



# DISCOVER VANUATU'S *hidden secrets*

PORT VILLA HAS SOME GREAT 'FLOP-AND-DROP' RESORTS, BUT THERE'S ALSO A WHOLE LOT MORE TO DISCOVER IN VANUATU.

'WE'LL GO TO THE TOP of the waterfall and upside down,' says Warren, our abseiling guide from Edge Adventures. Our group looks at him quizzically trying to decide if we had heard right. With a strong Ni-Vanuatu (local islander) accent, Warren is actually talking about 'abseiling down', exactly what we were here to do. His instructions had been baffling us all morning but we soon tune in and get down to business.

Once we step into our harnesses, and after a few practice runs down a small cliff, our group of five hit the big one, the Cascades Waterfall, where we abseil down the roaring waterfall in

three stages, landing feet first in a deep pool. It's exhilarating fun and we all want to do it again and again!

Vanuatu is just a few hours hop, skip and a jump from Australia, so it's not surprising that 65 per cent of its tourists are Australian. As a destination, Vanuatu has much more to offer than just its capital of Port Villa, which is situated on the main island of Efate. Port Villa is a staple on cruise ship itineraries, so if your visit coincides with 'cruise ship day', you'll witness a hive of activity as locals make the most of the influx of tourists, with local tours running at full capacity. Make sure you stop off at the local market to browse

the colourful and clever displays of fruit, vegetables and other treats.

Gaining independence 22 years ago from Britain and France, there's an exotic vibe about the place, with Commonwealth ex-pats well and truly represented as well as French, Chinese and other Pacific Islanders. Most locals juggle three languages – Bislama, a form of pigeon-English, English and French. My lack of a multi-lingual tongue leaves me feeling totally inept, coming away from a two-year stint in France with not much more than a vocabulary consisting of 'bonjour, como ça va?'

Luckily, when our French ride picks

us up one afternoon, his English is far superior to my French. Vivacious and energetic, Pascal from Ecotours Vanuatu arrives at our resort in the Ecotruck that screams 'look at us!' We pile into the back of this large open-sided safari truck towing a huge rack of mountain bikes, which makes us feel like an exhibit driving through Port Villa's suburbs. But the locals are used to it and I notice Pascal greeting most people we pass.

The cycling tour is a great way to get out of town, feel the wind in your hair, get your heart pumping and take a peek at local life. We hit a mix of off-road tracks that pass through coconut plantations, cattle farmland and local villages that still live a simple existence as though the tourist resorts of Port Villa don't exist. You don't have to be an avid bike rider to enjoy this tour, as it's suitable for all levels with lots of stops for Pascal to share his local knowledge. We 'ooh' and 'ahh' at empty unspoiled beaches and fail to see another tourist for the whole three-hour trip. It's hard to believe that we're only 30 minutes' drive outside the country's capital!

Wreck dive fanatics should jump on a plane and head north to Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu's largest island and a diving mecca that includes the 22,000-tonne US troop carrier SS President Coolidge, which sank in 1942 after hitting US landmines. It's the largest and most accessible wreck dive in the world, and can keep you mesmerised for weeks.

If you're not quite up to scuba diving, then Million Dollar Point is a great dive site, ideal for snorkellers. Thousands of tonnes of war surplus were dumped in the ocean by the departing US army after World War II and there are still jeeps, crates of Coca Cola bottles, and all manner of wartime memorabilia to explore from closer to the surface.

When I travelled here over ten years ago, getting around was slow going, but nowadays it's a breeze with a newly finished bitumen highway that will ensure you are lazing on white powdery beaches before morning tea.

### ACTIVITIES ON EFATE:

- + River kayaking
- + Cycle tours
- + Bush walking
- + Abseiling the Cascades waterfalls
- + Oceanwalker helmet dive
- + Buggy tours
- + Jet boat adventures
- + Scenic helicopter flights
- + Scuba diving and snorkelling
- + Sailing
- + Surfing
- + Custom village visits

### ACTIVITIES ON ESPIRITU SANTO:

- + Millennium cave trek
- + Canoe the Riri River
- + Scuba dive the President Coolidge and Million Dollar Point
- + Snorkelling
- + Swim in blue holes
- + Custom village visit with a water dance performance

### OTHER MUST-DO'S IN VANUATU:

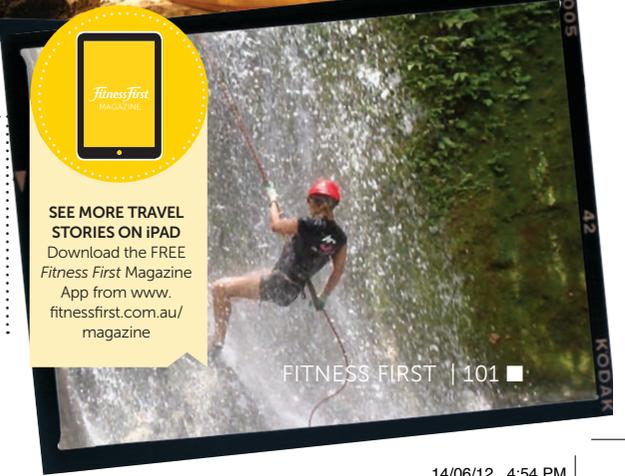
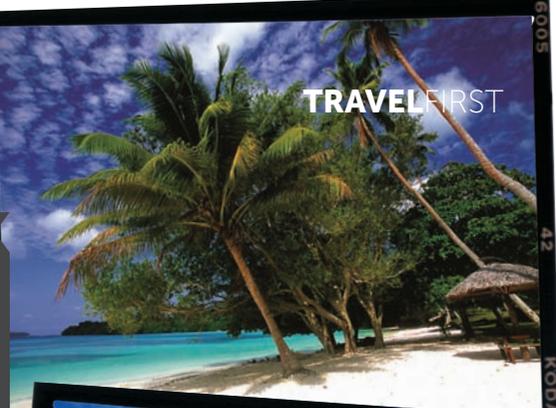
- + Pentecost Island land diving
- + Mount Yasur volcano on Tanna Island
- + Hiking on Malekula Island
- + Experience the Prince Philip and the John Frum's cargo cults on Tanna Island

### ANNUAL SPORTING EVENTS IN VANUATU:

- + Vanuatu Adventure Race
- + Vanuatu Open Water Swim
- + Wilco Relay
- + Vanuatu Marlin Classic
- + Tusker Vanuatu Golf Open
- + Coolidge Sinking Anniversary and Shore Dive Festival

*The writer was a guest of Vanuatu Tourism and Air Vanuatu, and stayed at Warwick Le Lagon Resort and Spa and Aore Island Resort.*

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