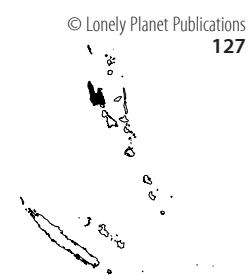


Espiritu Santo



ESPIRITU SANTO

It's called the Capital of Adventure, the Divers' Mecca, Espiritu Santo – Spanish for 'the Holy Spirit' – and mostly just plain Santo. The adventure starts by zapping down a river from an amazing cave, rounding cattle along the coconut plantations, trekking through the jungle to huddling little villages, searching for the elusive Lysepsep people, and swinging from trees into the brilliant blue waters of a blue hole. The diving is world class, with the magnificent wreck of USS *President Coolidge* accessible to anyone with certification, and the coral reefs often just steps from the shore. And as for the spirit, it may not be holy but it imbues everyone with enthusiasm for the place.

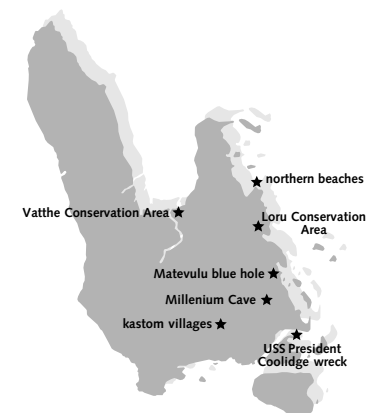
Santo is Vanuatu's largest island and has the country's four highest peaks (all more than 1700m) – Mt Tabwemasana, Mt Kotamtam, Mt Tawaloala and Santo Peak – rising from the mountainous spine that runs almost the full length of the island's west coast. In contrast, the much flatter southern and eastern coastal strips have been developed for cattle grazing and plantations. This is where most of the island's fascinating history has been acted out.

Santo has an interesting mix of city slickers, who live along the southern and eastern seaboard, balanced by villagers who are quite isolated, dress in clothes woven from the leaves of the jungle, and are totally self-sufficient. As *kastom* demands, there are important *nimangki* (grade-taking) ceremonies throughout these villages.

The island draws many travellers and facilities are just fabulous.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Diving the **USS President Coolidge** (p52), the world's largest, accessible luxury liner and WWII wreck
- Exploring beautiful lowland forests in the **Loru** (p137) and the **Vatthe Conservation Area** (p138)
- Swimming in a crystal-clear '**blue hole**' (p136) or relax on picture-perfect northern **beaches** (p137)
- Stepping into the past in Santo's many **kastom villages** (p128)
- Losing yourself in wonder amid the stalactites and stalagmites at **Millenium Cave** (p136)



■ POPULATION: 33,000

■ AREA: 3677 SQ KM

History

Santo's sandalwood resources were not discovered by the outside world until 1853, then alluvial gold was found and by 1856, 16 traders were resident on the island. Several ships at a time would be moored at various anchorages, taking on sandalwood in return for pigs.

By 1871, blackbirders (see p29) were casting their greedy eyes on Santo. Over the next decade, many sailors were killed in revenge for acts of violence against islanders.

RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

Many Santo locals were resentful of the Europeans and by the early 20th century resistance movements included the Ronovuru movement. Ronovuru claimed to be able to bring the dead back to life. He told his supporters that his wife had been poisoned by an Englishman and that only by killing this settler could his wife and other dead people be resurrected. He and two friends murdered the unfortunate man, giving portions of the body to his followers.

The European settlers were outraged. Ronovuru, unrepentant, went to the gallows, promising a return to life for all his followers' ancestors. Despite his death, and the fact that no corpses sprang back to life, the cult persisted in Santo's isolated bush villages.

WWII

Santo played an important role during WWII that few people are aware of. Japan's relentless southward drive in early 1942 meant the Allies urgently needed a secure forward base to buttress their desperate holding action in the central Solomons. Santo's Second Channel was ideal (see the boxed text, opposite).

JIMMY STEVENS & THE COCONUT REBELLION

In 1963 charismatic Jimmy Stevens formed the Nagriamel movement. Then on 27 May 1980, eight weeks before national independence, he and his supporters staged a coup known as the Coconut Rebellion. Armed mainly with bows and arrows, they occupied Luganville and proclaimed Santo's independence, calling their new country Vemarana. The new nation was short-lived, however; it collapsed with Stevens' arrest on 1 September (see p33).

Information

There is no tourist information centre but go to the Santo Rotary Club's website www.santotoday.com. **Dave Cross** (☎ 43911), president of the Espiritu Santo Tourism Association, will happily answer your queries, as will your host at your hotel/guesthouse. Find Dave at Beachfront Resort (p134).

Activities

SCUBA DIVING & SNORKELLING

Want to dive? Then Santo is the place to be. In fact, you shouldn't come to Santo without trying a dive. See p52 for detailed information on dive sites and p56 for dive centres, which hire out gear and facilitate dives. But if you're over 105, you could always settle for snorkelling as there are so many reefs within clear view.

GAME & SPORTS FISHING

Pit your skills against the wahoo, bonito, rainbow runners, mahimahi – whatever is out there. The catch is either tagged and returned or donated to local villages – never wasted. It costs around 50,000/75,000Vt for a half-/full day for a maximum of six people. Main operators are **Allan Power Dive Tours** (Map p132; ☎ 36822; www.allan-power-santo.com) in *The Lady*, a 10m Reefmaster; and **Seascape Charters** (☎ 37379; islandflyer@vanuatu.com.vu) in *Island Flyer*, a 7.5m Shark Cat. Bokissa Eco Island Resort (p135) has a 12m Mondoocoe and a 7.5m Sports Fish for guests.

TREKKING

There are many excellent hikes on Santo. Favourites are through the Vatthe Conservation Area (p138) and the Loru Conservation Area (p137). For die-hard trekkers there are major challenges in the Cumberland Ranges (p139).

Southern Jungle Adventure (☎ 54491; santo@vanuatu.com.vu; per day 6000Vt) is a five-day grand trek through dense rainforest, gardens, rivers, waterfalls and caves, including fabulous Millenium Cave (p136). You spend your nights in little huts, a fire burning nearby to keep away the cold, in traditional villages where MalMal people (pygmy size) live and still use Stone Age equipment. Chiefs of these villages have many wives. Your guide is local guru Glen Russell, who also arranges *kastom* dances for a minimum of 10 people.

FROM JUNGLE TO CITY TO DIVING MECCA

Second Channel was the Allies' base for their war efforts against the Japanese advance during WWII. For three years to September 1945 more than half a million military personnel, mainly Americans, were stationed here waiting their turn to head into battle in the Pacific. At times there were as many as 100 ships moored off Luganville.

Roads were laid throughout southeastern Santo. There were more than 40 cinemas, four military hospitals, five airfields, a naval repair centre, a torpedo boat base, jetties and market gardens. Quonset huts were erected for use as offices, stores, workshops and servicemen's accommodation; many can still be seen around Luganville.

Over 10,000 islanders came to Santo to work as labourers or servants for the troops. To the ni-Vans, the servicemen seemed fabulously wealthy and generous and to be paid much higher wages than the planters.

Once the fighting was over and the Americans were to return home, there was the problem of all the surplus war equipment. The USA offered local planters and the Condominium government the chance to buy the equipment and supplies. But they stalled, hoping, perhaps, to get it all for nothing. Their plan backfired, because the Americans dumped the lot. Everything from bulldozers, aero engines, trucks and jeeps to crates of Coca-Cola and canned food went into the sea at what is now **Million Dollar Point**. The coral-encrusted equipment, and the wreck of a boat that was trying to nick some of it, make the point a popular diving and snorkelling spot (see p54).

HORSE RIDING

Beginners and experienced riders can enjoy a superb day at **Bel Mol Ranch** (Map p130; ☎ 36823; belmolbeef@vanuatu.com.vu; half-/full day 6000/12,000Vt) among coconut trees, along the coastline, up on the plateau for amazing views, and rounding up some beautiful sleek Santo cattle. Price includes hotel pickup, lunch and gear.

GOLF

The **Santo Golf Club** (Map p130; ☎ Sat & Sun) at Palikulo Bay welcomes visitors, but you need to bring your own clubs. It's a delightful course running along the sea front with fine views of Aese Island and Palikulo Point. There's a golf tournament at the club on the last Sunday of every month.

Tours

Tours cost upwards from 2000/4000Vt per half-/full day, depending on the distance, fees to be paid and the number of people. A typical day trip includes visiting Fanafo, Matantas or Champagne Beach, and the Matevulu Blue Hole. Whoever you book with, be sure to agree on where you will go: not all guides have access to Champagne Beach due to *kastom* disputes, but you can walk across to it from Lonnoc Beach.

An absolute must-do is Millenium Cave (p136) high in the hills inland from Luganville. It was discovered by Glen Russell

in 1999, and took five years to open up for tourists to explore. Nearby is Nampauk. A tour to this fascinating village includes a scary fire-dancing ceremony, usually performed to welcome a new chief or to bless the yam crop. Book with Luke of **Paradise Tours** (☎ 37159), which offers a full range of tours.

Heritage Tours (☎ 36862, 40968) Offers a range of half- and full-day tours including the Vatthe Conservation Area and can tailor trips to your interests (eg hiking, WWII touring).

Little Paradise of Port Olry (Map p130; ☎ 37661, 37606, 43776; PO Box 115) Tarcisius runs a day tour, which includes his home village at Port Olry and its gorgeous beach. On the way you stop to swim at the Blue Hole, and visit Fanafo.

Getting There & Away AIR

Luganville's Pekoia Airport is the feeder airport for the following northern islands: Ambae, Ambrym, Epi, Maewo, Malekula, Paama, Pentecost, Banks Islands and Torres Islands. Contact **Vanair** (airport ☎ 36506; town Map p132; ☎ 36421).

There are at least two return flights daily between Santo and Vila. The island's other commercial strip is at Lajmoli, on the northwest coast. Vanair stops there on some flights; include it if possible as it takes you over the awesome central mountains.