

A Dream Holiday in Vanuatu, South Pacific. July/August 2005

Forty years on In 1965 I was seconded for a two-year term to the British Residency in Port-Vila in the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides, South Pacific, as an interpreter/translator.

Those two years proved to be the happiest years of my life: I loved the work, the social life, my attractive home, my little black cat called Peter, and above all the beautiful, peaceful, exotic islands in the sun. I was heart-broken when the time came to leave, and vowed I would never return so as to keep my memories of that part of the world - unchanged since the Stone Age - pure and intact. I did not wish to see any of the trappings I imagined "civilization" would have brought: high-rise tourist hotels, ice-cream vendors on crowded beaches covered with deck-chairs, and similar horrors a la Costa Brava However, this summer the opportunity arose to join a group of the "British Friends of Vanuatu" of which I had been a member for some years - Vanuatu being the new name for the New Hebrides following independence gained in 1980 - in order to participate in the



Arrival at Bauerfield airport, Port Vila Vanuatu, July 2005

Silver Jubilee celebrations to be held in the islands at the end of July. At first I dismissed the idea of such a trip out of hand, but on reflection I realized that the date marked not only twenty five years since the islands' independence, but also forty years - almost to the day - since my departure to the islands. It almost seemed as if Fate had taken a hand. And so, having thought long and hard, I decided to add my name to the list.

We left on Friday, 22nd July 2005, and after one night's stop-over in Singapore, arrived in Port Vila on the island of Efate, Vanuatu, on Monday, 25th July. Our party consisted of a dozen or so participants (ex-serving officers plus spouses) and was joined by four more in Brisbane. Norman Shackley - our "Fuhrer" - was, like myself, a retired Customs official who had gone out after independence in order to advise on the setting up of the Customs service in the islands. In fact most of my fellow-travellers had served there following independence, and in that sense - as probably also in the literal sense! - I was the most senior participant; and that holds true even after we were joined in Vanuatu itself by numerous friends from Down Under, thus bringing our numbers up to the grand total of some forty participants. The airline chosen for our flight was Emirates and it proved to be excellent in every way, especially as regards food and service. (Other airlines please note!). The last leg (Brisbane - Port-Vila), a mere two hours' flight, was courtesy of Virgin Pacific Blue - a brand-new baby of Richard Branson's, also perfectly acceptable, though without the frills. We arrived in Port-Vila at lunch-time on the 25th, and then a strange thing happened: as soon as I set foot on the tarmac and was enveloped by the warm and gentle air of the Pacific, I was at home. Despite all my earlier fears and misgivings, the



Custom dancers welcome the visitors to Vanuatu

finally led into the building by a group of native dancers. I was moved almost to tears, and when I looked into the eyes of one of the group standing beside me, I saw that she was similarly affected. For me perhaps the most wonderful thing was to see the native Melanesians who in my day had performed only the most menial of tasks, proud and self-confident, and yet still as friendly, warm and genuine as they had always been. As we waited to go through passport and immigration control in a light, modern and airy building, with a local band playing and singing in the corner, I could not help comparing the present with my original arrival in 1965 when I was ushered into an old tin shack, along with a handful of other passengers, by the Head of Personnel of the British Residency who had come to the airport to meet me. In those days only small aircraft could land on the existing grass strip, with traffic by no means on a daily basis. I recall having to wait two or three days in Fiji for my connection.

The "British Friends" were to stay in various hotels, most of them in the Meridien where I too was originally booked in. However, to my great delight I subsequently received an invitation from an old friend, Pat Bochenska, who was living in Vila. She had been married to a Polish sea-captain - now, sadly, deceased - and had brought up her three children in the islands. I knew and remembered them all, and was thrilled not only by the idea of meeting up with a friend from those far-off days, but also the thought that I would be spending that precious fortnight in a real home, rather than the more impersonal atmosphere of a hotel, however luxurious. Pat was at the airport to meet me and whisked me off to her



Meeting Michael Hill, the British High Commissioner

forty years rolled back like a magic carpet, and T was at home. Totally at home. We had a fantastic reception even before we entered the airport building. The Customs service, in honour of Norman and his family, was there to greet us - some in their smart uniforms (navy trousers /skirts and light blue shirts), and others in civilian clothes, the girls in their traditional "Mother Hubbard" dresses. Our hands were warmly shaken, we were kissed and embraced, and

"new" home - not the home I vaguely still remembered, but roughly out in the same direction, a few minutes' drive out of town. After I had settled in, she suggested lunch on the terrace, a suggestion I accepted with alacrity. I stepped out onto the terrace, chattering away nineteen to the dozen, and then turned round to look at the view I caught my breath: there, below me, was the most beautiful sight in the world, Vila Bay, exactly as I had remembered it over the years, with Iriki Island in the centre, the town

fringed by palm and pandanus trees on the right-hand side, and the wooded hills on the horizon. The whole framed by a blue sky filled with sunshine and small white clouds chased by a gentle breeze. I stood transfixed. Pat smiled. Clearly she was used to such a reaction from her visitors. This

visitor, at any rate, would have been happy to sit on her terrace for days on end, simply watching the changing light over the scene.

Alas! I was not given the chance. There followed a series of parties, receptions and celebrations. To name only a few: a warm welcome party on the evening of arrival at the Hotel Rossi - still there, right on the waterfront, but much modernized



The splendid view over Iririki island from the verandah

and extended, no longer reminiscent of the world of Somerset Maugham; a lavish reception at the High Commission generously hosted by Michael and Elizabeth Hill; an invitation to a grand reception given by the President of Vanuatu, K. Mataskelekele to mark the 25th anniversary of independence; and a very moving reception given in our honour by the Chevening Scholars in the house of the Chiefs Nakamal. Each one of us was presented with an individually wrapped gift in appreciation of whatever contribution we had been able to make over the years in the way of funds and/or hospitality to those amongst them sent out on study tours in the U.K.

Pat's son Marcus and daughter-in-law Imelda flew over from Brisbane for the Silver Jubilee celebrations. On the great day itself the four of us made our way to a huge area of open ground, flanked on three sides by stalls and huts selling all kinds of "goodies" ranging from sweets and nuts to T-shirts and sun-hats - the whole giving the impression of a giant fairground. Local families were strolling round and sitting on the grass, many proected by parasols against the scorching sun. The children were clearly enjoying themselves in playgrounds specially set up for them. Loudspeakers were blaring out over the colourful, frantic scene. We strolled around and waited to see the dancers whose performance was scheduled to start at 3 p.m. However, as nothing appeared to be moving by 5.30 p.m. when it was beginning to get dark, we decided to call it a day and go home. Still, even without the scheduled entertainment, I felt privileged to have witnessed the joy and pride displayed by the islanders on the 25th anniversary of their independence.

Of course the fortnight offered much else beside celebrations, flowing wine and tasty canapes. - On the very first morning we were taken to a fascinating archaeological site some 30 minutes' drive out of Port-Vila and treated to an enthusiastic talk by Professor Matthew Spriggs on the work which had been going on there in recent months. I remembered reading an article in the British press shortly before our departure, which said that 3000-year-old human remains had come to light in Vanuatu, indicating the presence of human habitation

already in those far-off days. - Now we were listening to details of the story and shown documentation and fragments of some of the exhibits which had been found. Once fully evaluated - who knows? - these findings may one day throw a totally new light on the ancestry of the native population of the islands, a subject still somewhat shrouded in mystery. At any rate it was exciting to be involved, albeit marginally, in such important discoveries from the very outset.

At Pat's instigation I booked a trip round the island with one of the tour companies in town. This was going to be a "first" for me, as the requisite roads were not in place forty years ago. And so I set out one morning in a mini-bus driven by a very chatty and friendly local and containing three other females: two Australian tourists staying at the swanky hotel "le Lagon", and one French teacher from New Caledonia. We proceeded somewhat bumpily and at the gentle pace dictated by the state of some of the roads - especially the unmade ones! - gazing at the glorious scenery while the driver pointed out some of its notable features and provided interesting details of the current life of the islanders, namely as regards schooling, work opportunities, and health care. We stopped for refreshments in a native hut where we were offered not only a lovely, cool drink, but hibiscus blossoms too, so typical of local generosity. And then it was on to the Ebuli river - roughly half-way through the tour - where we joined another group, were helped into small outrigger canoes and began our trip down river. This was the lush green jungle all right, but alas! water was in short supply and we soon got stuck in the mud. Fortunately help was at hand, wooden boards were removed



Professor Matthew Spriggs



Custom Dancers on the Ebuli River tour

from the canoes and we all walked the plank safely to dry land. There we were met by a male dancer in native costume who blew loudly into a conch, thus attracting a whole troupe of his mates including a delightful 3-year-old boy who was clearly having the time of his little life. We were treated to a series of dances, then to more refreshments and later to a delicious lunch before setting out again and completing the circular island tour. Altogether a memorable excursion and a most

enjoyable day. I took part in another trip, quite different in nature, this time only half-way round Efate, to the Village of Paonangisu on the northernmost tip of the island. Ten or twelve of the group had been invited to lunch by Willy and Janet Bunyan who had recently moved to a new home overlooking the sea, beach and pandanus trees - yet another magical spot that defies description. Janet came to the New Hebrides some thirty years ago as a



Panganouis village at the home of Willy & Janet Bunyan

V.S.O., met and married Willy and raised a family in the islands. I thought it was particularly plucky and generous of them to invite us, given that they had hardly had time to settle into their new abode, and that only two days previously they still had to carry every drop of water from a nearby well ! Anyway, we had a delicious lunch comprising mainly local produce, on the terrace with the splendid view, and listened to some fascinating tales of life in that part of the world, its highs and its lows. I think everyone enjoyed this very special outing and the fresh

perspective it opened up on our Vanuatu experience.

One of the school-masters of a French lycee in Port-Vila - together with the mother of two of his students - was engaged in an interesting project: the collection of expatriates' reminiscences, both personal and professional, of their days in the islands, divided up by decade. Of course our group was grist to their mill, and as I was one of the few representatives of the sixties decade, I was interviewed first. On Pat's terrace in the sun I was asked a few leading questions which were recorded on tape together with my comments. For me this was a most interesting experience - partly because I was given a golden opportunity to converse in French, but mainly because I was able to re-live memories of a long-distant past, many of which were buried deep in my mind under the weight of countless more immediate events. - The exercise took some two hours to complete, and later on representatives of the nineteen seventies, the nineteen eighties etc. were similarly interrogated. I feel sure that these records, once completed, will offer a valuable additional insight into the history of the islands, and hope to gain access to them at some future date.

Harking back now to the beginning - yes, Vila had changed. However, contrary to all my fears, its development was in no way offensive or insensitive; the new Vila fitted into the landscape and setting and in many ways was an improvement on the old. One morning Pat drove me round the town to show me some of the innovations. Perhaps the most impressive was the new Museum situated in the vicinity of the house of the Chiefs Nakamal - a splendid, sleek, light and airy building containing local artifacts and historic mementoes, all beautifully lit and presented. I particularly liked the work of Emmanuel Watt, a versatile artist who had spent a number of years studying overseas and who used different materials for his sculptures. My favourite of these was a simple, poignant wooden figure entitled "Loneliness". - This was a far cry indeed from the small beginnings of the Cultural Centre in town, Keith Woodward's baby, now grown into a fine museum which would bear favourable comparison with any similar institution in Europe or America, albeit of course on a smaller scale.

In my day there were only two hotels in Vila - the Rossi, already mentioned, and the more elegant Vate just behind. The latter had degenerated into the third-rate Olympic, but there were now some truly wonderful international hotels in and around town, the Chantilly,

Meridien and le Lagon being amongst the most notable. The Chantilly was an attractive building situated on the waterfront not far from the Rossi, with lovely views across Vila Bay and a fine French restaurant where I was very generously treated to a gourmet meal by Pat's son Marcus who took us out one evening during his brief stay in Vila. - The other two hotels were outside the town in more secluded positions and they were built in native style, along the lines of hotels I have seen in Fiji, Samoa or the Caribbean, both very attractive and inviting.



Pat Bochenska speaks her mind to the British High Commissioner

advance.... The shops too had undergone a similar humble stores - Hebrida (French) and Burns Philp (Australian) - and the handful of Chinese traders, there had sprung up numerous shops, cafes and boutiques - the latter sporting elegant and stylish ware, much of it imported from France . Again, I did not find this intrusive or out-of-place in any way and it was clear that the mainly Australian and N.Z. tourists were likewise enjoying the ambience.

The large covered market in the centre of Vila was a revelation !Very different from the weekly market of former times when the island women came to town once a week and deposited their wares - mainly foodstuffs - on the waterfront. Now you could buy not only local produce of many different kinds in the new market, but also locally made artifacts such as shell necklaces, purses, T-shirts, children's clothing etc. I spent many happy hours there pottering around, chatting to the friendly vendors and shopping for Christmas well in transformation. From the two

Last but not least, I saw and liked the new Parliament building, a single-storey structure, simple but attractive in style, behind an imposing iron gate in front of which stands a statue in bronze showing a typical nuclear family and sporting the inscription "United in peace we

progress" in the three languages of the country.



Pango beach on the island of Efate

On the penultimate day we held our AGM and the festive dinner which followed again in the Rossi of blessed memory. The atmosphere was very relaxed, the drink flowed freely, and it was clear that we had all had the holiday of our lives. There was much animated conversation covering the many

memorable features of our stay in the islands, and looking ahead to our next gathering in Cromer, due to take place in the autumn, where photographs, videos and memories would be savoured anew.



Sonja with fellow travellers Helga & Mike Longworth, Pamela Clunies-Ross and Mena Shackley in Singapore on the journey to Port Vila, Vanuatu

On the last day, a Sunday, Pat asked me whether there was a particular spot I wanted to re-visit. I thought for a while and then opted for Pango. We drove to the beach where she met some friends whom we joined for a few minutes' relaxation. After a while I made my excuses and walked along the beach to the far point, watching the trees swaying in the breeze, the colours of the ocean ranging from pale acqua to a deep

midnight blue, and the cotton-wool clouds in the sky. Once again the years rolled away and memories came flooding in. I looked back over the footprints in the sand, only this time there was but a single file.

Sonja Zentner London 2006



Singapore airport August 12th, 2005, exhausted on the homeward run, awaiting the final, connecting flight to Heathrow Airport London