

Trip report to Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu with Rising Tides

(link to photos at bottom of email)

Several years ago my dear friends Brian Basura and Claudia Richardson founded a non-profit they named Rising Tides with the goal of doing some good works in the South Pacific for a few years and then sharing what they learn along the way with students and other groups here in the US. The mission of Rising Tides was to do "reef check" style fish surveys and environmental baseline studies at remote and rarely visited islands with the secondary goal of looking for opportunities to help indigenous people once they knew more about the local needs. They departed San Pedro, CA in Feb 2010 and have sailed roughly 9000 miles over the last 15 months visiting many countries. Along the way they have distributed dental supplies (some villages share one toothbrush), mosquito nets (people are still dying of malaria every day), reading glasses, and basic medical supplies (many villagers die of simple infections). They worked with Habitat for Humanity to build a house for a low income family in Fiji. They've also spoken at schools and helped kids understand the importance of taking care of the environment and have given the kids a rare opportunity to speak with and ask questions to a professional other than the 5 or so choices they've been exposed to on their island.

GETTING THERE

Vanuatu is between Fiji and New Caledonia. It's a 10.5 hour flight from LAX to Nadi, Fiji. I had a 3.5 hour layover there and then a 1.5 hour flight to Port Vila, Vanuatu. From there, it was a short layover with a 1 hour flight on a turboprop from Vila to Santo. The first thing I noticed upon arrival to Vila is the heat and humidity! It just soaks right into you. Growing up in Alabama I have no strong aversion to heat, except at night when it confounds sleep, but it's a world of difference from the mild climate of SoCal that I've grown accustomed to! I was able to step foot onto Skylight, RisingTides 43' Mason Sailing Yacht, about 21 hours after being dropped off at LAX. Due to a wacky flight schedule, the trip home is much longer. It took more than 48 hours to get back since I had to spend one night in Vila and had a 10 hour layover at Nadi.

I can't say enough good things about Air Pacific! They're courteous, professional, and feed you even on short flights. You get 2 meals on the LAX - Nadi flight. I also enjoyed the airport process outside of the "security theatre" nonsense we employ in the US. Santo didn't even have metal detectors - you just give your hand written ticket to the gate agent and get on the plane. You know it's time to line up when the plane starts the engines! The schedule is approximate at best and no one seems very worked up about it. It's so carefree that there is some possibility that one could accidentally get on the wrong flight and be sent hundreds of miles in the wrong direction! At one point I had to ask the flight attendant if I was on the right plane when none of the cities mentioned on the intercom matched where I needed to go!

I had a good laugh at the Vila airport as I was waiting for my return flight to Nadi. An older Ni Vanuatu must have been heading to a funeral because he had a large stack of traditional woven mats that I'm told are used for the ceremonies. In addition to the matts, he had 3-4 chickens with their legs bound wrapped up in a traditional woven palm frond basket that you see in all the local markets. Somehow one of the chickens got loose and worked its

way out of the basket. He grabbed for it and it crapped all over the floor. It was obvious he was near the end of his rope with the stress of the funeral and finally the escaping chicken. He happened to look up and see me grinning during the process of him wrestling with the chicken and cleaning up the mess. He was stern for a moment and then burst into a big smile himself.

DIVING SANTO!

Claudia did a great job with her descriptions of the dives so I'll skip over the details there. I do want to acknowledge the staff of Aquamarine Santo. They make you feel like family and the prices are very reasonable.

The people of Santo are truly blessed with spectacular dive conditions. Having done essentially no research prior to my trip, after all I have Brian and Claudia's expert guide service at my disposal, I was astounded to discover that Santo has the President Coolidge, a 650 ft long ship laying just off shore within easy reach of a beach dive! There's also a place called Million Dollar Point that has an unbelievable story behind why thousands of tons of war materials were pushed into the ocean (google million dollar point). I've always had a fondness for beach diving and two major sites with this history, structure, visibility, and warm clear water was just too good to be true! I must have said aloud a hundred times during the trip, "it just doesn't get easier than this!"

The mechanics of each dive day were the same. We woke up once it started to get bright out, had our wonderful coffee made one cup at a time in Claudia's French press, checked our gear, and made the 15 minute dingy ride across the channel from Aore to Aquamarine's small dingy dock. Here we loaded out gear into plastic tubs that were then loaded onto a small trailer attached to van. After everyone was accounted for, the van makes the 15 minute trip from the shop up to the Coolidge or Million Dollar Point. The entry at the Coolidge is a beautifully manicured little clearing under a dense jungle canopy with nice benches for gearing up and a sheltered area to leave your clothes should it rain.

LIVING ON A SAILBOAT

It was such a good lifestyle! I didn't get a chance to do a significant crossing, but the island hopping lifestyle just can't be beat. Every day you're surrounded by incredible beauty. You tend to go to sleep shortly after it gets dark because you're tired from the day's activities and you don't want to burn too much power keeping lights on. You wake up when the sun comes up because it get bright (duh!) and you're so well rested from sleeping 8-10 hours. Brian and Claudia "cheated" while I was there and didn't do any work on the boat but their normal routine is some mix of boat maintenance and playing. Every day I was there included some big adventure - either diving, hiking, a blue hole trip, a cave trip, etc. All free time between the adventures was spent face down in the warm clear water. Everything seemed so balanced with just the right amount of sleep, food, exercise, and quite time spent simply looking around at the beauty and soaking it all in. I know my view would be different if I experienced the other side of sailing such as the cold wet night watches or occasional mechanical issue that threatens the safety of the vessel. Even then, I think the joy of island hopping in the South Pacific would make up for the challenges. I hope to have more sailboat time in my future!

Claudia does a wonderful job with the food on the boat. Much of it is fresh

local produce that she finds at the market or on one of the islands. Citrus and Papaya are everywhere and we enjoyed them every day. One of Claudia's specialties was lemonade but made with Grapefruit, Oranges, or basically whatever was laying around. It was delicious and I've taken to making it here at the house. Anyone ever eaten green papaya? I didn't even know it was possible. Claudia put some in a stirfry one night and it was really tasty. I learned a lot about cooking during my trip. Claudia loaded up on yams and bok choy before I showed up. After a week I felt like Bubba on Forrest Gump when he was going over the ways to cook shrimp. There are at least a 10 different ways to cook yams and bok choy and all of them were delicious! I became addicted to homemade guacamole and "grapefruitade". I've also been stir-frying more meals. It's probably not the lowest calorie food, but it sure is good and reminds me of my time on the boat!

THE CAVE EXPEDITION

See Claudia's report. I will mention that the rafting down the river through the canyon after the cave hike was my favorite part. The beauty of the carved rock walls and dense jungle is beyond my description. Another thought is that if this tour was in America, the tour operator would be put in jail for endangering people! It was dangerous as could be with fall hazards everywhere. If you got hurt near the cave it would take forever to crawl out or be carried out. I love stuff like this where a little effort has been put into the adventure to encourage a good outcome but you're not coddled. We need much more of this in the US!

GETTING AROUND IN VANUATU

Riding in vehicles is an adventure in itself. Lane lines are nothing more than rough suggestions. It's common to see a 2 lane road used as 4 lanes with very frequent borrowing of the incoming traffic lane. Seat belts are used so infrequently they're typically wedged under the seat or otherwise can't be found. ALL cabbies run on empty and generally have to go get fuel immediately after picking up a new fare. More surprisingly, several times our cabbie didn't know where we were headed and had to stop and ask directions! It's not just a ruse either because we had pre-negotiated the rate, or they were fixed such as the \$15 airport transport fares, and it would behoove them to get us there as directly as possible. Brian and Claudia confirmed this to be their experience as well.

CONSERVATION

There is a significant "green" element to life in Vanuatu. It's the opposite of the US in that it's done out of necessity instead of something done just to feel good. Most cars are smaller and have tiny motors that just sip diesel or petrol. They get around just fine but the economy of their engines become obvious when you see them downshifting on even the smallest hill. My hotel in Vila had a solar water heater and they warned you not to expect warm showers longer than 10 minutes. Goods are displayed at the local markets on huge green leaves and larger quantities of goods are provided in palm frond baskets. While plastic bags are available, they seemed much less prevalent than in the US. Many power outlets have a switch built in so that you can easily turn off devices that may be plugged in. Some of the small waterfront villas on the island of Aore even had a switch at the head of the drive that I imagine served a similar purpose for the whole structure. This is a useful feature since the only power on Aore either comes from generator or solar!

Life on a sailboat reinforces these ideas since fresh water and power are precious. We weren't on a tight power or water budget since we were close to fresh water at either a river or resort during my trip, and we could buy diesel in town if we needed to run the engine/generator, but it was easy to see how minding the battery state and water tanks would be critical during crossings. I learned that salt water can be used to wash dishes with only a quick rinse in fresh water. I also learned about using a pump up sprayer to dramatically reduce the fresh water required for rinsing dishes or taking a shower. A fine shower can be had on the deck of a sailboat with only a liter or two of water in a sprayer!

Well guys, I've probably rambled enough. I'm happy to chat about the trip if you have any questions.

Here's a link to my photos from the trip.

<http://ross-o.smugmug.com/Vanuatu2011>

Cheers,
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