

THE HAPPY ISLES

It's easy to unwind on Vanuatu's Efate and Espiritu Santo islands, but immersing yourself in Ni-Van culture illuminates the essence of islanders' happiness.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY
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Thwomp-thwomp-swish-swish, thwomp-thwomp-swish-swish. It's other-worldly and hypnotic – a deep, hollow, explosive bass rhythm overlaid by buoyant slaps, claps and swishes, sending sparkling water droplets curving through the air. Ni-Vanuatu women, wearing traditional dangling pandanus leaf dresses, stand thigh-deep in a concrete swimming pool, striking the jungle-green water with their hands in a series of strenuous sonic plunges and slaps, which sets the pool roiling, the sound reverberating. Against the constant rhythm the resonance changes, mimicking a distant waterfall, underground water surging through a blowhole, a powerful swell pounding a rocky shore, and dolphins fin-flapping the water.

This is kastom water music, usually performed at the beach, but we're at Leweton Cultural Village on Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu's largest island. Established by families from Gaua and Mere Lava islands in northern Vanuatu, who moved here for their children's education, Leweton showcases Ni-Vanuatu (native-born people) customs, while earning a small income.

"We only need money for the children's education," says Cherry, our hostess for the afternoon, explaining they grow everything they need. It's a simple life, but a happy one. "You see people smiling every day," she beams.

Budding teenage warriors, fearsome in their war paint, delight in scaring us 'intruders' on arrival, before a boisterous medley of foot-stomping, dust-raising, ankle-



rattling dances. Sweat-glistened muscles ripple above woven loincloths, where tufts of colourful croton leaves tucked into the back sprout like fanciful fan-tails. Wide-eyed toddlers mimic the action, stabbing the air with sticks, spear-like. Women shuffle to a slowly accelerating beat, whistling and ululating as the tempo increases. There's traditional fire-making, food preparation and cava making, before the 'magical water music', a moving finale to a culturally rich trip that started on Efate.

LAIDBACK LUXURY

"Welcome to Vanuatu," grins our driver Lowie, "No traffic lights, no speed limit and no seatbelts," he advises, between tooting to wave to friends and teaching us some words of Bislama, the local language. We disembark at Havannah Boat House (H.B.H), an all-inclusive private estate on Efate.

The world's most accessible volcano, Mount Yasur, is in Vanuatu.

Clockwise from this page, top: Kastom dances at Leweton Cultural Village; Swinging into Matevulu Blue Hole; Vintage teak villas at Ratua Island Resort; Making tortellini at Papaya Loco; The inviting deck and pool at The Residence, Havannah Boat House.

"BUDDING TEENAGE WARRIORS IN WAR PAINT DELIGHT IN SCARING US 'INTRUDERS.'"

Designed as a family holiday house by Adelaide-based Miranda Hodge and her then partner, H.B.H encompasses the main house, known as The Residence, with master bedroom opening onto the pool, and The Boat House, each of which can be booked separately, or together with two Pavilions for up to 12. The award-winning design celebrates local materials and craftsmanship, with traditional natangoura thatched rooves, timber floors, woven bamboo wall panels and indoor-outdoor

bathrooms, imparting a breezy, bespoke-but-homely, barefoot-luxe ambience. Lapped by Sunset Beach, cooled by sea breezes and fragranced by frangipani and spider lilies from the garden, it feels like a private wellness retreat – without the no-alcohol rule.

"If you can't get back to the room, I have a wheelbarrow," giggles our waitress as she opens another bottle of Adelaide Hills chardonnay for dinner on the beach where we're serenaded by a local bush band.

We salute sunrise with a private yoga lesson on the lawn, kayak over water so clear we shadow fish and turtles as they swim amongst the coral, then submit to the soothing strokes of a local masseuse on The Boat House deck as white butterflies flutter like confetti in the wind.

KASTOM CRAFTS

But the highlight is an afternoon spent at The Making Place, the estate's kastom crafts and pottery

GETTING THERE

Air Vanuatu operates direct flights from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland to Port Vila on Efate, and daily one-hour flights between Efate and Espiritu Santo. airvanuatu.com vanuatu.travel/en

WHERE TO STAY

• Havannah Boat House, on the north-western side of Efate, is around 30 minutes from Port Vila. Enjoy kastom dining experiences created by local chef, Charles Viaesgone, in collaboration with Kane Pollard – the Sustainable Chef, of Adelaide's Topiary Restaurant. havannahboathouse.com

• Papaya Loco Cooking Classes & Retreats and Papaya Villa are on the south-east coast of Efate 30 minutes from Port Vila. papayaloco.com papayavilla.com

• Ratua Island Resort & Spa is a 35-minute boat transfer from Luganville on Espiritu Santo, or you can charter a flight to the island's private airstrip. ratua.com

studio, chatting about Ni-Van life and culture. We learn to weave pandanus and get our hands dirty squishing clay with potter Brent Malessas, the artist-in-residence who created H.B.H's bespoke dinnerware. My wonky plate may not be as elegant as Brent's, but it's a sentimental souvenir, featuring the silhouette of a leaf from the garden.

We play with leaves at Papaya Loco too, during an hilarious half-day cooking lesson with ex-pat Aussie hospitality veterans Marcus and Stoney Xavier. A sea breeze from the private beachfront blows through the window of the newly 'Marcus-built' kitchen, as we wrap a cassava mixture in banana leaves at the long timber bench.

"You're gonna bugger up the colour if you grate your finger," laughs Marcus as we scrape snowy manioc on rustic graters while listening to anecdotes about his life. It's a whirlwind of activity preparing island- and Portuguese-inspired dishes for lunch, served with Stoney's icy sangria, which Marcus declares a 'health drink': "Well, it's hydrating and got fruit in it!"

There's accommodation here too at this off-grid location; two eco-friendly bungalows where you can escape the rat race, but we're headed to Ratua Island off Espiritu Santo.

Eco-luxe Ratua Island Resort & Spa occupies a 60-hectare island indented with sandy coves and fronted by a fringing reef. Vintage teak villas from Java and Sumatra, reconstructed onsite by Balinese carpenters, comprise the accommodation for a maximum of 42 guests. Two-hundred-year-old teak boards, aged, weathered and water-stained, texture the walls of my bedroom and bathroom villas, linked by a thatched patio, overlooking a tiny bay.

I walk straight from the bedroom for an early morning snorkel above swaying soft corals, comical territorial clown fish and darting sapphire damsels, then straight back into the bathroom.

Before bed, I sit on the patio listening to the soothing rhythm of waves beating on the reef while bats swoop between trees like black stealth bombers.

Meals are taken on the deck of the Yacht Club overlooking the marine reserve or on the sand beneath the shady branches of arching trees, twinkling with fairy

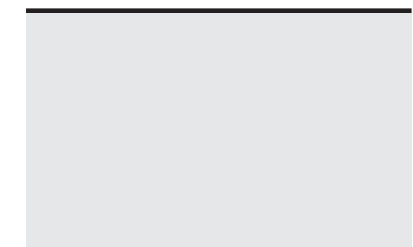
lights in the evening. The Ratua 'Bamboo Band' rouses guests on Island Night where we dance with the staff before an island buffet.

NATURE & ADVENTURE

Loggerhead turtles feed on the seagrass off the main beach, some enormous with age. Sitting on a kayak in the morning stillness I listen to their breach and sigh as they break the surface around me to breathe. Equally enthralling is swimming with horses. We wade bareback out along a curving sand spit, ever-deeper until our steeds lunge off the end. I grip Oreó's mane and float above his piebald back for an intimate tow to shore, emerging dripping and laughing with exhilaration.

On neighbouring uninhabited Malo Island, we kayak over a shallow lagoon, skimming sea stars, a wealth of sea dollars and black and white sea snakes. Entering a narrow creek we're funnelled into a cocoon of overhanging branches before emerging like moths into the watery amphitheatre of Malo Blue Hole. Securing my kayak to a branch I float on the blue-green freshwater spring, watching swallows dip and dart from the tangled tapestry of vines that cloaks the surrounding forest, as a local family collects water from a spring beneath the trees.

Vanuatu is famous for its blue holes, formed by underground streams resurfacing through limestone karst into deep pools of refreshingly cool, crystal-clear water. At Matevulu Blue Hole on Espiritu Santo, aerial tap roots of a colossal banyan tree intertwine to create a tangled, overwater jungle-gym where locals climb ever higher, amid shouted encouragement, to hurl themselves into the deep with dive-bomb splashes and jubilant whoops – making their own style of magical water music. 



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Vanuatu is made up of an astonishing 83 islands, which means you'll never be short of something to do – from swimming, to scuba diving, to shopping and enjoying local cuisine. mindfood.com/islands-of-vanuatu