



# THE SPIRIT OF VANUATU

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**T**raveling faster than the speed of sound, the shockwave came out of nowhere and nearly threw me backwards to the ground. The massive concussion that followed nearly burst my eardrums; and in one explosive moment almost too rapid to perceive, a fiery eruption of lava and molten rocks catapulted high into Vanuatu's thick humid air. Mount Yasur was spewing fire like a wild fairy tale dragon with volcanic boulders hurtling through the air, landing mere feet away. As the earth continued to tremble, the astringent taste of sulphuric smoke surrounded me, stinging my eyes, while a metallic taste crept into my mouth and throat. This mind-blowing spectacle of Mother Nature is well off kitesurfing's beaten track, but it is just one of the uncharted perks of exploring the islands of Vanuatu.

This small island chain in the South Pacific had been on my radar for quite some time but the logistics never seemed to work out. Back in 2015, I had lined up a trip but the expedition was put on ice when Cyclone Pam, the most powerful cyclone in South Pacific history, ravaged the islands. Buildings and infrastructure were flattened, roads, food stocks and water sources damaged or destroyed, and 95% of the crops grown for island subsistence were wiped out. I had to wait four years, but by 2019, most of Vanuatu had recovered from the after-effects of Pam and I began to plan what I had set my explorer-mind on many years earlier.

Kitesurfing is still in its infancy in Vanuatu, despite the southeast trade winds that blow consistently during southern hemisphere winters. Always on the hunt for off-the-beaten-kitesurf-path solo sessions and as a passionate surfer, Vanuatu—with numerous top-level surf breaks—had everything I was looking for in a destination. Only 65 of the 80 islands are inhabited and I focused my search for wind and waves on three of the islands in the vast archipelago with the greatest potential for surfing and kiting: Efate, Pele and Tanna.



LEFT: Mount Yasur is one of the most active volcanoes in the world. Gabi made it a sunset ritual to hike to the narrow black sand path at the rim of the volcano to experience the nightly fire. RIGHT: Surrounded by a magical sandspit and a hundred shades of turquoise, Gabi felt as if someone photoshopped her into paradise on Castaway Island, a tiny, uninhabited oasis, five minutes by boat from the Eratap Beach Resort on the south coast of Efate.





I touched down on Efate, Vanuatu’s main island in terms of population and tourism, politically and economically. Efate is home to the international airport as well as the country’s capital Port Vila. Although the busiest and most developed of Vanuatu’s islands, once you get out of Port Vila, simple village life awaits along a rugged coastline covered by a thick rainforest with stunning waterfalls and isolated bays. My home base on Efate was a small, secluded resort called Ripples on the Bay, featuring four bungalow options perched on the water’s edge of Teouma Bay. The Aussie owners Sally and Damien fell in love with Vanuatu during their first visit in 2007 and built this piece of paradise from scratch themselves. My friends at World Car Rentals of Vanuatu delivered a Suzuki Jimny to my bungalow’s doorstep, I threw some boards and a couple of kites in the back and headed towards Pango, just south of Port Vila.

**“ YOU KNOW YOU’RE GOING REMOTE WHEN THE AIRLINE CHECK-IN COUNTER WEIGHS YOU ALONG WITH YOUR LUGGAGE. ”**

My first stop was to say “salut” to Thomas and his wife Fanny of Vanuatu Kite & Surfing. Thomas has been my helping adviser ever since contacting him for the first time in 2014. Originally from Grenoble in the French Alps, he came to Vanuatu 16 years ago. Thomas is a frothing waterman, the kind who never runs out of energy, and has crafted a lifestyle to suit his passions. Presiding over an impressive surf center, he offers surf, SUP, kite and windsurfing rentals and schooling. Thomas’s center also boasts a land-based surf gym with simulators that he designed, constructed and patented. After a quick chat and a tour of his instructional empire, it was time to go surfing. Busy with clients, Thomas suggested I should check Breakas, one of the premier surf spots on Efate, only a short drive from his house.

Paddling out into the lineup of a new break in a new country for the first time is always a little nerve-wracking. The pecking order can be quite harsh, even more so for a girl. The vibe out at Breakas—a hollow barreling left and right reef break—was the friendliest I have encountered anywhere in the world with welcoming locals hooting and laughing, happy to share their spot and trade waves. When the bigger sets appeared on the horizon, they screamed, “Out the baaaack, somebody goooooo!” Whereas things can get heated in the lineups of neighboring islands like Fiji, Samoa or Tonga, the chances of a peaceful surf with only a handful of people are high in Vanuatu. Plus, there is plenty of potential for the intrepid surfer venturing further afield to surf alone, and the same applies to kiting.



TOP: Armed and ready for just about anything, the connections Gabi made during her first surf session at Breakas unlocked the secret pearls of Vanuatu including the best off-the-beaten-path kitesurfing setup. BOTTOM RIGHT: Wasting no time, Gabi launches into the left-handed reefs on the southeastern side of Efate during her first afternoon on Vanuatu. BOTTOM LEFT: Having the right set of wheels on an expedition is critical to mission success. The vehicle of choice for Vanuatu is a narrow track 4x4 courtesy of World Car Rentals.



LEFT: Pango Point is a swell magnet with reef break lefts that can be fast and hollow. The wind is cross-offshore and the closest launch is about a mile to the north—the nearest safety net is New Caledonia, 250 miles to the south.



During this really fun session at Breakas, I met Andy, a local carpenter and builder, who came to Vanuatu on a project assignment over 10 years ago. Born and raised in Melbourne, he swapped Australia for Vanuatu and is now married with three kids to a beautiful Ni-Vanuatu woman. My chance meeting with Andy was a gift; he turned into a guiding star during my trip. Andy clued me into dawnie surf sessions at a secret spot in front of his house and guided me to other breaks off the beaten path.

Later that same day I carved hard lines into clean wave faces pulled by my kite back at Breakas, strikingly all alone. Noticing the dark shadows under the water's surface from afar, I couldn't help but to kite closer, curious to find out what creature had joined me out there in the sparkling, translucent clear waters of the South Pacific. With its finless, bulbous back cutting through the surface of the water with sporadic smacking of its flattened, fluked tail, it turned out to be a mother dugong and its baby cruising right next to me. With its magical wildlife and friendly surf breaks, Vanuatu had already cast a spell over me within my first 36 hours on the island.

Due to their volcanic origins and lack of beaches, most spots on Efate can be challenging in terms of launching and landing a kite. Exposed to the trade winds, Tamanu on the Beach, a peaceful, luxury 5-star boutique resort in the south of Efate, offers one of the few wide, sandy beaches for safe launching. With its private

CENTER: Night sessions on the edge of the island are fine and dandy until the wind dies or injury strikes before a daunting mile-long slog upwind to safety. RIGHT: Full of natural sea life, Gabi witnesses a mother dugong and its baby amongst Vanuatu's endless splendor.



beachfront access and waves right out front, it's a heavenly place to stay, eat, relax and kite. There's another great kiting spot called White Sands just an upwind tack or short stroll away. For those beginners or kitesurfers chasing flatwater freestyle conditions, they will find their heaven at Mele Beach, a wide sandy launch with a sandy bottom, kiteable at all tides about 5 miles from Port Vila.

My days on Efate were filled with action and endless exploring. Swell magnet Pango Point became one of my favorite playgrounds for surfing and kiting. It's a hollow, fast reef break that can be quite powerful, but with the cross-offshore wind direction, there's no escape option when things go wrong—the chances of landing on exposed coral are pretty high on the wrong tide and there's no safe place to launch at Pango—the only access is launching from a beach about a mile upwind of the break. It's worth mentioning that there's another fun break along the way called Fatfar, which is safer than Pango.

One afternoon, Pango was pumping and I stayed out past sunset. In a pretty serious wipeout, my ankle was slashed by my fin. Amid the pain and bleeding, I had to kite back upwind in the pitch dark, find my launch beach and manage to land my kite by feel on the narrow stretch of sand with very little visibility. After that episode, I promised myself not to stay out that late again.





The kava root is ingrained in everyday life and has been a longstanding part of the Ni-Vanuatu culture as a ceremony since ancient times. Kava ceremonies mark significant milestones in the life of an individual, family or community. When consumed, the pressed juice of the kava root creates a pleasant, numb feeling around the mouth, lips and tongue, as well as a sense of calm and relaxation. Served in half coconut shells, you order the amount of kava you want in the local currency, called the vatu. The smallest amount is a 50-vatu sized shell which is equivalent to 40 cents. One day after a kite session I visited a kava bar and sampled both a 50-vatu and 150-vatu-sized shell and suffered a massive ‘kava-over’ and swore that would be the last time I drank the earthy brown liquid.

**“ OVER 20 DIFFERENT DIALECTS ARE SPOKEN ON THIS TINY ISLAND AND EVEN SOME OF THE LAST REMAINING CARGO CULTS STILL HOLD SWAY ON TANNA. CARGO CULTS ARE INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS THAT BELIEVE MEN FROM MODERN SOCIETIES ARE DEITIES AND THEIR WORSHIP WILL BRING THE COMMUNITY MODERN GOODS AND PROSPERITY. ”**



After an amazing week on Efate, I packed my quiver again for the trip to Tanna. You know you’re going remote when the airline check-in counter weighs you along with your luggage. Home to the mighty Mount Yasur, one of the most active volcanoes in the world, Tanna is one of the more mysterious islands in the far south of Vanuatu’s island chain. Tanna is isolated, even by Vanuatu standards. Its largest town, Lenakel, on the west coast, is more like a frontier outpost with only a few paved roads, a small outdoor fruit and vegetable market, a couple of upscale hotels, one bank and a handful of tiny shops, most of them without any refrigeration or electricity, thus they’re more like dark pantries full of long shelf-life goods. Tanna isn’t an easy place to explore. Its seclusion has left it undeveloped, with tiny villages few and far between scattered all across the island. Most villages are hidden away in thick bush and dense rainforest, only accessible by long walks in on foot. Living off of the land, the people are completely self-sufficient with a flourishing tribal life steeped in ancient traditions. Over 20 different dialects are spoken on this tiny island and even some of the last remaining cargo cults still hold sway on Tanna. Cargo cults are indigenous religions that believe men from modern societies are deities and their worship will bring the community modern goods and prosperity.

Arriving at White Grass Airport, my local guides Phillip and his brother Jackson of Yasur Backpackers couldn’t believe their eyes when I emerged from the plane with my two huge coffin bags and a third duffel bag, each weighing about 50lbs. Since there are no rental cars on the island, the best way to get around is by hiring a 4x4 with a driver, so we loaded up the ute and headed east into the most remote part of Tanna across the rugged cross-island road. Cresting over the mountain ridge in the center of Tanna, I got a view of its entirety, with the 11,000-foot Mount Yasur giant surrounded by a vast moonscape of black ash fringed by solidified lava rock.

TOP: Surrounded by the black volcanic ash of the great Mount Yasur, Gabi poses with brothers Phillip and Jackson of Yasur Backpackers on the island of Tanna. BOTTOM RIGHT: Vanuatu offers the traveling kitesurfer consistent trade winds July through October along with infinite cultural adventures. BOTTOM LEFT: Navigating the Air Vanuatu check-in counter for intra-island flights is a nod to the early days of aviation. Island hopping passengers are weighed along with their baggage to keep the puddle jumpers running smoothly.



It was dark by the time we reached Sea Breeze Bungalows on White Beach in Latukuri Village. Just feet from the secluded breathtaking beach, the two bungalows and its restaurant are the results of a joint project between David, the landowner, and the University of South Australia. UniSA students designed and built the structures, sourcing the materials from the surrounding natural environment. I couldn't have slept any better amongst the bamboo walls and woven coconut frond roof of the simple bungalow.

Every single morning the wind was up at sunrise and all I had to do was walk a few meters down the beach, pump up my kite and glide out into the ultimate kitesurfing dream: crystal clear waters, small waves to play with, local kids running up and down the beach following me, and from further out the back, I could clearly see Mount Yasur in the distance. After a couple of solo sessions, I hung out with the kids in the village, playing with my gear and teaching them how to pump up a kite. They were all smiles and their beaming eyes made my heart overflow with joy and gratefulness.

Almost every sunset I went up to Mount Yasur and stayed until after dark when the natural spectacle took on an added effect. Walking the narrow black sand

path around the rim of the volcano and gazing into the abyss was frightening yet mesmerizing. Amongst the volcanic explosions, it's easy to understand why locals regard Mount Yasur as a living being.

One of my kite missions on Tanna was to find Waisisi Beach. Back on Efate, Andy had hinted to me about a very isolated, magically stunning beach with fantastic waves, but his directions were vague at best. "Seek and you shall find" is the motto on most of my trips, so we loaded up the ute and turned off the main dirt track onto a tiny road that obviously hadn't been driven on in a long time. My driver wasn't sure if his Toyota would make it down and especially back up the steep, heavily washed-out super slick track. At rock crawling speeds, it was a long, rugged drive, but once we reached the very last village of the Lauyasias tribe, the road came to an end.

Villagers of all ages gathered around the truck with their eyes wide open staring at me, evidently not quite sure what to make of this tall, strong, blonde, white woman with big bags. According to Jackson, I was more than likely the first-ever white person the kids here had seen. Jackson's cousin Thomas had come along as he had family ties to the Lauyasias tribe, which is important in the kastom as the kinship-ties meant we weren't overstepping any boundaries or traditions.



LEFT: The active volcano of Mount Yasur is one of Vanuatu's largest tourist attractions as well as a sacred area for the John Frum cargo cult. Members of the cult revere John Frum, a deified messenger who is believed to live in the volcano and once predicted the material wealth that arrived when American forces were stationed on the island during World War II.



CENTER: Gabi shares a moment with the young village girls of the Lauyasias tribe. Gabi learns about the 'kastom' traditions, including elaborate right of passages for boys and girls that preserve the tribe's cultural heritage. RIGHT: Gabi gets her face painted like a warrior before she goes into kitesurfing battle.








TOP LEFT: Gabi's guide thinks it's quite possible that this kite lesson with the villagers might be their first interaction with a European and definitely with kitesurfing. TOP CENTER: Gabi and the curious members of the Lauyasias tribe head down the path to the beach. TOP RIGHT: At the age of six, boys are circumcised, permitting them to wear the penis sheath and leave their family to reside with the male elders. Only after they boys have learned to hunt, make tools and find food in the forests, can they return home, build a house and gain approval from their mothers to marry. BOTTOM RIGHT: A line forms as Gabi gets ready to blow minds with the magic of kiteboarding. BOTTOM CENTER: Watching from afar, one can only imagine villagers of all ages making the connection between their traditional sailcraft and Gabi's modern Duotone equipment. BOTTOM LEFT: Gabi dances a traditional kastom dance with the women of the tribe. When a girl approaches 15 years old, her father and mother put a chicken feather in her hair. Interested boys will then fight each other for her. Whoever takes the feather out of her hair, will marry that girl—but only if he has built a house and has a pig and kava for the wedding ceremony.



The ocean was nowhere to be seen and we knew the village was well above sea level, but everyone wanted to help carry our gear and show us to the beach. It was a good half-hour walk through dense, lush jungle before the vegetation opened up to two long, black volcanic sand beaches, framed by high cliffs deeply covered in rainforest. The swell was tiny and the wind very light. Most of my helpers didn't speak a word of English, but we communicated perfectly with gestures and smiles. Together we pumped up two kites, played around in the light wind and laughed a lot. It was really hard to say goodbye to the Lauyasia people and Tanna, but the small, dreamy, volcanic isle of Pele was calling my name.

**“FLYING ALONG, I ASKED HIM ‘ARE YOU SCARED?’ ‘NO,’ THE CUTE LITTLE VOICE CAME FROM BEHIND. ‘NOT SCARED... EXCITED!’ SUDDENLY ALL THE KIDS WERE IN. ONE BY ONE THEY JUMPED ON MY BACK TO GO FOR A RIDE OF A LIFETIME. ”**

After a quick stopover on the main island, I took a 30-minute boat ride to Pele, just north of Efate. Split between four villages, only about 220 people live on this remote island. My boat dropped me on the beach right outside my accommodation, where my host family, Cynthia and her dad Tarisu of Sunrise Bungalows, warmly welcomed me. After a brief tour and introductions with chief Tom, I was kindly invited to come to church, as it was Sunday. While listening to the beautiful singing of the villagers, I noticed the wind come up outside. I quietly snuck out and in no time, I was being pulled by my kite out into the stunningly beautiful lagoon. After church, the kids gathered on the beach. I cruised over to them and asked, “Would you like to come for a ride?” Afraid at first, most of the kids shook their little heads. Only Magenti, my host Cynthia’s seven-year-old son, was keen. On my back with his arms tightly wrapped around my neck and his legs gripping onto my waist, I took him out to the reef. Flying along, I asked him, “Are you scared?” “No,” the cute little voice came from behind. “Not scared... excited!” Suddenly, all of the kids were in. One by one they jumped on my back to go for a ride of a lifetime—none of them had ever been that far out in the lagoon.

I spent my last few days back on Efate staying in my cozy bungalow at Ripples where my trip had started. With a solid-sized swell in the water the day before my departure, I rocked up to Pango Point hoping for the best but found the break messier than messy and I declared it unrideable. The tidal window was running out, so I headed over to Andy’s house and found his secret spot was firing on all six cylinders. The launch at his house and the ride out to the wave had dodgy wind and big holey patches due to the cross-offshore direction, so I drove a few beaches downwind and launched with a solid upwind grind back to the break. I scored the best waves of my trip—once again, all alone in the lineup, and watched the most magical sunset from the water. I was overwhelmed and deeply grateful. Vanuatu had amazed me in so many respects. Screaming “thank you Vanuatu” towards the golden horizon and bowing to Surf God Huey, I bid my farewell to this magical place and some of the kindest people I’ve ever met. 



TOP LEFT: On the tiny island of Pele, Gabi divides and conquers the hearts of the young kids with exhilarating piggy-kite rides, taking them to parts of the lagoon they have never seen before. TOP RIGHT: With endless kiteboarding options, vast stretches of pristine Vanuatu shoreline are open for pioneering kite discoveries. BOTTOM: For the adventurous kitesurfer, June through August are the best months to overlap tradewinds with bigger groundswells coming from New Zealand, although it takes a straight south swell to avoid the shadow of New Caledonia.