



## AKAMA REPORT 30

### Port Vila & Passage to Noumea

It just dawned on us that many of our correspondents have probably never heard of Vanuatu, let alone know anything about it. Vanuatu is an independent republic consisting of more than 80 islands. It is located about 5,600 km southwest of Hawaii and about 2,400 km northeast of Australia. From the late 19th century until independence in 1980, Vanuatu was called the New Hebrides, and was governed jointly by France and Britain.

Port Vila (17-45S x 168-18E), the capital of Vanuatu, on the Island of Efate, is the first actual city we have been in for about the past six months. It has a population of around thirty thousand, many of whom are foreign expatriates. Added to this, there are many western tourists (mostly Aussies and Kiwis); it is a bit odd to see so many white faces. The city has a bilingual, French/English, atmosphere.

We Med-moored (tied up stern-to the sea wall) at Yachting World (YW), which is the closest thing to a marina. We had electric power and water, what luxury. To get on and off the boat we literally had to "walk the plank", about a 12-foot by 8 inch wide plank running from the stern to the shore. One of the ladies in a nearby boat fell into the water, getting off of her boat. To make it a bit safer, Maurice rigged up two lines on either side, with which we could raise and lower the plank like a drawbridge. He also rigged a rope to help pull ourselves up at low tide when the angle is steep, or to slow our descent.

Port Vila is a "financial centre", which really means a tax haven. So, the amount of money around is reflected in the style and maintenance of the buildings and shops. We noticed that most of the successful businesses in the area are owned by expatriates, mostly Aussies and a few Americans; the variety shops, like everywhere around here are owned by Chinese. The locals are thus relegated to salaried jobs. Although most must be happy to have jobs at all, we wonder if there is any undercurrent of ill feelings; none is displayed. Indeed, we noticed that most of the people display the same sort of happy-go-lucky spirit that we noticed in many of the remote islands.

This is obviously a touristy town, as there are souvenir shops everywhere. We did not buy much, as we bought a lot in the other islands. We were tempted to buy a few local dresses as gifts for people back home, but common sense prevailed. The dresses in question, we call "Mother Hubbard" dresses, we are not sure why...something to do with the cut. Nearly all of the married women here wear them. They are rather loose fitting and are very colourful. Louise-Ann thinks they would make a great housedress; here they are worn everywhere. There is a good female string band that plays outside the Westpac Bank. Every day they have a different costume, always a variation on these dresses. Sometimes they wear hats woven from Pandanus leaves.

We are really enjoyed shopping in big grocery stores again; our view on what might constitute a paradise is definitely altered by our cruising experience! There are several supermarkets in Vila, stocking many things that we have not been able to get for months. The down-side is that everything here is expensive, compared to prices in SE Asia. We were astounded to see that the shops were openly

selling pirated computer software at about US \$20 per disk. Pirated movies go for 8 to 12 bucks a pop. In South East Asia both sell for only a few dollars each.

Good restaurants were rare where we've been, except at a few resorts. Some of the restaurants in Vila are very good; we've been trying different ones for various lunches and dinners. On the other hand, they charge big city prices. The Waterfront bar and restaurant right at the marina is a going concern, packed every night, and as Seven Seas Cruising Association members we get a 10% discount. The best value, though, is Jill's American Restaurant, which charges about what the rest do, but gives huge portions. In her menu, Jill boasts that one doesn't go there to count calories and we can attest to that. There are also a bunch of French restaurants that looked good, but we ran out of time and did not try any.

We got a badly needed package of spare and repair parts from the US, via DHL. We have discovered that Saint Brendan's isle, our mail forwarder in Florida, can not only supply us with boat parts from West Marine, but they come at a discount as well. Maurice has been up to his elbows in the bilges and engine room installing new pumps, switches, regulators and other mysterious stuff. We have had good luck in using DHL as the carrier; they seem to be able to get goods through without duty or delay. We are entitled to a duty exemption as a yacht in transit, but in some countries one does not get what one may be entitled to.

There are about a hundred boats in the area, something else that we have not seen for about six months. It is rather nice to get to know a bunch of new people. Some sailboats arrived from Fiji, having endured a bad passage. They are part of an around the world in two years sailing rally. Frankly, we don't get it. We know another couple that did it in four and a half years and quipped that they would not be in such an all fired hurry next time. As you all know by now, we are not only not in a hurry, but for the most part we do not even have a set itinerary, just a rough idea where we want to go.

One of the other yachts organized a 'round the island trip in a small bus. We stopped half-way to have lunch at a local resort (very rustic). One couple, Henry and Gail from MARITIME EXPRESS looked a bit familiar but we could not place them. It turns out that Henry worked in Moncton, New Brunswick for Transport Canada at the same time that Maurice worked there for Communications Canada. They retired a few years after we left Canada and have been cruising ever since. What are the odds? But wait, it gets odder. One evening over drinks Gail mentioned that her sister had worked in Singapore for a time. Get this...we know her! So, what are the odds!

30 July was the 24th anniversary of Vanuatu's independence. We put up some tube lights and a set of code flags spelling out "Happy 24 Birthday Vanuatu". The local boats dressed ship and did a cruise past. To get the spirit going we blew our horn and others followed suit. All in all, though, it was a rather low-key affair compared to Canada day at home.

One of the couples that we have been cruising with, Peter and Flavia of SAMPAGUITA, surprised us by announcing that they are terminating their voyage here in Vanuatu or maybe in New Caledonia. They've put their boat up for sale and plan to settle in Vanuatu. They have been busy looking for a retirement farm (now there's an oxymoron) to buy, and it looks like they have found one with a coconut plantation, cattle and hogs on Santo Island. It makes us wonder what we will do when and if we find a place that we would like to settle in. Neither of us can imagine living ashore, and at least for now we intend to keep on travelling aboard AKAMA "forever".

We decided to leave Port Vila on Wednesday, 11 August, thinking that we would make the 300 mile passage in two days plus another few hours. The GRIB files showed that the wind would move around to the east and drop...great for a power boat. Sure enough, on Wednesday morning it was calm with a light rain and the sailors were complaining that there was "no air". So we left. However, the wind gradually picked up and it did not turn east. We had winds of thirty knots with gusts to 45. This kicked up big waves, some about three metres high. We were both seasick in no time, Maurice for the first time in his life. Louise-Ann was the worst and could not eat for two days; she slept quite a bit during those two days leaving Maurice to do most of the navigating. Moreover, we could not travel quickly, as we were going right into the weather; thus we did not get into Noumea until Saturday morning, after three nights at sea. Poor AKAMA had salt water blown into every crack and crevice, and we now know where we have several leaks that need attending to. The worst one is in our pilothouse doors. We were constantly mopping up.

We will end this report with a few words about malaria, as several people have asked about it. We take no prophylactic medicine, on the advice of a friend who is a malaria researcher. Because of our route and timing, we would have to be doped up on drugs for long periods, and the drugs can have undesirable side effects. The most common prophylactic drugs these days are chloroquine and mefloquine (Lariam). The former is cheap and effective, except that in some areas the malaria parasites have become resistant. Mefloquin is better, but it is expensive. Doxycycline is probably the current favourite prophylactic anti-malarial agent in use around here; but, it has lots of side effects and proscriptions. Among other things, it can cause thrush in some women and it can provoke severe sunburn in some individuals. It is recommended that it should not be taken for longer than three months without a medical review. So, it is not much good for us.

Our primary line of defence is to not get bitten by an infected mosquito. So, if we are going ashore in dangerous areas we use bug dope with DEET, cover up, and try to avoid being outdoors at dusk and dawn, the periods when the female anopheles mosquito feeds. And, yes, we do kill the little buggers if we have mossies in the boat, using a standard domestic killer spray. So far, touch wood, we have made it through most of one of the world's most malaria ridden zones without any problem.

So, what will we do if we are infected, you might ask. Well, we carry creative doses of several drugs. The most interesting is artesunate, which has been used for many years by the Chinese. We bought it in PNG, as it not yet licensed for use in Australia, North America or Europe. It is recommended only for treatment not for prophylaxis. This stuff kills the malaria parasites and gets you back on your feet in only three days; one of our friends took it and it really works, and without side effects. After the artesunate one takes a short course of Fansidar, which we also carry, and that kills any remaining stages of the parasite. We also carry creative doses of Mefloquin. Of course, all of this is not for routine use. If we thought we had contracted malaria and could get to a clinic ashore, we would go there to get properly diagnosed.

Well, so long for now. Next report will be all about New Caledonia.