



AKAMA REPORT 29

Oyster Bay to - Port Vila (Vanuatu)

On 5 July, the wind finally let up long enough to get across from Oyster Island to Ambae Island, about 30 miles to the east. Ambae is reputedly the inspiration for James Michener's fabled island, Bali Hai, which was featured in the movie South Pacific. He was supposedly gazing out to sea from Surundu, when the tops of the clouds that were obscuring Ambae dissipated, leaving what looked like an island sitting atop the clouds. Interestingly, none of the three versions of South Pacific made to date were filmed anywhere near here. We anchored at Lolowai (15-17.3S x 167-58.6E), in a basin formed by an extinguished volcano that has one side open to the sea. The approach is riddled with lava rocks and coral heads; we felt it prudent to wait for the tide to rise a bit before going in. It is a good thing we did, as we had less than a metre under our keel at the shallowest point. There is a much larger volcano a few miles inland, which is considered to be the most dangerous potential volcano in Vanuatu. It has a crater with a thin floor that is filled with water, creating a lake. A steam vent above that provides stability by relieving the pressure. Apparently, geologists fear that if the floor of the lake gives away, the water will react with the magma making a spectacular explosion. We hoped to be well away from here before that ever happened! When we asked the local people about this they just shrugged and said, "I don't think it will happen"; no doubt Californians living along the San Andreas Fault line have a similar perspective.

On 6 July we stopped at Asanvari Village (15-22.5S x 168-08E) on Maewo Island. The locals here have created a "yacht club", to which they hope to attract cruisers. It is very well done, comprising a large club house with kitchen and a small souvenir shop. The village is pretty and well cared for, and the people are very friendly. We met the Chief's son, Nixon, and were taken on a tour of the village by a young boy, Michael. Nixon showed us a coconut crab that he had bought. They grow to be quite large and have claws powerful enough to tear a coconut open. Scattered throughout the village are a number of graves belonging to prominent families. One is Nixon's brother, who Michael's brother claims died from witchcraft, at the age of 29. In this part of Vanuatu many people still believe fervently in sorcery. Nixon told us that it was most likely caused by excessive alcohol consumption or a medical condition.

The next day we moved due south about twenty miles to Wali Bay (15-55.5S x 168-11E) on Pentacost Island. Maewo and Pentecost Islands are of volcanic origin, with spectacular waterfalls in the mountains. They are each about thirty miles long and about five miles wide, in a north/south line, making them a natural barrier from the persistent SE trade winds. The water along their western coast was tranquil. Wali and the neighbouring Homo Bay are the sites of the original bungee jumpers. The natives here, as part of their yam festival, erect high towers, attach vines to the top of the tower and to their legs, and then jump. Their heads just touch the ground in a puff of dust, as they jerk to a halt. Sometimes people are injured or even killed doing this. Jumpers are permitted to say anything they want, and apparently sometimes utter some pretty strong stuff. Alas, we missed the jumping season by about a month, as the festival runs from April to mid June. Outside this time the vines are apparently unsuitable.

The next day, we pushed on to Ambrym Island, through unusually calm seas. Upon landing at Ranon village (16-8.6S x 168-6.7E) by dinghy, we asked to see the local carvings, which are reputedly the

finest in Vanuatu. We were greatly disappointed, for while they were the best we have seen around Vanuatu, they were obviously cranked out for the tourist trade; there were bags of the same few things. The big attraction here is Fire Mountain, the English name for an active volcano. We had seen the glow at night from our previous anchorage on Pentecost, but nothing like the sight we had while anchored at the base. At night, the glow from the lava lights up the clouds and smoke above the crater. Way cool!

>From Ambrym, we went back west, to Malakula Island, anchoring in Crab Bay (16-10S x 167-44.6E). This is a secluded spot, as there is no village near here; we had the place to ourselves. We walked along a nice beach and spotted a small moray eel and a large coconut crab. We would caution anyone following in our wake into this anchorage to watch out for coral heads and other shoals that are unusually difficult to see. We did not take AKAMA deep into the bay. Good thing! When we went in by dinghy, we saw several huge coral heads and even struck one (no damage).

In the morning of 10 July, we went south to Banam Bay (16-20.6S x 167-44.6E), where we met John Eddy, brother of Chief Saitol; he paddles out to meet each cruiser. This area was recently hit by a massive cyclone. The Chief's daughter walked with us along the "main road" (not much more than a cart track), to show us some of the damage. It was impressive, as gardens were washed away in mud slides, the road was covered with mud and rocks, and huts and parts of huts were blown away. They have no coconuts, papaya or most other crops to eat. No one is starving, but they are clearly doing poorly. Still, nobody complained or begged. We were touched when the Chief's young granddaughter handed us a freshly laid egg; rather than keep it herself to eat. Back aboard AKAMA, we made up a package of things for the locals, including some clothes, food, the last of our balloons, and several handful of lollies. There were two other yachts in the anchorage, which we had seen before, SIOME and RIVENDEL II. It turns out that Allen and Martta of SIOME knew of the plight of the people here and came with a big load of donated items from New Zealand, including clothes, garden tools and food; the look on the locals' faces was most joyful as they unloaded the donations. Hank, of RIVENDEL is a doctor who for the past three years has been setting up first aid stations in many of the more needy places, including Banam Bay.

We did not snorkel on the large reef in Banam Bay, as Maurice still has unhealed coral cuts from pulling the dinghy through the rapids going into the blue hole at Oyster Island. Those who did snorkel said that the coral here is worth taking the time to see. We should explain to those of you who have not been to the tropics that coral cuts are a serious thing. Even a slight scrape can turn into a tropical ulcer, which can eat right down into the bone; it takes a lot of care and usually antibiotics to get rid of them. Unfortunately, Maurice is prone to these and his legs are becoming a mess from healed cuts and ulcers. Economists believe that tropical ulcers and Malaria are two major impediments to development in the tropics.

We tried to leave Banam Bay on the 11th, but turned back due to high seas. We ended up staying until the afternoon of the 12th, and it is a good thing we stayed. The bad weather drove a half dozen more boats into the bay and the people from SIOME organized a local dance and meal, as the people in this bay are renowned for their cultural dancing. It was spectacular. The men, clad in only a rolled leaf penis sheath, belt and war paint, did five different dances. The married women, clad in simple grass skirts did some similar dances. These were not your typical tourist dances, but the real thing; they dance several of these routinely, even when no tourists are present, including one that they do each time a baby is born, one when a male is circumcised, one when a female is looking for a groom and another featuring a sort of bogie man, which the local children were clearly afraid of. The food consisted of a young coconut (for drinking) and lap-lap. Lap-lap is food cooked inside leaves, in this case including manioc (the root tapioca comes from) and chicken. It is rather bland fare. We paid about US\$20 each for this,

which is rather high by local standards; we gladly parted with our money, as we knew that they were destitute due to the cyclone. Since there were about 18 of us, this constituted a rather large cash infusion into this needy community.

The trip to Awei Island (16-32S x 167-46.2E) on the afternoon of the 12th was quite rough, as we still had well over 20 knots of wind and large waves. But, we continued on, as we needed to get to Port Vila to pick up a package of repair parts. The weather was right on the nose and for the most part we ran up and over the waves like on a rollercoaster. Every once in a while we would hit a particularly large wave and the wind would carry the spray right over the pilothouse roof, over 15 feet above the water.

AKAMA goes to weather fairly well, for her size and it was actually fun, given that we only had to do this for a couple of hours. We had intended to anchor at Sakon Island, only two hours south of Banham, but SIOME left before we did and beat us to the only good anchorage spot there. We pressed on hard, through coral infested waters, luckily arriving just before dark. Our reward was a calm and beautiful anchorage that we had to ourselves. The next day it was too windy to leave. Two sailboats showed up, SAMPAGUITA, which we have cruised with a lot, and VOYAGER, some Americans who we had not yet met. We had a nice communal dinner on VOYAGER.

Now that we are quite far south, about a thousand miles south of the equator, and since it is winter in this hemisphere, it is getting cold, relatively speaking. Up around the equator we spent most of our time day and night in a quest to not sweat. Even moderate activity would cause us to break out in a sweat, causing us to take several showers a day. Now, the days seldom go above 29 degrees and the nights down to a chilly 23. We had to put a blanket on our bed and on particularly cool nights we wear our PJs! For a couple of Canadians this is a bit odd, as we are supposed to be able to take the cold. Indeed, back home this would not be considered cold at all. How one's perspectives change...

The next day, we pushed on towards Port Vila, stopping overnight at Emae Island's Sesake anchorage. This is not an anchorage per se, just an open roadstead in the lee of the island. Thankfully it was calm that night or we would have rolled badly in the swells. In the morning we started out early, hoping to stop for the night at Havana Harbour on Efate Island. We were unable to do so, as they are filming yet another of those Survivor TV shows. We tried another anchorage, on Lelepa Island with no success, then pushed on towards Port Vila, hoping to have favourable currents, which would permit us to arrive before dark. Part way along the west coast of Efate the Marine Police came out and ordered us to go further off shore; it seems that the Survivor people are taking up nearly the entire west coast of Efate. We refused, citing the danger of going into an unknown port in the dark. They bought this and allowed us to continue. We did have favourable currents and by pushing AKAMA a bit managed to anchor in Port Vila just before dark. We were exhausted, as we had not planned or prepared to go so far in one day, travelling from dawn to dusk.

So, that's it for now. We have arrived safe and sound in the capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila. We will tell you all about that in the next report.