

Travel Tales

by

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Port Vila, Vanuatu, Part 1: The Least Known Cruise Destination?

Most Americans have never heard of Vanuatu, and even fewer have heard of its capital, Port Vila. Yet Vila, as it is often called, is becoming a major cruise destination, with about 140 port visits planned over the next twelve months, or about one every two to three days. The vast majority of these cruise visits are one-day stops by P&O cruise ships (www.pocruises.com.au; 300-159-454 in Australia) sailing out of Sydney and doing a loop around the Coral Sea east of Australia, and Carnival Cruise Lines (www.carnival.com; 888-227-6482 in the US), with similar itineraries. These cruises generally hit New Caledonia (including Noumea and the Isle of Pines) and Vanuatu (including Port Vila, Luganville on Espiritu Santo, and Wala island off Malekula).

Of course you can fly to Vila, with connections via Brisbane, Sydney, Auckland or Fiji. But all air routes to Vila from the US are a bit painful – for instance, it took me 36 hours of traveling to get from Washington, DC to Vila via air! So I recommend sailing to Vila via cruise ship, as a side journey when you visit Australia.



Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu and the primary port

The country of Vanuatu was known as the New Hebrides until 1980, when the country achieved independence from the joint British/French Condominium (widely known as “The Pandemonium”). That government wasn’t so much despotic as insane, with two school systems (British and French), two governors (ditto), two police forces, two court systems, two currencies, and even two jails! On some islands you could drive on both sides of the road!

Vila has one of the prettiest harbors in the South Pacific. The town lies in a large bay on Efate island, protected by two small picturesque barrier isles, and surrounded by steep hills, the remnants of an extinct volcano. Numerous anchored yachts dot the smooth waters in front of the town. Vila’s population of 40,000 is spread out over several square miles, but the downtown is quite small, only about eight blocks between two one-way streets.

By the way, there is no point in me giving you any addresses, since there are no street numbers and only three street signs in the entire city, and even the locals have no idea what the street names are! Just tell your driver your destination.

No Stop Lights, No Parking Meters



P&O Liners sailing from Sydney and Brisbane, Australia call at Port Vila every few days

Some of the great attractions of Vila and Vanuatu are what they don’t have: no stop lights, parking meters, parking garages, motorways or income tax! The climate is mild, with temperatures almost always in the 80s, and showers on many days.

The architecture in the downtown is not distinguished, and is comprised mainly of concrete slab two story buildings, with one nine story hotel, the Grand. The sidewalks are often irregular, so take care.

The most interesting building is the central market, an open, gabled structure about 30 feet tall and 200 feet wide, with numerous tables laden with exotic fruits, vegetables and nuts, live coconut crabs tied up in stacks, a dozen varieties of bananas, and prices as low as one US dollar for a bunch of 12 monkey bananas. Chat with some of the lady vendors – almost all of them live on north Efate island or on out islands, bring their produce into

town on Monday morning, and sleep on the concrete floor of the market each night, beside their wares.

You will get off your ship in the wharf area about one mile south of downtown. Inspect the many stalls with T-shirts and souvenirs just beyond the port gates. The drivers from Tanna island are rather aggressive and have a lock on the port exit. Take pity on the other drivers, and walk past the touts and get a van at the end of the row of stalls.

Transport: Only \$1.60 for Five Miles

Transport around town is generally via the 1000-odd vans that trundle slowly up and down the main north-south road (rumored to be called Lini Highway after the founder of the country). These vans only cost \$1.60 to go five miles, one of the best bargains around. Since the vans are entirely unregulated, they are often grubby, and watch out for potholes and rocks when you hop out.

The vans are jitneys, so they go where you and others want, sometimes resulting in long detours. If you are in a hurry, take a taxi for about \$7-10. This is somewhat negotiable. You can't use taxi meters, because there are none in the whole country!

Next month we will talk about cool things to do, and the best restaurants.

Lew Toulmin is on assignment in Port Vila, working in the Prime Minister's Office on telecommunications policy.

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