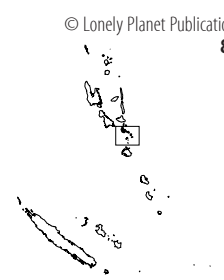


Epi & Tongoa



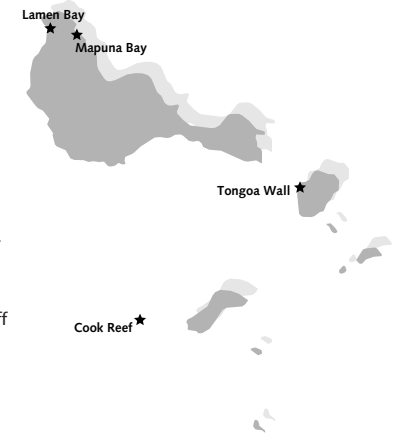
Epi is one gorgeous island, just a hop and skip from Efate. Arrive in the south and while away the hours in a rustic lodge watching for whales and dolphins to cross the small bay. Take a bumpy ride up north to Lamén Bay, to do the whole water-sports thing, including swimming with young **Bondas**, a gregarious dugong that loves to have its tum rubbed – although not vigorously, his spiky coat will rip your fingers off. Epi's an adventure island, where you become part of the village structure. Listen to the local lads pounding the kava in the dusky *nakamal* (clubhouse); chat to the ladies of the village as they prepare their ground ovens and wrap the *laplap* (doughy mix) in banana leaves. Or walk along the black-sand beach at Lamén Bay to the conservation area – where megapodes and turtles can lay their eggs in safety. Meanwhile, local string bands will entertain you, given a few hours' notice.

Coastal Epi is covered with coconut plantations with palm-fringed, secluded beaches down its west coast; the east coast is lined with jagged coral rocks. There are two submarine volcanoes: one offshore from Mt Nitaia, the other close to Tefala and Tefala Kiki. With a bit of trekking, you can visit several lakes including Lake Lapa, beside Mt Mariu, which has clear water for fishing and swimming as well as lots of water birds.

Tongoa is the largest and most important of the Shepherd Islands, and it has only just started its tourism activities. Be one of the first hundred guests – they've lots of interesting tours, activities, and cutesy accommodation in a very nontouristy environment.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Donning your snorkel gear and swimming at Lamén Bay with **Bondas** (p85), Epi's friendly resident dugong
- Visiting a **garden** (p86) and learning how the islanders grow and process their food
- Going **night spear-fishing** (p86) with the villagers in their outrigger canoes
- Diving the mighty **Tongoa Wall** (p88) or snorkelling the coral gardens of **Cook Reef** (p88), both in the Shepherd Islands
- Watching the submarine volcano spurt its stuff from the beach at **Mapuna Bay** (p85)



CLEVERERS & POISON MEN

Important people on these islands are the Cleverers, who heal with the same *kastom* (the rules surrounding ancient ancestral legacies and customs) medicine used on Tanna. The Cleverer in Epi is an old man who talks to Mt Yasur volcano using a red stone placed on his ear. On the dark side is the Poison Man, who uses black medicine to settle local scores.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Epi's two airfields are at Lamén Bay and Valesdir. The Lamén Bay strip gives you a stunning introduction to the island as the plane comes in low over coral reefs and crystal-clear turquoise water.

Vanair (☎ 25025) flies from Vila to Valesdir on Monday, Tuesday and Saturday, and to Lamén Bay on Tuesday and Saturday. Some flights also stop at Tongoa.

The Shepherd group has two airfields: one on Tongoa and one on Emae (called Emae Aromai, 'Welcome to Emae'). Vanair flies from Vila to Tongoa on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday; to Emae on Monday and Saturday.

If you are planning to visit the islands and your proposed Vanair flight is full, contact your host. A few strings might be pulled to get you on your way.

BOAT

For boats that call into Epi and the Shepherds, see p185.

There are several good anchorages in north Epi: Lamén Bay, Mapuna Bay, Rovo Bay, Walavea and Cape Foreland. All can be unsuitable, depending on the wind direction. September is the best time to visit, when the weather is oh so very pleasant.

Getting Around

A good plan when visiting Epi is to fly to Lamén Bay, make your way down the west coast by taxi truck (6000Vt) and then fly out of Valesdir (or vice versa). Epi's roads are basic and the eastern half of the island only has walking tracks. Hard-core walkers might be interested in an around-the-island trek – a guide is necessary (about 1000Vt per day) and can be arranged by your host.

Tongoa's airfield is at Puele. A taxi to Burao costs about 1000Vt, while the fare south to Bongabonga or Meriu is around 1400Vt. Tongoa has the only vehicles in the Shepherds: 4WD taxis meet each scheduled flight.

EPI

pop 5000 / area 444 sq km

History

Before the arrival of Europeans in the 1860s, there were so many villagers on Epi that when all the men called out, a flying fox would fall out of the sky. Within 70 years fewer than 1000 remained.

Epi was one of the first islands to experience large-scale European settlement. The settlers planned to grow cotton, hoping to capture the world market lost by the USA during its Civil War. However, the recovery of the US economy forced them to turn to other crops, mainly coconut.

THE CARL INCIDENT

One of the worst blackbirding incidents in the Pacific occurred in 1872 aboard the *Carl*, a labour ship owned by Dr Murray of Epi. About 90 villagers from two islands further north were enticed alongside the *Carl* by the offer of trade. Their canoes were sunk and they were seized, hauled aboard and locked below.

On the second night, the captives used their bunks as battering rams to break out of their prison. They were met by pistol fire from Dr Murray and his crew, and the slaughter resumed the following night.

The crew ordered the survivors to come out on the fourth morning. Miraculously, five were unharmed and nine were only slightly wounded, with another 16 in a serious condition. The rest had all been killed.

The murderous Murray ordered the more badly injured islanders to be bound and thrown overboard to drown. The ship was then whitewashed in an effort to conceal bloodstains.

Once inquiries began in Sydney, Australia, Dr Murray turned queen's evidence in order to escape punishment. Not only that, a public outcry in favour of the murderers resulted in the worst offenders among the crew being acquitted.

THE PLANTATION ERA

In contrast, the 1920s were Epi's colonial heyday. Several plantations had their own racecourses and held regular race meetings; some even printed their own currency. However, the 1930s Depression, followed by a succession of powerful cyclones, brought these halcyon days to a sudden close.

LAMÉN BAY

This is a good swimming spot; the 1.5km black-sand beach is among the island's best. There's also plenty of shallow coral for snorkelling. The bay is home to massive sea turtles and several dugong, including Bondas: if you can find him he'll be happy to let you hang around as he goes about his business (see the boxed text, p86).

There are a few small stores selling limited groceries, as well as a fish shop behind the bungalows, a cold room selling ice cream and meat (ask for Isabelle's place) and a bakery. There's a market every second Saturday where you'll find the national dishes *laplap* and *tuluk* (tightly wrapped packages of doughy mix filled with meat

or fish), sweet corn and so on, at bargain prices.

The beautiful flat island in the bay, almost surrounded by a white-sand beach, is Lamén. About 600 people live here, although they all have their gardens on the mainland. All through the day you'll see them paddling across the bay, using simple, coconut palm-leaf sails when the wind is favourable. These make a picturesque sight against the sunset.

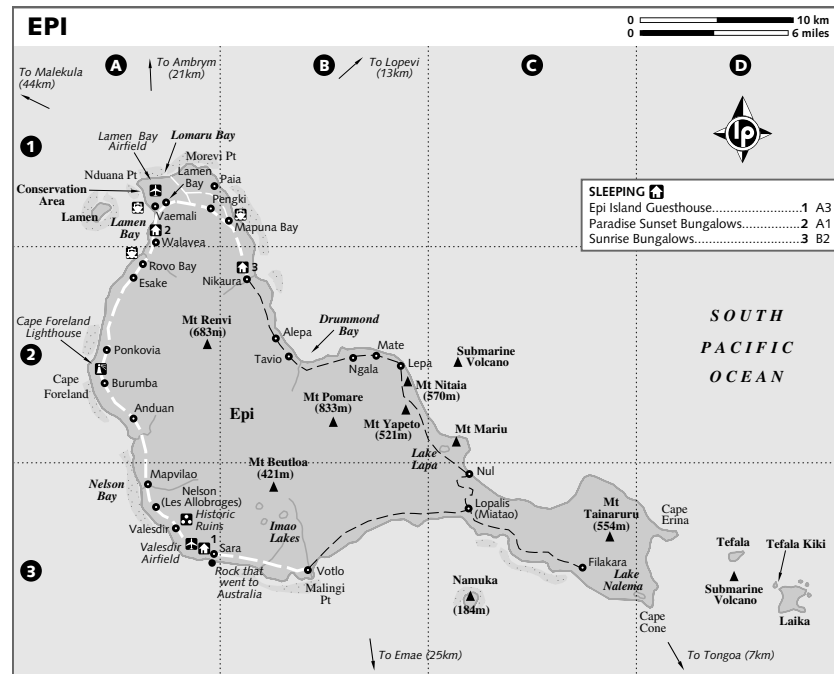
The ni-Vans set up stalls to show their handcrafts when cruise ships visit the Bay.

MAPUNA BAY

Five kilometres over the hills from Lamén Bay is Mapuna Bay, another lovely spot with a white-sand beach and pristine coral gardens. En route to Nikaura there are fine views of the rugged coastline, and of the volcanoes on Ambrym and Lopevi to the north and northeast. You can feel the rumbling of Lopevi, like thunder, from here.

VALESDIR

In the 1920s the Valesdir plantation had its own coinage; in keeping with the times,



THE GENTLE DUGONG

Ever watched *Teletubbies*? You know the fat little vacuum cleaner? That's what the dugong is like. Its fat little snout swishes around on the ocean floor, sending up a cloud of fine sand as it separates out its food. Then it rolls over to get a better look at you, and floats up to have its tummy rubbed. You think that'd be interesting? No, much much more. It's like being a nature child. Communing. Realising in one mind-blowing moment what conservation is all about.

Dugongs inhabit the warm tropical and subtropical coastal waters of the Indian and southwest Pacific Oceans. Vanuatu is the easternmost limit of where they live. But worldwide, populations of these sweet creatures are declining due to over hunting, drowning in fishing nets, pollution and loss of food resources. In fact, dugong are considered vulnerable to extinction. Fortunately, by being cute and cuddly, they've turned themselves into a major tourist attraction. Hopefully this will help protect them.

Traditionally, dugong were hunted for food on Epi, during the March full moon at the time of the yam harvest. The men who did the hunting left the villages to live in the forest, where they made a special net from vines and thorny branches. This was used to fence off a section of the bay, thus trapping the dugong. But the chiefs, as they have with turtle hunting, altered the tradition to preserve their tourism opportunities.

one of the coins was marked 'five centimes' on one side and 'six pence' on the other. The plantation is still operational, producing copra and beef cattle. For many years, there was a grand race day near the airstrip. Horses came from all over the Pacific.

In the tiny bay is the 'Rock That Went to Australia'. The story goes that a local boy was sitting on the rock, and disappeared. He returned two years later with clothes and a leg of bullock. When white men arrived in Valesdir, the locals already knew about them.

The cliffs are so steep and the jungle so dense that at dusk, you might only know you are approaching a village by the boom, boom, boom of the men pounding the kava in metal pipes.

INFORMATION

The area's administrative centre is at Rovo Bay, about 12km south of Lamén Bay.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **submarine volcano** south of Mapuna Bay steams or bubbles, spurting out flakes of pumice in all directions. And when Mt Nitaia is steaming vigorously, the evening sky takes on a deep scarlet glow. Another submarine volcano is intermittently active 5km offshore from Cape Cone, in Epi's far southeast.

Sea kayaks and outrigger canoes are available through all the guesthouses, or charter a fishing boat (5000Vt) to try your hand at **reef fishing**. **Spear-fishing** is especially good at night – the locals will take you out.

Game fishing is available out of Lamén Bay; a small Kiri 8 takes you out trawling (half-/full day 15,000/30,000Vt) or deep-sea fishing (all day 15,000Vt).

Swim with the **dugong** and **turtles** – ask your host about borrowing snorkel gear. Hopefully you'll see Bondas and get to rub their bellies. Afterwards, walk along Lamén Bay to the **conservation area** where turtles and megapodes lay their eggs, and flying foxes hang about, or take a truck excursion around the coast.

Down south, there are interesting **historic ruins** of a mansion in the Valesdir plantation. Later, enjoy the twilight in a *nakamal*, with a shell or two of **kava**, just dug up from a nearby garden. Maybe Beria, the local **string band** from Sara, will play and if you can make up a group, enjoy an island feast and *kastom* dancing.

Your host will arrange a guide for you to walk to local villages, see their subsistence **gardens** high in the hills, or visit waterfalls and rainforest.

There are stunning **coral gardens** just off the beach near Epi Island Guesthouse (near Sunrise bungalows in the north too), or rally a team for volleyball, *pétanque* (a type of lawn bowls played on a hard surface), horse riding along the coastal road, or maybe go pig hunting, on foot.

SLEEPING & EATING

Sunrise Bungalows (☎ 28230; Nikaura; s with all meals 2500Vt) Just a short distance south of Mapuna

BONNE ANNÉE

All through January, whole villages set out to walk as far as they can, armed with long flower-embedded posts. The groups dance along, stopping at each village they pass through to sing songs and chant, 'Happy, Happy, Bonne Année'. Then they dust their listeners with talcum powder and set off to the next village.

Bay at Nikaura are two charming little bungalows (two beds in each) in a grassed field at the foothills of Mt Renvi. Walk down a path to the white-sand beach in a marine conservation area, with gorgeous coral. A guide will look after your every whim. Meals are served in a dining room – simple island food such as yam salad, and crab meat with tomatoes, as there is no power. A truck from Lamén Bay is 3000Vt.

Paradise Sunset Bungalows (☎ 28230; Lamén Bay; s/d with all meals 5500/7200Vt, camping 500Vt) A friendly, relaxed place right on the bay, a short walk from the airfield. The rooms and shared facilities are basic but the food and the bay views are lovely. Tasso has snorkel gear, bikes, outriggers and he will arrange any tours you like. A truck to the airstrip is 200Vt. The open-all-meals restaurant (set meals 1000Vt) is large and usually full of guests and visitors from the yachts in the bay, who eat together and make for a fun evening. Ask if the meal will be fish curry and sweet potato bread. Yumm.

Epi Island Guesthouse (☎ /fax 28225; www.epi-island-guesthouse.com.vu; epimoments@vanuatu.com.vu; Valesdir; s with all meals 8000Vt, camping 1000Vt) Enjoy rural life in total comfort, in this delightful arty, rustic lodge powered by a microhydro turbine. There are four bedrooms around a sitting room full of fascinating bits such as clam-shell axe heads and Enfield guns dating from 1865–75. It has a good book-and-DVD library, puzzles, kids games, baby-sitting, and a veranda to dream on as you look over a tiny bay. You may see 100 dolphins leaping and spinning, or a humpback whale looking like an island. In the Moments dining room (set meals 1500Vt to 1700Vt, open all meals), gourmet cuisine is whipped up by Alix (homemade bread, organic produce from the garden, local beef, knock-out desserts...mmm).

TONGOA

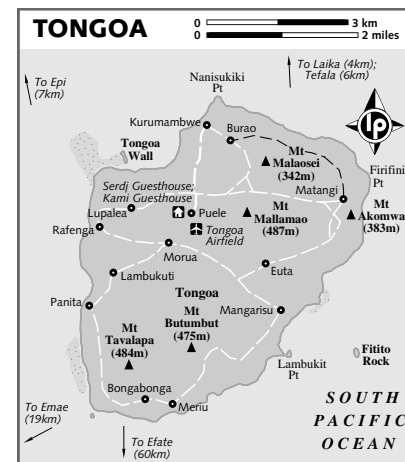
pop 2500 / area 260 sq km

Tongoa's people named their island after the *tongoa* plant, which grows widely in the area. Tongoa, the island, has 2400 inhabitants, making it the most populous island of the Shepherd group, and it's also the group's largest island. It's densely forested, with a rugged terrain of 15 extinct volcanic cones and several broad valleys. There are old ruins of ovens and workers' huts scattered around. The oldest archaeological site is at Mangarisu. It dates back to around 600 BC, when Lapita people arrived from islands further north.

There are good views of Epi northward from the island's highest peak, Mt Mallamao (487m). Only 3m lower, Mt Tavalapa has similar views of the rest of the group, as well as of Efate. Mt Akomwa (383m) was used as an American observation post during WWII. The 1½-hour climb to the top provides a stunning panorama of the Shepherd group, with Efate in the distance.

Each village has two or three trade stores, and you can also buy supplies at a small general store at Morua.

About 2km north of the airfield is Burao, Tongoa's main centre for traditional ceremonies. *Kastom* dancers from Burao wear wraparound kilts made of tapa (bark cloth), and paint their bodies in black, yellow and white.



SHEPHERD ISLANDS

All nine islands of the Shepherds are volcanic, rising steeply through dense scrub from mainly black-sand shores to inland peaks or ridges. Inhabited islands are Tongoa and Emae, Tongariki, Buninga, Makura and Mataso, while Ewose, Wot Rock and Falea are not.

Island legends tell how Tongoa and its small neighbours, Tongariki, Ewose, Buninga and Falea, were originally all part of an island called Kuwae, or Gua. An immense volcanic explosion in about 1475 blew the island apart and killed many people. After the cataclysm only the present-day Shepherd group remained.

Life in the Shepherds continued in the Melanesian way, with intervillage and -island raiding, followed by feasting on the flesh of captives. In 1878 a party of 11 Epi islanders, returning home from Efate, passed too close to **Makura**. Eight were killed outright and three were captured. Parts of the captives were given to the people of neighbouring Emae, Tongariki and Tongoa as gifts! Fortunately these days villagers weave fine pandanus mats for gifts. Being of single weave, they make fine wall hangings. Other handcrafted products include small models of trading canoes, complete with outriggers.

Emae is home to an angel, and a large number of peregrine falcons. The angel is one of seven placed around the world by a Swedish group, UniteHopeProject – art for universal love. It is sculpted in concrete by Lehna Edwall and symbolizes endless and uniting love for all people. Emae's angel is called Hope. She is by the Presbyterian church in Sowo, very close to the airstrip.

Cook Reef, 5km off Siwa Point in southern Emae, is a popular scuba site for touring yachts. Although awash at high tide, many parts of the reef are exposed at low water.

Emae's greatest claim to fame was its string band, the Western Boys, of the 1980s. Look out for the album from the New Western Boys. The six members are all sons of the original group.

The people of Kurumambwe are the *kas-tom* owners of Laika, near Epi. This island has one of the largest colonies of wedge-tailed shearwaters (or mutton birds) in the Pacific. During March and April the villagers go over to feast on the hatching birds and collect others to sell back on Tongoa.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Visit the northern coast of Tongoa between Nanisukiki and Firifini Points, where there's a great number of hot springs and **fumaroles**. In some places, people cook their food in the heated water. Early in the morning you may see megapode birds, which lay their eggs in the warm sand. The sea here is warmed by volcanic activity, making it extremely popular with swimmers.

Off the bluff near Lupalea is one of Vanuatu's most outstanding scuba spots: the **Tongoa Wall**, for experienced divers. This deep drop-off dive, which features a huge and fascinating concentration of marine life, is visited by tour operators from Vila.

SLEEPING

Serdj Guesthouse (☎ 28201; Puele; s/d with all meals 3200/6400Vt) You will be picked up from the airport and taken to your host Daniel's family home in Puele. There are several excellent full- and half-day tours to villages and you receive a gift of an island shirt or Mother Hubbard dress to wear when you visit.

Kami Guesthouse (☎ 28331, fax 28240; Puele; s/d with all meals 3200/6400Vt) Also in Puele village; is attached to Kalo Store. Kalo has power in the evenings.