

Malampa Adventure Trek and Island Hop – Malampa Province, Vanuatu

2½ weeks: 10-28 July 2012 – First Draft, 11 February 2012

Brief Summary

This trip consists of a ten day bush walk, traversing the island of Malekula. Beginning on the west coast, heading up and over the ranges to the south west corner, and then walking back along the south coast to the south east corner of the island. Once in the south east we visit the Maskelyne Islands and head out on a three day island hopping trip on catamaran canoes. After a rest day on the main island of Maskelyne a three hour early morning speed boat ride takes us across to the South West coast of Ambrym, the active volcano. We climb up to the ash plain from the southern side, camp for two nights and come down on the northern side, making a complete traverse and viewing both craters. A commercial walking trip of this kind has never been attempted in Vanuatu. Tourist numbers in Malampa province, especially the remote areas with no vehicle access (i.e every area this trip visits), receive very few tourists a year. The trip is truly unique offering a cultural and wilderness experience like no other.

This unique trip combines spectacularly beautiful scenery and reasonably challenging bush walking, with an unforgettable cultural experience visiting many custom villages in the highlands of Malekula Island, the most culturally and linguistically diverse island in Vanuatu. It is also unique in that it visits three very different regions of Malampa province:

1. The highland rainforest and remote custom villages and gardens on the Man Bush trail where traditional life is very well preserved, the extremely remote villages around the stunningly beautiful South West Bay on the south west tip of Malekula island and the remote and pristine black and white sand beaches of the south coast, fringed by uninhabited islands and dotted with remote subsistence villages.



2. The stunningly beautiful Maskelyne Islands archipelago that boasts one of the largest, healthiest and most productive marine environments in the country. It's here that we island hop on canoe catamarans for three days visiting uninhabited islands and remote villages and enjoying bountiful and very cheap seafood.



3. The active volcanoes of Ambrym island, whose steep slopes are covered in thick jungle and cloud forest that dramatically give way to the moonscape of the giant ash plain. We'll have the opportunity to view both active craters and camp in the forest on the edge of the ash plain for two nights.

The trip will use three new local tour operators as local guides to lead us on the three different sections of the walk. All three operators have newly established tour businesses and although highly skilled and knowledgeable about their local areas, they have operated very few trips to date (apart from the volcano guides, who have lead hundreds of trips).



The trip will also use Ed Hill, a Willis's Walkabouts guide who has led trips for Russell in Kakadu and the Kimberly since 2008. Ed has been living in Malekula, Vanuatu for the last 12 months working as the Eco-Tourism Development Officer under the Australian Youth Ambassador volunteer program. Ed has been based in the Maskelyne Islands helping set up a tourism association. He has a good relationship with the three tour operators and his knowledge of the culture, language and environment of Vanuatu has made this trip possible.

Itinerary (Note: This is the basic itinerary, changes to it may occur depending on various factors. As most of the walking through Malekula goes through many different villages, we may stay at different villages than those mentioned here. **Organisation of strict itineraries in Vanuatu and the Pacific in general is impossible**, one must be very flexible due to the incredibly absent minded but hospitable nature of the people, exposure to natural disasters and extreme weather and other random unexplained Pacific island mysteries that this guide (Ed) will never understand!)

- Day 0** 9 July. Arrive in Port Vila, check into accommodation and meet for evening meal and trip briefing. You need to organise your own flights to and from Vila and book your own accommodation before and after the trip.
- Day 1** 10 July. Depart for Malekula. Fly Port Vila to Norsup. Guides will meet us at the airport and we will take a truck (a 4WD ute) taking you on an interesting journey down the east coast of Malekula to Unua and on to Red Ground, where you start your guided walk to the bush village of Melken, entertained by stories of custom life along the way. You stop at Melken for a well-earned rest and tour of the village, as well as a visit to the local nakamal, a custom meeting place. You then continue your walk to the picturesque village of Lambure, where you spend the night at the local guesthouse.
- Day 2** 11 July. Lambure – Mt Laimbele (6 hour walk approx.)
The second day has some serious uphill walking! Your trek takes you to the summit of Mt Laimbele for a well-earned rest, and some fantastic views (weather permitting). You may be able to see both the east and west coasts of Malekula, and even catch sight of the islands of Ambrym, Paama, Pentecost and Ambae. You camp out in a bush shelter, where you may catch sight of the awesome glow from the volcanoes of Ambrym.
- Day 3** 12 July. Mt Laimbele – Lebongbong (6 hour walk approx.)
Keep an eye out for the birdlife, and you may even spot some wild cattle. You arrive at your guest house in Lebongbong in the afternoon ready to enjoy some special Manbush food (in season) – Nesowong is a dish made from bush banana, water taro and coconut milk. If we are lucky we may also sample fresh water prawns cooked in coconut milk inside bamboo.
- Day 4** 13 July. Lebongbong – Lawa (8 hour walk approx.)
Your guide leads you onto the trail again to begin your last day of walking to the west coast. Highlights of the day include visits to a cave, nakamal and waterfall. Big banyan trees feature along the trail as well. You complete your trek at the Lawa guesthouse.

- Day 5** 14 July. A rest day in South West Bay, staying at Aloo Logde with our host George Thompson. We'll have a chance to take a canoe trip to the fish nursery at Tsiri lagoon, see a traditional dance display or just walk around the village of Wintua, visit the school and chat with the locals.
- Day 6** 15 July. Rest day to allow for possible delays.
- Day 7** 16 July. We depart South West Bay and walk to the south coast. We climb east up into the headwaters of the Mantanoi River where we cross and follow a roughly cut track along its banks toward the south coast. We camp in the forest by the river in tents.
- Day 8** 17 July. After breakfast we continue to follow the river towards the south coast. Stopping for the occasional swim, we should reach a remote coastal village by mid afternoon where we will eat dinner and sleep.
- Day 9** 18 July. We take a speed boat along the south coast towards the village of Okai, stopping at beautiful sandy Akahmb Island for lunch. and a village tour. sleep in the village of Okai for our last night on mainland Malekula.
- Day 10** 19 July. Last day of Walking on Malekula. Walk along the south east tip of Malekula island through beautiful forests and massive trees on rocky beaches. We walk for about two hours and have lunch in Naraniam, another remote coastal village. A speed boat picks us up in the afternoon for a short visit to Avohk Island, where we view a traditional dance display. Finally we arrive on Maskelyne Island by speed boat to sleep in bungalow accommodation and eat the local seafood.
- Day 11** 20 July. We begin the only multi day canoe tour in Vanuatu, "Maskelyne Eco-Adventure". We pack the canoes and head to the Ringi Te Suh Giant Clam garden, a unique conservation area, where the villagers have planted clams in an effort to preserve them. Paddle over the channel to Sakao, Garden Island, swim at secluded beaches, walk in the gardens and jungle, camp on the beach at the mouth of 'mud crab creek'. A very special traditional meal is on tonight's menu, root vegetables such as yams are grated into a paste laid out on leaves and a whole chicken is placed in the middle. It's covered in coconut cream, wrapped up and baked in its own juices in a ground oven.
- Day 12** 21 July. Paddle to Bagetelle Island, a tiny sandy beach and reef fringed island with historic ruins from French traders. Lunch at Ayom, a remote village, climb a rocky outcrop to get great views of the whole island group. Paddle to uninhabited Vulai island to a secluded beach camp site.
- Day 13** 22 July. Wake up to watch the sunrise over the sugar lump reef plateau. Visit a turtle nesting beach protected by the chiefs. Swim in sheltered lagoons, snorkel over the pristine sugar lump reef, paddle back to Uliveo to another secluded beach camp at Malaflap point where a seafood feast awaits you.
- Day 14** 23 July. Maskelyne Island rest day. Meals and accommodation is included but optional activities are not. We need a spare day to make sure that we have extra time in case something happens to slow us down.

Day 15 24 July. Early morning speedboat ride to Ambrym, the volcano island. We leave at 5am to ensure the sea isn't too strong. The trip takes about 2-3hours, depending on the seas. We arrive in Port Vatu, South West Ambrym and are met by experienced volcano tour guide, John Tasso. We walk out of Port Vatu at about 9am climbing to about 700m altitude to camp on the edge of the ash plain. The walk is absolutely stunning. We follow a large dry black volcanic sand creek that winds its way through rainforest with massive tree ferns overhanging the banks. After we begin to gain some altitude we follow some smaller tributaries and steep ridges through wet cloud forests of stunted palm trees and tree ferns festooned with mosses. The break from cloud forest to ash plain is stunning. We come out of lush dripping rainforest to the stark nothingness of black sandy ash plain. Here we camp at a beautiful place on the edge of the ash plain but still in the cloud forest.

The camp was originally used by Volcanologists monitoring the volcano. The camp is at 700m and can be cold enough to wear a jacket and pants, unusual in Vanuatu. Walking on this day is about 3-4 hours total.

Day 16 25 July. Today we visit the active volcano of Marum. We walk across the desert like ash plain for a few kilometres before dropping packs and climbing up into the moonscape near the crater. Marum's crater is monstrous, it looks like a giant open cut mine and 500m below the edge of the crater the lava violently boils, a very impressive site indeed. We head back down to collect our packs and walk back around the ash plain to another camp close to the other active crater of Benbow.

Day 17 26 July. We visit the crater of Benbow. Benbow is different from Marum, instead of standing 500m above the lava, we follow a track down to a terrace above the active crater and get spectacular views of the lava. After having a good look we'll climb out and rest for lunch before following more black sand creeks down the north side of the volcano. When the vegetation comes back it starts with giant forests of wild cane and grass, then we follow another black sand creek through rainforest before turning off and heading down a ridge through some spectacular forest again with giant tree ferns, palms and fig trees. We finish in the village of Ranvetlam. Here a ute will meet us and we pile in the back and drive for 20mins to the village of Ranon, home to some of the best wood carvers in the country.

Day 18 27 July. Opportunity to see the famous traditional dance of the "Rom", where highly ranked tribesmen wear impressively decorated masks and completely conceal themselves in a cloak of banana leaves. The chiefs lead the dance and lower ranked men join. The right to dance the Rom is gradually earned over many years of pig killing and grade taking ceremonies that allow tribesmen to attain higher ranks. Custom is very strong in North Ambrym, where they have managed to preserve many aspects of their culture. After viewing a dance in the morning we have another 2 hour speed boat ride back around to the west coast of the island to Craig Cove.

Day 19 28 July We take a small plane back to Port Vila, concluding the trip.

Additional Information

Here is a link to the official Man Bush walk brochure.

http://www.malampa.travel/uploads/7/5/4/9/7549058/manbush_trail_tour_brochure.pdf

Here is a link to the official Maskelyne Eco-Adventure canoe brochure.

<http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/pdf/VanuatuCanoeBroch.pdf>

The weather – comments from guide Ed Hill

In terms of weather, it's likely to be pretty good, although it can rain at any time in Vanuatu. The "dry season" is nowhere near as dry as it is in Darwin. There is less rainfall from May through September, however, it may not rain for two weeks and then bucket down for two days.

From about April the NE trade winds get going and create bring with them large and stable high pressure systems, so it's highly likely we'll have great weather, but I would advise everyone to prepare for rain just in case. A loose plastic poncho is about as high tech as you need although still not very good to walk in. Gore-tex and other synthetics do not work in the tropics. However, more than often we'll just hide from the rain and stop walking or just get wet and then dry off later, it's warm and easy to dry things when the sun comes out.

It will be warm, but not as hot as it gets in Kakadu. The presence of the sea means Vanuatu has never recorded excessive temperatures. I'd say it'll get up to 28° Celsius at the very most, cooler in the highland areas, about 1° with every 100m altitude gained. Both the Man Bush and the Ambrym walks climb to heights where it'll be cooler. It is worth carrying a light weight pullover, and a beanie just in case. On the ash plain camp, I could actually see my breath but all I needed was a lightweight pull over and trousers.

What gear do you need?

You will need to bring your own tent, although you do not need to carry it very much as the Man Bush section has porters, then for Malekula south coast section we can arrange porters very cheaply if it's desirable. We will be staying in some village huts on some of the nights, although it really is best to bring a tent to be safe, especially if the schedule changes.

For the Maskelyne Islands canoeing section you will need your own tent but we paddle our packs in a big fibreglass catamaran canoe and finally for the Ambrym volcano walk, porters can be arranged for about an extra \$10-15 per day.

You will need to keep the contents of your pack dry. In the canoeing section you may get some minor splashes, but for the most part the packs are strapped to the deck of fibreglass catamaran canoes, the seas are very well protected and almost always calm with few waves. I would say a standard strong plastic bag pack liner would be more than adequate. The speed boats we use have small undercover areas to stow baggage.

As per the weather comments above: a lightweight plastic poncho, a pullover & a beanie in case it gets chilly.

Why go with Willis's Walkabouts? Best to repeat what was said earlier in these notes.

"The trip will use Ed Hill, a Willis's Walkabouts guide who has led trips for Russell in Kakadu and the Kimberly since 2008. Ed has been living in Malekula, Vanuatu for the last 12 months working as the Eco-Tourism Development Officer under the Australian Youth Ambassador volunteer program. Ed has been based in the Maskelyne Islands helping set up a tourism association. He has a good relationship with the three tour operators and his knowledge of the culture, language and environment of Vanuatu has made this trip possible.

Who else can offer that kind of experience?

Group size – absolute maximum of 8. We may have to limit it further.

Cost. \$1995 per person.

This covers all domestic flights and transfers, local guides fees, customary land entry fees, all meals, accommodation (sometimes in bungalows, sometimes camping fees), Ed's fee as guide and organiser.

It does not include flights from Australia (or anywhere else) to and from Port Vila (Vanuatu's international airport) nor does it include your accommodation in Port Vila before or after the trip.

In addition, you will need extra money for souvenirs (things like carvings, woven baskets, mats, fans and other traditional handicrafts and art) and optional activities along the way. On some of the rest days there will be the opportunity for extra activities for the more energetic clients, things like fishing, canoeing, cultural tours, Ed expects that these should come to no more than \$20 a head.

You will need your own travel insurance. We cannot take anyone who does not have travel insurance.

The fee above does not cover our public liability insurance. Public liability insurance for our overseas trips has been a problem in recent times. Our overseas trips were removed from our main policy and then insured individually. The cost for covering the last single trip we did like this \$1925. The actual cost above will depend on the final price we are quoted this year.

If we did not have public liability insurance and you were to make a claim on your travel insurance, it would be possible for your travel insurance provider to sue either or both Ed and Walkabouts owner Russell Willis. That's the way the law works in Australia. It's not a chance we can afford to take. When we get a quote, we will split the cost equally among all the participants.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. *Do not* expect everything to run like clockwork. Such things do not happen in Vanuatu. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you can't be flexible enough to accept whatever changes we may have to make, this trip is not for you. If you can accept that, it should be a wonderful experience you'll remember for the rest of your life.

Conditions

- 1 A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. This will be refunded in full if five people have not booked by 15 March. Payment in full is due on 15 March or when you book, whichever is later.
- 2 Cancellation fees are \$200 before 1 January, \$500 before 1 February, \$900 before 1 March and the full \$1995 after that.
- 3 All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance.

Questions?

Try as we might, we've almost certainly forgotten some useful piece of information. The more and the sooner you ask your questions, the more likely it is that we can give you the best possible trip.