

Savouring SANTO

Vanuatu Voyages Part 1:

The remote and mysterious island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu has a rich bounty of bluewater sportfishing options

WORDS & PHOTOS BRENT DELANEY



Matt prepares to fight his first marlin – a battle he fortunately won!

VANUATU IS a place of extremes. Volcanoes boil and simmer under the ocean's surface as predatory fish patrol nearby. Islands explode from abyssal depths and reach for the heavens. The local customs are exotic and intact – from traditional bungee jumping using jungle vines, to rumours cannibalism still occurs! The weather can be tempestuous and the seas angry.

Among the beauty is a well-known sport and game fishery, particularly for large blue

marlin. It's based primarily around the main island of Efate and the capital town, Port Vila. However, the sportfishing potential of the rest of the island chain is largely unexplored by modern fishing methods. Think sea-mounts that have never seen jigs; contour lines that have never been trolled; reef passages that have never seen poppers...

Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures has a number of programs that aim to open up this remote country and I recently travelled to Vanuatu to sample the action. I fished

aboard *Southern Destiny*, a 43-foot Cabo Sportfisher under the charge of Captain Chris Donato. In this feature I will detail the bluewater sport and game fishing I experienced around Vanuatu's largest Island, Espiritu Santo. In a future issue I'll highlight the dogtooth jigging action we encountered on a long-range wander around this magnificent archipelago.

Sensational Santo

Santo is home to Luganville, Vanuatu's sec-

ond-largest town, however most of the island is swathed in dense jungle and is inaccessible. Towering over all of this verdancy is the 1879m-tall Mount Tabwemasana.

Captain Chris had the *Southern Destiny* moored off the Aore Island Resort, my home for the first week. The resort consisted of beautiful waterside bungalows set on an island situated just off Santo. Clear water, coral and great snorkelling was only metres from my pillow. My companions for this part of the trip were Matt O'Brien and Jess

Condi. Matt had brought Jess to Vanuatu so they could catch their first marlin, but more importantly, to pop the question! Luckily Jess said yes – our adventures were off to a positive start!

The plan was simple – to get the happy couple a marlin! Each day Chris would pick us up from the jetty and after a short steam down the channel we would be at the Santo FAD and nearby islands. Over the next few days, the FAD produced some quality tropical bluewater fishing with blue marlin,

yellowfin and hordes of big mahi mahi the main quarry.

A close neighbour

From both a piscatorial and cultural perspective, Vanuatu is a fascinating destination. This diverse archipelago of 82 islands is one of our most proximate Pacific neighbours, yet it seems to be one of the furthest from our national conscience, perhaps because of its French influences.

Known as the New Hebrides and jointly



Matt with a ripper! Stud bull mahi mahi were abundant in the waters around Santo.
LEFT: Matt's first blue marlin prior to release.



Southern Destiny is a well-equipped vessel with the latest in gamefishing gear aboard.
RIGHT: When one of these starts screaming, the fun begins!



administered by the French and British until 1980, Vanuatu has an intriguing mix of colonial French and English influences and Melanesian cultures, with varying local customs. This is a diverse place where profound and deeply held island-specific local customs dominate the lives of the Ni-Vanuatu in a way that seems to have largely survived the machinations of the missionaries, more so than many other Pacific nations that I have explored.

The local Ni-Vanuatu people are fishos of inspirational skill and ingenuity. These guys use spider-web balls to catch needle fish, hermit crabs to catch flying fish and regularly take blue marlin of ridiculous proportions from their small outrigger canoes!

FAD attack!

Our first glimpse of the Santo FAD quickened the pulse. The FAD consists of a string of buoys located a short run from Aore in 500m of water. The area is semi-sheltered by a ring of islands and numerous channels converge in the general area. As we neared the FAD, squadrons of birds wheeled and dived and rippling schools of bait disturbed the surface. The sounder showed big blobs of bait deeper in the water column and mahi mahi scouts shot out to investigate the boat like fluorescent torpedoes. I was reasonably

confident it wouldn't be too long until the happy couple had that marlin!

We ran out a spread of skirts and commenced trolling in the vicinity of the FAD. After 30 minutes a seriously large blue marlin came in for a look at the right teaser. The fish drifted back and sniffed the long right lure then faded off into the depths. In the

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three days leading up to the full moon, Chris had tagged 12 blue marlin off this FAD and early indications showed there were still fish around, but would they fire up after going bananas in the preceding week?

After another 20 minutes of trolling the left outrigger cracked and the big Tiagra 130 was singing the sweet falsetto all anglers love to hear. A nice little blue marlin ejected from the water behind the boat and the fish

was on! Matt was on strike and successfully completed the tag and release of his first marlin. Mission accomplished – and on the first morning!

I then rigged up a small pusher on my jig rod and put it out long in the centre. On each pass small yellowfin and solid mahi mahi jostled to belt the smaller offering which kept the scoreboard ticking over. I even pulled out my popper outfit and worked the FAD. The mahi and yellowfin were equally keen to inhale my popper. Sandy deployed two of the yellowfin as livers which we slow-trolled. We had a take but no solid hook-up. It had, however, been a successful first day.

That night a traditional Ni-Van band performed at the resort and we celebrated Matt's first marlin to the local beat while indulging in the local Kava – evil stuff!

On the way to the FAD the next morning, I worked a large popper over a tasty-looking reef shelf I just couldn't go past. Two red bass came to the boat to get proceedings off to a good start. Shortly after arriving at the FAD another blue crashed a lure and Jess was on to her first marlin! Jess fought the fish for 10 minutes before it threw the hooks. We raised three more marlin that day with an equal absence of luck. The following day big mahi mahi decided to switch-on and fish after fish came to the boat, including

some horse-sized bulls. The mahi mahi went crazy! To add variety, a 40kg yellowfin decided to crash the party and put up a typically dogged battle before it was captured.

Over the next two days we alternated between trolling the nearby island fringes and working the FAD. We raised more blue marlin, but they seemed to be relatively tentative after gorging themselves in the lead-up to the full moon. The big mahi mahi stayed on the chew to keep the reels turning, as did a few wahoo that took a liking to a big Nomad stickbait I trolled out the back of the spread.

▶ GETTING THERE

Luganville is located on the island of Espiritu Santo, around 55 minutes' flight from Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila. However, Air Vanuatu also offers flights direct to Espiritu Santo from some capital cities. Visit www.airvanuatu.com for more details. The guys at Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures offer anglers a range of fishing packages for Vanuatu, Fiji, New Caledonia and Kuala Rompin.

To book your adventure contact Ocean Blue on (02) 9280 1405 or visit www.oceanblue.com.vu.

Living in paradise

Chris cut his game-fishing teeth in Florida and recently relocated from Samoa to Vanuatu. He usually works out of Port Vila, however he will spend part of the year working the Santo region and even has plans to install his own FAD in the area to complement the existing one. *Southern Destiny* is well appointed, has comfortable berths and of course has the full armoury

of the latest game tackle. Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures is also organising longer-range jigging expeditions to remote locations to complement the game-fishing options – but that's the subject of my next Vanuatu feature!

I had the privilege of staying on the nearby Ratua Private Island for a night. Wow! This resort is one of the most exclusive destinations in the world. No expense

The sun sets over Espiritu Santo – Vanuatu's largest island.



This 40kg yellowfin was one of many that also called the FAD home.



PRO TIPS

VISIT VANUATU

- *Southern Destiny* has a full complement of gamefishing tackle and a few jigging rods – don't bring any tackle if the focus of your trip is trolling.
- Beware the Vanuatu kava – it is potent and deadly!
- Take some time to snorkel and explore the water – the reefs are full of life.
- Eat Santo beef – it is cheap, tender and delicious.
- Speak to the locals and learn some of their customs – Vanuatu is one of the most culturally diverse and interesting places on the planet.



has been spared to provide guests with the ultimate private-island experience.

Picture fine food and wine, an entire island to yourself and dreamy vistas over coral lagoons and islets on sunset as you sip mojitos on your private beach... paradise.

Ocean Blue offers Ratua as an accommodation option for gamefishing adventures aboard the *Southern Destiny*. Whether you stay at Aore or Ratua, you will have a relaxing holiday coupled with quality fishing.

A word of warning on the kava! There are three types of it in Vanuatu and they are all reputedly the strongest in the world. If you've tried kava in Fiji and think you know what you're in for, you don't! Take it easy!


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Also, note that malaria is present in Vanuatu, though it is not hugely prevalent and most people don't bother with preventative medication. I suffered a bout of malaria upon my return, though it turned out to be a relapse of a dose I contracted in PNG. Oh, the joys of tropical travel!

One final note – eat as much steak as you can when you visit Santo. It is the cheapest and most tender beef you will find.

Something to do with happy cows living in paradise, I believe.

A 2006 New Economics Foundation study found Vanuatu to be the world's happiest nation. After seeing some of the fishing options available there – and how the locals live – I can now see why!

If you are looking for an idyllic tropical holiday and sportfishing adventure, Ocean Blue and Espiritu Santo can provide it. 

Jess Condi celebrates her engagement by landing this bull mahi mahi.

