

Vanuatu

The Happiest Country in the World? Yes, Vanuatu was given that gong in 2007, and there's nothing quite as glorious as a holiday among an entire nation of happy people. The locals smile at you as they pass. Hop on a bus and have a conversation. Need an answer and ask anyone for a polite attentive reply. Add to that the scented balmy breezes, gourmet food and several best-in-the-world experiences that very few people know about: a luxury liner shipwrecked in clear diveable water; accessible active volcanoes; a banyan tree the size of a soccer field; pounding waterfalls; an ancient living culture with extraordinary ceremonies; picture-perfect beaches and an underwater paradise for snorkellers and scuba divers.

Port Vila, the national capital, buzzes at the centre of Vanuatu's tourist trade, all colonial and cool, with a view for every restaurant, and hotel beds that float you out over lagoons. If you've come on a package deal, you're just starting your adventure. Stay on when it ends to try out the sporty options, such as abseiling down a waterfall, parasailing over Vila's glorious harbour, horse riding along a beach or acting like Robinson Crusoe on any of the tiny offshore islands.

The outer islands have amazing highlights. Tanna, Espiritu Santo (known as Santo), Erromango, Malekula, Ambae, Ambrym, Pentecost. They are as mysterious and exotic as their names and offer diving, trekking, wild horses, dugongs, colourful lakes, impenetrable jungles, magic, dance and land diving. But it's the happiness, the way you feel safe, the knowledge that the locals love their country and want you to enjoy its pleasures, that really strike you about Vanuatu. Ni-Vanuatu (ni-Van) people aren't after the tourist dollar. There's no bargaining, no hawkers, no pressure to buy. It is so refreshing.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Feeling Cupid's arrow during a romantic tropical dinner complete with a glorious sunset and stunning harbour views in **Port Vila** (p574)
- Camping in the surreal caldera of an active volcano surrounded by the jungle, cane forests, lava beds and ash planes of **Mt Marum** (p590) on Ambrym
- Swimming through an underwater world of luxury liners, coral gardens and encrusted caves off **Luganville** (p598)
- Connecting with people's savagery and mysticism at cannibal sites and spirit caves around the **Dog's Head** (p587) on Malekula
- Talking to the gods of thunder and hear their thunderous replies punctuated with brilliant volcanic fireworks at **Mt Yasur** (p581) on Tanna



CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Vanuatu's climate varies from wet tropical in the north (over 4000mm of rainfall a year) to subtropical in the south (less than 2000mm), with dry rain-shadow areas in between. The dry season, from May to October, is cruising time: sparkling days and pleasantly cool evenings. This is Vanuatu at its glorious best; festivals and sporting contests are held, beaches call. For walking, the cooler period from June to August is better. Speaking of cool, it's advisable to take some warm clothing year-round.

November to April is the wet season, with higher temperatures, heavier rains and mosquitoes. December to March is cyclone time. Vanuatu averages 2.5 cyclones a year.

Temperatures in Luganville and Port Vila range from 27°C in July to 30°C in January. Winter nights in Vila can drop to below 12°C from June to August.

COSTS & MONEY

Vanuatu's vatu (Vt) goes a long way, especially once you move away from the big resorts. Budget accommodation may cost only 1800Vt including meals. And a meal could be lobster, or it could be a few SAO biscuits on a rough day. Also, be patient if your expected bungalow blew away, you've been forgotten, or rats ate the only mattress. This is homemade accommodation in a tropical jungle, but hey, it's great.

If you're paying between 7000Vt and 18,000Vt a night, your midrange accommodation will be delightful, and anything over 20,000Vt means you'll be totally looked after in a top-end tropical paradise. Try each category for your share of adventure, a chance to live a little on the edge, plus some serious pampering.

HISTORY

In July 2004, an archaeological dig at Teouma, near Port Vila, unearthed Lapita pottery and the skeletal remains of nine Lapita people, chickens and pigs, dating back 3200 years. The site continues to provide archaeologists with insights into the beliefs and rituals of these first people to settle, establish crops and have domestic animals. Lapita people are the ancestors of all Polynesian people, from Tahiti to Hawaii to New Zealand. They had crossed the sea from the Solomon Islands.

Between the 11th and 15th centuries AD, many Polynesians arrived from the central

Pacific in sailing canoes holding up to 50 people, live animals, and gardens growing in the boats. Vanuatu's traditions tell of cultural heroes arriving around this time from islands to the east, bringing with them new skills and customs.

Ancient Vanuatu

The people lived in clan-based villages, each with its own language because villages were separated by impassable mountains and rocky coastlines. Everyone lived in the shadow of their ancestors' spirits. Some spirits were benevolent, but others were hostile; famines, cyclones, enemy attack and other misfortunes could result if they became displeased. Magic was the main defence against angry spirits.

Inter-island trade networks were established using large sailing canoes. Otherwise, villagers regarded their neighbours with deep suspicion. Skirmishes between villages were frequent, and usually the victor captured a male or two. It gave a chief great status to present a victim, ready for the pot, to chiefs of other villages. The victims' relatives would mount reprisals, so hostilities continued indefinitely.

Alongside this, the culture was steeped in agriculture. Yam cultivation decided the cycle of the year, and months were named after yams.

European Explorers

The first Europeans to visit Vanuatu, in May 1606, were on a Spanish expedition led by Pedro Fernández de Quirós, who was convinced that Santo was the fabled *terra australis incognita*. It was not until May 1768 that Louis-Antoine de Bougainville sailed between Malekula and Santo, proving that Vanuatu's largest island was not *terra australis*.

James Cook arrived on 16 July 1774, on his second Pacific expedition. He drew the first charts of the region and named places he visited, including Tanna, Erromango, Ambrym and the Shepherd Islands.

In 1789, shortly after the famous mutiny on the *Bounty*, William Bligh sailed through the northern Banks group in his longboat. He sighted several previously unrecorded islands, and returned three years later to confirm his discoveries.