



AKAMA REPORT 28

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Sola to - Oyster Island (Vanuatu)

Sola, the most northerly CIQ (Customs Quarantine & Immigration) point in Vanuatu is a very sleepy little place. As we arrived on a Saturday night, there were no officials around to clear us in, and nobody bothered us. This was good, as we needed the sleep after having made an unexpected long passage. On Monday, we dutifully went to the customs office only to find out that the officer had left for another island and would not return until later that day. We feared the worst: bureaucracy, graft, corruption, island time hours. However, when he did eventually show up the customs officer and the quarantine officer came aboard and were most professional and reasonable. We entered Vanuatu without incident. We were told that there were few mosquitoes at this time of year, as it is winter (right we know what winter is and this isn't it); so, malaria is less of a risk. We were also informed that there are no unsafe areas in Vanuatu. For any yachties following in our wake, we don't recommend staying in the Sola anchorage in high winds from the NE through the SE. Sola is on the east side of the island and when the SE trades set in the roll can be uncomfortable. We rigged a stern anchor and deployed our anti-roll system, and were quite comfortable despite swells that occasionally were over 4-foot trough-to-crest. Other boats thrashed about, or left seeking a better spot.

On Wednesday, 23 June, we went around to the west side to Waterfall Bay. The winds and waves were high and getting around put us on a beam sea for a while, not too comfortable a point of sail. But, once we got around to the lee of the island things smoothed out. The anchorage still had only a small and gentle swell that rocked us asleep. This is a beautiful spot with a striking twin waterfall. The village chief, Mr. Kerely, and his family welcomed us and granted us the run of the area. The village is very small, neat and clean. They are very progressive, while living traditionally without electricity or running water. Yachts are welcomed graciously. We stayed an extra day here, just to veg out and to plan our route through Vanuatu. There is a festival here in September, which of course we have to miss, but we saw a video of last year's. For a little place they put on a heck of a show.

An interesting aspect of Vanuatu, especially in the outer islands, is the extent of the custom rights. As westerners, we are used to nobody owning the sea, or even the foreshore, and of having the right to go where we wish. In Vanuatu, somebody owns everything, usually including the reefs as far out as they can be seen down through the water from a canoe on a fair day. This means that one cannot go ashore, fish, or even swim or snorkel anywhere without first seeking permission. The permission is invariably granted, unless the place is a "taboo area", and a small fee is sometimes asked for, especially for things ashore. While some may find this custom charming, we find it restrictive and will probably skip some places. It is just too much of a pain to first seek out the village chief before going for a snorkel or taking a walk on the shore. Sometimes it takes a bit of time, as it is not immediately evident which of several nearby villages might house him. In a few cases, this requires going to another island. Custom rights like this were also evident in the Solomon Islands, although in most cases they seemed less onerously observed. They can and do lead to economic problems. We were told of many instances in

both countries where a proposed industry was either not started or was abandoned because people kept coming out of the bush claiming custom rights over this or that parcel of land, foreshore or reef.

On the 26th, while en route from Gaua Island to the national park on Espiritu Santo Island, we saw our first whales! As if to make up for the many missed sightings before, this one was super. First, in the distance we saw many whales blowing water as they surfaced for air. They were on a reciprocal course to ours and as we neared we could see them more clearly. We got the best look through our stabilized binoculars, and the climax was when one brute surfaced, blew, and then as it sounded first his back and then tail flukes came out of the water in a gentle rolling motion.

This reminds us that we should comment on binoculars in a bit more detail than we did in Report 4 (available on www.nunas.com). We cannot imagine going back to our venerable 7x50 binoculars, now that we have used our stabilized 14x40s for a few years. We chose the Fujinon brand, as they are totally waterproof. They cost a bit more than a fine pair of 7x50s, but are so much better that they are worth the extra. They bring things much closer, and when we engage the stabilization feature all of the jitter is removed, leaving only a slow swaying motion. At night, ships that appear to the naked eye to be a single indistinct light are resolved to the point where the individual navigation lights can be seen easily.

The National Park at the head of Big Bay has a beautiful black sand beach and an excellent bay with good holding in black sand. We went ashore and had a guided bush walk; the guide explained the uses to which the natives put all of the trees, and she identified many of the bird calls. Unfortunately, it rained about half way through; so we rushed the last half a bit. The family that runs the place is very friendly. They have a few bungalows for rent. The swell there was only slight; so we were very comfortable.

Our next stop was Hog Harbour (15-8.9S x 167-6.5E), the site of Champagne Beach, reputed to be the most beautiful beach in Vanuatu. We could not find enough shelter behind the reef near the beach; so we moved farther into the bay behind a headland in front of Lannoc Beach Bungalows. On the way in to anchor, a local man in a small boat said something that we could not understand; more on this in a bit. We went over to Champagne Beach by dinghy and it was beautiful, but just a tourist trap. Upon arrival, a man came out and advised that the fee to use the beach would be 5000 vatu, which is an extremely high fee. We left and went to the resort in front of which we were anchored, where we encountered the man from the little boat. He asked us how much they were trying to get from us at Champagne Beach. When we told him he just laughed and said, "I told you so; they have no facilities - just a beach but charge high fees". For anyone coming this way, we recommend anchoring near Lannoc Beach Bungalows. They have a beautifully landscaped property, reasonable beach, a great view, a dozen or so cottages (extremely austere but clean), and a small restaurant. Just to put this in perspective, we spent 3280 vatu (about 40 dollars Canadian) at the resort and we each had a beer, a kava and a small steak dinner. The cottages at the resort are interesting. Some are traditional leaf huts, while others look like concrete. Upon closer inspection, they are made from burlap! They erect a wooden frame, and then soak burlap sheets in a mixture of water and concrete. The burlap is stretched over the frame and nailed in place. When it dries the result is a thin, reinforced "concrete" panel.

On Tuesday the 29th, we ran south about twenty miles to Petersen Bay (15-22.6S x 167-10.9E), where we anchored in front of Oyster Island Resort. This was a very difficult approach, as we had to make our way through a very narrow passage in a reef. Once inside, we anchored in a very nice hurricane hole. The resort is very interesting, and it provides some hope for those of you who dream of escaping to a desert island. Anna and Jean-Pierre, a genial French couple, leased the island about ten years ago, and then built a home for themselves and a small resort (a few bungalows, a restaurant and a bar). We

should mention that Anna and Jean-Pierre are both excellent chefs. On the rest of the island they have a herd of beef cattle, some goats and some free range chickens. We asked them if they were busy; the answer was interesting. "Just busy enough. We don't want a lot of guests, as we are semi-retired." They love their life on their little piece of paradise. This is another place we recommend; you can email them at oysteril@vanuatu.com.vu.

We anchored at Oyster Island for a few days, as we were having a good time and the weather outside the reef was bad. SAMPAGUITA, MUSCAT and SELKIE were here when we arrived; so we were among friends, and we met Frieda and Bruno of MORAY-X, who have been anchored here since January. One day we were watching Whiskey, a dog, harass a little goat. At one point, he drove it well out into the water. We feared that he would drown the goat, so we hopped in the dinghy to rescue it. As we were readying the dinghy, Bruno and Freida hopped into theirs and were frantically rowing towards the melee, beseeching us to hurry. They could not see the goat or the dog and, unknown to us, from the sound the goat was making they thought that one of the girls from the resort was drowning and crying out for help. They could not figure out why we were taking our time and we could not figure out why they were so frantic. Once we all got to the 'scene of the crime' it all became clear and we had a good laugh. We hauled the kid aboard our dinghy and returned her to Anna. Later, Jean-Pierre, gratefully for our assistance, cooked us a fantastic Italian meal. Since Peter and Flavia of SAMPAGUITA had earlier rescued J-P's errant dinghy, he treated them too. A party broke out, resulting in hangovers the next day! The following night we had another terrific dinner, at the resort, paying this time. Still, it was a bargain at 4200 vatu (about 50 dollars Canadian) for a big meal and some beers for the two of us.

One of the attractions at Oyster Island is the blue holes. These are springs at the bottom of holes at the head of rivers, with water so clear that in the deep areas it looks strikingly blue. The water wells up from the hole and the flow is sufficient to create a small river. We visited the nearer one first, but access to the hole was blocked by a large number of water lilies; still, it was a nice run up the little river. Bruno and Anna came with us to see the other one. We miscalculated the tide and had to drag the dinghy across numerous sandbars. This was not easy as the darned thing weighs about 300 pounds. At one point, we had to pull the boat against rapids that were coursing under a bridge. But, it was worth the effort, as the blue hole was exactly as advertised. At the head of the narrow river, there is a secluded round pool surrounded by trees. The water is deep and clear. We played in the water until the tide had turned and then enjoyed a leisurely trip down the river and back to our boats.

We went by truck to Luganville, over a very rough road. Parts of it are paved and parts are nothing more than a collection of potholes. Jean-Pierre, who was driving us, told us that it was made by the US forces during the war and it has not been improved since in most places. He explained that the road passes through the properties of dozens of people, each with custom rights. So, unlike in developed countries, where the Government owns the road, this one is owned by all the people through whose land it passes, and none of them can agree to improve it. Nobody wants to push the issue, as any one of them could simply fence off his portion on the road! On the way, we passed the road to Surundu, where there was a major US base during the war. James Michener was stationed there and no doubt frequented Bloody Mary's Bar, featured in South Pacific, which still stands.

Well, that's all the new for this instalment. Stay tuned...we are headed for islands with active volcanoes next!