



population per sq km



Vanuatu Today

The Times (& Kastoms) are Changing

Vanuatu is like two different countries: there's well-developed Efate and Santo, with roads, electricity and tourism infrastructure, and then there are the other islands – all 81 of them. Here, life mostly goes on without basic infrastructure and the islanders survive on subsistence farming.

Though Vanuatu's villages can be remote, ni-Vanuatu that have eschewed modern life (by choice) are few and far between. *Kastom* (traditional) villages on the island of Tanna are the most well known, featuring in a handful of documentaries and reality TV programs. In such visitor hotspots, *kastom* itself is changing to meet the tourism industry's demands. For example, Pentecost's spectacle of land diving now has an extended season and more jumps per week (much to the chagrin of some villagers). Also, access to Ambrym's volcano is now allowed from the north of the island throughout the year, even during what was once a *tabu* (sacred) yam season.

My Land, My Vatu

Since 1980, foreigners have been permitted to buy 75-year land leases in Vanuatu. It's tempting for traditional owners to sell up and buy a speedboat or 4WD truck; however, these decisions are often later regretted. The law was developed so that ni-Van could have control of their land and earn rent, but foreign investors now control some 90 per cent of the (mostly beachfront) land around Efate and there have been plenty of disagreements between developers and landowners.

Vanuatu's beauty has also created tourism opportunities for the ni-Van. The traditional owner of a tourist-friendly blue hole or stunning beach is going to make between 800VT to 2000VT (AUD\$9 to \$22) per visitor. Working out who that traditional owner is can lead to disputes that sometimes result in the complete closure of an attraction.

- » Total area of Vanuatu: 860,000 sq km
- » Area that is land: 12,200 sq km
- » Arable land: 2.5%
- » Number of tourists in 2008: 197,000
- » GDP growth: 3.8
- » Unemployment: 1.7%

Dos & Don'ts

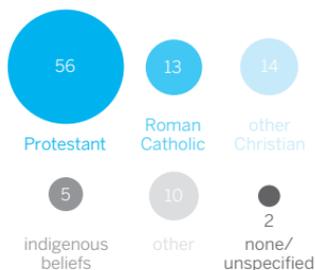
Do Accept that landowners will want payment (from around 500VT to 2000VT) if you go on their land (or visit their blue hole, snorkelling spot or beach).

Do Check with locals to find out if the local *nakamal* (kava bar) is female-friendly. It's rude to walk through a *nakamal* and they can be quite difficult to spot in rural villages when they're outdoors and there's no lighting.

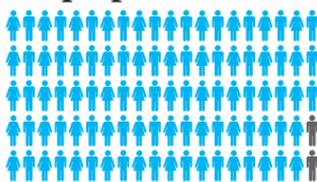
Don't Bargain, as prices are fixed. To help matters, most fruit at markets is priced (with a marker on the skin).

belief systems

(% of population)



if Vanuatu were 100 people



98 would be Ni-Vanuatu
2 would be other

Cultural Landscapes

There are hundreds of expatriates living in Vanuatu, and on most islands you'll find Australian Youth Ambassadors, American Peace Corps volunteers and New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad participants (VSAs). There's an increasing number of Asian families running shops. Tanna's Lenakel is an exception, as no foreigners are allowed to own shops here.

Politics Pacific Style

The head of state is the president, who is elected for five years by parliament and the Malvatumauri (National Council of Chiefs). The Malvatumauri is an elected group of chiefs from Vanuatu's regions. Their role is to discuss matters relating to custom and tradition. However, their power in government is limited, as legislation doesn't have to be approved by them.

The current Prime Minister is Sato Kilman of the People's Progress Party. His election came after the previous Prime Minister was ousted by a vote of no confidence. Kilman was himself ousted in 2011, though this was later reversed, and he was re-elected by parliament a month later. Politics in Vanuatu is certainly fiery. Its recent history of scandals includes selling state land despite a ban and issuing passports unlawfully. Despite public service reforms that aimed to create a system of accountability and transparency, 80 per cent of government expenditure goes on wages and salaries.

In 2011 Vanuatu became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Among those against the move were the opposition party and churches who claimed that as a country with a mainly subsistence lifestyle, there was no benefit to joining.

- » Population: 240,000
- » Population growth: 1.34%
- » Migration rate: zero
- » Life expectancy: male/female 63/66 years
- » Sex ratio: men/women 105/100

Top Websites

Mt Tabwemasana (1877m) Visit www.tabwemasana.com for an entertaining look at climbing Vanuatu's highest peak. It gives a realistic impression of an off-the-beaten-track adventure in Vanuatu.

Histri Blong Yumi Long Vanuatu Oral history plays a big part in Vanuatu's culture. Get a head start by reading some of the origin stories here: www.vanuatu.net.vu.

Top TV

Meet the Natives (2007) Download the episode in which five men from Tanna head to England and live with local families.