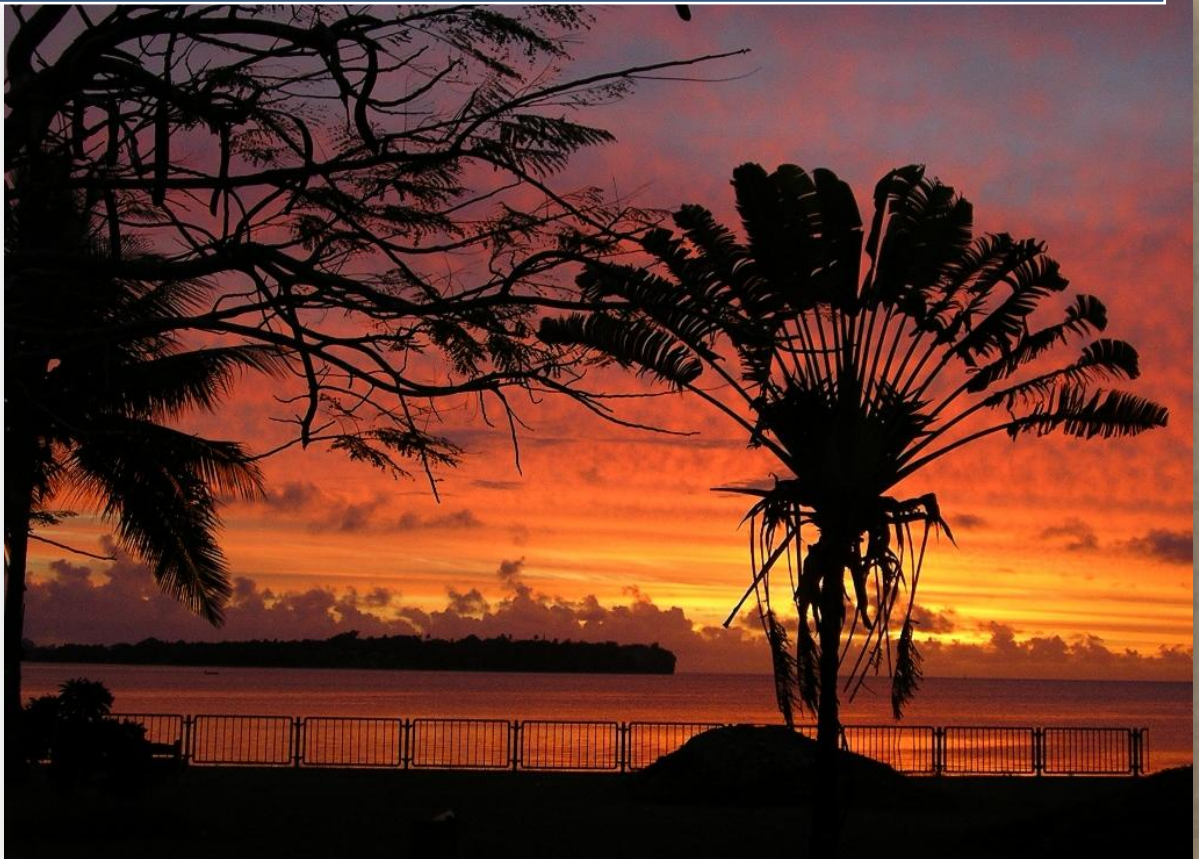


Travel diary Brigitte & Heinz


Vanuatu; Melanesian Pacific-culture at its best



Chapter 11

October 2005 - November 2005

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After three days in Melbourne, we boarded an "Emirates' plane" to Auckland, and enjoyed the luxury of this Arabic airline. New Zealand was just a short stop-over before we left for  [Vanuatu](#) 3 days later. This Pacific island state of 83 islands forms a landmass of 12'336 sqkm. They are situated between Fiji and Cairns in Australia with the capital being Port Vila on Efate island. Of its 200'000 inhabitants, 98% are Ni-Vanuatu, as the local people are called. They belong to the Melanesian group and are pretty dark skinned, with tall and strong stature, usually slim and all have curly black, brown or even blond hair.

As all the other Pacific Islands, also Vanuatu has a troubled history because Europeans interfered and destroyed big parts of its ancient cultures. In 1605 some of these islands were first sighted and immediately claimed for Spain, by a white seafarer: the Portuguese Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, who was sponsored by the Spanish crown. By about 1850, traders and missionaries started coming in bigger numbers. However, christianity couldn't set foot as easy as on other Pacific islands and quite a few missionaries ended up as the main-course of cannibal feasts. Unfortunately, the locals couldn't eat them all, as more and more missionaries were sent in and finally even the most hungry Ni-Vanuatu tribe was satiated and couldn't eat any more! Today 98% of people are christianised and the missionaries still work hard to get the last remaining bastion. As soon as the chief of one of the few remaining villages dies, they are soon there "to help" the grieving. Many things that might be considered cruel in western society, were just natural and normal here. For example when a husband died, his wife would often be strangled on his funeral ceremony. When the missionaries attempted to stop this tradition, the women fought for their right to die with their spouse. The most common form of cannibalism was to eat flesh from deceased relatives to incorporate something of the beloved among the living, which was practiced on some islands until 1980. Also victims of war and people who broke the rules, were often eaten, last time in 1969.



As most islands in the New Hebrides, as Vanuatu was known previously, were either occupied by French- or Englishmen, those two governments decided in 1906 to govern all the islands in a condominium. This produced an amazing duplication of authorities with 2 languages, 2 education systems, 2 health services, 2 currencies, 2 police forces and prisons that had different laws. Apparently, they were not working together all the time as smooth as they should, but how could you expect that? Independence finally was granted in 1980, after which the new state changed its name to Vanuatu and became a tax heaven.

Today they try also to attract tourists and their dollars and already many Aussies and Kiwis come here for an "all inclusive" holiday to small resort islands.

Port Vila

We arrived in [Port Vila](#) on Oct. 26, 2005 and headed for a cheap guesthouse. Our first impression was that the people were extremely friendly. Before we had reached the centre, dozens of people had greeted us or waved (and this without the intention to sell anything, as is often the case in Asia). Port Vila is a pretty long stretch of village with a fair amount of duty free shops lining the dusty road. There was a big covered market with an impressive array of locally grown fruit and vegetables.

As we had never found a market in Micronesia, we enjoyed it even more to stroll between the stalls, displaying many exotic products and nobody ever hassled us to buy, not even in the section where they sold souvenirs.

At first sight, the French hadn't left that much influence behind as we had hoped for; neither did we hear much French being spoken around us, nor did French bakeries and restaurants line the street.

After a few days however, we discovered a variety of very good French influenced restaurants; none of them cheap, but nothing is cheap in Vanuatu anyway - except maybe on the market. In some areas of Vila, everybody spoke French and just a bit English. Ni-Vanuatu people have more than [110 local languages](#) and therefore, a new artificial language had been created: Bislama, a form of Pidgin English that is used by everyone as additional national language since independence. Parents still decide whether to send their children to an English school (55% choose to do so), which mainly belong to anglican influenced sects, whereas the remaining 45% of children are being sent to French schools that are predominantly catholic influenced. They all teach Bislama too and this results in many people speaking 4 languages. In this respect, they are ahead in knowledge of many western nations.



Whereas, if it comes to fashion, they still stick to old colonial times. Most women still wear what is called a "Mother Hubbard dress"; a long colourful frilling bag. This was introduced by the missionaries to cover what they considered to be naughty skin that had been so normal to the people. Since then, they sweat and need soap to wash themselves and their cloths, which in turn is polluting the water. Not even for bathing, the newly introduced dresses were removed, after which the wet garments stuck to the body for a long time, as they often didn't have clothing to change. The same happens a lot during the rainy season. So people feel cold and get sick and often this led even to tuberculosis, a pest that hadn't existed here before.

The missionaries even told them, that the many new diseases that suddenly killed so many people, and which of course were all introduced by white men, were just a punishment because they had been cannibals before and worshiped the wrong god...

How anybody, except sadists could force others to wear (long) cloths in this hot climate, remains a mystery and it's also frustrating to see how entire nations can be brain-washed successfully!

Tanna: native & fascinating

Let's talk about nicer things; the scenery of the coastline with its blue ocean and coral-reefs was stunning. On our flight to [Tanna island](#), 4 days later, we could admire it even from above. Tanna has a population of 30'000 that spread over an area of 565 sq km. It's famous for the last remaining villages, still living in quite a traditional way and for an active volcano.

The guesthouse we had booked by phone, didn't really delight us. The standard was very basic and in Thailand the same bungalow would most probably have gone for € 2, but here it cost more than € 20. With some good luck we found a new guesthouse, which cost € 4 more but was much nicer and cleaner. This was situated in [Lenakel](#), which is, with about 1'000 inhabitants, the islands biggest village. There was not much to buy in the few shops apart from tins and fresh bread in the morning or maybe some nails or T-Shirts. Twice a week they held a small market, to which other villagers sometimes walked 4-6 hours, as this was the best place to sell and buy things.



There were almost no cars and public transport was expensive and scarce. None of the roads were sealed and in most sections they were not only a bit, but pretty rough! They were only good for walking or 4 WD vehicles and thus very dusty.

About 80% of Ni-Vanuatu people have neither jobs nor money. In fact, they would not need money if the missionaries wouldn't have come here. They can live off the land and are quite skillful gardeners. Pigs, cattle, goats and fish are also part of their healthy diet. The only money they need to spend, are for cloths and soap, a local repeated to us. Apart from their land, most people have really nothing and those few that have jobs,

need to pay dearly for everything, as prices are out of proportion. Here we realized how much more developed and wealthy, even the poorest Asian countries are. There, most people have at least some sort of income and prices are much more in relation to that.

What was impressive about Vanuatu, in spite of this, was how happy the people seemed to be and how friendly they always were. If we ate in a foodstall, the owner or waiter would always sit with us and talk - about anything, except cannibalism, which seems to be a taboo these days.



The biggest assets the families usually had, was a big number of children and that means 10-20.

Thanks to an Australian aid organisation, there was now one manual water pump installed in every village and the water was of good quality.

As all over Vanuatu, only a small percentage of people had access to electricity. On Tanna, only the village of Lenakel enjoyed this luxury but 97% of people were left in the dark. But the island was relatively well connected by telecommunication means: about every third village had a phone for the community mounted to a tree, which worked with calling cards using pin numbers. Where-else in the world would 200'000 people have only 5 digit phone- and 4 digit car-plate numbers?

As most locals don't ever need a bank, the Tanna branch of the state bank tried to make money with the few tourists. Although there was no way to get money with a credit-card, the bank employees gladly exchanged traveller's checks into Vatu, the local currency, giving a very bad exchange rate but asking for a small € 8 flat-fee for the cashing of each check. Also the airline office next door was very helpful as soon as we had found the employee, who had been chatting in a nearby foodstall. He promised to forward our reservation request to the headquarter in Vila via the public telephone at the nakamal, how they call the village meeting place. After several unsuccessful attempts, we finally found him in his office again two days later and he was then able to confirm our booking. The next challenge in Lenakel was to organise our food. At least from Monday to Friday it was easy to find fresh bread in the morning and a simple meal in a foodstall for lunch, but to get dinner, we always had to reserve ahead. Then, a restaurant opened exclusively for us, as the locals couldn't afford such luxury and the other tourists spent their usually only night on Tanna somewhere outside the village in a hotel-resort, if they didn't come with a charter-jet for a daytrip only.

Now we catch ourselves complaining about the lack of the modern world, but really; we have come here to see what's left of the traditional world! On Tanna island, there are still a handful of what they call "kastom villages" where people still live a mainly traditional life as in the past. After trying unsuccessfully to visit one independently, we finally joined a tourist-tour, as no taxi driver had been willing to undertake the journey over this particularly rough road to [Yakel](#). A 22 year old woman, clad in only a grass skirt and a 28 year old man, who only wore a *namba* (penis sheath) were fluent in English and showed us and the other 7 tourists around



their dwellings. They explained how the family clans have their own bamboo huts for cooking and sleeping. How marriages were arranged, gardens tended and herbs for medicine collected. In this village we felt as if we were set down in another world with another pace. Small children were in the nude but everybody older than 3 wore grass skirts or nambas only. The size of the penis wrap is given by the tribe a man belongs to and has nothing to do with his 'willy'. On Malekula island for example two tribes are living, called the "big nambas" and the "small nambas". But if they go to surrounding villages that are not "kastom villages", they put on western cloths, which we fear they buy with money gained from tourists who are obliged to pay quite a high visitors fee (abt.2150 Vatu/€ 17).

Also there, we saw a water-pump but no telephone and only very recently, they started to send some children to school.

Pigs are very valuable and important as gifts and in many ceremonies, where big feasts are held. They carve special clubs, to smash the head of a pig when its time is due, but before, it has certainly a much better life than those pigs farmed in developed countries. Here pigs roam around freely and we've seen a woman patting a piggy as we would pat a kitten.

Before the villagers performed some dances for the tourists, we were introduced to the healthy looking chief of the village who was apparently 108 years old. The chief will take responsibility to arrange marriages for those bachelors that have lost their parents and so, he'll buy a spouse from another village. In many places throughout Vanuatu, the chief is also the "witch-doctor", whom they call "*Kleve*". People believe very strongly in sorcery and magic and in Tanna, four witch-doctors enjoy such a good reputation that sometimes patients are being flown in from other islands to be cured. On one occasion we were shown a living example of a young man who's arm and leg had been squashed in an accident a few years ago. Within only 1 months of laying with his limbs stabilized by bamboo sticks and receiving herbal treatment cut into his skin and as drinks, the fellow recovered. Now he only bears a few scars but is perfectly able to use his arm and leg again. He was convinced that the western hospital in Lenakel would have amputated both, as this is apparently often their solution. Although there are a few modern medicine hospitals throughout the islands of Vanuatu, their equipment certainly is not very sophisticated, thus giving the doctors not many alternatives.



Might be that western doctors could learn something from these "witch-doctors" and already we can observe a trend of modern people turning to "nature practitioners" in big numbers.

On the eastern side of the island, we visited what they claim to be "the world's most accessible active volcano" (we bet Aussies created that slogan!). In a 4WD vehicle, we crossed the black sand- and ash-plain at the foot of the 316 m high [Mount Yasur](#). After a good look around this eerie landscape, where ashes suffocate an extremely green vegetation that is constantly fighting back its territory. David our guide and driver, showed us the canyon, about 10 meters high, where all the water of a lake that had been on the foot of the volcano,

suddenly burst through an opening to the sea, after a cyclone had brought a lot of rain in 2000. Now, he drove us up, almost to the crater of Yasur and a few hundred meters higher up, we were able to see down into the crater. We could not see right into the molten lava, but we were told there are three melting pots, which spit out lava at various intervals. Fountains of orange liquid thundered into the air in a cloud of smoke along with a terrible noise. Especially after sunset, it was amazing how well the molten rock became visible and looked now obviously like flying lava-bombs. Some eruptions were only small but others could spit very high and the thundering noise accompanying them, apparently has caused to jump so many frightened tourist, that plenty of camera and video equipment lies on the dangerous slopes of the crater.



The activity of the volcano is measured in grades 0-8 and it was at level 2 when we visited. This was impressive to watch and still quite safe. At level 4 it feels like a constant earthquake at the base, we were told and then tourists are not allowed to go up to the top of the crater anymore. There had been three fatalities so far as the activity can change in no time.

We spent two nights at [Jungle Oasis](#) right below that groaning cone. After the generator was switched off at about 10 pm, instead of going to bed, we watched the reflections of the eruptions on the low lying clouds above the crater and we heard the rumbling of the eruptions all night and day. The ash the volcano spit out, was constantly in the air and a layer covered everything in the surrounding. Only one hour after we had put a glass on our garden table, a dust mark was already visible where it had stood. Once a while we felt there was a bit of ash in our mouth as well. The hefty € 17 entrance fee was meant to support the surrounding villagers for the times when their own crop gets covered in ash after heavy eruptions.

As everywhere in the countryside, people here lead very modest lives. It is no exception that 20 persons sleep in the same hut, which consists of one room only. Everyone sleeps just on a mat, as beds and mattresses are not used here and people do not even dream of having a (hot?) shower or electricity.

The simple huts are normally made of bamboo and palm leaves. Only very few have brick walls and tin roofs. As earthquakes are frequent, this results usually in little damage to and by them. In the cyclone season however, the simple bamboo huts cannot protect their inhabitants. For this occasion every village is equipped with a "ground house" for shelter; a bamboo hut that is dug into the earth.

Already before we had come to the guesthouse at the volcano, the arrival of their new car with the ferry to Lenakel, 50 km away, was the 'talk of the town'. By the time it arrived at Jungle Oasis, many curious people of the surrounding villages lined the street for the welcome reception, with the car being led through various arches decorated with flowers. Speeches by the village elders followed and then the shiny white 4WD ute received blessings to all its important parts. One after the other, young and old climbed on the back of the new pick-up and wanted to be given a ride.

This was now the first car to belong to someone of that village, whereas beforehand, whenever something had to be transported, a taxi from far away had to be called in.

Life in these villages is directed by daylight and we were bothered by the churchbell that woke everybody up at 5 am, so that the poor children could attend church before starting classes 3 hours later. After the work of the day had been done, the village women start cooking, whereas the men gather in the many kava bars. They can easily be identified, as there is always a lantern burning there, which they call "the red light".

It's said that kava here is stronger than in other pacific island countries and its anesthetic reaction more powerful. Preparation is often in the old traditional way, where peeled kava roots are being chewed and then spit into the pot from which a coconut bowl is filled with the brew and handed around the circle of kava drinkers. In some places today, kava is just grounded and an inventive company does even prepare "instant kava", which is being sold abroad.

When the ute had come to pick us up, we hopped to the back, in the same manner the locals do. Now we were glad that the sun was out again after a rainy day, as this meant that the rough road across the island was at least not so dusty and not too muddy either. We passed Tannas hilly "middle bush" where coffee and coconuts were grown. Again, many people walked and everybody was friendly waving at us. Some went hunting with bow and arrow or with a sling shot.



We spent the next four days at [Evergreen Bungalows](#). For Vanuatu-standard, they are already in an upper category, as they have hot showers, a generator and an 'à-la-carte' restaurant. Compared to western standard, however, the bungalow was still very basic and neither mosquito-proof nor very clean. But even the more luxury resort next door, that was four times more expensive, offered bungalows that were invitingly open to the surrounding wildlife, only bigger, so they could fit in more of them...

However, the location on the limestone shore and the gardens above, were very nice. There was good snorkeling nearby and the guests could use fins and masks for free. The shore was of sharp cutting coral limestone and the most difficult part was to get into deep water; in brief terms: it was a pain in the...feet! ... or; in the ass, if you fell.

We were very pleased with the quality of the restaurant on our place. There was lobster on the menu most days and we could even convince the kitchen staff to replace the imported rice with local vegetables as kumara (sweet potato), taro or pumpkin, even though they believe they have to serve their guests expensive rice. As the 4-8 guests were usually dining together, this made for a nice atmosphere.

Another luxury was offered by Evergreen as a farewell to their guests: Before we flew back to Efate, the reception collected our airline tickets and luggage and went to the nearby airport to do the check-in on our behalf. Two hours later, after we had seen the plane coming, we were given our boarding passes and driven to the airport. What a service. Tank yu tumas Tanna, Ata.

Back in Port Vila

After 10 days, we were back in the capital Port Vila. Now it seemed more developed to us than before. There was a lot of traffic with most cars being either taxis, minibuses, government- or business-vehicles, which their number plate indicated. Of the few ones that were private, 90% carried white or Asian passengers who sometimes employed a local driver.



Even though most didn't look that run down, half of the cars exhausted black smoke, because probably none of the taxis and busses were getting serviced regularly. But there is hope for the future!

The first few cars here were already driving on coconut-oil that can be grown locally. A French company is working on the development to generate electricity from copra, dried coconut, used to gain the oil. They hope that this way, electricity might be provided to all the islands, who could then grow the rawmaterial themselves.

We learned about this project, because we now stayed at a B&B called "[La Maison Bleue](#)". This was run by French born Françoise, who is married to one of the leading engineers involved in the coconut-energy project. The house was superbly situated on the hillside overlooking the blue bay and it was the best accommodation we've had in Vanuatu. A wonderful break-feast was served on the veranda, which included exotic fruit and fromage blanc. One night Françoise also cooked a French dinner for us that would easily have rewarded her some "Gault Millau" points. The other two remaining nights we ventured out to some of Vila's gourmet temples.

It's an unreal world here: in a country where most people don't earn a single penny, as mentioned before, they have 2'000 international companies registered in their books. They all take advantage of Vanuatu's tax freedom that has no income taxes for either corporates or individuals, no capital gains taxes, no death duties. The country's only income is from 12,5% VAT (GST) and up to 70% import duties mainly paid by the small fish. For those who work, the minimum salary was recently raised to a "generous" € 155 per month, even though prices are comparable and often higher than in Australia (min.wage € 1'163p.mon.). Although the big money stays with white and Asian people, Ni-Vanuatu are very diligent people and work hard for their privilege to have a job. Considering all this, it is even more surprising, how genuinely friendly and hospitable the locals are towards foreigners, forgiving all the suffering the white men have brought



to them and especially the missionaries still bring to them in their (uncorrectable) belief they have to bring the(ir) light to everybody...

On the day of our departure to Auckland, we were spoiled by Françoise one last time. She insisted to provide us with a gourmet breaky even at 04:45 am. After boarding the plane, we were surrounded by all these package-folks that raved about the good deals they got in the duty-free shops and their bags full of handcrafted souvenirs, purchased on the Australian owned and operated resort islands.

Upon arrival, the New Zealand quarantine check-point hassled most of them as wood and bamboo products fell under quarantine restrictions. How much luckier we felt! Our souvenirs are many but they are neither heavy nor can they be taken away, as they consist mainly of memories of wonderful experiences and remembrances about Vanuatu

Brigitte & Heinz



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