

VANUATU

Explorer Pedro Fernandez de Quiros laid eyes on the islands in 1606, naming the first one he sighted Nuestra Señora de Austrialia del Espiritu Santo, known today simply as Santo.

His lofty - if quixotic - ideal was to found New Jerusalem in the Pacific on the banks of a river he called the Jordan. But the locals didn't really want to be saved and the prevailing south-easterlies continually hindered the Spanish landings. De Quiros wandered off into the Pacific not long after he arrived, presumably believing his failure had condemned the unsuspecting ni-Vanuatu to burn for eternity. Among the Spanish, Portuguese and French explorers who followed was Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who wrote that he had been transported to the garden of Eden'.

The ni-Vanuatu pride themselves on their musical instruments, of which the tam-tam - also called the slit-drum or slit-gong - is a fine example. Traditionally used in ceremonies, it is an intricately carved log with a slice hollowed out from the centre from which the sound reverberates. Panpipes are also common in music, as are conch shells, which double as bush telephones. On Santo they play a three-holed flute, while on Ambrym a long, carved musical pipe is played. Ambrym is also home to the most elaborate sand drawings in Vanuatu, which villagers employ to illustrate legends, songs, ceremonies or to leave messages. Stone, wood and even treefern carving has developed into an intricate art form owing to the abundance of available materials, and in the north the sculptors sometimes use coral to carve small statues. Magic stones carved from pumice are part of Vanuatu's hidden life and are generally not on display. Tattooing was once a high art form but is becoming rarer, although body and rock painting are still widely practiced.

Vanuatu's fractured terrain has produced a kaleidoscope of cultures and more than 100 indigenous languages. Isolated from each other by sea or impassable mountains, disparate groups of islanders had hundreds or thousands of years to jealously guard their own cultures and languages or to throw them in the mix with their neighbours. The indigenous population is an assemblage of Melanesian - the black people of the Western Pacific with links to Papuans and Australian Aborigines - Polynesian, the lighter skinned people of the eastern Pacific, and varying degrees in between. While Bislama is a linguistically unifying factor, English, and more commonly, French are also spoken.

You've got to hand it to the ingenuity and sense of humour of a people who invented bungee jumping to get their yams in on time. You think Vanuatu's beaches are unbeatable on one island until you reach the next. Divers are delighted at the pristine waters, coral reefs and accessible shipwrecks; vulcanologists' eyes go misty at the mere thought of its many smoking peaks; and naturalists lust after its untouched forests, reefs and extravagant bird life. The islands shimmer with a green that almost hurts the eyes amid an ocean so blue you'd think the picture was doctored.

The ni-Vanuatu, as islanders are known, have bounced back today and are among the friendliest and most welcoming people in the Pacific. Since independence in 1980 travellers have been kicking back in the country in ever greater numbers to surf, dive, water-ski, trek and relax. And if any of that sounds too active there's an especially mellow-inducing brand of local firewater called kava to take all your hinges off and implant the suspicion that the 20th century is just a bad dream after all.



FILE

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FACTS ABOUT VANUATU

Population:	189,000
People:	Melanesian & Polynesian (94%), French (4%), Chinese, Pacific Islanders and Vietnamese (2%)
Size:	533,000 sq. miles
Religion:	Christian (84%) Animist (16%)
Language:	Bislama ('pidgin' English), French, English and more than 100 indigenous languages