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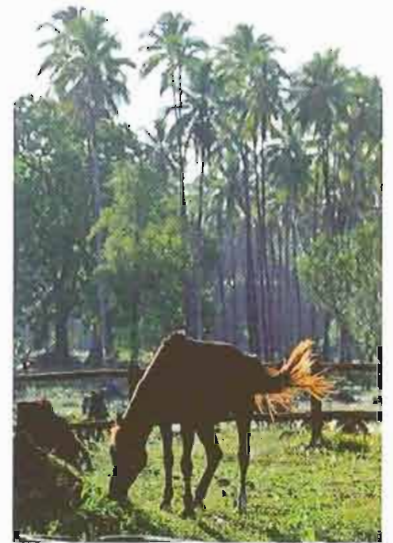
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paradise found

Heaven is where you can walk barefoot in the sand without leaving your (carbon) footprint. Welcome to Ratua Private Island

My journey to Ratua starts on Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu's largest island. It's a little disorientating to be looking out to azure ocean with the sun beating down, when barely five hours prior, I was wrapped up in a pashmina braving a chilly Sydney winter morning. We pile into a van and begin our drive, dodging potholes and smiling at the waving barefoot locals, to catch the motorboat that will whisk us off to Ratua, a mere 30 minutes from Santo.

Ratua is the vision of one Frenchman – and a few of his close friends – to develop a private, sustainable retreat that will benefit the local communities. It's been a four-year process of negotiations with tribal elders, logistical planning, design and construction, but as the property starts to unfold on the horizon, we can see it's all been worth it.

Ratua is a postcard of teak chalets surrounded by wild, dense greenery. The 60-hectare island is predominantly inhabited along one half, where there are three 'villages' with a total of 10 dwellings. The actual structures are 200-year-old Sumatran houses, which have been partly constructed in Indonesia, then shipped to Ratua to be completed. Each house is baptised after an animal; I'm in Tiger, next door to Cobra (thankfully, neither is native to the island).

My home is actually a series of three houses joined together by little walkways surrounded by lush landscaped gardens, with a pathway leading down to a private deck facing the pristine water. There are two verandahs with wicker settees and colonial-style leather lounges, and three daybeds (two of which could sleep extra guests). Oil lamps, straw baskets and stone sculptures complete the look. There's not a modern material in sight, with the exception of a telephone, albeit a retro dial variety. TVs are a no-no and even the fridge is housed in a wooden cupboard. I start to feel like Robinson Crusoe, but in far more fetching surroundings.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The Yacht Club on Ratua; one of the island's wild horses; the Indonesian-style accommodation; Ratua chef Kandy Tamagushiku serves up lunch; the view from the Yacht Club



escape



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT Turtle Island; stairs from a private deck lead to crystal water; the rustic interior of one of the villas

Ratua is designed to be exclusively hired out by you and 23 friends for \$14,500 per night. While the figures border on the obscene, it's almost a steal when you consider that it includes boat transfers, all activities and as much food and drink as you could want. All profits also go towards assisting the local communities set up schools, hospitals and cottage industries.

When you have New Zealand chef Kandy Tamagushiku plying you with hearty breakfasts and three-course lunches and dinners, you'll never go hungry at Ratua. Kandy is also more than happy to give you full rein in her stand-alone fantasy kitchen, complete with bread- and ice-cream makers.

In line with the sustainable philosophy, almost everything is grown or bred on the island, or caught from its shores. Kandy's fare is Franco-Polynesian, making the most of the local stars, including 'poulet fish' (local snapper), organic beef, oysters and coconut crab, named after its inherent coconut flavour. All herbs, fruits and vegetables are from the garden and are used to create salads, as well as imaginative dishes, such as coral trout with sweet potato and breadfruit.

The wine cellar is the one area where food miles are forgotten. The owners take their wine very seriously and their collection boasts excellent French, Californian,



We lunch on roast organic chicken, banana flower salad and Taittinger. Who says island life is primitive?

Australian and New Zealand drops. It's also the only room on the island that's airconditioned. Eric Le Calvez, one of Ratua's investors, reveals that the next project is to produce rum on the island. "Why not?" he says. "We can have everything we need here and more. We're also thinking about growing tobacco and making our own cigars!"

I discover that two environmental science students from Montreal are also on Ratua, experimenting with coconut oil as a source of energy. It's certainly logical; coconuts are in no short supply here. "There are 5000 coconut trees on Ratua," general manager Frederick Maclean says, as he manoeuvres the electric buggy along the path. "In fact, every 10 minutes, a coconut falls, so watch out!"

The Ratua mantra is 'you can do as much or as little as you want' and there's plenty to keep you occupied on and around the island. Some of us contemplate a 5am start to see giant turtles mate at nearby Aore Island, but I opt for a snorkel instead at Million Dollar Point off Santo, where the Americans sank their jeeps and military equipment after World War II.

The keen divers among us visit *SS President Coolidge*, a 200-metre luxury liner-turned-American military vessel, which now lies some 70 metres below sea level near Santo.

Blue holes are another attraction. One morning, we canoe 45 minutes down an inlet shrouded by mangrove, at one of the neighbouring islands. Beneath us, we see the powdery white floor and darting schools of tiny fish. It's blissfully calm, the only sounds our paddles slicing the water and the occasional caw of a bird. The journey itself is pleasant, but our reward at the end is even better. We arrive at a magnificent oasis surrounded by verdant forest and dive in to cool off.

By noon, we're ravenous and, for a change of scene, picnic on Turtle Island. Frederick unwraps banana-leaf-packages, once again emphasising Ratua's sustainable policy, and we lunch on roast organic chicken, sandwiches made with Kandy's signature loaf, banana flower salad and Taittinger Champagne. Who says island life is primitive?

While exploring our surrounds has been invigorating, docking back in Ratua feels like we've come home. A siesta crosses my mind, but it's time to go horseriding. While the horses on Ratua have been trained, you still need to remember they were wild for most of their life. A muscular dark brown mare is the looker of the pack, but I decide to go for a docile beast more my speed, aptly named Tiny. She proves quite friendly and provides a fitting pace to match Ratua's own.

I amble back to the Yacht Club, Ratua's social centre, for a glass of chardonnay while the sun goes down. It's been three days since I've checked my emails or watched TV, and I've never felt better. Luxury with a conscience – priceless. BP 396, Luganville, Santo, Vanuatu, +678 30 020, ratua.com. VE+T