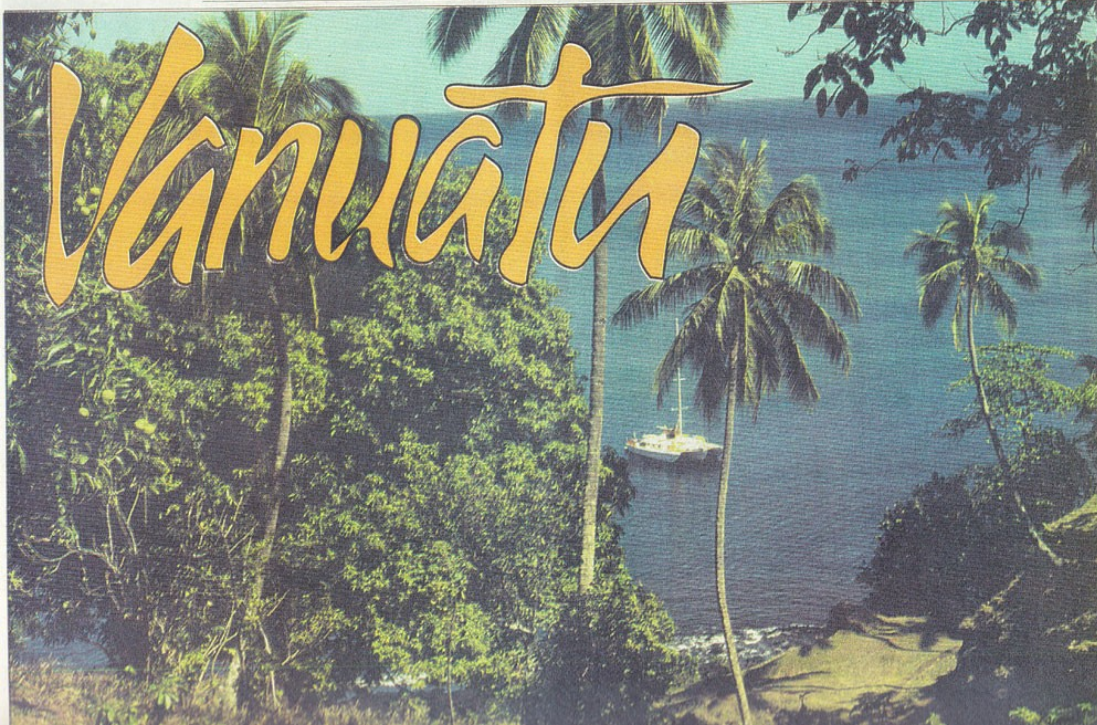


SOUTH PACIFIC ISLANDS HAVE CHANGED LITTLE SINCE CAPTAIN COOK'S DAY



By ALAN R. LEWIS  
Special to The Okanagan Saturday

The quarter moon peeks in and out of the heavy layer of broken cloud, yet does little to illuminate the silhouette of the rugged island known as Efate.

Volcanic peaks lurk over the lagoon sheltering our steel-hulled, 43-foot trimaran, The Enchantress. James, our Australian skipper and I haul the anchor from the coral bottom.

With fingers crossed that we'll be able to free ourselves from a forgiving anchorage, we say goodbye to Efate and set a course for the remote islands of Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides. These islands have resisted western influence since their discovery by Capt. James Cook in 1774.

Our sails fill with the predictable southeasterly trade winds blowing from our aft quarter. A strong, following sea accompanies us from the south.

The route for this two-month expedition will take our group of six multi-nationals more than 2,500 miles, starting in the Fijian islands, sailing west to the Solomon chain, then north through the Solomons and Santa Cruz islands.

Eventually, our throwback in time will land us on the eastern shores of Papua New Guinea. Our purpose: the acquisition of primitive art served up on a bed of romantic adventure in the first degree.

#### MALEKULA

Closely, we follow the information in the navigators' guide, The South Pacific Pilot, the bible of our journey. Our destination today is the small village of Aulua on the east coast of Malekula, the second largest island in Vanuatu.

"According to our charts, a small freshwater stream from the interior mountains bisects the village. Rather than run our limited water supply too low, we'll stop here," Jim says.

We drop anchor in a lagoon protected on three sides by a shallow coral reef.

A dark and narrow deep water channel separates brilliant coral fields a metre below the crystal clear surface. In a rainbow of colors and shapes, inquisitive fish are everywhere.

Within moments, we're surrounded by dozens of children in outrigger canoes, intent upon converting our sail-

boat into a floating playground. Jim, and his wife Patty, paddle our dinghy into shore to collect fresh water and pay respects.

We bring our stereo speakers on deck, hitting previously undiscovered decibel levels as everyone joins in singing and dancing and, of course, taking turns throwing each other into the water. Total mayhem.

With a population of 16,000, Malekula is home to some of the most inaccessible tribal groups in the South Pacific, the small Nambas. Access to this fast-disappearing culture is treacherous and impossible without the aid of a guide. The opportunity presented itself and, of course, we jumped.

After three days of mountains, valleys and stream crossings, the rewards are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Greeted by the resident village big man, wearing little more than his penis sheath and a few pandanus leaves, we are made to feel welcome.

Our curiosity is reciprocated by our hosts, especially toward the blond hair of my companion, Amanda. This is an unnatural sight for the majority of the tribe, whose global insights don't extend much beyond the hills and valleys that envelope the village. I busy myself with trying to absorb as much as I can during our brief visit.

We are presented with ritual objects of strange, overmodded skulls covered in a paste with boar's tusks protruding, on the end of a four-foot stick. While these colorful, fragile and eerie representations of someone's deceased relative may not be for everyone, they became the centrepiece of our experience with the small nambas of Malekula.

#### SHOWER AT SEA

Back aboard The Enchantress, we experience only hot, cloudless days enroute northward. A combination of high humidity and a persistent film of saltwater makes the prospect of a freshwater shower an anticipated event.

It rains, finally. In delirium, with soap and shampoo in hand, we enjoy the luxury of a shower. That's the beauty of the outdoor experience: a heightened appreciation of the basics. Simple



ALAN R. LEWIS/Special to The Okanagan Saturday  
A remote spot on a remote island: Lewis poses with villagers after bartering.



wood-fire meals ashore resemble gastronomic delights, an old wool sweater provides warmth on a drizzly day and an open-sided tarp keeping you dry and protected takes on the qualities of a dream home.

#### THE BLACK ISLAND

Our approach to Ambrym - known as the black island - is accompanied by darkening skies, a sudden drop in temperature and driving rain, perfectly befitting an island of mystery, voodoo and witchcraft.

French. We actually make considerable headway communicating.

We hike inland, up through a steep garden area and arrive at an open grassy spot, surrounded by thick vegetation and a dried-up creekbed.

Here, we are treated to a smorgasbord of carvings. Ten-foot ceremonial slit drums appear in godlike fashion at the head of the arena. A group of villagers appear, displaying their distinct carvings - tree fern figures, pig killing clubs and miniature slit drums - all indigenous to Ambrym, and respected by art collectors around the world.

Our imaginations are in overdrive, thinking about mysterious occur-

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## VIA VANUATU

■ **WHERE:** In the South Pacific ocean, a group of 80-plus islands running basically north/south between the Equator and the Tropic of Capricorn, between Fiji and the Solomon Islands.

■ **POLITICAL STATUS:** The Republic of Vanuatu, along with Fiji, New Caledonia, The Solomons and Papua New Guinea form Melanesia.

■ **HISTORY:** Named the New Hebrides by Capt. James Cook in 1774. Jointly governed by France and Britain until 1980, when it declared independence under the name Vanuatu.

■ **CAPITAL:** Port Vila, Efate Island.

■ **POPULATION:** 135,000.

■ **CLIMATE:** Tropical in the north, sub-tropical in the south. Hot season is November through April.

■ **LANGUAGES:** More than 100 languages and dialects are spoken with Bislama - similar to pidgin English - dominant. French and English are other main languages.

THE OKANAGAN SATURDAY, MARCH 1, 1997

# In the doldrums? Try a South Pacific sail

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE D1)

Our imaginations are in overdrive, thinking about mysterious occurrences on ceremonial evenings, realizing that cannibalism has been abolished for less than a generation – supposed.

As the sky darkens, our acquisitions are complete. We begin our steep trek down the garden path for a two-and-a-half hour journey back to the lagoon. We have hired a local couple, Isaac and Emily, to guide us with the aid of kerosene lamps and my indispensable Mag-Lite.

Our guides find trails where no trails exist, as our expedition begins to resemble a Steven Spielberg adventure film. Crickets and creatures of the night echo in full symphony.

Breaking out of thick vegetation we discover a new challenge – a river crossing.

The creeks are swollen from heavy rains, and this one – about 100 feet across – is no exception. With packs, lamps and artifacts held high, the five of us form a human chain, facing upstream.

The rushing water speeds by us, to upper-thigh depth. To lose our footing as we cross the river would mean being swept into the sea.

We gather ourselves on the opposite side, exhausted. Our resident anthropologist, a British woman named Gillian, is visibly pale.

Isaac and his wife just smile, as if this had been a routine walk in the park.

## STORMY WEATHER

The islands of Melanesia average two or three hurricanes every year, usually in January or February. Developing just south of the equator, they build in velocity and can become gale force winds within minutes.

The time of year is early December.

Our next two weeks are characterized by light

– yet unpredictable – winds by day and powerful electrical storms many nights. Watches on the ships wheel have been in two-hour intervals around the clock.

One night on my watch – after three days of near doldrum conditions – menacing clouds open and close at will. The Enchantress has never felt so vulnerable as she tosses on the sea.

Rumbles give way to cracking thunder as winds pick up to half-gale velocity. Flashes of lightning illuminate the horizon.

The boat is now screaming through the eight- to 10-foot swells. Torrents of rain and wind almost blind me; it's all I can do to hold onto my post.

Warnings from friends back home echo in my ear: "Are you crazy? Sailing a trimaran with a keel-less hull into open ocean? It'll flip when the swells build!"

The sheets must be eased. "Point her head to wind," Jim roars from the foredeck as he attempts to change the jib and reef the mainsail.

As quickly as the storm grew, it subsides, leaving in its wake an exhausted crew and vessel, both still standing after the ordeal. The critics have been proven wrong.

## THE BANKS GROUP

The last group of islands in Vanuatu we visit is the Banks group, named after Joseph Banks, Captain Cook's botanist aboard the HMS Resolution. From this point we continue northwesterly through the Coral Sea into the Santa Cruz and Solomon Islands.

Constantly, we keep a trolling line off our transom. The supply of fresh fish has been unceasing. I've actually discovered a new purpose for my carved, mother-of-pearl walking stick –



ALAN R. LEWIS/Special to The Okanagan Saturday

Step back in time: life for the islanders of the Vanuatu is simple. Food, water, shelter and a universe that does not extend beyond their remote villages in the South Pacific.

three young men in canoes arrive, laden to the gunnels with bananas, coconuts, mangoes and pineapples.

Accompanying the offering is an introduction to a ceremonial pastime among the islanders, the drinking of kava, an intoxicating beverage made from the crushed roots of a Polynesian shrub.

Passing up a couple of tangled root systems, 15-year-old Mathew, in excellent English, says "We like to share local custom with friends."

While Amanda and Patty put the finishing touches on Jim's 40th birthday cake, our guests prepare the kava. The roots are chewed, like tobacco, until the kava becomes a fibrous pulp, then expectorated into a large wooden bowl.

Stuff, chew, spit. Stuff, chew, spit. This is truly an unappetizing sight to witness.

After delivering a sufficient offering in the bowl, the mounds are soaked in fresh water and strained through cloth while being worked by hand into a paste.

The result: a disgusting, distasteful liquid with a strong resemblance to dirty dishwater.

"Now, we drink," Mathew says with a grin from ear to ear.

Ritual has it that all participants sit in a circle around the kava bowl, passing a half coconut shell around the group. Politeness is important as everyone claps their knees with encouragement. Especially interesting is watching the facial contortions after a dip of this sweet sauce.

I'm not certain the supposed narcotic effect of the plant is worth the pain of the swallow, but who knows?

Maybe this is the South Pacific's version of Dom Perignon.

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to put these meals on a hook out of their misery.

It has become customary to develop a trading relationship with each group of locals we encounter. In exchange for canned food, sugar and tobacco we receive fresh fruit, vegetables and eggs. No danger of scurvy on this trip.

The next morning we wake up to the sounds of at least a dozen tropical birds, twittering in the overhanging forest.

At 15° south latitude, floating somewhere in the South Pacific, this is the type of escapism you only dream about.

Feeling secure with our anchorage and in no hurry to move on, midday arrives, and with it