

Archipelago of Adventure: A Study of Tourism in Small Islands

By Prof. Donna Heddle and Dr Alex Sanmark.

In the spring of 2017, the [Institute for Northern Studies](#), University of the Highlands and Islands, gained funding from the [Global Challenges Research Fund](#) for a research project on sustainable tourism in the island nation of Vanuatu in Melanesia. The Institute has a strong profile in tourism, especially island tourism. A range of training programmes for tourist guides are offered and the Institute also runs an MLitt Programme in [Island Studies](#), partly focusing on management and development of tourism. It was on this basis that the Vanuatu research project was developed.

Vanuatu is a small developing country, which despite some economic difficulties, has managed to put in place a strategy which has resulted in an emerging, if not yet fully robust, tourism industry. The aim of our research project was to evaluate the Vanuatu tourism industry, in particular to examine the methods by which they have achieved its current level of tourism offer, and see what improvements could be suggested.



The Vanuatu Department of Tourism.

The major part of the work was carried out during a twelve-day visit to Vanuatu by Prof. Donna Heddle and Dr Alex Sanmark in May 2017. During this time, we visited three different islands, all of which are key tourist destinations: Efate where the capital Port Vila is located, Espiritu Santo in the north and Tanna in the south. In all three locations, we conducted in-depth workshop meetings with stakeholders including both government representatives and tourism practitioners. We also visited a range of tourist attractions, often in the company of local guides.



View from our hotel room.

Below follows a short diary from this visit.

11th May, Port Vila, Efate:

This first full day in Vanuatu was spent in meetings in Port Vila on the island of Efate. Our first stop was the Vanuatu Department of Tourism, where we met with the staff whom we had previously been in contact with via email and Skype, including Mr Jerry R. Spooner, Principal Accreditation Officer, Ms Célestina Jessa Yolou, Administration Officer, Mr Freddy Manueta, Project Officer, and Ms Nadia Kanegai, Senior Officer, Taxi Ambassador Program. We also had a separate meeting with Mr Donald Pelam, Acting Director of the Department of Tourism. Our discussions with the different staff members covered the current tourism offering in Vanuatu, the future tourism strategy and the biggest restraints on tourism developments, such as the lack of trained tourist guides. During our stay in Vanuatu we had several meetings with team members of this department.

In the afternoon, we met with Mr Philip Florian Ayong, Investment Promotion and Research Officer at the Vanuatu Investment Promotion Agency, who provided his view on investment opportunities for tourism in Vanuatu. Our next meeting was with Mr Honoré Noaida, Director of the Ekasup Cultural Village, where cultural experiences, such as traditional dancing and drinking ceremonies (*kava* drinking) are arranged specifically for tourists, above all cruise ship passengers.



The meeting with Honoré Noaida took place in the outdoor conference area of Vanuatu Department of Tourism. Donna is seen writing up the notes from the meeting.



We also had a very useful meeting with Mr Richard Shing, Acting Director of the Vanuatu National Museum and Cultural Center. We discussed many different issues, such as the strategic plan of the National Museum and how Museum staff could contribute to the development of cultural tourism and tourist guide training.



Alex, Donna and Richard Shing at the Vanuatu National Museum in Port Vila.

In addition, we went to the Port Vila airport to meet with Mr Kevin Dick, General Manager, Airports Vanuatu Ltd, who provided his view on opportunities for the future and outlined current problems with air travel for tourists.



Bauerfield International Airport, Port Vila.

12th May, Port Vila, Efate:

We started the day with a visit to the Vanuatu Department of Education, where we held an initial meeting with Margaret, a volunteer from Australia. This was a very useful meeting which gave us insight into the Vanuatu system of education and the current standard of qualifications. We also visited the Vanuatu Statistics Office, where we met with Anna Wells, who provided us with statistics on tourism in Vanuatu for the last 20 years.



To the left, Donna with Margaret, a volunteer from Australia, outside the Vanuatu Department of Education. To the right: the chickens outside the Department building.

In the afternoon, we visited the *Malvatu Mauri*, or the National Council of Chiefs, which is a formal advisory body of chiefs. Meetings are held in the assembly building (*nakmal*), which has recently been rebuilt after the last one was destroyed by the large hurricane of 2015. A local man, Tino, showed us round the building and also introduced us to Chief Paul from Pentecost Island.



The assembly building (*nakmal*) of the National Council of Chiefs. The image on top shows the building seen from afar, while the photo below shows Donna and our guide, who explained how the building was constructed and the symbolic meaning of the different features.



13th and 14th May, Port Vila, Efate:

We paid a visit to the Handicraft Market in Port Vila, where we interviewed a number of local producers and sales people. Popular local products include soap and art works, such as paintings and carved objects of wood and stone. Speaking to the vendors it became clear that locals were struggling to make enough sales due the low numbers of tourists who made their way to the market, even on the days when large cruise ships were in.



The ground floor of the Port Vila Handicraft Market.

During our time in Port Vila, we also interviewed many other local people, such as various staff members at Le Lagon resort, as well as bus and taxi drivers, who together gave us detailed knowledge into the tourism industry. We also explored Port Vila and its surroundings from a tourism perspective.



Alex and a local bus driver, who took us back to the resort.

15th May, Espiritu Santo:

In the morning, we travelled to the island of Espiritu Santo with Air Vanuatu. Once there, we continued our meetings, starting with Ms Beverley Anti and Ms Almonique Wells of the tourist resort Village de Santo, who described a downturn in recent tourism in the islands, due to problems with airport runways. They also outlined their ideas for future expansion of tourism.



The check-in desk for domestic flights, Bauerfield Airport, Port Vila.



View from the plane en route to Espiritu Santo.

Our next meeting took place in Luganville, the only town in the island. This time we interviewed Kay Clarke, Tourism Business Development Advisor, Department of Tourism in Luganville, Santo. Key themes discussed included the desperate need for an internationally recognised bench mark qualification across the archipelago and the cultural issues that would have to be addressed to provide a really good tourism product.



Almonique Wells and Donna in the restaurant of the Village de Santo resort.

In the afternoon, we went on a tour in the small car of a local guide. He took us to the Francophone village of Port Olry (pronounced Port Lory by locals) on the east coast. This is a stunning beach with crystal blue water, where there are bungalows with tourist accommodation and restaurants. Our next stop was the famous Champagne Beach, another very beautiful spot, which is a key location for cruise ships. Stalls for the selling goods to tourists had been erected just above the beach. One potential problem for visitors was that access to the beach was restricted by the chief who owned the land.



The beach at Port Olry, Espiritu Santo.



An outrigger canoe on the beach at Port Olry, Espiritu Santo.



Access to Champagne beach restricted by the owner Obed Toto.

16th May, Espiritu Santo:

In the morning we went horse riding at Santo Horse Adventures, a ranch for rescue horses run by Megan Roberts. This is a highly popular activity for tourists, and they at times have special deals for cruise ships passengers. Megan is also involved with the local community and runs many activities for children. On our 2-hour ride we went through a village consisting of bamboo bungalows, through the rain forest with banyan trees surrounded by butterflies, and also through a mangrove tunnel which took us to the sea and then back along to the beach. Afterwards we interviewed Megan who gave her view on the opportunities for cultural tourism in Vanuatu.



Donna and Megan Roberts at the airport café in Santo.

17th May, from Espiritu Santo to Tanna, via Port Vila:

In the morning we took the plane to Bauerfield Airport in Port Vila, where we caught a minibus into town for a second meeting at the Department of Education. This time we met the Project team of the Vanuatu Qualifications Authority, including CEO Mr David Lambukly. During this meeting we discussed in more detail the exact training needs in Vanuatu in terms of tourism and how these can be met.

In the afternoon we travelled to Tanna, where we stayed at the Tanna Evergreen Bungalows. This is the only resort in Vanuatu run by local people, and we interviewed the manager Mike, who explained the development and the future vision for the resort.



Tanna Evergreen Bungalows.

18th May, Tanna:

This day was spent on two different excursions to key tourist sites in Tanna, with local guides. In the morning, a driver took us in a jeep to Lenawawa, one of the 'cultural villages' in Tanna where people have chosen to live a traditional life style, living in bamboo huts and wearing traditional dress. We were met by a villager, who took us round and told us about the different aspects of their lives. We were then shown traditional cooking methods, as well as local games and dances.



The entrance to the Lenawawa 'cultural village', Tanna.



Lenawawa children showing us one of their games.



The national dish of Vanuatu being prepared inside a bamboo hut.



Grass skirt in production.



Our guide feeding the village chickens the cooking leftovers.

In the afternoon, we were taken on a tour to Mount Yasur, an active volcano in Tanna. On arrival, we could hear the rumbling from the volcano in the distance. At the foot of the mountain, we took part in an offering ceremony during which traditional dances were performed and were then driven up to the open crater in jeeps. At the time of our visit, volcanic activity was at 'level 2' and lava was being thrown up from the boiling middle of the crater.



The beginning of the path leading to Mount Yasur, which can be seen in the background. Note the smoke coming from the crater.



Offering and dance ceremony before our visit to the crater.



Lava being thrown out of the crater at Mount Yassur, Tanna.



Visitors, guided by torch light, making their the way down from the crater to the awaiting jeps.

19-20th May, Port Vila, Efate:

On May 19, after some delay, due to technical issues with the plane, we flew back to Port Vila in the aeroplane christened 'Betty Emma' after the first Tanna islander to fly on a plane in the 1950s.



The Betty Emma, in the process of being unloaded, Tanna airport.

During these last two days of our stay, we visited the cruise ship terminal in Port Vila, the market place where locals sell flowers, fruit and vegetables, and an indoor market where Ni-Vanuatu women made and sold clothes, above all dresses, but also frocks for dolls. In this market, there were also stalls with products for tourists, such as scarves and t-shirts. We also visited some of the duty-free shops, aimed especially at cruise ship passengers.

On the 21st of May we began our travel home via Singapore.



Produce for sale at the market in Port Vila.



At the market in Port Vila.

Conclusion

Our visit to Vanuatu made it clear that the structure for supporting the tourism strategy was not very developed and that, in fact, the tourism industry was in an embryonic and uncohesive state. We identified significant issues to address, the main one being the absolute necessity of articulating with international standards and creating recognised training for the tourism industry. This was recognised as a prime need by all interviewees as tourism development could not really take place without it. Another major issue is that the industry is in the hands of external stakeholders, not the Ni-Vanuatu. There is exploitation of the workforce as there are no recognised qualifications currently available, the international resorts pay staff the equivalent of 75p an hour, with no prospect of progression. There is a general lack of awareness among the Ni-Vanuatu of the value of their own cultural product. Also absent is an overarching 'Vanuatu identity' for products, as there is no 'Made in Vanuatu' marketing concept.

Training programme in development

The Institute for Northern Studies is currently developing a training programme for Vanuatu tourist guides, to be validated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority in conjunction with the Vanuatu Qualifications Authority. This programme has been developed with the input of all our correspondents. The aim is to upskill a workforce with an internationally recognised qualification of a high standard which would improve the cultural product on offer and attract more high end tourists. It would also improve the career economic prospects of this workforce as all tourism stakeholders would have to use this qualification as a benchmark. Furthermore, the programme could be accessed by business owners, craftspeople, and others working in the industry who wish to learn how to promote their products and enhance the tourism experience on the islands.

Contribution to the economic development and wellbeing of target recipients

This development of the training programme will contribute to economic development and wellbeing by:

Providing a progression route for those seeking a career in tourism

Creating job opportunities in delivering similar programmes and creating small to medium business enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism area.

Producing an internationally recognised qualification which will assure workers in the industry of a fair rate of pay with will have indirect benefits for their families and communities.

Future collaboration

There is also great scope for linking with other Pacific nations to offer tourism products telling the story of the South Pacific with various foci, such as World War II, which could, for example, become cruise packages. This is an area that we hope to develop in the future.



View from Champagne Beach on Espiritu Santo.