



**T**he promise of a week in a sun-drenched island in the Pacific is possibly the perfect start to Spring. After a cold winter cooped up in an office and buried in wool-blend, the idea of warm water and blonde beaches is just too tempting to resist.

Just under four hours flying time from Sydney, Vanuatu promises all of this and delivers much more. From the moment you touch down at Bauerfield Airport in Port Vila, everything slows down. Customs takes an hour but there's no machine gun-wielding intimidation. The desk officer grins at you like an old friend.

Outside there is the usual bevy of taxi drivers, transfers and buses but without the push and hassle. Everything is easy breezy; you get on the bus and away you go, past coconuts palms, plots of cassava and taro, colourful tin shacks, big agricultural warehouses and car yards.

Once you arrive at your resort, you have two choices; stop and flop (it's easy to do with pools, bars, restaurants and day spas) or hit the tour desk and book in some exploration. I recommend the latter; the main island of Efate has so much to offer beyond the manicured boundary of a golf course.

### Natural state

If you want an effective mental cue for Mele Cascades, just close your eyes and think of Enya. Mouthwash blue water washes over limestone encrusted lava flows, community gardens flourish under morning glory canopies and birds hoot and twitter above the walking trail up to the top of the waterfalls.

The Cascades would be a great place to shoot an ad for bottled water. Or virgins. Or angels. It's a pure, pretty and magical place to cool your heels. Located about 30 minutes from Port Vila, entry to the Cascades is 1000VT (about AU\$10) and the walk up to the top of the falls involves some slippery underwater bits so wear shoes with tread.

Pele Island off the north coast of Efate is another must-see natural wonder. Home to a live coral reef teeming with everything from moray eels to bashful reef sharks, Pele Island offers a glimpse into remote village life. There is a small community of Ni Vans (the correct term for Vanuatu nationals) that subsistence farm on the island and host the daily influx of tourists. Visitors receive a welcome lei and fresh coconut, a tasty BBQ lunch, a good hour of snorkelling and a jaunty live music performance including makeshift instruments made out of wooden boxes and strings.

Teenagers of the early 1980s will remember a certain Brooke Shields flick called *The Blue Lagoon*. Guess what? It's a real place! The gin-clear water of this idyllic lagoon takes on a distinctly Bombay Sapphire hue due to some mysterious force. There's a 300VT (AU\$3) entry free making it the cheapest way to get to paradise.

### Polyglot dining

Vanuatu's colourful history spans everything from Polynesian and Melanesian settlement, involving the requisite cannibalism, to a period wherein it was dually colonised by France and Britain. Subsequently, half of Port Vila's street names start with 'Rue' and the upshot for gourmands is that it's easy to find old-school French cuisine. ▶