

Vanuatu

by Aya Kasasa

Vanuatu, timeless land

The Republic of Vanuatu is made up of 83 small tropical and subtropical islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, its close neighbours being the Solomon Islands, and the islands of Fiji and New Caledonia. The majority of the Ni-Vanuatu are Melanesian, said to be descended from emigrants from South-East Asia more than 2,500 years ago. A small proportion of the population is Polynesian and less than two per cent originate from Europe, Asia and other islands in the Pacific.

Contact with new diseases brought over by the Europeans in their boats decimated the population. A number of islands remain very sparsely populated as a result of the epidemics of the 19th century. Two-thirds of the population occupy the four main islands of Efate, Espiritu Santo, Malekula and Tanna. The remainder is scattered over small areas of territory on the archipelago, geographically distant from the two main urban centres, the capital Port Vila and Luganville.

Alliances and misalliances

This is perhaps an apt description of the complicated game of politics. The Republic of Vanuatu gained its independence in 1980. At the head of this parliamentary democracy is a president elected for four years, the symbol of national unity. Political reform is a key factor in the social and economic development of the country. The relative political stability of the early years of independence gave way to increasingly marked volatility in the 1990s. Closer scrutiny reveals that the country has moved from alliances to misalliances, the most recent upheavals having brought the new Prime Minister, Barak Sope, to the head of government in November 1999. In 1996 alone three different governments steered the country, resulting

in a total freeze in the political and business environment.

The current political divides in Vanuatu politics are partly to be explained by the colonial heritage of the Anglo-French Condominium. From 1906 to independence in 1980, Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides, was under joint Anglo-French administration. This dual colonial structure is reflected in education, law, policing and the prison service, citizenship, money and of course language. Although a great deal has been done to relax this duality, it persists in many aspects of life in Vanuatu today.

Until 1987, Vanuatu was governed by the New Hebrides National Party, later renamed Vanua'aku Pati (VP), of the Anglican priest Walter Lini. Largely identified with the English-speaking electors, these 11 years of rule were considered by the French-speaking section of the community as a period of administrative segregation against their interests. The party ultimately split into three fractions, the Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) mainly representing the French-speaking community. After the 1987 elections, the general secretary of the VP, Barak Sope, challenged Father Lini for leadership of the party. This led to a boycott of parliament by 18 members of the UMP and a split in the VP. In September 1988, Barak Sope announced the formation of the Melanesian Progressive Party, the MPP.

The split between the English- and French-speaking communities therefore grew deeper following independence and new political manoeuvring ultimately led to the formation in 1995 of the United Front, a coalition of four parties to stand for the elections of the same year. Post-electoral manoeuvring was further complicated by a split within the UMP, with each side using the same initials. The political instability intensified in the wake of these elections and led to the victory of a coalition that saw Donald

Kalpokas made head of government on 31 March 1998. This period of calm was short-lived since Mr Kalpokas, threatened with a motion of no confidence in Parliament, resigned before Sope was elected Prime Minister in November 1999. The Ni-Vanuatu take the view that more effort should be made to manage the alliances than to govern the country. There is furthermore the opportunity to try out all kinds of alliances since there is no true right-left-centre fraction in Vanuatu.

Corrosive corruption

Marie-Noëlle Ferrieux, a Vanuatu of French origin, was appointed Ombudsman in 1995 and has shown a certain political muscle. An essential figure in Vanuatu politics in recent years, she has shaken the political class and has made a number of enemies. Her office has published several reports which are extremely critical of important figures in the government, uncovering what can only be described as corruption, embezzlement of public funds and violations in the awarding of contracts. Observers are of the opinion that even in the West nobody else would have dared go so far. More generally, Marie-Noëlle Ferrieux-Patterson calls into question the dearth of knowledge and political experience of the ruling classes. "The basic problem in this country is the legal system which is desperately short of qualified and experienced individuals. People are suddenly catapulted to positions for which they have not received the proper training. Despite their best intentions what can you expect them to do? When Kalpokas was appointed, he declared that action would be taken... this has never been followed through." Kalpokas claims it has not been possible to prosecute incriminated persons through lack of evidence. But Ferrieux-Patterson's opinion is that there have been too many purely cosmetic changes, with nothing being done to support the public prosecutor, who is unable to carry out his duties. "The situation is even worse for the judiciary. The president of the

supreme court is currently working on a temporary basis. Despite his abilities, he has been overcome by the scale of what he is expected to do and cannot dispense justice as he does not have the necessary resources at his disposal."

A jumpy economy

The islands of the Pacific are no strangers to a degree of economic vulnerability. The main reasons for this are their distance from the world markets, high reliance on natural resources for their survival and their dependence on exports of agricultural raw materials whose prices are fixed by the world markets. Vanuatu has a dual economy, with 80% of the population dependent on subsistence farming, and a service sector dominated by tourism and the civil service which is concentrated in the two urban areas of Port Vila and Luganville. Although agriculture dominates, it regrettably only represents 24% of the economy. 63% of GDP for 1997 came from the service sector. The industrial sector is fairly small, representing only 13% of GDP. The economy can be regarded as undynamic and structurally weak, since even if resources were maximised, Vanuatu could never make much money. Some believe it is motivation that is somewhat wanting. The fact is that despite the problems, life is good in Vanuatu. As one inhabitant of Vila explained, people do not need cash

unless it is to pay for their children's education or arrange ceremonies, etc. And in this case they simply sell a pig (corresponding here to the notion of the piggy bank, given the value attached to them here) or cut down a tree to sell. Otherwise it is easy to find something to eat, and needs are minimal.

Economic development in Vanuatu since the 1980s has been uneven. The Asian Development Bank, the ADB, observed that growth in the 1980s was fairly strong at nearly 3.2%, dropping in the 1990s to 2.9% - modest rates which have failed to track population growth, resulting in a stagnation in quality of life. Vanuatu has a costly structure, with a low-performing public service, underdeveloped infrastructures, a scanty private sector and an urgent need for human resources with the necessary education and expertise to allow the country to participate in modern economic activities.

Reform

The combination of these various factors, severe recession and the social upheaval following the publication of a report by the Ombudsman, led the Kalpokas administration to call on the Asian Development Bank for assistance. A comprehensive reform programme, the CRP, was launched, with the main aim of reassuring financial backers and investors. The programme relates to all aspects of the

Many governments have followed each other, in too short a time, according to the wishes of investors

Cyclone Nigel destroyed all the lines of communication on Espiritu Santo

economy, the objective being, by 2002, to shore up institutions, meet the targets of good governance and organise reform and restructuring of the public sector. The programme has also been devised to make structural adjustments to the economy and encourage sustainable growth by promoting the private sector. Marie-Noëlle Ferrieux-Patterson sees much good in the programme, which has led to an in-depth revision of the law, the introduction of VAT, etc. However, right from the start she has seen a fatal flaw: "Laws have been introduced, but no action has been taken to apply them and impose penalties. We do not have an effective penal system."

Unfortunately for the former Prime Minister, Donald Kalpokas, the political cost of supporting such a programme has been high. The effectiveness of the CRP has been questioned on a number of occasions, those having to deal with its complexities seeing it as a solution

forced on them from outside. Since 1989, the bad tax situation has been worsened further in recent years. Government spending increased three times more quickly than revenue between 1989 and 1997. The government has been in constant deficit since 1989 and has exhausted its reserves, leaving nothing for contingencies.

The government forecasts real-term economic growth of 1% for 1998, 3% for 1999 and 4% for 2000 and beyond. Much hope has been placed in returns from the tourism sector, the largest area for financial returns. In addition, the industrial sector is set to benefit from the construction of a new power station in the capital and a more favourable climate for increasing private investment.

Eric, Nigel, Uma and Dani

Natural disasters represent a major part of the vulnerability of islands in the Pacific. Contributing factors are the scale of the impact of

All you need is a Smolbag

In Vanuatu it is not uncommon to hear a conversation beginning: "What island are you from?" This question, the locals say, hides a fundamental problem; the tensions that exist between different communities. These problems are becoming more pronounced and could erupt at any time. Take the example of the shantytown near the capital which is home to Ni-Vanuatu originating from Tanna; a number of traditional groups would like to see it pulled down and the police have had to be called in to calm spirits.

Corruption, inequality, rising criminality, violence directed against women - all these issues demand closer attention. But generally in the Pacific, people tend to avoid tensions and confrontations. Those working in the social sectors fear that Vanuatu will one day have to deal with situations which could be defused if they were better addressed today.

Certain people have decided not to expect the worst and have set themselves a challenge: why not go out to the people, help them discuss their problems...by illustrating these problems on the stage? This is how the Wan Smolbag Theatre came about: "It means 'small bag' in Bislama," explains Lucy Seresere, player in the company, "as we are a small company ready to go anywhere. All we have to do is pack a few bits and pieces." The Wan Smolbag Theatre was formed in 1989 by around 15 volunteer actors. The troop performs plays relating to health, the environment, the popu-

lation, etc. "Most people from Vanuatu never got the opportunity to complete their primary education. They can hardly read and write. To get a message to those living in remote communities, you have to go to the islands. The development agencies cannot be everywhere and Smolbag is a perfect vehicle for getting their messages across. In addition to plays put on in the villages of Vanuatu, the company records radio series and short public service announcements, to reach as great an audience as possible. "It was an instant success! We prided ourselves on having done the campaign for the 1998 elections. The public service announcements were drawn from a play we performed in around 100 villages a few weeks before the ballot, to advise people of their rights, the problems caused by corruption and the concept of good governance; the organised discussions that followed the performance were a true learning experience for many."

Theatre can act as a catalyst for action in rural communities. Wan Smolbag succeeded in its mission and is going further. In a country where many deeds and patterns of behaviour are taboo, where you do not question the decisions and whims of your chiefs and superiors, your father or husband, the company has succeeded in opening a niche which continues to expand. Dozens of companies have been set up around the islands, including groups of children who are also helping to spread the word.

The mother tree

The improved Grand Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Red Dwarf and Grand Vanuatu hybrid or the Grand Vanuatu and Grand Rennel hybrid. These are not some mystical figures from tales of fantasy, but the names of species of coconut tree on which CARFV has been working for a number of years.

The Vanuatu Agricultural Research and Training Centre (VARTC), a Vanuatu national body for research on coconuts, coffee, cocoa and cattle farming has been in existence for over 30 years. It has set itself new challenges: farming diversification, increasing yields and producing more sizeable returns. The country's financial resources stem mainly from tourism, economic aid and the export of farming produce: copra, cocoa, kava, beef, etc. 1998 saw the launch of a campaign aiming to increase the effect of research and development on farming through the organisation of rural farmers. Known as the Producers' Organisation Project (POP), the plan is to identify new niches in the market for products of the soil, employing methods developed in other regions, based on projects financed by European funds. These activities come within the broader framework of preserving the country's genetic inheritance. Five groups of producers are involved: the plan is to be able ultimately to sell organically-certified cocoa in France, for example.

As far as the eye can see

But for visitors perhaps the most interesting work is the "perennial crops" project, one aspect of which is the work undertaken by the coconut division. This division is working on a system to optimise coconut-based production, surveys on local coconut cultivars and their uses, the collection of plant material from around the archipelago and the maintenance of these collections, and conducting coconut hybrid trials under the Pacific Regional Agricultural Programme (PRAP).

Behind Bernard Dolacinski and his team, here we are in a vehicle making our way through the rows of trees in a giant nursery. In the full sunlight the trees stretch out as far as the eye can see. In addition to the conservation of individual species, the VARTC is attempting to introduce new varieties by crossing different existing varieties. The aim of these hybridisations is to increase coconut production and quality and make them more resistant to disease and natural disasters. One particular cross withstood the passing of hurricane Dani, proving itself genetically better suited to the conditions in the region. This regional programme will ultimately offer varieties more suited to the soils of countries in the region. There are currently 40 different combinations on trial over an area of 55 hectares - some 9000 trees. Each tree is numbered and its fruit carefully analysed. The first hybridisations were conducted in 1992 and the trees have been producing for three years. The researchers will need eight or nine years to evaluate the different species. Then work can begin to produce the improved plants so that they can be distributed to planters.

The government of Vanuatu has entrusted management of the centre to the Centre for International Cooperation in Agronomic Research for Development (CIRAD). CIRAD is thus providing Vanuatu with valuable scientific support, with the presence of eleven experts. Bernard Dolacinski explains: "The Centre's philosophy is that the Ni-Vanuatu should receive training and that management responsibilities should gradually be transferred to them." To do this, young graduates have been recruited since 1998 and more will be taken on until 2001. The transfer must be effective, since they are to take over the three main activities of the VARTC: preservation, collection and conservation - for improved dissemination.

Traditional Vannatu house. People in rural areas survive mainly on subsistence farming

such disasters in relation to the small size of the countries affected, the fragility of the islands' environment, the fragmented spread and sometimes extreme remoteness of the populations, accelerated urbanisation and the weakening of traditional measures of response. Between 1970 and 1985, Vanuatu suffered major losses caused by the passing of 29 tropical hurricanes. In 1985, hurricanes Eric and Nigel hit the same central Pacific islands just one week apart. For a number of years after hurricane Uma

passed in 1987, Vanuatu recorded a real growth rate of -9%. The hurricane destroyed commercial cocoa and coffee plantations, caused 48 fatalities and affected more than 48,000 people. This is by no means the end of the story - the countries in the region are at genuine risk from ecological disasters. These may be associated with other types of natural disaster such as storms, floods and landslides. Although environmental disasters may have their causes external to the region, their repercus-

sions are sadly too keenly felt internally; slash-and-burn farming, deforestation, animal incursions, etc., which can add greatly to the physical impact of natural disasters.

A hurricane needs to be waited out - like it or not - for anything from a few hours to a few days. The most recent uninvited guest was Hurricane Dani in January 1999. This left wounds that still need dressing and destroyed bridges, fords and more besides on Espiritu Santo. The roads are of vital importance to Vanuatu, not only for the tourism sector, but above all for the local populations. Glen, a tourist guide from Efate, explains that to sell their products in Luganville, the inhabitants of Big Bay had to make the journey by boat, taking an average of 24 hours.

"Sometimes they only got one boat every six months. You can well imagine the state of panic in the event of illness! The new road was very important, but Dani came along to put a spanner in the works. River levels in the Big Bay River have already been responsible for many deaths. It simply must be made passable again." A road-repair programme is underway with European cooperation from the STABEX funds (924,000 Euros), helping to reconstruct crossing points destroyed by this natural disaster.

No war of languages

After years of stand-off, the English- and French-speaking populations of Vanuatu seem to have finally decided to bury the hatchet. For the Ni-Vanuatu, the split is the result of Anglo-French disputes exported to the Pacific. Certain people even cherish the Utopian dream of seeing Bislama replace the two European languages within the administration. But it would be wrong to conclude that bilingualism is common; it is hard to get by if French is your only language. The two paths do not cross, so much so that you would think this was an entirely English-speaking country. In the 1980s, the French-speaking community tended to turn in on itself. It became almost politically incorrect to speak the language of Voltaire.

In diplomatic circles, however, reconciliation and collaboration are the order of the day. For the new French Ambassador, defence of the French language has taken a defensive and aggressive course. English was on the way in and the French-speaking minority, feeling threatened, occasionally responded aggressively. The situation today is that English is in the majority, but French is a distinct plus. This biculturalism is a treasure from which Vanuatu can only profit if both sides listen to and learn from each other. "What we do not want is a timid, withdrawn French-speaking community!"

The British High Commission would tend to agree: "There is a need in this country for both countries to work together. We must avoid competition at all costs. We are fully aware of the importance of the French background. Division is a bad thing. In symbolic terms it would be good to one day see a VP-NUP coalition in this country."

Welcome to Ulei

A very pleasant place at the water's edge at Havana Harbour. Some distance away to the right I can make out young girls, lazing on the grass, sharing a joke and plaiting their hair. Washing hangs from a line stretched between two buildings.

We can hear the muffled voices of the young people. This is Ulei, one of 39 secondary schools in Vanuatu, and among those receiving support from European cooperation, in accordance with the wishes of the government.

Kalnaure Kalfatak became headmaster at Ulei two years ago. This former teacher overflows with enthusiasm, despite the difficulties encountered by his school. With a sweeping movement of the hands he points out the boundaries of Ulei Secondary School, a school like so many others in Vanuatu. Ulei currently has 150 pupils, from the seventh to the tenth grade, the end of compulsory studies. Built by missionaries, it is now only attended by pupils from the seventh grade up. As a school in Vanuatu it consists of a complex made up of classrooms, dormitories, a kitchen, a

dining room and lodgings for the teachers and headmaster. Many pupils live far away on neighbouring islands and transport cannot be arranged every day.

The school is short of a great many things: a science lab, a library, an assembly hall and sufficient housing for teachers. It is stretched to the limits by the many pupils and has to make do with the facilities it has. The girls' and boys' dormitories are separated by the headmaster's house. The young girls spotted on our arrival are resting in front of their dormitory. They reply in chorus to our greeting.

Kalnaure Kalfatak
actively involved in
the improvement of
the secondary level of
his school

Heidi is from Mela, a village on Efate. She enrolled last year and will shortly be sitting exams. She intends to study maths to realise her ambition of becoming an accountant. She takes us round an overfull dormitory: just a

few centimetres separates the bunks which fill the room. The dormitory accommodates nearly 60 boarders, the richest having the newest beds.

Leaving the girls to their rest, we make our way to a hut, from which a cloud of dense smoke is rising: this is the kitchen. On duty today are Priscilla and Naomi, cheerfully labouring over this evening's meal to fill 170 hungry stomachs. A typical day at Ulei starts early; wake-up call at 6 to begin the morning routine, breakfast at 7 before starting lessons half an hour later. After lessons come shared duties such as collecting wood for cooking. At weekends and in their free time, pupils do sport and gardening, growing bananas, cassava, cabbage and other vegetables which they will later eat.

A sector in urgent need of development

As underlined by the Minister for Education, Joe Natuman, the educational system in Vanuatu introduced by the missionaries has inherited various discrepancies from the period of the Condominium, namely different philosophies and teaching systems. Since independ-

ence, the government has worked to unify the two systems. "Our government is committed to a massive programme of reform. The situation is fine in primary education, with 80% of children being able to attend school. The problems start in the seventh grade. Every year a number of young people are unable to find a place. The lack of space has reached desperate proportions: only 33% of those who qualify from the primary level are enrolled into secondary school, fewer than 7% make the eleventh grade and only 1% remain to bid for places at higher levels." This is the result of the policy that has been pursued for many years, under which the governments of the Pacific nations made the promotion of higher education their priority, in a bid to nurture an elite to later run the country. Donor countries are now aware that the focus should be on basic education.

This sector of concentration has been earmarked to receive 75% of the resources allocated to the country under the Vanuatu national indicative programme (NIP) - a sum of 7.5 billion euros. The logic is clear if you study the educational objectives pursued in the country: to double the number of

pupils completing the first academic cycle (10 years of study), to improve the quality of education provided and ultimately to improve the management of the entire education system. Armand Hugues-d'Aeth, the EU officer in charge of implementing the project, believes that the EUVED can be summed up in three words: extending, repairing and renovating secondary schools, "so that pupils have enough space to work, teachers are effective and textbooks are available". All this work by the government is recorded in a document from the Ministry of Education, approved by Parliament in 1997.

Its stated objective is to substantially increase the number of students qualifying at the tenth grade by pursuing the policy of repairing existing schools (at least 40) and adding extra capacity for grades 7 to 10 as required (minimum 12 schools). The target is to at least double the number of those qualifying from the tenth grade by 2002 and to achieve a balance between girls and boys. It is also necessary to improve the quality of the education provided by focusing more on gender-sensitive research, supporting the improvement of teacher training, broadening the curriculum and producing educational

equipment. Finally, management of the sector has not been overlooked, since it is proposed to strengthen the Provincial Education Offices and the central office of the Ministry in terms of planning, development of school programmes, management of grants, collection and analysis of data and the geographic distribution of schools. These activities are to focus on rural areas which are home to the majority of the population.

Ulei is one of the 19 school sites chosen by the government for repair or erection of buildings, and the provision of equipment for classes 7 to 10. The project also covers training teachers for these classes. France has taken entire charge of teacher training for the French system at the Vanuatu Teachers' College. The education system is failing: there are not enough schools, not enough teachers and not enough classrooms. Furthermore, the number of school places available cannot keep pace with the explosion in the birth rate.

Although new means of communication such as the Internet hold a great deal of promise in terms of their ability to shorten the distance between remote schools, a means of reducing the high cost of these methods and the restricted access to this technology has yet to be found. The development of basic and secondary education needs immediate attention. It is vital that more children be given the opportunity to learn as they do at Ulei, which in the local vernacular means: "It's a cool place anyway."

King Kava

He greets you with the warmest of welcomes. Pacts are signed and sealed in his presence. He officiates at the opening of political conferences and is Master

of Ceremonies at the rituals marking births, marriages and deaths. As night falls, the lanterns are lit and it is the hour for Kava!

“It makes you feel much better, and it's entirely natural!” The lantern outside the Kava bar in Vila lights up the sign: *time blong drink kava* - time to drink kava. The *nakamal* is to be found in a pretty seashore property, with benches set out on a jetty from which you can enjoy the view and watch people arriving. Our guide is a woman - this would be unthinkable in places where there is still strict observance of tradition, but in towns nowadays it is widely accepted.

Families are also welcome here - people come to socialise, to talk and to make friends. It poses no risk to health: "it's a lot better than smoking or drinking beer! What's more, it is clean, the service is good and you meet people of rank". Indeed, some ministers have just walked in, taken their seats and are talking in hushed voices. There is no music or laughter: kava drinking must be done quietly to make the most of its beneficial effects.

A widely-observed custom

The ni-Vanuatu have begun cultivating the kava plant just about everywhere. Made from the roots of the *Piper methysticum* shrub, the drink is consumed on all the islands of the archipelago and throughout the Pacific. Here, though, is where it originates and, as if to prove it, there are no less than 40 different varieties to be found in Vanuatu. Huge domestic demand has made it one of the country's primary agricultural products - more than 500 tons of roots are consumed every year in Vila and Luganville alone. The export revenue it yields - up from 48 million vatu in 1995 to 102 million vatu in 1997 - has made it the produce of choice for small farmers. In Pentecost, Epi and Tanna, the majority of farmers are happy to stick to planting it and buy their food with the profits they reap.

No guest could refuse the honour of being invited to share in this evening ritual which is also the most frequent form of welcome to the country. Both the preparation and the sampling of kava are subject to an extremely strict code of etiquette. In the most traditional regions, such as Tanna, the roots are brought to the *nakamal* - the men's dwelling - by pre-pubescent boys. After washing them, they chew the roots to form a mush. This is then placed in a container, covered with water and worked for a while. The resulting mud-coloured liquid is filtered through coconut fibres. In Ambae and Maewo, the men prepare kava in wooden receptacles and crush the contents with a stick made of coral. Elsewhere, as in the kava bar we have come to, the drink is simply prepared in a plastic

bucket or from a powder you can buy in a shop.

When the kava is ready for drinking, you are handed a shell - half a coconut filled with the brownish liquid. You drink it down in one go, and it is not considered rude to spit out the aftertaste. The effects of the drink can be felt within 15 minutes: first, a numbing of the mouth and gums, followed by an exquisite feeling of peacefulness and wellbeing which floods through you. The ni-Vanuatu drink two to three shells per session. The chieftain has the honour of drinking first, followed by the other men in order of rank. In the most traditionalist areas, in fact, the kava ceremony is an exclusively male preserve: a strict taboo forbids women even from going near the *nakamal* where it is held, let alone from taking part.

Kava the unifier

Thanks to the role of kava in their society, the ni-Vanuatu have managed to preserve one of their most remarkable ancestral practices. The drink is said to have played a decisive part in maintaining the country's extraordinarily low crime rate. Unlike alcohol, a toxic stimulant likely to provoke irresponsible and violent behaviour, kava promotes feelings of tranquillity and acceptance of life. In towns and villages alike, *nakamals* are an oasis of calm. There are no noisy conversations, no music - simply a place for friends to meet up after a hard day's labour.

A promising future

Not all the varieties of kava are drunk: some are used in traditional medicine. Kava is a blend of 10 or so different analgesics and anaesthetics, not to mention its recognised painkilling and appetite-suppressant properties. It is also said to have anti-bacterial, tranquillising, diuretic and decongestant properties. Although no large-scale scientific study has yet been conducted, some Western laboratories are starting to look at the possibility of using kava in hospitals to replace painkillers and tranquillisers like Valium with its problematic addictive side-effects. As one of the purest galenic remedies of all the medicinal plants, kava could be of invaluable assistance in the treatment of children and the elderly. There are moves to start producing kava for the modern market, particularly in the form of lemonade. But enough of all this talking: other lanterns beckon, and there is nothing to stop us from going next door to see if their kava is better...

Exploring the islands

She is married with two children. She curiously and cheerfully asks me whether the prime minister of my country is the man she has seen on the screen who is called Mandela. She has never heard of Mobutu, still less of Kabila. Until only a few days ago, I was just as ignorant about matters relating to her country. This will help to put you in the picture: I am right on the other side of the globe. If I tried to go any further, I would be on my way home. But I don't want to do that: I am here to savour the delights of countryside tourism, with an obligatory stay at the accommodation on Lonnoc Beach.

Wendy has been working at the Lonnoc Beach Resort for a number of years. This part of Santo has always belonged to her family, the Voccor. They were the first on the island to venture into the tourism business. We landed at the capital, Luganville, early in the morning. The population of the island of Espiritu Santo (with an area of 4,000 m², the biggest island in the archipelago) lives mainly along its coast or on the islets surrounding it. Discovering the island is a delight, with its blue lagoons and the small islands with magical names that can be seen from beautiful beaches. Lonnoc is to be found at the edge of one of the best of them, Champagne Beach.

The rural accommodation is frequently built of wood and bamboo together with materials from local forests. At Lonnoc, as elsewhere, visitors are accommodated in huts covered with palms that are stitched together and sealed against the rain. The rough-hewn furniture is made of planks that have been cut to shape by hand or with a chain saw. It all fits in with the environment and the oil lamps that are available as soon as the sun goes down are an encouragement to go to bed early. As in the case of the Voccor, the accommoda-

tion very often belongs to a single family, but they can sometimes also be managed by a community.

Respect for the environment

For tourists who are willing to accept basic accommodation, ecotourism is one of the best ways of reaching natural areas where social and cultural traditions are preserved. Mangroves, coconut palms, flowers and pandanu and burao trees stand guard at the edge of the sea, while kauri and banyan trees, creeping ferns and wild orchids are to be found in the virgin forest, which is home to large numbers of insects and birds. The fauna of the archipelago is not dangerous and most of the animals, that is to say pigs, chickens and cattle, have been imported by man. Seafood is also on the menu, of course, and in particular the coconut crab, whose meat is greatly valued. Tourists may, for example, visit the island of Tanna to admire its volcanoes and customs that have remained unchanged for centuries.

Development of tourism

The problems encountered by this emerging sector have been those of scale, due to lack of investment, of domestic and international air links, of transport, communication and accommodation facilities and of training for local businesspeople. In 1993, hotels and tourist facilities were listed as part of a tourism master plan. This revealed that there was a need for advice to be given to the 12 rural *gîtes* to be found on various islands in the archipelago. Since 1996, the European Commission has therefore financed technical assistance intended to develop countryside tourism. This is geared towards supporting the management and marketing activities of those working with tourists. This project has made it possible to open up new paths and therefore to kindle private-sector interest in the region. Jean-Louis Herman, Technical

Assistant, explains that an association of countryside and adventure holiday accommodation has been set up under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "Despite the handicaps, countryside tourism has adopted standards for the accommodation and services offered to visitors, a reservations office (Island Safaris) and a wide range of promotional leaflets for use on world markets. In two years, the number of visitors has increased seven-fold, generating useful revenue in areas that were previously dominated by resources obtained from subsistence crops". These results have led to EU assistance being given to a programme intended to reinforce the training of those working with tourists in the countryside and to improve the way in which countryside tourism is integrated in an effort to promote Vanuatu.

The development of countryside tourism is well under way. According to Jean-Louis Herman, the shelters are achieving occupancy rates in excess of 25% to 30% and look set to take off as rural enterprises. "The others will always be able to subsist on agriculture if they have no access to borrowing. What is needed is to maintain the quality of service and promotional activity in the adventure tourism sectors". The Ni-Vanuatu welcome the plan to develop sustainable activities for tourists in the countryside in order to breathe life into a very promising sector, and are spending without counting the cost, to attract visitors to whom they are proud to show off their heritage. Ecologically sustainable and based on nature and a taste for adventure, this programme will make it possible to educate people about the natural environment and generate income for the local people. "Who are not beggars at the feast. They have set up their own businesses. It's their business".

Bungalows are built using local material

Profile

Vanuatu

General facts

Area:	12,190 km ²
Capital:	Port Vila
Main islands:	Efate, Espiritu Santo, Malekula, Tanna, Erremango
Population:	177,400 (1997 estimate)

Population

Rate of population growth:	2.3% (1997 to 2015 forecasts)
Official language:	Bislama (Melanesian creole, used by 70% of the population), English and French. Some 105 local languages are spoken
Main ethnic groups:	Melanesian, Polynesian, European, Asian

Economy

GDP per capita:	\$1396 (1997)
GNP per capita:	\$1340 (1997)
Rate of inflation:	2.9% (1996)
Foreign debt:	20.5% of GNP (1997)
Currency:	since 1983 the Vatu. (1€ = VT 134)
Main sectors:	Subsistence farming (25% GDP) and services (63% of GDP) (tourism, offshore financial centre)
Main exports:	Copra, beef, timber and cocoa
Main imports:	Consumer goods, preserved foods, electrical goods and vehicles, medicines, machines. (Australia, New Zealand, Japan, France and New Caledonia)
Aid per capita:	\$178.20 (1997)

Political structure

President:	Father John Bani, elected in March 1999 for four years by an electoral college composed of Members of Parliament and the presidents of the six regional councils.
Political system:	Westminster-model constitution. 52 members in a unicameral Parliament, elected for four years, meeting in Vila. The executive is made up of the Prime Minister Barak Tame Sope (since 25 November 1999) and eight or nine members of the cabinet. A National Council of Chiefs, the Malvatu Mauri advises Parliament on all constitutional issues relating to matters of national custom.
Government:	The Prime Minister (Melanesian Progressive Party (MPP)) heads a coalition of five parties: National United Party (UNP), Union of Moderate Parties (UMP), Vanuatu Republican Party (VRP), and the John Frum Movement.
Main political parties:	Melanesian Progressive Party (MPP), Union of Moderate Parties (UMP), Vanuatu Republican Party (VRP), John Frum Movement. Opposition: National United Party (NUP), Vanua'aku Pati (VP),

Social indicators

Life expectancy at birth:	65.8 (1998)
Infant mortality:	39/1000 (1997)
Adult literacy:	64 % (1997)
School enrolment ratio:	44% female; 49% male (1997, levels confused)
Population with access to drinking water:	23%
Population with access to healthcare:	20%
Human development index:	116 of 174 countries

Sources: Economic Intelligence Unit, UNDP report on human development (1999), UNDP report on human development in the Pacific (1999). EU-ACP cooperation in 1997 (EU, DGVIII).

The maps reproduced here do not imply recognition of any particular border, nor do they prejudice the status of any state or territory.