

WHY VANUATU ?

“Tony, Tony, here, quickly!!” Edwin, my Ni-van guide, called from above me. I was engrossed, taking a photo through swirling mists of the cinder slopes of Mount Marum, an active volcano on the island of Ambrym in Vanuatu.

We had walked from the village of Ranvetlam on the coast, first through village gardens and then overgrown coconut plantations merging into jungle. On the way Edwin had introduced me to ‘navara’, the edible inside of the sprouting coconuts that lay in abundance beside the track. With a few whacks of his bush knife, he split a coconut in two, exposing the ball of what looked like polystyrene foam but tasted of coconut and oil and bean sprouts – rich and filling. Soon after crossing a small creek, we had emerged from thick, cool, shady jungle onto a dry river bed of black cinders, as wide and flat as a highway. This was our path to the top of Mount Marum, leading us across a cinder plain, and then through misty gullies in the flank of the mountain, covered in mosses, bromeliads and ferns. A final scramble up black volcanic scree had brought us to this point, the very edge of the caldera, but cloud and mist blocked any sight more than 20 metres away.

Edwin apologised profusely – no view of the ‘insides’ today, too much cloud. I turned to take a photo into the mist but was interrupted by the call from Edwin “Tony, Tony, here, quickly!!”

The mist parted. We lay on the edge of the caldera, peering down an almost vertical drop. About 80 metres below, two pools of molten lava surged like ocean swells, splashing red foam against the black walls. Smoke and steam rose above the pools, and the heat warmed our faces. The power of the scene held me speechless for two minutes, before the mists enveloped us again.

Edwin grinned with satisfaction, delight even, that he was able to share the full magic of ‘his’ mountain with me.

Mount Marum was a highlight of my first visit to Vanuatu, when I used an inflatable sea kayak to explore some of the outer islands of this Pacific island republic. I have returned several times since with small groups of friends. Using inflatable kayaks brings us into contact with many of the local Ni-van people. Camping on beaches close to the villages or staying in local bungalows has provided us with many highlights:

- sitting on a white sand beach at sunset, being shown how to use a bush knife (machete) to split open nafa nuts gathered from the surrounding bush,
- snorkelling off the edge of a fringing reef, only 50 metres from our camp, into a crystal clear sea of coral forms and tropical fish,
- visiting the ceremonial grounds of a custom village, and being shown spirit carvings and tam-tams,
- being impromptu guests of honour on several occasions at village ceremonies, where the power of the group singing almost rattles your teeth,
- on a seemingly deserted beach, Ni-van locals appearing from the bush and presenting us with a gift of food, nuts or bush-fowl eggs, just collected for their own family,
- soaking in hot spring pools on a deserted black sand beach, and
- being surrounded in our kayaks by a pod of swirling, leaping, spinning Pacific dolphins.

On every visit, we were invited into homes and to share village life with the locals, to experience their generosity (and curiosity) and openness, and to be amazed at how their lives contrast with our own.

On a recent trip to Vanuatu, with some friends, I re-met Edwin. He's a new father, and proudly introduced his first child, a son. We shared some lap-lap and drinking coconuts at a village sports day.

Camping for several days on a golden sandy beach, amongst ruins and trees remaining from a colonial-period coconut plantation, the peaks of Ambrym Island were visible about 30 kilometres to the east. A constant tower of cumulus cloud formed and reformed in the hot air above Mount Marum. At night, the underside of these clouds glowed and pulsed red in the sky, reflecting the power of the lava pools Edwin and I had seen briefly on my first visit.

Perhaps I will go to the top again next year. I hope Edwin is available to join me.

TONY CHESSELL

SSV offer a 10-day sea kayak trip in Vanuatu during the (southern) winter season, July to October, including the option of a guided trek to the top of Mount Marum, an active volcano. Accommodation combines camping, local bungalows and motels(in Port Vila). The trip includes 3 local flights (from Port Vila) to access the outer islands, plus all meals, equipment and experienced guides. Suitable for fit beginners with previous outdoor experience and an adventurous attitude.

Notes:

Ni-van = born in Vanuatu or native of Vanuatu.

Laplap = local 'pudding' ; mixture of staple vegetables (eg. Yam, taro) cooked in banana leaves.

Tamtam = slit drum; made from a partly hollowed out tree trunk or limb.

Tony Chessell will be guiding Southern Sea Ventures' inaugural season of sea kayaking adventures in Vanuatu in 2003.