

# Our Land and Sea, FOREVER

In Vanuatu, new cultural programming led by Indigenous women is paving a more sustainable future for tourism.

Story and photographs  
by Jonny Bierman



**W**HILE NEIGHBOURING South Pacific nations have long captured travellers' attention, Vanuatu offers an alternative for those seeking fiery volcanic landscapes, pearl-hued beaches, aquamarine blue holes, and unparalleled scuba-diving adventures alongside WWII-era shipwrecks. And it's the efforts of the Ni-Vanuatu people, particularly Indigenous women leading tourism and preservation, that give this archipelago—whose name means “our land forever” in Melanesian languages—its edge as a deeply authentic cultural destination. Here, lived traditions offer heartfelt invitations into a raw and rugged way of life untouched by time.

Since gaining independence 45 years ago, the Ni-Vanuatu people have embraced a future centred on their past. Cultural pride radiates through every story, song, and shared meal, creating an environment where visitors feel like guests, not outsiders. This unshakable bond to their land and water weaves sustainability and tradition into all aspects of life, inviting travellers to experience the beauty of Vanuatu, and get a glimpse of its soul, as seen through the strength of its South Pacific islanders.

On Santo Island, this connection becomes personal, as I'm drawn to the island's many natural blue holes. These naturally occurring, freshwater swimming holes have vibrant, electric-blue water, formed by rainwater from volcanic mountains seeping underground and resurfacing through limestone as crystal-clear springs. My PADI dive resort, **Turtle Bay Lodge** ([turtlebaylodge.vu](http://turtlebaylodge.vu); doubles from *US\$135*), has connections to several blue holes in the region.



At Nanda's Blue Hole, visitor experiences of this natural phenomenon are amplified through new cultural programming by the ancestral landowners, Marie Melteck and her mother, Suzie Wells. Melteck's journey began with a trip to New Zealand sponsored by the NZ Māori Tourism board and New Zealand government. It was here that she first witnessed how the collective power of Indigenous Peoples could transform their communities through sustainable tourism.

The trip opened her eyes to the untapped potential of her own homeland and inspired her to weave ancestral traditions into sustainable, modern travel experiences. While savouring homemade *laplap*, a traditional dish crafted from ingredients we foraged with Marie, she reflects on her story: “I was so caught up in a Western way of thinking that I almost forgot the treasures right here on my own land. For the longest time, I doubted whether visitors would want to experience our local food and traditions. But after my trip to New Zealand, I realised the beauty and value of what we have. It was a wake-up call—I started to see that there are people who genuinely want to connect with our culture and taste the authenticity of our way of life.”

Marie's rediscovery is at the heart of her business. She collaborates with nearby villages, weaving the community into her work by sourcing fresh produce and handcrafted items like woven baskets and natural soaps from local artisans. After our kava ceremony, *laplap*, and a refreshing swim in the blue hole, she invites the renowned Vanuatu

Water Dancers to perform in the blue hole. It's extraordinary. Standing waist-deep in the crystal-clear waters, the women create hypnotic rhythms with their hands and bodies, each slap, swirl, and plunge echoing stories of their heritage. Dressed in vibrant, traditional garb, they fuse the sounds of water with hauntingly beautiful songs in the Mwerlap language. It's a profound connection to Vanuatu's history and identity, making the moment unforgettable.

FROM SANTO'S sugar-soft shores, the storytelling continues underwater. Diving with Yvanna Kassao, one of only two Ni-Vanuatu women PADI instructors in Vanuatu, ever, I explore vibrant marine ecosystems steeped in history. At dive sites like Million Dollar Point and the SS President Coolidge, WWII relics rest as stunning artificial reefs, teeming with marine life, while the untouched reefs around Turtle Bay Lodge offer endless discoveries.

Yvanna speaks passionately about introducing visitors to a world most have never witnessed—a realm completely transformed from life above the surface. Her own transformation from head of housekeeping at the lodge to dive instructor reflects the resilience she hopes to instil in other women, particularly as a single mother who refused to let circumstances limit her aspirations. “The ocean teaches us about change,” she explains, noting how diving reveals the delicate shifts in coral health that mirror our impact on the environment above. »

*Clockwise from top left: Children of the Black Magic Tour on Tanna Island; Mount Yasur, Tanna Island; a Ni-Vanuatu man creating fire. Opposite from top: The author's spouse wreck diving at Million Dollar Point; a dive briefing with Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu PADI instructor Cathy Savei.*

From below: Vanuatu Water Dancers performing at Nanda's Blue Hole; Marie Melteck with plants in her garden prior to preparing them for dinner.



Next stop: Tanna Island. With Volcano Island Divers—the first PADI Eco Center in Melanesia, based at **White Grass Ocean Resort** ([whitegrass.com.vu](http://whitegrass.com.vu); doubles from US\$175), I witness the perfect fusion of adventure and environmental stewardship. Achieving the prestigious PADI Eco Center designation requires strict adherence to best practices like responsible-diver protocols, staff environmental training, and waste management.

The centre also participates in conservation initiatives such as PADI's Adopt the Blue program, connecting them to the world's largest global network of underwater sites "adopted" in the name of marine protection. Diving with these guys reveals coral gardens flourishing in the shadow of fiery Mount Yasur and intricate underwater caves that house secrets as ancient as the land above.

Adding to the experience, Tanna Island's cultural programming offers a window into its

vibrant traditions. Eric Yalulu spearheads the Black Magic Tour, an experience exclusive to White Grass Resort involving the youth of his village and their sacred banyan tree. Eric, the first university graduate from his village, crafted the tour to celebrate local customs while empowering the community with education. The school he founded has already celebrated its first student to go on to graduate university, who has since returned to Tanna, to inspire the next generation as a high school teacher.

NEXT, I FLY to the capital of Port Vila and check in at **South Pacific Memories** ([southpacificmemories.com](http://southpacificmemories.com); doubles from US\$190) for more diving adventures. Here I reconnect with the legacy of female pioneers in Vanuatu's underwater world, meeting Cathy Savei at Big Blue Divers, the second of the two Ni-Vanuatu female PADI professional instructors in the country's history. For her, diving was a true calling.

"I've always wanted to do it, but it felt out of reach until I heard about the PADI scholarship," she tells me. That scholarship, under PADI's People + Humanity pillar, ensuring that the ocean remains accessible to all, became her stepping stone to earning a title that once felt unattainable.

"The industry here has always been male dominated," Savei tells me. "But Yvanna and I are proving that females can do it too. I hope to inspire young girls to take the plunge." She also hopes to inspire her son. "I want [him] to look back and say, 'My mom helped the reef, helped the ocean, helped people connect with the underwater world.'"

And this is how I find myself doing a sea slug census. Led by Dr. Christina Shaw, who also works to protect dugongs and seagrass meadows, this underwater scavenger hunt for vibrant nudibranchs is a vital initiative that contributes to global conservation by identifying and cataloguing these often-overlooked creatures. The photographs we take are uploaded to platforms like iNaturalist, creating valuable data for researchers.

My trip winds down at **The Moso** ([themosovanuatu.com](http://themosovanuatu.com); doubles from US\$227), a haven of low-impact luxury nestled by crystalline waters just a short ride from Port Vila. Here, relaxation feels like an extension of the cultural immersion that has defined my journey.

As the sun dips below the horizon and the gentle rhythm of the sea lulls me into reflection, I am reminded of what makes Vanuatu truly extraordinary: traditions that are actively lived, that show you the "real" South Pacific way of life, as genuine as its volcanic landscapes. And it's the warmth of the Ni-Vanuatu people, whose stories and heritage create connections with the modern traveller, that endure long after the journey ends. 🌐