

Malampa Adventure Trek and Island Hop – Malampa Province, Vanuatu

2½ weeks: 5-23 August 2014

Brief Summary

This trip consists of a five-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 for another two days back to the south coast. From there a few short walks and boat trips along the south coast take us 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 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 had never been attempted in Vanuatu before we led two trips in 2012. Tourist numbers in Malampa province, especially the remote areas with no vehicle access (i.e. every area this trip visits), receive very few or no tourists. The trip is truly unique offering a cultural and wilderness experience like no other.

The trip combines spectacularly beautiful scenery and reasonably challenging bush walking, with an unforgettable cultural experience visiting many traditional 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 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. Here we island hop on canoe catamarans for three days visiting uninhabited islands and remote villages enjoying bountiful seafood.



3. The active volcano of Ambrym Island, whose steep slopes are covered in thick jungle and cloud forest that dramatically give way to the moonscape of the ash plain. Ambrym is one of the few places in world where you can safely view lava lakes. 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 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 led 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 we will never understand!)

Day 0 Arrive in Port Vila, check into accommodation and meet for pre 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 Depart for Malekula. Fly Port Vila to Norsup. Guides will meet us at the airport and we will take a truck (a 4WD ute) down the east coast of Malekula to Unua and on to Red Ground, where we start walking to the bush village of Melken. We 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. We continue walking to the picturesque village of Lambure, where we spend the night in Bamboo huts. The five hours of walking on this day is flat and relatively easy however it involves about 11 river crossings, which you will need suitable footwear for. Sports sandals that you can walk in for the day or shoes you can get wet are highly recommended so you don't have to change footwear at every river crossing.

Day 2 Lambure to Mt Laimbele (4-6 hour walk approx.)

The second day has some serious uphill walking! The track is muddy, slippery and steep. However, we have plenty of rest stops on the way up, snacking on bush foods, fruits and drinking coconuts. The walk finishes on the summit of Mt Laimbele, 750m above sea level. It can get chilly up here and is almost always misty in the cloud forest. If the weather is clear we 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. We camp out in a bush shelter constructed by the local guides and eat traditional bush food roasted in green bamboo.

Day 3 Mt Laimbele to Lebongbong (6 hour walk approx.)

Keep an eye out for the birdlife, and you may even spot some wild cattle. We follow a beautiful forested ridgeline and undulating terrain to Lebongbong village, which we should reach early in the afternoon. Lebongbong is one of the last hill tribe villages in the area, most were abandoned when the Christian missions were established on the coast. Traditional life is well preserved here. It can get cool too, at 550m above sea level. Walking on this day is mostly down hill, although there are still some challenging climbs on steep sections of the slippery, muddy track. We sleep in tents on a grassy area in the village.

Day 4 Lebongbong to Matanoi River (4 hour walk approx.)

Usually walking groups finish the Man Bush trail on day four with an 8 hour slog to the coast, however to make things a little easier and more enjoyable, we'll be breaking up the final walk on this section into two days and camping on the Matanoi river. Today's walk involves some very steep descents into the river valley. If we find it too steep the guides will rig up a bush rope to hold onto as we climb down into the valley. We pass some massive fig trees, pristine rainforest and huge waterfalls on the descent. We'll eat fresh river fish, prawns and root vegies for dinner, cooked in the traditional style in green bamboo. We camp on the river and can swim in crystal clear pools.

Day 5 Mantanoi River to Lawa village, South West Bay. (4 hours walk)

The last day of walking on the Man Bush trail. We climb out of the river valley ascending a steep slope, quickly being rewarded with spectacular views of the forest country and the south coast. We then drop down again into another valley, passing local gardens and crops and crossing a few small creeks. One last ascent of a steep slope begins from a beautiful rainforest creek where ancient rock carvings can be seen on river rocks. After the last ascent is complete we reach a newly constructed road, built to service coconut plantations. We follow this road to the coastal village of Lawa, where we stay in a guesthouse.

Day 6 A rest day in South West Bay. We'll take a boat trip across the bay to Aloo Lodge, a guesthouse in Wintua village. We have a chance see a traditional dance display and tour of the 'nasara' sacred ceremonial grounds. (N.B This is an additional activity costing about 1500 Vatu (\$15AUD) per person. This is not included in the cost of the tour). We'll go for a walk around the village of Wintua, visit the school and chat with the locals. We'll also be able to wash clothes here and charge up camera batteries if we buy a couple of litres of petrol for a generator.

Day 7 South West Bay to Matanoi River camp.

We begin our walk out of SW Bay to the south coast of Malekula. We climb into the ranges again to about 350m. The walking is challenging but not as hard as the Man Bush Trail. We follow some beautiful forested ridges with massive strangler figs we might catch a glimpse of the endemic Chestnut Bellied Kingfisher, a rare bird but common in these hills. After following a series of ridges we descend to the large river valley of the Matanoi. We follow the river for about 4 km. Sometimes we have to walk in the river for distances of up to 200m. We weave our way downstream, either in the river or through cut tracks in the wild cane that lines the banks. A pair of strong water shoes/sandals is highly recommended for this day. Chacos, Tevas, Keens or just shoes you don't mind getting wet are essential. Camp is a large sandy beach area with plenty of space above the high water mark. We sleep in tents and eat a standard bushwalkers meal from a food drop we pick up in SW Bay.

Day 8 Matanoi River to Malfakhal village

We continue downstream towards the south coast, crossing the river many times as we follow cut paths through the cane thickets and forest. Once we leave the river it is about an hours walk to a long black sand beach and the village of Malfakhal, which we should reach by about midday. We stay here for the night camping in tents on a grassy area near the village. The afternoon is spent walking through the village with the chief having a look at everyday village life. We eat a traditional feast for dinner with the villagers. Last year we were the first tourists to ever visit this area so it was a big deal. We were treated to a kava ceremony, a live string band, lots of seafood and dancing into the night. This year it will be lower key but still a special experience. A spring fed shower pours out of bamboo onto the black sand beach, a beautiful setting for a well earned wash.

Day 9 Malfakhal village to Akamb Island

Very little walking today, so we have a leisurely start. Before setting off we take a short walk to a high point above the village with a spectacular view of the black sand bay, the river mouth and the mountains we traversed the week before. After leaving Malfakhal, a 45 minute walk takes us to the village of Bonvor where a traditional lunch awaits us. After lunch we walk for about an hour following a long black sand beach to a point at the end of the bay. Here we are met by a fibre glass outboard motor boat which takes us to the idyllic white sandy island of Akamb. We sleep the night here in tents on a grassy area right next to the beach under massive shady trees.

Day 10 Early in the morning we can have a swim or snorkel and after breakfast walk around the perimeter of the tiny island. Akamb is stunningly beautiful, a picture post card tropical paradise home to about 500 people who plant their gardens on the mainland but live off shore to avoid mosquitoes. We take the same fibreglass boat from Akamb to the mainland village of Okai, where another traditional lunch awaits us. From Okai village we walk for an hour around rocky headlands and follow white sand beaches and tracks through the forest to a sheltered anchorage where we are met by another fibreglass boat that takes us to the stunning archipelago of the Maskelyne Islands. The Maskelynes are home to one of the most extensive coral reef systems in the country. Massive areas of mangroves and sea grass occupy much of the shoreline of the islands. The islands boast one of the most productive fisheries in the country. Ni-Vanuatu people refer to the islands as ‘ples blong fish’ – place of fish. Our boat takes us to the main island of Uliveo (Maskelyne) where we stay in bungalows and prepare for the canoe trip.

Day 11 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. We paddle over the channel to Sakao, Garden Island, snorkel 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 the lunch 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. Mud crabs, rice, coconut soup and seasonal vegies are for dinner.

Day 12 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. Lobster for dinner.

Day 13 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 Malaflaf point where a seafood feast awaits you.

Day 14 Rest day on Maskelyne Island. In the morning we can walk around the island visiting three villages and meeting the chiefs, it’s so small it only takes an hour but due to the friendly nature of the locals it’s likely to take two or three. In the afternoon we’ll take a boat across the channel to the small island of Avohk to watch a customary dance display that tells the story of the imperial pigeon, rainbow lorikeet and hawk. This is the only dance display that is included in the cost of the tour. We’ll sleep in bungalows again tonight making our early morning departure to Ambrym the following day a little easier.

Day 15 Early morning boat trip to Ambrym, the volcano island. We leave at 5 am to ensure the sea isn't too strong. The trip takes about 2-3 hours, depending on the seas. We arrive in Port Vatu, South West Ambrym, where experienced volcano guide John Tasso meets us. We'll camp in Port Vatu tonight and spend a relaxing day exploring the village and the stunning black sand beaches.

Day 16 After the canoeing, and rest days we should be feeling rejuvenated for the volcano walk. We walk out of Port Vatu at about 9 am climbing to about 700m above sea level to a camp on the edge of the ash plain. The walk is challenging, but not as hard as the Man Bush Trail. The ground is much less muddy as the volcanic sand is very well drained. The scenery is absolutely stunning. We follow a large dry, black volcanic sand creek that winds 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.

This 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 4 hours total.

If we have time in the afternoon, we'll go for a walk to the crater of Marum for a sneak peek at the spectacular lava lake. Those of us who want to rest at camp won't miss out, as we'll visit the crater again on the following days.

Day 17 We visit the crater of Benbow. Benbow is different from Marum, instead of standing 500m above the lava, we follow a very steep track 150m down to a terrace above the active crater and get spectacular views of the lava. We'll use a climbing rope that we anchor on the edge of the main crater as a hand hold to get down. For those in the group who find this a little hair raising, it is optional. You can wait at the top of the crater for the group to return and soak up the amazing views. It's actually a lot easier than it sounds and looks, 6 out of 8 of last year's group made it. After lunch at the top of the crater at about 1000m above sea level, we'll retrace our steps across the ash plain back to camp.

Day 18 Today we visit the active volcano of Marum. We walk across the desert like ash plain for a few kilometres before 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 that word can't describe. We walk around the rim of the huge crater to the northern side where we follow 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 cloud forest before turning off and heading down a ridge through some spectacular forest again with giant tree ferns, palms and fig trees. The vegetation on the northern side is very different to the west where we begin the walk. 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 19 We have another two and half hour boat ride back around to the west coast of the island to Craig Cove. Here 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>

Testimonials

“When I first saw the trip advertised I signed up almost immediately because it seemed to offer everything I look for in a holiday.....remote travel, physical activity, beautiful scenery and a unique cultural experience. This tour had all of that and more. I learnt so much from the Ni-Vanuatu....I was totally blown away by their lifestyle, their harmony with the environment, their warmth and of course their amazing generosity. The walking was pretty damn good as well.

Since I've been back I've had the usual questions re...."how was the trip" and, to be honest, I've glibly replied with one liners like "great, I had a fab time." Basically, I just can't find the words that begin to describe the totality of the experience....where we went, what we saw, who we met, what we ate, how we were treated etc etc etc”

Margo Condoleon, July 2012

“Thank you Ed for you guidance in our recent journey.

I have travelled in developing countries previously but have never been so immersed in the world of the people I was visiting. I feel I have learned so much about their culture, attitudes, foods, plants, history, languages, politics and attitudes to daily living.

I was touched by the hospitality and generosity of the people we visited. The people obviously value the work you do with them. The way we were encouraged to interact with our hosts enriched our experience, and in small ways, some of our group, were able to help with daily living issues of some Vanuatu people. The snorkeling was the best I have experienced but it is the people that I will remember. I also respected your care about the various special interests of the members of the group.

Most of us Australians know little of Vanuatu but my family, friends and my students have been genuinely interested in the world you showed us.”

Chris Charleson, August 2012

More Photos. Grant Dixon, a photographer who came along on our second Vanuatu trip in 2012, has posted a number of his Vanuatu photos on his website.

<http://www.grantdixonphotography.com.au/galleries/gallery.php?resultpage=1&id=116>

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 no where near as dry as it is in Darwin. There is less rain fall from May through September, however, it may not rain for two weeks and then bucket down for two days.

Everyone should prepare for rain. You will need a decent rain jacket, not really to walk in but to wear in villages or at camp in wet weather. If you take a mozzie dome instead of a tent you will need to have a fly for it, as we will get at least a couple of rainy nights.

It will be warm, but not as hot as it gets in Kakadu. It can get up to 28° Celcius 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 should also bring a lightweight mosquito net to hang in the bungalows we stay in. Some bungalows may not have nets so bring your own to make sure you get a good sleep. Malaria mosquitoes only bite at night. It sounds strange bringing a tent and mosquito net but having both means you can take advantage of bungalow accommodation when it's available and not worry about mozzies.

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 boats we use have small undercover areas to stow baggage.

Strong walking shoes or boots are recommended. The Man Bush trail is slippery and muddy and hiking boots are the best option. As well as this you will want a pair of sports sandals or river shoes that you can walk in. On the days with many river crossings and on day 7 and 8 when we follow the river these are essential.

Ed wears hiking boots and take a pair of Chaco sandals to wear in camp or in the villages these are also comfortable to walk in on the days with river crossings. You may be able to put up with wet feet and wear your boots or running shoes in the river but you will still need some sandals or thongs to wear around camp or the villages.

As per the weather comments above: a rain jacket (better to have a light tropical poncho than a heavy goretex jacket for use in temperate areas), a pullover & a beanie in case it gets chilly.

Why go with Willis's Walkabouts?

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 lived in Malekula, Vanuatu for 12 months in 2011 working as the Eco-Tourism Development Officer under the Australian Youth Ambassador volunteer program. Ed was 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. The trips in 2012 were a test run and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The 2013 trip was even better. Hopefully, this will be better still.

Who else can offer that kind of experience?

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

Cost. \$2995 per person. This does not include porters. If you want porters they will cost about \$15 a day extra. We pay as we go so if you think you want them then you will need to carry at least \$150 extra to pay for porters. On top of this it would be wise to carry another 20,000 Vatu (\$200AUD) in cash for any additional activities (e.g traditional dance displays), purchasing of art or traditional handicrafts, purchasing any extra food items you may like, shouting your guides kava at the end of the day and any unexpected costs. You may spend very little of this money but it's a good idea to bring it just in case.

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.

Note. None of the discounts which apply to our Australian trips apply to any of our overseas trips.

Notes.

As the cost of the domestic airfares depends on which airline you choose to get to Port Vila, we cannot include the cost of the domestic flights. We will book them for you, but they will cost extra. The extra cost will be due after we've made the bookings and seen what they cost.

On our other overseas trips, your fee covers only our guide and the meals he or she cooks on the walks. In this case, we will have to include more: land and sea transfers, local guides fees, customary land entry fees, all meals, accommodation (sometimes in bungalows, sometimes camping fees), Ed's fee as guide and organiser.

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. **You must send us proof that you are insured.**

Do not book a return flight to Australia the day after the trip finishes. Local flights are sometimes cancelled. If that happens, you would miss the flight back to Australia. Please do not book a return flight before the 25th.

Do you have special dietary requirements? We obtain much of our food from the local villages. It can be difficult to cater for some special diets, eg gluten free. If you do have a special diet, please let us know well in advance so we can work out how best to meet your needs.

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 April. Payment in full is due on 15 April or when you book, whichever is later.
- 2 Cancellation fees are \$200 before 1 January, \$500 before 1 March, \$900 before 1 April, \$1500 before 1 May and the full \$2995 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.