

Paddling Paradise

A kayaking trip around Vanuatu's small islands offers thundering volcanoes, tropical storms, village hospitality and a solid workout.

By Matthew Horan, The Courier-Mail - Brisbane

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THE journey from civilisation to adventure takes one hour, eight kayaks, buckets of sweat and at least five painful blisters. It's a short journey from the poolside cocktails of Vanuatu's innumerable resorts with their packaged programs of island life, but a journey that demands you grasp it – literally – with both hands.

And once you do, you find yourself outside the tourist trail in a land where you drift over heartbreakingly beautiful coral reefs, paddle beside dolphins and turtles, laugh with the locals as you share their pork and laplap, and gaze down the throat of an active volcano.

Paddling a sea kayak around a handful of the chain's 80 islands leaves you with a much greater sense of fulfilment, both from personal achievement and cultural appreciation, than from spending your days with the hordes of partygoers in Port Vila.

The 10-day kayaking trip in Vanuatu is one of the most accessible trips offered by Southern Sea Ventures, a Sydney-based firm that has similar trips all around the world, including both polar regions.

It's a journey that needs to be grasped with both hands. There are no porters, no restaurants, no duty-free stores. Everything you need you carry yourself. Actually it was a little worrying, seeing that the food fitted into a depressingly small number of waterproof barrels, but it turned out we had enough left over for a final feast.

The kayaks are Sevylor River XK2s – inflatable boats with a sturdy construction and plenty of tie-down points for the equipment.

We flew into Valesdir Airport on the island of Epi, a goat paddock of an airstrip, mercifully clear of goats. After piling the gear out of the back of the Twin Otter aircraft, we dragged it to the edge of the water and began inflating the boats.

We paddled for about two hours on the first day, past small coves and around reefs, before finding a small campsite in trees near Revolieu Bay.

Our guide, Tony Chessell, has spent years kayaking around Vanuatu and has a friend in each town. Within minutes of setting up our tents we were being led down the beach by Joseph, who looks after Tony's groups every few months, to see his village. We wandered among the vegetable plots, talked to Joseph's ancient father and filled our water bottles from the village spring.

If we were all relaxed and on island time, that night was a rude awakening about how tropical islands suddenly experience tropical storms. Stones whipped against flapping tents, tree branches crashed disturbingly close to our campsite and sleep was interspersed with bouts of terror as massive gusts pulled out yet another tent peg.

In the morning the sea was still boiling as we paddled towards Lamén Island to the north, with big offshore swells rocking our kayaks.

It took almost five hours of serious paddling to finally get to the island. There Max, our local kayaking guide, proudly showed us around his home, picking mandarins and coconuts for us to eat and drink. His family cooked a traditional roast meal of pork and laplap (a polenta-style paste) in a pit of hot volcanic rocks. We shared it sitting on the sand with the waves crashing over the reef behind us.

From Lamén Island we flew to the island of Ambrym, as wild and magical as Epi is relaxed and welcoming. There's still a hint of the wild South Pacific about Ambrym – a little more than 100 years ago they were still slaughtering Westerners here, although with good reason as most of the Westerners were slavers.

Paddling along Ambrym's west coast is an awesome experience, with massive cliffs of volcanic rock rising above. In 1937, Mt Benbow, one of the two active volcanoes on the island, blew its top, the lava flow melting a new coastline and more than a few local villages. Much of the coral is only now growing back, but there is some good snorkelling along the sheltered coves.

The volcanic activity also provides a wonderful spot to relax: a hot spring about halfway along the coast lets you soak tired muscles.

When we reached the village of Ranvetlam, about three days paddling north of where we started, we set out on a trek to the top of Mt Marum, the island's other active volcano.

It's about four hours of reasonably hard walking through steep jungle and desolate ash plains to reach an eerie creek shaped by lava flows. From there the walk is shrouded in sulphur smoke, as you pick your way towards the edge of the volcano rim and peer inside. Nothing.

But wait; our guide Edwin suddenly yells "Fire wind!" and scurries down the slope. We stand around bemused for a moment before realising that if the local is running away we probably should too. We scoot about 20m down the slope and wait as the hot, choking, sulphur wind blows over us. Max, our kayaking guide, already has decided Edwin isn't being careful enough and is about 100m away and still running.

As we creep back to the edge, the smoke has cleared, revealing a boiling, churning pit of lava perhaps 200m below us. It's like peering into the pits of Hell.

And as we walked off the mountain, back towards our boats and home, it dawned on us that the trip wasn't a holiday – but it was an adventure.

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