

Travel Tales

Vanuatu – Most Exotic Country on Earth?

by

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I recently won a contract to spend a year in the Republic of Vanuatu, working as the senior advisor to the government's Chief Information Officer (CIO) in the Prime Minister's Office. When I excitedly told people that I was going to live in Vanuatu, 99 percent said, "Huh? Where is that?" The worst case was a professional visa processor in Arlington, Virginia whom I called to ask if I needed a visa to enter Vanuatu. He had not heard of the country, and refused to believe that it WAS a country. He kept claiming that it was "just an island."



Vanuatu is a large archipelago covering 600+ miles from north to south

In fact, Vanuatu is an archipelago of 82 islands, spread in a Y-shape for 500 miles from north to south. The country is about 3 hours flying time north of New Zealand, 4 hours east of Sydney, and 4 hours west of Fiji. It used to be called the New Hebrides, and it was the location for James Michener's immortal book *Tales of the South Pacific*, and the later play, movie and TV mini-series called simply *South Pacific*. Vanuatu has been independent since 1980, has 230,000 citizens, and is perhaps the oddest and one of the most exotic countries on earth.

From a Washington, DC point of view, Vanuatu is quite odd in that it has no embassy or ambassador in our nation's capital. Even the Vatican, with a population of only 800, has an embassy in Washington! But Vanuatu is so remote, poor and reliant on Australia and New Zealand for aid that it doesn't bother to have an outpost in DC. It

does have an ambassador to the UN in New York, who doubles as the ambassador to the US. Vanuatu has been a member of the UN since gaining its independence in 1980 from Britain and France, and has a tiny staff of only three people who take care of its interests at the UN and the US.

Similarly, Vanuatu's capital of Port Vila is odd in that it has only four embassies: French, Australian, New Zealand, and the new sheriff in town: the Chinese. Even the British have pulled out and now have a circuit-riding ambassador in Fiji. The US embassy in Papua New Guinea takes care of American citizens in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands – to the extent that a US embassy provides any American with any help anywhere! I tried to register my trip to Vanuatu on-line with the US embassy in PNG, as recommended by the State Department, and of course the system did not work. I did learn on-line that our ambassador in Papua New Guinea speaks Spanish, Turkish and Hungarian, but not the local language of pidgin English. Go figure.

Getting to Vanuatu was fairly excruciating.

The worst part was not the 38 straight hours of flying and waiting in airports from Denver to Honolulu to Auckland. No, much worse was dealing with United Airlines in buying the tickets! It may be hard to believe, but I actually spent 14 hours on the phone with 10 different UAL employees, including 4 supervisors, spread over three days, trying to pay them \$3000 to sell me a round trip coach ticket. The UAL ticketing system was such a mess that most of the UAL agents eventually gave up, and tried to discourage me from flying on their airline. I eventually found the one supervisor who had a brain and actually used it, and she figured out why the system would not work – the last leg was operated by Air Vanuatu on a code share with Air New Zealand (ANZ), and the former had no agreement with UAL even though ANZ did. She switched that last leg to a flight run by ANZ, and was then able to issue me an e-ticket in minutes. Needless to say, I will not be flying UAL in the future. That once-great airline is clearly “augering in.”



Spectators with a Vanuatu flag celebrate the country's 1980 independence from Britain and France



Port Vila is the picturesque capital of the country

Arriving in Port Vila, Vanuatu, I was met at the airport by my new boss, the CIO, and his charming assistant. Wow! In 50 assignments in 30 countries I have never been met at the airport by my client before. That was a first. What a great guy – sharp, intense, knowledgeable, politically savvy, scrupulously honest and terrifically hard-working. Very unusual. He was clearly a tremendous resource for his country.



A Melanesian child of Vanuatu

And what a strange country it is:

- With 110 languages for its numerous clans and tribes, it has the greatest linguist density in the world.
- It was ruled for many years by the French and the British in a bizarre system officially called the Condominium, but generally called the “Pandemonium.” Parallel French and British courts and legal systems ensured that no one could figure out what was going on.
- The population has been largely converted to Christianity by

missionaries from many denominations, yet that religion is largely irrelevant. What really matters here is raising pigs with circular tusks, to slaughter in ceremonies for tribal chiefs.

- It is beset by deadly volcanos, frequent earthquakes, fierce cyclones and endemic malaria, yet is rated as one of the happiest countries on earth.



The super-yacht Phoecea was involved in a year-long scandal in Vanuatu

- The national politics are based on island origin, clans and corruption, and some ministers regularly beat up their critics in brawls in the streets. But the press remains vibrant and active, and is highly critical of government.
- The current national political scandal involves a visiting super-yacht and super-models who may or may not have been smuggling in diamonds, arms and drugs.
- There are tribes here which practice black and white magic, and some which worship Prince Philip as a god.
- The national drink is kava, which tastes like dirty dishwater and turns your tongue numb.
- The national dish is lap-lap, which tastes like roasted flip-flops.
- Western-style apartments cost about the same as in Washington, \$1800 to \$2500 per month, while new and used cars are twice as expensive as in DC. But a local person with 10 acres of jungle and coconut trees for fruit and veg, some wild pigs to hunt, and a bit of

coastline to catch some fish, can sleep until noon, build a grass hut, and live off the land for only \$2 per month.

- Most island “roads” are just strings of massive potholes, while the first paved road around the capital island of Efate was just completed in April 2011, thanks to assistance from the USA and New Zealand.
- The major athletic event is La Piste Bleue, a cross-island foot race through rivers of mud and up and down perpendicular mountain ridges.

- There is a history of cannibalism which only ended (or did it?) in the 1960s.
- Some tribes are named after their penises – for example, the Big Nambas and the rather unfortunate Little Nambas.

For pure wonderful wackiness, I'll put this country up against any on earth.

Over the next year, I will bring you bulletins from this strange and exotic land that most Americans have never heard of, and some don't even believe exists!

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P&O cruise ships from Australia call at Port Vila every few days