

## Damarri update – June 2008

Dear All,

Plans are drawn in the Sand at Low Tide..... and all our plans got washed away!

We had intended to visit New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu this year before returning to Australia for the next Cyclone Season. We wrote to you from New Caledonia only about a month ago. While there, the Tradewinds set in with a vengeance so we had strong Easterly winds which was just what we didn't want and there was no sign of any change in the foreseeable future. We felt that we could wait a whole month and not make it to Fiji and thence to Tonga, so we decided to cut our losses and go straight to Vanuatu, with a stop at one of the Loyalty Islands on the way. We called in to an island called "Lifou" in the Loyalty Islands..... It was beautiful but unspectacular and we spent a lazy week there, fishing and looking around while we waited for a suitable weather window to take us to an island called Tanna at the Southern end of the group of islands which make up Vanuatu. Those of "a certain age" many know Vanuatu better by it's former name of the New Hebrides which is what these islands were called by Capt.Cook and known as until independence from England in 1980.

Arriving in Tanna was like travelling back in time to another age..... there should have been a big sign on the beach saying "Welcome to the Third World"! It turned into such an adventure and we saw so much there that I thought I would devote an entire letter just to our time on Tanna.....

We anchored in PORT RESOLUTION which is in no way a "port", just a fairly sheltered bay with absolutely NO facilities. There are a couple of villages which consist of a few grass huts and there is also a "Yacht Club" which is owned by the village and any pennies it makes go to the village as a whole. But it is not a Yacht Club as we know them..... It is just a bigger grass hut where the yotties can gather if they want to. I think there may be warm beer there but that is all..... There is no electricity so they could not run a refrigerator. The correct place to check-in with Customs and Immigration is at a place called Lenakel which is round the other side of the island but unfortunately the anchorage there is not very safe so most people go to Port Resolution and are then faced with the problem of getting to Lenakel to check in. The locals have cottoned on to this and a guy named Stanley runs a sort of Taxi service across the island.

Four boats came in that weekend so on Monday morning, TEN yotties and a couple of locals all piled into the back of a big four wheel drive pick-up and off we went. The problem is that there are no proper roads on the island, only what you and I would recognise as rather poor farm tracks. In places the track was so bad that we were only going at

walking pace so it took us more than two hours to get to Lenakel..... and the back of the pick-up was pretty uncomfortable so we felt a bit the worse for wear by the time we got there! Anyway, we saw the relevant officials and got our paperwork stamped and then had lunch at a local "restaurant"..... all I can say is that it wasn't as bad as I expected! The meal consisted of a MOUNTAIN of rice, on top of which Ute had a chicken wing and I had a piece of leather which went under the name of "steak". We haven't had any noticeable side effects..... yet! We then visited the fruit market and bought some lovely mandarines, a beautiful pineapple and a few veggies..... and some UNroasted peanuts which were still on the plant..... as you probably know, Peanuts are the ROOT of the plant and grow underground. They are absolutely delicious and taste very like fresh peas straight out of the pod..... Hence the name "peanut" I suppose.

Then it was all back in the Pick-up for the even longer trip home..... Longer because enroute we took in a visit to the top of the local volcano. They bill Mount Yassur as the world's most active volcano and they are not kidding! On the way we drove across an ash covered plain and could hear the mountain roaring and see smoke belching from the top. During the drive round the mountain and then up the track that leads to the crater, we started to encounter the very fine dust (like the finest sand that you have ever seen, but black), it got in your eyes and you could feel it between your teeth. It was everywhere! We drove almost to the top on the upwind side of the mountain and only had to walk the last 1/4 mile or so. As we walked we could hear the explosions from within the crater and could see what looked like rocks flying hundreds of feet into the air. Actually it was a bit scary but there were lots of other people there so we hoped it was "OK".....

We reached the top just as the Sun was going down behind the mountain so I got some nice pictures of that and then we walked a short distance round the crater to the best view of the "fireworks"..... We couldn't see from below but there were in fact THREE craters, two smaller ones within the big crater that we had previously thought was THE crater. And it was from the two smaller craters that all the noise, smoke and rocks were coming. One or other of the small craters seemed to erupt every couple of minutes..... it just went on and on. There would be a quiet period and then an almighty explosion and we realised that what we had previously thought were "rocks" were in fact great "globs" of molten lava, shooting hundreds of feet into the air, followed by a "mushroom cloud". It was absolutely AWESOME and as it got dark the lava and fire just glowed brighter and it became more and more spectacular! I flattened two lots of batteries taking lots and lots of pictures and movies. We thought that Montserrat was pretty spectacular but this..... The noise, the fire, the sheer magnitude of the display..... followed by silence..... and then the dull "thuds" of the lumps of molten lava as they landed back in the surrounding outer crater..... Unbelievable! The strange thing was that everybody was so awestruck that we were all talking in hushed tones..... like a sort of "reverence".

It was another experience we will never forget.

And then at seven thirty the following morning we were visited by three guys in a dugout canoe who offered us two pawpaws and a big bunch of bananas..... They refused to take any money for them so we said thank you very much and wished them a good day..... A few minutes later they returned, saying that their dugout was leaking quite badly and would I take them fishing in my dinghy!!! What can you do? So out we went..... It turned out that in the afternoon they were having a special ceremony to introduce a new baby to the village. They wanted the fish for the feast. There were two younger guys (in their 20s) who spoke good english and a third older guy (50ish?). They directed me out into the ocean and outside the reef. There was a big surf running so I was not completely comfortable with it but they seemed quite happy so I went along with what they wanted. We reached a point just on the reef but beyond where the waves were breaking and then Eric and Tom, the two younger guys, donned their masks and flippers, grabbed their spearguns and in they went..... I won't give you a blow by blow account but suffice it to say that because the water was comparatively cold they only speared six fish (fewer fish in cold water apparently) in the hour before they themselves became too cold and wanted to go back. Because they didn't get as many fish as they wanted for the "feast" we offered them some of the Dorado (or "Mahi Mahi" as we Pacific islanders call them) we had caught on the way there, and they gratefully accepted! The long and the short of it was that we were invited to the ceremony.....

Actually the "Ceremony" was a bit unspectacular but the interesting bit was the chance to visit the village and meet lots of members of the extended family..... Each "village" consists of a collection of grass huts occupied by members of just one family..... The next village is another family. Honestly, we may get a bit dissatisfied with life in the UK but we have never seen anything like this..... There is no electricity in the village though they do have water, there is a hosepipe which runs from where it is collected half way up a mountain some miles away and ends at a standpipe in the middle of the village. They have little or no furniture and sleep on a mat made from coconut palms. There were dozens of "piccaninnes" running around, many were stark naked and I don't think there was a pair of shoes in the entire village. There were pigs and piglets running everywhere, most get eaten but we were introduced to Eric's pet pig "Pollo" who it seems was destined to die of old age!

They did give us a meal which consisted of small chunks of chicken and pork accomanied by Yam and Taro which are pretty dry and uninteresting and also "Laplaps" which is something of a local speciality. It consists of a very stodgy outer layer made from mashed up Yam, Taro and Manioc and in the middle is some kind of minced or mashed up meat. The whole is wrapped in Banana leaves, much as we would use aluminium foil. They don't have an oven, it was cooked by placing the package amongst

large stones which had previously been heated by placing them in a fire..... It was actually very nice but very filling! We were not invited to the main "Feast" which was a bit disappointing but entirely understandable and frankly we were slightly relieved when we realised that we would not have to drink kava after all..... Vanuatu kava is renowned as being particularly strong and is prepared by having the boys of the village chew the roots and spitting it into a bowl..... We did see them doing this and it was revolting! It is then diluted before being drunk.... and only the men are allowed to drink it!

One morning we went into the village to visit the local school with some of the other yotties. The school is paid for by the government and seemed quite adequately equipped but individual kids have to be paid for by their parents..... the amount doesn't seem much to us but to parents who live in a grass house and have so little, it is a lot of money and consequently many kids do not go to school..... It was a most enjoyable visit, one of the yotties took his concertina and during the mid morning break we had a singsong with the kids..... it was another memorable moment and I got some lovely pictures. Because some of the kids in the school came from other villages often several hours walk away, many of the older children board during the week. We visited the Boy's dormitory, a hut maybe 25-30 ft long by 15ft wide in which were EIGHTEEN bunks. The boys were packed in like battery chickens and had no bedside table or locker, nowhere to keep any personal effects. There was no electricity in the school so the dormitory had one paraffin lamp (hurricane lamp) which is the only light they have after dark. This lamp had been hanging on a nail hammered into the doorframe and the wooden frame was badly scorched where the lamp had nearly set light to it! I had some screw-eyes and some wire on the boat and after our visit I went back and rigged a hook from the ceiling so that hopefully a fire will be prevented in the future. The Head Teacher was very grateful and asked me to do the same thing in the Girl's dormitory. It was such a minor thing but they just hadn't seen the danger and even if they had, they didn't have the means to solve the problem.

Another day we went for a looooong walk along a track through what I can only describe as "the jungle", to the "Jon Frum Village"..... In 1942 when the Americans were there as a part of their Pacific War, one of the sailors off one of the supply ships managed to channel a lot of goodies to the natives. His name was "Jon frum America" and because he supplied them with virtually all they needed he became regarded as a "God". When he left he promised he would be back but of course he never has..... However there is still a "cult" here who believe in him and are still waiting for him to return. They live in a village separate from the rest and just a few miles from Resolution Bay so we made a sort of pilgrimage. It took us all day to go there and back but at least we found it and were able to meet the Chief..... an unassuming little chap called Isaak Wan. It was quite a big village and very neat and clean. There is a big "parade ground" in the middle at the end of which was flying an American Flag!..... Perhaps George Bush would like to visit

them during the course of his world tour!

It turned out that on the following Monday there was one of the biggest celebrations that they hold on Tanna..... A "Circumcision ceremony"! The poor lads are "done" at a time of their father's choosing but round about eight y/o give or take. In this case four kids were done two to three weeks previously. They are held down by men from the village and no anaesthetic is used. Until recently they used a "scalpel" made from a specially cut piece of bamboo but we were told that the "special man" now uses a pair of scissors!!!!!! The whole village turns out for the celebration when the wounds have healed..... We were told there would be much feasting and dancing in Grass skirts, so we stayed on for a few extra days.

The day started early, not long after dawn. As we walked through the village towards the "square" where it would all happen, we met a couple of girls dressed in all their finery.... Grass skirts, painted faces and headdresses, on their way to the same place so they showed us where to go. When we got there, preparations were well under way but still going on. Although there were four boys who had been circumcised, two were brothers so only three families were involved. So there were three big piles of "Gifts" which seemed to consist mainly of food..... Yams, Taro, Manioc, some kava and the pile was topped with mats made from palm leaves and then straw bags full of smaller items of food and goodness knows what else. These were BIG piles, maybe 6ft high.

Then the grizzly bit..... They started slaughtering the animals for the feast. They killed I think SIX pigs by clubbing them on the head, which unfortunately we witnessed. Also TWO cows.... mercifully we didn't see that. I'm not sure how the initial deed was done but in the course of the slaughter, they slit the cows' throats. There was an awful pool of blood around the cows and dogs were lapping it up..... It was really quite distressing for us sensitive westerners, used to having our meat neatly wrapped in conveniently sized pieces..... But it was all quite normal for the Tannese and was in full view of all the children present, who didn't bat an eyelid. The pigs and cows were then dragged into position (laid out) between the piles of gifts to the families.

During all this, many more people in "fancy dress" were arriving and at some point a long single file parade arrived from a different direction, consisting of the men of the village with varying degrees of fancy dress/war paint and including the four boys in whose honour we were all there.

There was then a brief dance in which I think mainly (only?) the men went round in circles and chanted and then there was a period of presenting more gifts to the boys and their families. We had gathered a few things from the boat and wrapped them up so we gave a small gift to each of the boys..... who, despite their wonderful costumes, seemed rather bewildered and looked as though they would rather be somewhere

else! Then the whole lot seemed to disperse. The animals and other food items were collected in the back of a big pick-up and taken of to various huts to be cooked. Kids went to school and people who were not directly involved just got on with their day..... There is an American Lady from the US Peace Corps doing voluntary work in the village and we asked her what was happening. She told us that that was it for the time being and we should return at about 6.30pm for the main celebration in the evening..... This turned out to be bad advice.

We went back to the boat and busied ourselves for the rest of the day..... But when we went back at exactly 6.30pm we found that we had MISSED the feast! I don't know what time they started eating but when we got there, everybody had finished and there were just a few scraps and leftovers lying around. It was very disappointing as I had really been looking forward to a chunk of roast cow! (Though I might have passed on the taro and Yams!). We then met a couple of kids we had met before and they escorted us back to the square where they said all the night's dancing would take place..... and we waited..... and waited..... and waited. After well over an hour at maybe 8.00 o'clock a large group of men turned up. Very few had any form of costume, most just wore their normal grubby shorts and tee-shirts. I would guess there were 50-60 of them and the whole group formed into a round mass and started chanting and going round and round, stamping their feet EXACTLY in time and clapping their hands. The stamping was quite hard and they were so precise in their timing that you could feel the vibration through the ground..... They had obviously been practising. We later learned that most of these men had been imported from other villages so that the men of the "home" village could drink themselves stupid on Kava!

Gradually the women of the village started to arrive and most of them had made a big effort with their costumes and they attached themselves to the outside of this circular "clump" of men and the whole lot went round and round whilst chanting, clapping their hands and stamping their feet. They did several "dances" but they all looked and sounded much the same to us and frankly, after the big build up we had been given, we were rather less than enthralled..... and a bit hungry since we had missed the feast!

We were mindful of our intended dawn departure the following morning so after an hour or so of this we decided to give it best and stumbled through almost total darkness back to Damarri and bed. Apparently it did get better as the night wore on.... but not much! It was a bit of an anticlimax but a fascinating experience nonetheless and we were very glad we had stayed on for it.

Our visit to Tanna was a real eye-opener for us. We have been to a lot of out of the way places now and we have seen many people living very simple lives but we have never seen people living such a "primitive" existence. Many of these people had never had any education but they were not stupid. This experience really hammered home the difference

between a lack of education and a lack of intelligence..... If you show them how to do something, they are very quick on the uptake. It is just that nobody has ever shown them and they have NO money for any form of technological conveniences. It was extraordinary to see people living that way in the 21st Century..... Life is such a lottery but I have to say that I am quite glad that my number came up in England!

So now we are in Dillon's Bay in Erromango, the next island up in Vanuatu. This is the place where the Rev.John Williams was killed and eaten in 1839 and other missionaries met a similar fate in the 1860s..... Watch this space!

Love,

Paul, Ute and Damarri

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Paul Jefferies

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