

#VANUATU

Wild Tanna

Words and photography
by Emily McAuliffe

I

CLUTCH A YELLOW HARDHAT TO my head against the powerful and relentless wind. The helmet is loosely tied beneath my chin with string, making it seem more symbolic than protective, particularly if a fabled car-sized lava bomb comes my way.

I'm peering into the furnace of one of the world's most accessible live volcanoes, Mount Yasur, and its bubbling pit of lava. A plume of gritty smoke mushrooms from the crater, gliding past onlookers as it drifts towards the ocean. Against a backdrop of vast plains and distant mountain ranges, my fellow travellers look like ants marching along the volcano's 300-metre-high ridge.

I stand with camera poised, unable to predict the next clapping boom, which will send streaks of molten rock 200 metres into the sky. From my elevated position, the glowing lava fragments look like orange tinfoil floating through the air, until they thud against the crater wall far below me.

Some land a bit close for comfort, but I trust the judgement of the local guides who assess the activity level and wind direction before driving guests up the mountain, leaving just a short but steep 10-minute walk to the top. Watching Yasur's fireworks show as the sun goes down is merely part of their daily routine.

It's also reassuring to know that the village at the base of Mount Yasur has been happily co-existing with the grumbling giant for a thousand-odd years, with the locals unperturbed by the intermittent booms that echo through the valley. Their home, Sulphur Bay, is not only blessed by rich volcanic soil but has the added advantage of a hot spring running alongside the village.

It's here that I laze about in the warm stream, with the occasional wave refreshing me with cool seawater. Three boys of about six edge towards me, their bare bottoms breaking the water's surface. They giggle while pushing pieces of driftwood back and forth, while upstream a woman washes her

MAIN IMAGE:
Tanna's famous Blue Cave.
BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT:
Lenakel Market; White Grass
Ocean Resort & Spa;
Touring Mount Yasur.



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Air Vanuatu flies directly to Port Vila from Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, with onward flights to Tanna.

STAYING THERE

White Grass Ocean Resort & Spa
whitegrasstanna.com

TOUR

White Grass coordinates tours to all major attractions.

baby. Further along a piglet snuffles through the fine black sand before darting under a line of washing and disappearing amongst the thatched village huts.

My accommodation on the island draws inspiration from the traditional homes of the locals, but has a few extra comforts. The White Grass Ocean Resort & Spa is set across 3.5 hectares, one-kilometre north of the Tanna airport, and offers comfy beds and en suites inside its 18 thatched cabins.

I wake each morning to birdsong and the sound of the ocean, and outside my bure, tangles of pink and orange bougainvillea creep amongst the palm trees. A pebbled path leads to the restaurant, which has a front-row view of the ocean and jagged coral shoreline. There's also a long jetty leading out to the reef, and it's here that a group of us bundle into a motorboat to make the 30-minute journey to Tanna's Blue Cave.

We speed through the cobalt sea past a wild tropical forest and limestone bluffs. The water turns to turquoise as we near the cave and the driver cuts the engine. With snorkels and fins, we kick towards a sliver of light peeking out under the rockface.



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On the other side, the view is breathtaking. A cylinder of light pierces the top of the cave, creating a spotlight on the blue-green water. We perch on the rocks to admire the postcard shot before swimming back to the boat.

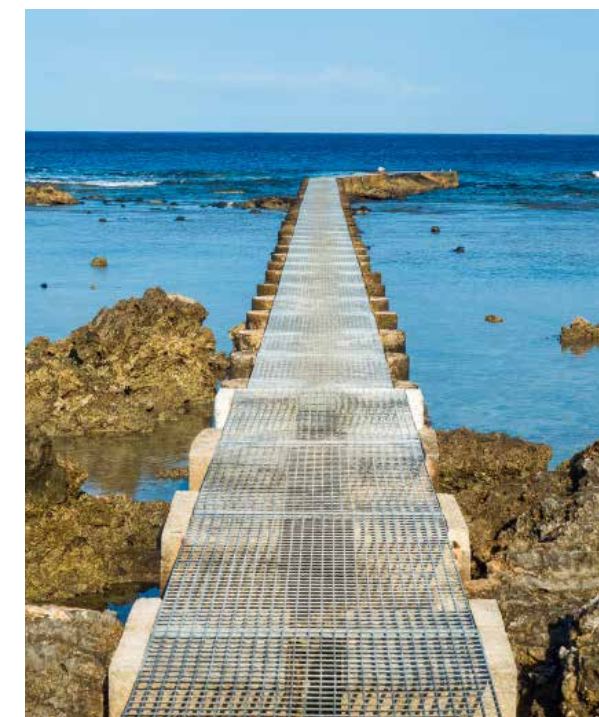
Our next mission is to spot the bale of green turtles known to frequent the area near the resort. While the turtles had seemingly popped out to lunch when we arrive, the shelves of coral and sheer clarity of the water make for a pleasant snorkelling expedition nonetheless.

Later, some guests choose to take the turtle search up a notch with a scuba dive (White Grass has the only PADI dive centre on the island), while I opt for a volcanic ash facial in the beachside spa hut.

Late afternoon is fittingly spent on the resort deck watching the sunset with a cocktail, before dinner in the onsite restaurant. Given the remoteness of the island and lack of infrastructure, dining options beyond the resort are limited, but that's nothing to worry about, as White Grass's food is deliciously fresh. Organic fruit and vegetables are collected from the nearby Lenakel market, and seafood is pulled from the ocean directly in front of the resort. A waiter shows me a photo of the day's plump poulet (local snapper) catch in the back of his boat – yes, I'll have that.

The following morning I'm invited to join the chef at the market to see where the beautiful produce I've been eating comes from. As I clamber out of the dusty ute tray I'm struck by a sea of colour. Ladies in bright sarongs peruse bundles of carrots balanced like teepees on patterned fabric, while men lug giant hands of green bananas through rows of taro and cabbages. Elderly women natter away as they hack at coconuts with sharp knives gripped by leathery hands, and children peer out at me from behind their mothers' legs.

Most people have brought their produce to the coastal market from the mountains, where 75 per cent of Tanna's 30,000-strong population lives. After selling and bartering their harvest, perhaps negotiating a pig or fish swap too, the locals will bundle back into the village car or set off on foot to return to their thatched huts in the forest. To others it might seem like Tanna got lost in time, but to them, Tanna is life. ☺



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: There are dozens of smiles at the markets; Fresh market produce; A sign at the resort; Lenakel Markets. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: The villagers at the base of Mount Yasur; A peaceful bure at White Grass Ocean Resort & Spa; Enjoying the ocean at the resort.

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