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Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu

A deep, dark rendezvous with the Lady and the Unicorn

Travel to the Pacific takes a lot of time and money, so when I do manage it, I try to do it all. Solomons was my main destination, Vanuatu was the add-on. The price was right, but was the diving worth the extra time? . . .

*John Q. Trigger
Editor*

Dear Fellow Diver,

All I knew about diving on Vanuatu was that it has the world's largest wreck that a diver could reach safely on air -- the SS *President Coolidge*, a 640-foot liner converted to a troop ship in World War II then sunk by a mine. And, since Vanuatu lies in the South Pacific between Fiji and the Solomon Islands, I expected pristine reefs.

As my Air Vanuatu flight from Fiji descended into Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital, I savored the mystery. I thumbed through the slick travel literature -- bare-breasted Melanesian women, men wearing only a penis sheath and carrying wild pigs over their shoulders, colorful open-air markets piled with fruit and fish, and beautiful turquoise-blue seas.

But the only culture in Port Vila was at the frozen-yogurt shop. It was a lovely, modern, clean resort town with international restaurants and shops catering to Australians and cruise ships. Hoping to find the "real" Vanuatu on its largest island, Espiritu Santo ("Santos"), I left Vila on a one-hour Twin Otter flight.

The Spirit Moves Me

The Bougainville Resort is just outside the town of Luganville (also known as "Santos"), a funky village with rusty WWII-era Quonset huts, Chinese shops, and empty concrete building pads. As the van that had met me at the airport whisked through town, I even glimpsed a man wearing a penis sheath -- and not a tourist in sight.

The resort comprises 18 small, simple huts with ceiling fans set amid lush vegetation; its veranda, facing the road, gives it the character of an exotic inn. When I arrived, it

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... ***“And if you would like fruit-bat soup tomorrow, order tonight so I can tell the fellow who shoots them.”***

seemed deserted except for staff, who promptly introduced themselves. “Would you care for the Melange de Mer, Brussel in Pernod, Lobster Walaska, or the Grouper Bisque? And if you would like fruit-bat soup tomorrow, order tonight so I can tell the fellow who shoots them.”

The President and the Lady

As I relaxed on the veranda with my first cold Vanuatu Bitter, Australian divers returned from diving with fellow expat Kevin Green of Aquamarine Diving. (Allan Power, the guru of the *Coolidge*, who has made more than 15,000 dives on it, was out of the country.) Kevin, a chipper, blunt, party-down sort of dude, has been in Vanuatu 15 years. Being the new kid in town, he has chalked up only 7,000 dives on the *Coolidge*. While Power does the wreck from shore, Kevin uses a 30-foot boat, covered to ward off the sun and lined with

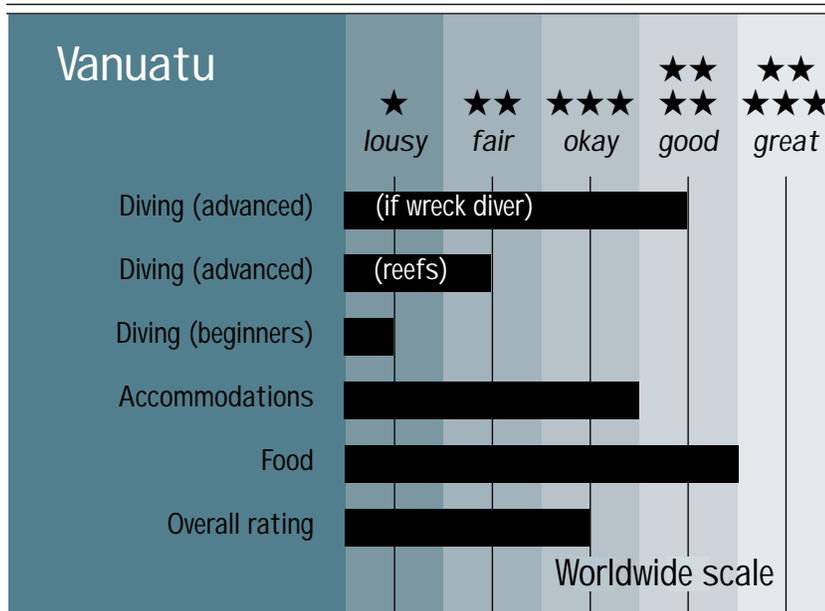
racks holding new aluminum 80s. It was crowded with six Aussies, a father and his teenage daughter from New Zealand, my buddy and me, but was okay for our short trips.

The 64-foot-long *Coolidge* lies on its side with its bow in 70 feet of water and its stern at 250 feet. Dive briefings tend to be confusing because different divers visit different parts of the behemoth with different dive-masters. You can take a guided tour or dive your own profile with a buddy. The diving is presented like a marketing scheme. On each dive you get to go deeper than the day before. On the

first day it's the promenade deck at 100 feet. The next day it might be a deeper hold full of jeeps, the day after that a row of toilets or the engine room. The goal is a penetration dive at 150 feet to the smoking salon to see the mural of the Lady and the Unicorn. After that it's trips to the swimming pool at 180 feet, the soda fountain, or the stern, for as long as your macho holds out.

At the end of your stay you're awarded a certificate saying what parts of the wreck you dived and at what depths. Kevin sells a T-shirt with a rendition of the mural of the Lady, which you can buy only if you have indeed seen her.

When my turn came to enter the 81-degree water, I stepped off the stern (no dive platform, but an easy exit, with two metal pole ladders for reentry) into visibility of only 30 to 40 feet. As I drifted down, the massive hull came into view. The divemaster, the father-daughter team, my buddy and I



Aquamarine will arrange a night dive on any night with as few as two divers, sometimes using the Coolidge or the nearby wreck of the U.S.S. Tucker, both of which are deep.

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slipped down the hull into the semi-enclosed promenade deck. We cruised along a passageway littered with rifles, gas masks, helmets, and canteens to 110 feet. I swam into the blue through an opening and looked up. The wreck went as far as I could see. I looked down; it went as far as I could see. The same left or right. It was big. I was small.

As I drifted there, feeling alone and insignificant, the divemaster and the girl emerged from the hull. She was breathing off his octopus. Her father came out, looked at his distressed daughter, and went back to poking around the wreck. Each day they would take her deeper, and each day the scene would repeat itself.

I found a few interesting critters -- a manta shrimp scampering across the hull and many nudibranchs -- but fish are not the *Coolidge's* forte. Except for Boris. A line from the bow leads toward the shore. Here, in the shallows, Allan Power has planted a coral garden to help while away the minutes offgassing. Nearby I would run into Boris, looking well fed and big as an overstuffed love seat. He's a lot of grouper.

So Many Sharks, So Little Time

Each day, not necessarily at the time designated, Kevin would drive us to his sparsely stocked shop to pick up tanks, then to the boat. The first dive of the day was the wreck, the second dive shallow -- for example, sloping, algae-covered Charles's Reef, a drift dive with no current. The plan was to dive until we wanted to come up, but after 45 minutes the divemaster insisted that we surface. I didn't care. With no large fish, little variety in its scant tropicals, a single tridacna clam and a small turtle, it was less interesting than most Caribbean dives.

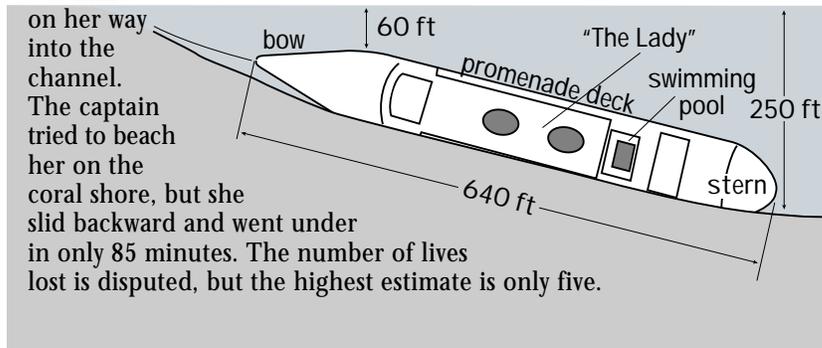
The morning after a night dive and barbie on the beach, instead of diving the wreck we did the shark dive. Seventeen divers showed. Not enough tanks had been filled (even though Kevin has three compressors) and I ended up with an aluminum 50.

Kevin gave his pre-dive briefing: "The surface current should dissipate after we get down. Go to the bottom and wait for me. I'll be carrying two bags of fish heads. Lie down next to each other quickly; the sharks will be getting anxious. Keep arms and legs down. I'll hide one bag and tie the other in front of you. When everyone's in place, I'll open the first bag. The attack is fast and furious. After the sharks

The 640-foot, 22,000-ton *Coolidge* was a luxury liner doing time as a troop ship when it went down on October 26, 1942. Carrying 5,440 soldiers, she struck two U.S. mines

on her way into the channel. The captain tried to beach her on the coral shore, but she slid backward and went under in only 85 minutes. The number of lives lost is disputed, but the highest estimate is only five.

S.S. President Coolidge



Bokisa Resort, on a small island that's a 20-minute boat ride out of Santos, is where I originally tried to book, but the word was that it was closed. It turned out that not only was it open, but Aquamarine was also its dive operation. On the day of the shark dive, we visited its astoundingly beautiful bay — white sand beach, turquoise water. Not having gone ashore, I can't say anything about the accommodations, but I can say that although the water was beautiful, the snorkeling was poor.

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have quieted, I'll open the second bag for anyone who blinked the first time. DO NOT get up or try to leave until I give the OK sign."

... I like sharks. I like to see them. I don't like to feed them. This was my last shark-feeding dive.

The surface current was ripping. I used a lot of air getting to the anchor line. I used more waiting on the bottom, encircled by 5-foot whitetips and larger, menacing gray sharks, for the other 17 divers to show up. With visibility 30 feet or less, I could see up to 20 sharks at a time. Finally Kevin showed and we followed him to 70 feet, where we settled in. I was disconcerted when he hid the second bag of bait under the rock I was lying on -- and then saw the first bag on the buoy, an arm's length from my face. But the worst was yet to come.

On my right lay the 14-year-old girl, glancing nervously at her gauge. Kevin ripped open the fish bag. The sharks exploded into a frenzy. As he raced away, a big shark went for his fin but veered off at the last second. My view was all sharks. I had to throw up a camera to turn a large gray that got in my face. Bits of fish rained down on me. I didn't like this, but neither did I want to pick up bloody fish bits and wave them in front of the sharks. I brushed the bait off with quick jerky motions, as if trying to knock away a black widow spider. The frenzy was over in a flash, but the sharks' appetites raged on. It was several minutes before Kevin felt brave enough to open the second bag. My air

Ditty Bag

Single-tank dives were \$35, two-tank dives \$70 (10% discount for buying six) at Aquamarine Diving (00678-36-196). I booked this trip through Island Dreams (800-346-6116 or 713-973-9300); most major wholesalers can make arrangements. Prices were mostly high in Vanuatu. The Bougainville Resort (00678-36-257 or fax 00678-36-647) was \$110 a night for two, diving and meals not included. ... Meals were generally gourmet quality, but ran about \$15 for lunches, \$20 to \$40 per person for dinner. Beers were reasonable at \$2.50; a carafe of Australian wine was \$10. ... Vanuatu was hot and humid during my early-April visit, typical for November through April. Water temperatures range from 72° in the winter (our summer) to 82° in their summer. Trade winds blow May to October. ... Nearly everyone spoke English or French, and Americans seemed especially welcome. ... Passports were required, but not visas, for Americans and Canadians for stays less than 30 days. ... Electricity is 220-240 volt/50 cycles. Bring a converter if you need to charge. ... No accommodations for photographers on Aquamarine's boat.

dwindling fast and my bottom time running out, I had nothing to spare if the 14-year-old ran out of air in the middle of this frenzy.

If you're looking for artifacts, forget it. Even the underwater junkyards are historical sites. Nothing can be removed.

J. Q.

Finally it was over. The girl hadn't run out of air and I had 40 psi left. I like sharks. I like to see them. I don't like to feed them. This was my last shark-feeding dive.

A Two-Bit Dive at Million-Dollar Point

During WWII, Santos harbor sheltered more than a hundred Allied ships at a time, and war machinery was parked everywhere. At war's end, troops drove, pushed, or threw it all into the sea at what is now called Million Dollar Point. I rented a car and driver to tour the island and took a couple of tanks. (Kevin refused to rent tanks, but Power's center rented me a tank for \$5). With sharp coral and surf, it's a tough entry and exit. Underwater it's a junkyard: trucks,

jeeps, ships, road graders, cases of sodabottles, airplane engines, and metal twisted beyond recognition, spilling over a dropoff. I combed the junk like a vagrant looking for a treat. I found silver-dollar-sized flatworms with an orange encircling ring and brilliant yellow-and-black center. Two big wrasses rose from the depths to see what I was doing, but not many fish were around. A million-dollar dive it ain't.

Do You Want to Vanuatu?

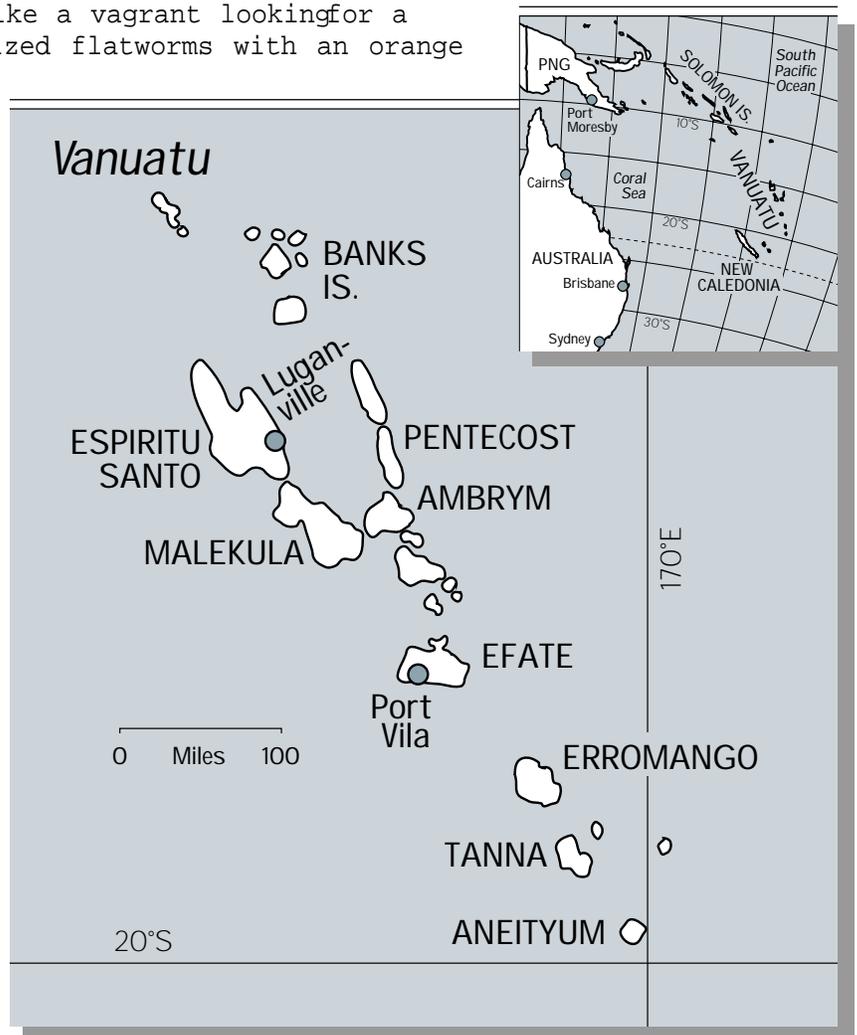
The Bougainville Resort, with its hexagonal cabins and exquisite cuisine in an unlikely setting, is a twin of Pirate's Point Resort on Little Cayman. What Gladys Howard is to Pirate's Point, Yvan and Elaine Charles are to Bougainville. The charming Australian couple made sure all their guests went where they wanted to go, had what they needed, and were well taken care of and well fed. I was a happy camper.

Wreck divers will embrace the *Coolidge*. It's enormous, it's intact, it's historical. With both guns and chandeliers, it's part military and part ocean liner. It's accessible; in 2 or 3 days, casual divers can see all there is to see above 130 feet. If you're a hard-core wreck diver, you could easily spend a week, go much deeper, and not still not see it all.

What about reef diving? Well, all diving focuses on the wreck and everything else is an afterthought. For several days I tried to arrange afternoon dives to deeper reefs. Kevin said they existed and that he would go, but it never worked out. Makes me wonder.

As for the real Vanuatu, read on.

J. Q.



Family Feud

In June of this year, Jean-Michel Cousteau and the owners of the Post Ranch Inn at Big Sur opened Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort in Savusavu, Vanua Levu, with its own dive operation, L'Aventure Cousteau.

According an Australian newspaper, Jean-Michel's father, Jacques Cousteau, in conjunction with the Cousteau Society, is suing him for using the family name on the Fijian resort.

I might be mistaken, but I thought Cousteau was Jean-Michel's name too.

J. Q.

The Vanuatu of the Brochures

. . . They told him the room was “the perfect place for a writer.” Theroux walked to the bookcase and said, “Yes, it will do perfectly. I wrote this book.”

The pig in the gunny sack lying on the baggage cart squealed louder every time the porter threw another bag on top. Eventually the pig was loaded with the other bags and the Twin Otter was off to Tanna.

I was headed to Vanuatu’s small southern island for a tour of Mt. Yasur (the world’s “most accessible” volcano), a dugong on call, and villages where people don’t have TVs.

I stayed at the Tanna Beach Club for the same reason travel writer Paul Theroux did: they take American Express. The owner of the resort, an Irishman named McGeough, poured me a welcome drink. Rick, a young local who worked at the bank, and a Scottish woman touring the South Pacific were the only other patrons. McGeough said that Theroux had been staying at Whitegrass Resort, but they didn’t take American Express, so he moved. He was shown to the only unoccupied

space, a spare room with only a bed and a bookcase. They didn’t know who he was, but to excuse the Spartan accommodations, they told him the room was “the perfect place for a writer.” Theroux walked to the bookcase and said, “Yes, it will do perfectly. I wrote this book.”

The conversation turned to kava. “Kava in Vanuatu is ten times stronger than in Fiji,” proclaimed Rick. He insisted I had to see a kava bar. He would drive me there now. On the way, while looking for the kerosene lantern

Discovered: More Discover Passes

The Discover Pacific Pass on Solomon Air being offered by Air Promotion Systems lets you add Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, or the Solomons to a Fiji trip for \$399, or add two of these destinations for \$499. The add-ons are also available from and to Australia, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and New Zealand.

The Paradise Pass on Air Vanuatu allows any two flights from and to Fiji, Australia (Melbourne, Brisbane, or Sydney), Vanuatu, or New Zealand for \$399.

A Discover Vanuatu Pass that allows four flights within Vanuatu for \$199 (additional flights \$50 each) is a real money saver if you’re diving the *Coolidge* in Santos and doing another island such as Tanna or Pentecost.

Mention the passes to your travel agent or call Air Promotion Systems at 800-677-4277 or 310-670-7302 for more details.

. . . Kava is not for sipping. It’s a belt-it-down drink. I belted down three, because it’s bad manners to refuse kava.

along the dirt road that signaled a kava bar, Rick explained that kava is extracted from the root of a shrub, *Piper methysticum*. On some islands the root is boiled and strained, but in Vanuatu the tradition is for several people to chew it, spit it into a communal bowl, strain it into coconut shells, and drink up. Kava-heads talk quietly and sit sedately under its novocaine-like effect.

We found the lantern and stumbled into the dimly lit, dirt-floored hut, where two elderly men sat quietly on benches along the wall. With a muddy-water appearance and earthy taste, kava is not for sipping. It’s a belt-it-down drink. I belted down three, because it’s bad manners to refuse kava when offered.

The next day, as our four-wheel-drive bounced over the rutted path into the hills, I had to use all my will power to keep my breakfast down. Eventually we came to a village where, under the canopy of enormous old trees, villagers

brought out pig-tusk bracelets, grass skirts, spears, and carved items that you could buy if you could find someone who wasn't too shy to talk to you. Most of the villagers gathered, clapping and chanting, and performed the tourist version of their traditional dance.

That night, back in my hut by the river reading Theroux's *Happy Isles of Oceania* by kerosene lantern light, I learned that the previous owner of Tanna Beach had been awakened one night by a loud rumbling noise and had left his wife in bed to investigate. The ever-growing thunder turned out to be a wall of water coming down the creek. It picked up his bungalow, his wife, and everything he owned and carried them out to sea. Later that night I awoke several times thinking that I heard a rumbling.

The next day I hired a truck to drive across the island to see the dugong, a shy cousin of the manatee. Hours of bouncing over ruts brought us to the rocky shore of a large bay, where a young boy came out to summon the village's semi-tame dugong. Fifteen minutes of slapping the water conjured up only a sea snake, which made the agile youth leap out of the water. Just as I was ready to give up, the dugong appeared and frolicked with the boy. Then it was time to move on so we could catch the volcano at sunset.

We drove over acres of monochromatic, lifeless ash to reach the volcano. Two visitors had been killed recently, our driver explained, because they had made the mistake of running away from the flying lava: "If you stand and face it, you know which way to dodge." He went on to say that normally he didn't park this close, since trucks were expensive in Vanuatu.

I made the short hike. In the twilight, the smoking, lava spitting, mile-wide crater was awesome, the red glow of its lava pools eerie. The thing roared and shrieked like a huge beast breathing in and out. I was properly terrified.

If you wish to be similarly terrified, give at least three days to Tannu. The hourlong flight from Port Vila runs about \$140 (if not on a Discover Vanuatu Pass), the Tanna Beach Resort about \$100 double/night. Food is costly, but the price for a wife is five pigs. And try to get to the island of Pentecost when the first yam crop emerges, April to early June. The people perform a ritual known as land diving (which we have reinvented as bungee jumping), jumping head first from 80-foot-tall wooden towers with vines tied around their ankles to break their fall just in time for only their hair to touch the ground. It's these kinds of things that make Vanuatu very special for adventurers who want more than just diving.



Life seems laid back in Tanna's villages, where islanders maintain traditional customs. The tree house in the large banyan tree is an all-male club.

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