

DESTINATION SOUTH PACIFIC

01 Canoeing from the sea to Matevulu Blue Hole
Images © Trevor Onn

Remote and beautiful, the island of Espiritu Santo beckons travellers to experience James A Michener's real Bali Hai. As Jenni and Trev Onn discover, exploring an island paradise takes more effort than you'd think.

Espiritu Santo is the largest island in the Archipelago of Vanuatu. Because the northern roads are very rough, it's slow going for those who intend to visit the famous beaches and geological wonders of the north-east region.

A good plan is to choose some accommodation in the area and make day trips to the incredible beauty spots.

DAY ONE

Our party of four arrive at Pekoa airport in Air Vanuatu's Boeing 737 – 800. As we walk across the tarmac the warmth of the earth rises up into our feet as if we were in bare feet.

The scented air hints at cooking fires, tropical flowers heavy with

summer nectar and a steamy humidity that thaws us immediately.

A smiling ni-Vanuatu man holds a welcome card in our direction indicating he has picked us out as his likely bus transfer clients.

Our luggage is swiftly stowed in the back of a ute and we, the adventurous four, are advised to wait in the shade while the other passengers are sorted.

Shortly we have our complete contingent and we pile into the bus to begin the journey to the north-eastern coast of Santo, with the unanimous thought of "follow that luggage" going through our individual minds.

In Vanuatu you drive on the right, as you do in Europe. Well at least that's the intention but due to the potholes

and corrugations enroute we spend as much time on the left, until someone approaches from the other direction and the shuddery crossing over the middle 'proper' part of the road is inevitable.

The long and very bumpy road trip takes us past green hills, cattle, a few wandering villagers, James A. Michener's cottage (Wow !) and glimpses of an incredibly bright aqua ocean.

UNDERWATER WWII RELICS

WATCH OUT FOR THE PROP!

Early next day we climb into an inflatable dive boat to snorkel Oyster Island's southern reef which boasts the scattered remains of a WWII fighter plane.

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We round the bend of Oyster Island and anchor in the unbelievably blue water at the edge of the reef.

The wreck is positioned on a sand covered cliff which drops away to a great depth. The ocean is clear but white sand coats everything on the bottom and it takes some time to distinguish the plane bits from the reef itself. A battered wing is spotted first; then at some distance the unmistakable shape of the cockpit looms up from the steep slope. A large propeller is supposed to be around here somewhere but we are unable to find it. The tide is coming in fast and soon it will be impossible to continue the search without scuba gear.

I pop to the surface to keep an eye on the location of our boat and I notice our guide calling and pointing into the water below so I quickly swim over and see the long spike of a propeller jutting out vertically from the sea floor. The rest of the blades

are driven deep into the sand where they have been lodged for some 50 or more years. It is quite eerie when you think about it.

After this we head across to the calm side of the bay to locate the submerged fuselage of another old plane which rests in very shallow water making it easy to explore from the beach off the mainland. A less dramatic story surrounds this wreckage. It was discovered in the rainforest by local ni-Vanuatu people and dragged into the ocean for the benefit of kiddie-pool snorkellers.

An fascinating feature of this water is that the top few feet consists of fresh water from a nearby river whose source, the Matevalu Blue Hole pours vast quantities of bright blue water into the bay. The fresh water shimmers and is difficult to see through but dive a few feet down and everything becomes crystal clear.

A colony of tiny iridescent fish lives in the plane's fuselage and I

am amazed at how many variations of blue there are in this place, even underwater!

BUT WAIT! THERE'S MORE BLUE!

VANILLA, PINEAPPLES AND BLUE

Not content with the incredible ocean wonders we decide to explore the interior by 4WD. Along with our driver Chief Joseph and a guide in a second vehicle there are eight of us on this excursion; two honeymooners from Sydney, two American Forensic Pathologists, two retired ladies, and us, the writer and the photographer.

Mile a minute vine, the biological relic from WWII, covers large tracts of the native rainforest and through this encroaching greenery a network of narrow roads, little more than rutted tracks, link villages and farms.

First stop is Fanafo Village where we meet Chief Villa. He speaks no English but our guide, who was raised in Vanuatu, translates Villa's friendly welcome message.

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