

Travel Tales

Meet the Land Divers of Pentecost [Part 2]

by

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Last month we learned about the history of land-diving. This month we will interview some actual young divers and watch a real ceremony.

I spoke with Thierry Bebe, only 12 years old, who began diving at 9 and has now jumped three times. Speaking in his local language (one of 160 in Vanuatu), he said, “My father always jumps from the top platform. My mother is not scared to have me dive, and does not discourage me. I haven’t been hurt yet. My friends are not jealous but they don’t think it is super-cool either – it’s just another sport. After jumping I get a special lap-lap [a bland pudding made of manioc] as a reward.”



Phillipia Tabisara, 15 years old, has jumped three times over four years, and plans to jump again next year. He said, “My father has never jumped but my big brother did. My mother likes it that I jump. I want to keep jumping until I get up to the top step. I have never been hurt, and neither have my friends. I am not afraid when I jump; I feel strong.” Asked, why he does it, he said, “Custom. It is what we do and what we are.”

Christian Lala, 34 years old, has been jumping for 10 years, and followed in his father’s footsteps, so to speak. He jumped from the top platform, 30 meters in the air, and was the only one to achieve that height on the day I visited. He says, “I am a bit frightened when I am about to jump, but on the way down I feel strong and good. Almost all the men and boys around here jump. I have a wife and two small kids, and they are all happy to have me dive, and they come to watch. I have never been hurt, and plan to jump again next year.”

12 year old Thierry Bebe has been land diving for three years

OK, let's go watch some diving! As I approach the tower, I can't believe that someone will throw themselves off it. It looks like a rickety assembly of bamboo and sticks lashed together with vines, perched on the slope of a steep hill. It sways and twists in the breeze. Men are already climbing the tower and preparing the diving vines. Two experienced men stand below the diver, making sure the vines do not get entangled with the tower. Bare-chested women, men and children are dancing and chanting on top of the hill, overlooking the tower and the crowd below of about 70 tourists. The dancers shuffle back and forth to the beat of a large tam-tam hollow log drum.

The first diver goes out on the first, four-meter-high step. It is made of two pieces of wood resting on two small sticks, strong enough to support the standing diver, but weak enough to break later. The first diver is Thierry Bebe, just 12 years old. He waves to the crowd, holds his arms aloft, then throws a bit of coconut fiber to the wind. He clasps his hands in front of him, interlacing them into a fist.



Philipia Tabisara, 15 years old, dives for the strongest reason of all: "Custom"



Christian Lala, 34, is one of the top land divers in the country

Then it all happens in seconds -- much faster than I can write. Thierry suddenly crouches down like a frog, and springs up quickly, driving up and out with his legs. He dives up and out, away from the tower, then sails along like he is flying. His body is horizontal, head is up, and his interlaced fingers are in front of his face like he is praying. He rapidly descends toward the ground, but just as he is about to hit, the vines straighten out, the pressure on the platform is tremendous, it breaks with a loud crack, and little Thierry is yanked backwards about two meters, slowing his descent. His entire body from elbows to feet hits the sloping ground all at once, going backwards, with a huge thump. He looks stunned, then gets up and waves to the crowd, which gives him an enormous cheer.

I am totally gob-smacked. From the descriptions I had read previously, I thought the diver would dive straight down, and the vines would catch him just as he grazed the softened ground with the top of his head. Thus there would be no skill or strength involved -- just a test of measuring the vine right. But all that is wrong, wrong, wrong. The vines are much longer than the distance from the platform to the ground. If the diver

doesn't have the right technique, and the strength to dive far out beyond the platform – he's dead. Ohmygod!

We watch nine other divers take the plunge over the next 90 minutes, gradually moving up the five steps. Each step is even closer to heaven.

One diver hits the ground hard and clutches his stomach. He appears injured, which is very alarming since no medical staffers are present (!), and the nearest (not very good) hospital is about two hours away by air evacuation. But two men rush over to him, screening him, and then he bounces up, unhurt, and waves to the crowd.

We later learned that clutching the stomach is a secret signal that the diver's "namba" or penis sheath has fallen off, and the two men were re-inserting the penis, to preserve the dignity of the occasion. How would you like that job on your resume? Land-diver penis inserter.

Note that the penis sheath is just that and only that – the testicles dangle in full view of the crowd.



The fragile diving boards have just broken, intentionally, so the diver is yanked backwards

By the way, for a cool souvenir, you can buy a used vine or namba, for just \$10!



Christian Lala hits the ground horizontally with a tremendous thud

The last and highest diver, going off the 30 meter (97 foot) platform, is Christian Lala. He hits the ground with perfect technique and a massive thud, and survives to give the crowd a big grin.

So, now that you know about this fabulous and exciting sport, you want to become a land diver, right? I'll tell you how – next month.