

# Vanuatu

## War wounds in paradise

**Winsor Dobbin** finds links to the past all around.

We met Chief Dani Rusa at the Sunday morning market in Luganville, the main town on the Vanuatu island of Espiritu Santo. A wizened, wiry and proud old man with a long white beard, he told us he had walked for two days to reach Luganville from his home village deep in the mountains and with no road access.

In deference to more sophisticated locals, he had wrapped a piece of cloth around his lower parts rather than wear the leaf he traditionally uses to preserve his modesty.

Accompanied by a younger assistant chief, he had made the trek to the big smoke to resolve a dispute with another tribe, a complicated affair involving a native plant being used to place a curse on the local courthouse. Speaking bislama, the local pidgin language, through an interpreter, the chief said he was confident the contretemps could be resolved the next day, after which he planned to return to his people, renowned for shooting at US aircraft with wooden arrows during World War II.

In the meantime, wearing a Boston Celtics beanie and a New York, New York necklace, he was more interested in shopping than rebellion as the two mountain men perused the yams, pineapples and other fruits and vegetables on offer in the market.

Life here moves at a slower pace; there is a handful of places to stop in Luganville, with the hilltop Deco Stop Lodge a pleasant place for a stay or for lunch by the pool. Accessible only by water are the Aore Resort and Bokissa Resort, both great for lovers of water sports, particularly scuba diving.

Bokissa Island is beautiful and has daily cruises to Malo Island for snorkelling with turtles, swimming in blue holes and peaceful river inlets, kayaking and a barbecue lunch.

Wherever you go in Vanuatu, but particularly on Santo, you'll find links with World War II. James Michener was inspired to write *Tales Of The South Pacific* while he was stationed on Santo. The island is the home of the world's best dive wreck, the SS President Coolidge, a cruise liner-turned troop ship that was sunk by the US military's own mines with 5000 troops on board. All but two survived. She lies intact on her side and is easily accessible, as is the USS Tucker, off Malo Island.

Just down the road from the Coolidge is Million Dollar Point, where the Americans dumped jeeps and other heavy equipment into the ocean at the end of the war. Our guide also took us to the wreck of a World War II bomber slowly being overtaken by the foliage.

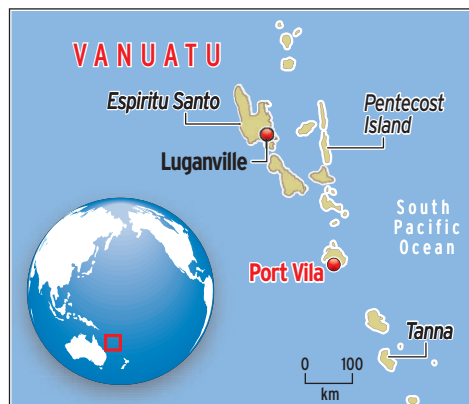
Given the sleepy state of Santo today, it is hard to believe it was once the second-largest US base in the Pacific after Hawaii and was home to more than 40,000 troops at any one time. Those troops included Michener and future president John F. Kennedy, while Eleanor Roosevelt visited in her role as ambassador for the president.

Today, Vanuatu's 83 islands are ideal for getting away from it all. There are no traffic lights or speed limits and few road rules. No McDonald's, Subway or KFC. No chain hotels. Internet connections are painfully slow and telephone calls sometimes drop out. The last recorded incident of cannibalism was in 1969.

On Tanna, you'll find the amazing Yasur volcano, a still-fiery cauldron that angrily hurls rocks and lava, and islanders who still live the traditional way, wearing little more than grass skirts and penis sheaths. It's also home to the John Frum cargo cult, devoted to US servicemen who visited in World War II, and another tribe who believe that Prince Philip is their saviour – somewhat bizarre given his disdain for anyone not wearing a suit.

Pentecost Island is famous for the land diving ritual – the original bungy jump (held each April and May) – but most tourists base themselves on the main island of Efate, in and around the somnambulant capital of Port Vila.

Here you'll find duty free stores, a daily market and a handful of top-line restaurants and resorts, including the Le Meridien Resort and Casino, the new Sebel, itself soon to be home to an upmarket casino, and long-time



favourite Le Lagon. With a mixture of Melanesian, Asian and European cultures, Vila is the ideal base for visiting tropical beaches, bathing in waterfalls at Mele Cascades, snorkelling, abseiling, renting a buggy to go offroad with Buggy Fun Rental or just enjoying a cocktail by the pool.

Restaurant choices include the excellent French patisserie Au Peche Mignon (the omelets are divine); the modern and eclectic Tilly's at Chantilly's or L'Houstalet where you can enjoy local specialties such as flying fox or coconut crab.

I also enjoyed beachfront dining at the



Plunge into history ... (clockwise from above) scuba diving at Million Dollar Point; Le Meridien Resort; Yasur volcano; a cargo cult gathering. Photos: Getty Images

### > TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there** Air Vanuatu has regular flights to Port Vila from Sydney and there are regular connections between islands. Phone 9299 9737, see [airvanuatu.com](http://airvanuatu.com).

■ **Staying there** Breakas Beach Resort & Villas has bungalows and villas (some with their own pool) on a two-kilometre, white sand beach. Phone +678 23670 or see [breakas.com](http://breakas.com). Chantilly's On The Bay has modern rooms with all amenities within walking distance of downtown Port Vila. Phone +678 27079 or see [chantillysonthebay.com](http://chantillysonthebay.com). Moyyan House By The Sea is an upmarket resort on Espiritu Santo with just four bungalows on the water and a restaurant-bar, see [moyyan.com](http://moyyan.com). Bokissa Island Resort is on a remote coral island and has comfortable bungalows. Meals are communal buffets (the fresh lobster is amazing). It's popular with divers. Phone +678 30030 or see [bokissa.vu](http://bokissa.vu).

■ **Further information** See [vanuaturism.com](http://vanuaturism.com).

The writer was a guest of Vanuatu Tourism and Air Vanuatu.