

Travel Tales

Land Divers of Pentecost Jump Off a Perfectly Good Nine-Story Tower [Part 1]

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Skydivers ask the ironic question about their sport: “Why would anyone jump out of a perfectly good airplane?” A land diver might ask, “Why would anyone build a 97 foot tower, tie vines to his ankles, and dive head first off that perfectly good tower, into the dirt below?” Yes, that is the most famous sport here in amazing Vanuatu. While stationed here, I knew I had to interview some of these intrepid divers, and see them risk life and limb, in a death-defying sport that is certainly one of the most dangerous on the planet.



Top land diver Christian Lala gets ready to dive off a perfectly good 97-foot bamboo tower

Douglas Asal, 19, of Wali village on Pentecost, now a taxi driver on Espiritu Santo, has been land diving since he was just 13. He described the preparations that divers go through. “We must spend one week in the nakamal [the large meeting house for chiefs in each village] eating special food, and, most importantly, we must not have sex with our wives, girlfriends or any women for that week. On the day before the diving and up to the diving, we must not eat anything. We take off all jewelry, and wear custom costume, which means just a penis sheath and waist band.”

Douglas continued, “Our experienced divers and elders take about three weeks to build the tower at the beginning of the season, anchored to a live but stripped tree. They usually build five bamboo steps or narrow platforms sticking out from the tower. No women can touch the tower or come within ten meters of it, during

the entire April through June diving season. Men prepare the ground on the steep slope in front of the tower, by digging it up and loosening the soil, to a depth of ten centimeters [5 inches]. They also select the vines, usually about five centimeters [2.5 inches] thick, and cut them to the right lengths for each step, taking into account the weight of the diver. They don't measure the vines, they just estimate the length using their great experience."

He added, "When I get up to my step, two men coach me and tie the shredded ends of the vine around my ankles. They do not grease or prepare my ankles or legs, but they do make sure that the vines are naturally moist, by keeping the shredded part encased in leaves until just before they are used. Otherwise the ends could dry in the heat, and break."

I asked Douglas about his training. "Most divers do not train, since there are no towers in the off season. But I went to a river, tied vines to my ankles, and practiced jumping into the river from a tall tree." Most rural men in Vanuatu are already in excellent shape, since they often walk long distances every day, carry heavy loads, do lots of manual labor, and eat a diet of root vegetables, fruits, nuts and fish, with a little pork every month or so.

Douglas has his diving career mapped out: "I want to keep diving until I am about 35 to 43, when most old men retire."



Land diver Christian Lala dives out horizontally from the tower with all his might

How did this amazing sport get started? Legend has it that hundreds of years ago a man named Tamalie was fighting with his wife, and beat her regularly. To get away, she climbed a tree. He climbed up to get her, and she threatened to kill herself. As she reached a natural platform, she jumped off. Filled with remorse, he dove after her, expecting a double suicide. But just before he hit the ground and died, he realized he had

been tricked – she had tied jungle vines around her ankles and was hanging suspended above the ground.

Now only men dive, to show that they can't be tricked by women again, celebrate the yam harvest, and prove their masculinity. At the land diving ceremony (locally called "nangol"), I asked several village girls if they didn't want to dive like that legendary wife. They just stared at me, then ran off giggling.

Land diving has been documented since missionaries arrived in Pentecost in the mid-1800s, and was discouraged by them as a pagan ritual. It was resurrected after independence in 1980, is now going strong, and is a major tourist attraction. The revenue from the admission fees is distributed to the local clans, and very little filters down to the actual divers.



Women and children of the village dance to support the divers and bless the yam harvest

Next month I will interview some divers ranging in age from 12 to 38, and describe the actual jumping – far more dangerous than I imagined.

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