a message for the local minister, Mathias, so meals can be arranged.

Redcliff gets its name from the colour of the nearby cliffs. The airfield is behind the cliff, and close to a small harbour formed by a drowned volcanic crater. Sorcerers are active here and a few still cast spells on their rivals.

MAEWO

pop 3600 / area 269 sq km

The 'Island of Water' has rivers, springs and magnificent waterfalls. Water taro, the principal food, grows in paddies in beautiful terraces along the rivers. There are walks to cascades, hot springs and deep cold pools, as well as good snorkelling and some fine swimming beaches.

You'll see village ruins, dry-stone walls, and huge banyan trees beside clearings that were once used as *natsaros* (traditional dancing grounds). There is great cultural diversity, because the villages are small and separated by rough terrain. Varied birdlife can be seen throughout the mountainous spine and southeastern coast. Wild pigs roam freely, so take care when bushwalking.

The coastline is very rocky south of Kerembei and Point Rokao and the southeastern seaboard experiences almost continuously rough seas. The reefs of northeastern Maewo are good places to find lobsters and there are plenty of freshwater crayfish in the rivers along the coast. Because of the climate and inhospitable terrain, very few Europeans ever settled here.

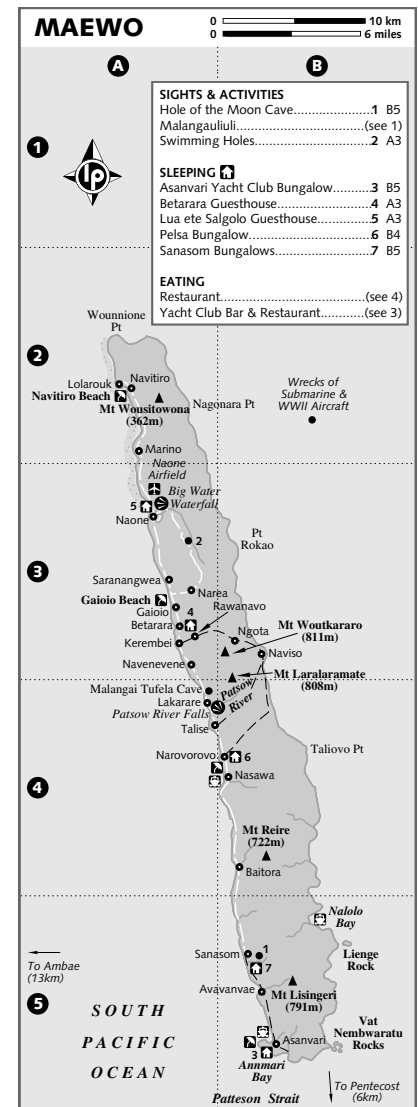
Local Customs

The islanders perform many *kastom* dances and sand drawings. As elsewhere, pig killing occurs when men take grades but there are only a few stages to pass through.

Some sacred dances may not be seen by women. Indeed, the dancing ground remains *tabu* for a long period after the dance is over. Conversely, Maewo women have dances that are forbidden to men.

During the yam harvest from April to August you may be chased by the Mid-Year Hurters, who wear masks and banana leaves. They are armed with thorny sticks (these days they're balsa, but don't hang about to check if that's true) and they shout as they come to a village. Hide in a house or they'll strike you. It is thought that this tradition has its origins in the rites of a secret society of men who had passed through a painful initiation. Women and children were executed if they went near the group's meeting ground.

Most sorcerers are found on the central coast, at Kerembei on the west coast, and across the mountains at Naviso. Women also practise the black arts and some are very powerful. Whenever there is a festival, magic is part of the show and children are taught conjuring tricks from an early age.



Festivals & Events

Sand Drawing Festival Held in mid-August in odd-numbered years. More than 200 contestants gather at Kerembei to tell their stories as their picture develops.

Discovery of Maewo Two-day culture festival in September. Celebrations include a tour to the Moon cave, parades, black magic and other traditional customs.

Naone

Maewo's airfield is on the plateau above Naone. Nearby, **Big Water** cascades down: the most amazing waterfall spreading into large, deep pools, and tumbling into new **waterfalls** and **cascades**. It's thought of locally as the eighth Wonder of the World. You can swim in the pools and lose yourself in the wonder, or ask for a guide at Naone to take you to the top. You'll get very wet going through the river, under the falls, but you can see over Maewo and across to Ambae.

There's a large *kastom* stone 1km south of Naone, which you may visit with permission, but you mustn't touch. Monoliths such as this mark men's ceremonial areas; they are *tabu* to 'unqualified' men and to all women and children.

At last someone has built accommodation within walking distance of Big Water Waterfalls. Very new **Lua ete Salgolo Guesthouse** (☎ 38342; s with all meals 1500Vt) is a little building with a bedroom and sitting area, kerosene lamps and water-seal toilet. Ask for Nathaniel. It's so good to be able to spend time exploring Big Water.

To the northeast, out from Nagonara Point, are the wrecks of a submarine and WWII aircraft.

Central Coast

White-sand beaches stretch up the west coast from Naone to Lolarouk, and down to **Gaioio**. Chief Joseph of Gaioio is a great source of information. Talk to him about Noah's Ark relics, and the prophets Takaro and Madame Buto. The **snorkelling** is great at the clear sandy beach, and there are hot springs nearby. At the Gaioio store next to the beach, ask for Edis. She will point you in the right direction for a 15-minute walk inland to the plateau at **Narea**. Ask here for a guide through the jungle to **Big Water**, which feeds the magnificent cascades at Naone. The swimming is fantastic up here. A 4m waterfall drops into a deep hole.

There are rope swings and crystal-clear, icy water gurgling out and into more holes. All the locals play here and they may catch you some river prawns. You can walk on to the east coast (four hours) through bush gardens, coconut jungles and triple canopy forests, past 70m trees, rivers, taro gardens, and corn and cabbage patches.

Just south of Gaioio, Betarara sits beside an attractive bay. The **Betarara Guesthouse** (☎ 38342, 38305; beds 1200Vt) is a concrete building with four bedrooms, a kitchen and fabulous views. There is a restaurant nearby, serving island food.

Kerembei has two small coral monoliths that represent people who were turned to stone. The villagers will tell you the story. There's a great **trek** from here, for two hard hours along the Naviso footpath east up through attractive rainforest, gardens and villages to good views at the summit. From Naviso, the footpath then goes back west to Talise. Allow two days for the loop walk.

The Road South

Beautiful **Navenevene** is on top of a 40m cliff. Sit in the *nakamal* and watch the sea changing, drink the water from the sparkling river or listen to the local church choir, which goes to Ambae for competitions. Between Navenevene and **Talise** is Malangai Tufela, a cave with two shapes in its ceiling that represent two men who were killed then hung in the cave.

Talise and nearby **Nasawa** are rich in history. Located close to the shore at Talise, just below the surface, is the wreck of a 19th-century blackbirding ship. Nasawa was also the first base of the Nagriamel Federation movement. A flagpole with a concrete star at its base forms a national historic site.

Contact Leslie (☎ 38353) at Nasawa if you need transport back up north. He has a blue truck.

Pelsa Bungalow (s with all meals 2300Vt) is located on the beach in pretty little **Narovorovo**. It's a quaint concrete and bamboo-and-thatch house with two bedrooms, inside loo, kitchen and tiny lounge. It's near the ocean and the river, where you can swim.

(Continued on page 161)

(Continued from page 152)

It's just a 15km speedboat ride (5000Vt) south to the magnificent **Hole of the Moon Cave** at Sanasom. A large circular indentation shows where the god Tagaro tore out a piece of rock and hurled it into the sky, creating the moon. Near the cave mouth is a rock wall covered by ancient petroglyphs and paintings, and a crystal ocean pool. Nearby is **Malangauliuli**, which means 'cave of writing'. The spectacular petroglyphs here are associated with particular tribes. Both sites have depictions of European ships, lit up by the afternoon sun. Chief Jonah Toakanase has declared the complex of rock-art sites a 'conservation area'. Ask his permission to visit.

Sanasom Bungalows (s with all meals 3200Vt), run by Chief Jonah, is just across the river. It has two lovely bungalows and a restaurant serving meals like prawn *laplap*. This is a peaceful base for **bushwalking** and **snorkelling**. Transport from Naone is around 5000Vt. It's difficult to book, so just turn up, or leave a message with Asanvari Yacht Club or the Nasawa Store.

South Maewo

Asanvari is a pretty village with flower-lined paths near a magnificent waterfall. Its sandy beaches offer good swimming and snorkelling and great fishing. You can often see dolphins and dugong in the bay. Chief Nelson Sara can arrange *kastom* dancing and tours to the legendary Hole of the Moon Cave. He also tells the history of the whole island.

Asanvari Yacht Club Bungalow (☎ 38239; beds 1000Vt) is a short walk from the picture-perfect bay. It's concrete and thatch, with a small front porch and an ocean view. Take a 15m walk from your bungalow to see the

30m waterfall. The **Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 38239; mains 500-950Vt; ☎ 7.30am-7pm) is popular with yachties, who come for the fresh prawns and vegetables straight from the garden. It's best to book.

There is good anchorage here for most of the year. **Annmari Bay** lies between two tall rocky headlands, which make a most impressive entrance. **Nalolo Bay**, up the east coast, provides a very good refuge for yachts during cyclones.

Getting There & Around

Maewo's airfield is at Naone in the north. Vanair flies here on Wednesday and Friday. It's a powerful trip to fly into Naone, travel down the west coast to Nasawa or Asanvari, and take a speedboat to the airports on Ambae or Pentecost. To get from Nasawa to Lolowai on Ambae (8000Vt), leave a message at the **Nasawa store** (☎ 38353). To get from Asanvari to Laone on Pentecost call **Asanvari Yacht Club** (☎ 38239). Chief Nelson will take you across in his substantial covered speedboat (5000Vt). Small problem is, there's a deep cut between the islands, so even on a calm day there are 3m swells rolling through. If they say you can't get across, they're giving sound advice.

For shipping that calls into Maewo, see p185.

The island's only road runs down the west coast from Lolarouk to Nasawa – more than an hour's trip by truck (8000Vt). From here, a footpath hugs the shore to Annmari Bay. Another footpath forms a loop around Mt Woutkararo in the centre of the island.

Taxis generally meet scheduled flights. Speedboats can take you down the west coast. They don't carry lifejackets, spare fuel or oars, so try to ignore the sharks.

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