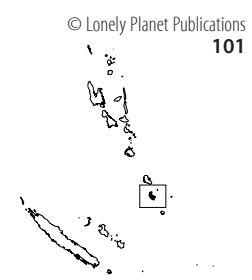


# Erromango & Aneityum



One of the major attractions of these islands is that they are sparsely populated and not visited by many tourists. That very benefit means there is no tourist infrastructure. And since the islands both have grand forests, mighty mountains and wide deep rivers, getting around can be rather difficult. Arriving at Dillons Bay airfield on Erromango, you may be met by a group of people there to help you walk to the coast, down a cliff, and into a little boat that's bucking wildly among the rocky crags. On the other hand, Aneityum is easy. Wander across the grass, between the trees, to your very private bungalow set by the white sands that separate the azure sea from the island palms and hibiscus bushes. Tough.

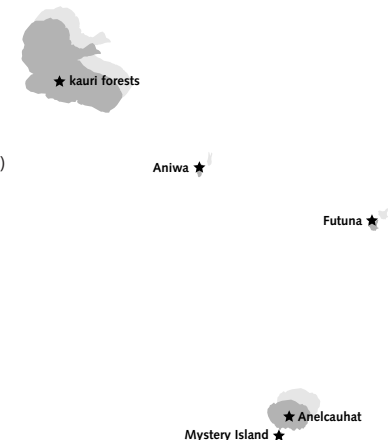
Erromango was devastated by a cyclone in February 2004. It destroyed the gardens and houses of the small coastal settlements so the government encouraged the people to relocate to Potnarvin and Dillons Bay. Dillons Bay is looking especially attractive, with new bungalows set along the path that follows the expansive Williams River.

Food on these islands is basic, just crayfish and homegrown vegies, because supply ships mightn't visit for ages. Adjusting to the diet isn't so hard, but the islands' isolation does affect the fuel supply which is both sparse and expensive.

Erromango and Aneityum are typical Melanesian islands. The other two islands that make up Tafea province, along with Tanna, are Aniwa, also Melanesian, and Futuna where the population is Polynesian. At the far-flung boundaries of Tafea are the volcanic outcrops of Matthew and Hunter Islands, both uninhabited and currently claimed by the French.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking among the mighty trees in Erromango's **kauri forests** (p103)
- Being challenged by the weird topography of **Futuna** (p105)
- Visiting fascinating ruins at **Anelcauhat** (p107) and Aneityum's west coast
- Spending a few idyllic days alone in paradise, on deserted **Mystery Island** (p106)
- Swimming across the beautiful lagoon in tiny **Aniwa** (p105)



# ERROMANGO

pop 1500 / area 975 sq km

The 'land of mangoes' is a mountainous, forested island, with almost all the people living in villages on its rugged coast. Each village has a fertile ecogarden, where yam, taro, tomato, corn and sweet potato thrive among huge mango, coconut and papaw trees.

The island was named Martyrs' Island when missionaries met violent deaths there, then Sandalwood Island after the abundant supplies of the fragrant softwood.

The heyday of Erromango's sandalwood trade was between the 1840s and 1970s; there was also extensive logging around

Ipota in the 1970s. Since then, logging has been limited to the export of *tamanu*, a local mahogany-like tree, and a small amount of kauri.

## History

Erromangan legends tell how a huge canoe came with a white god and other ghosts aboard, but the mysterious canoe withdrew to a floating village, which then vanished back into the spirit world. It was, in fact, August 1774 when Commander James Cook landed briefly in Cook's Bay, and offered the usual green branch of friendship. The waiting islanders – cannibals who were accustomed to war – were hostile. When the local chief suggested

Cook bring his longboat ashore, the explorer suspected treachery and retreated rapidly. He named the nearby headland Traitors' Head.

The majority of attacks on trading ships in the archipelago occurred in Erromango's waters. By the late 1840s so many ships had been attacked that the islanders were required to swim out to any ship with their sandalwood or leave it in a pile on the beach. The latter was still no guarantee of safety, as the most prized item was the longboat, which was a much more versatile craft than any dugout canoe.

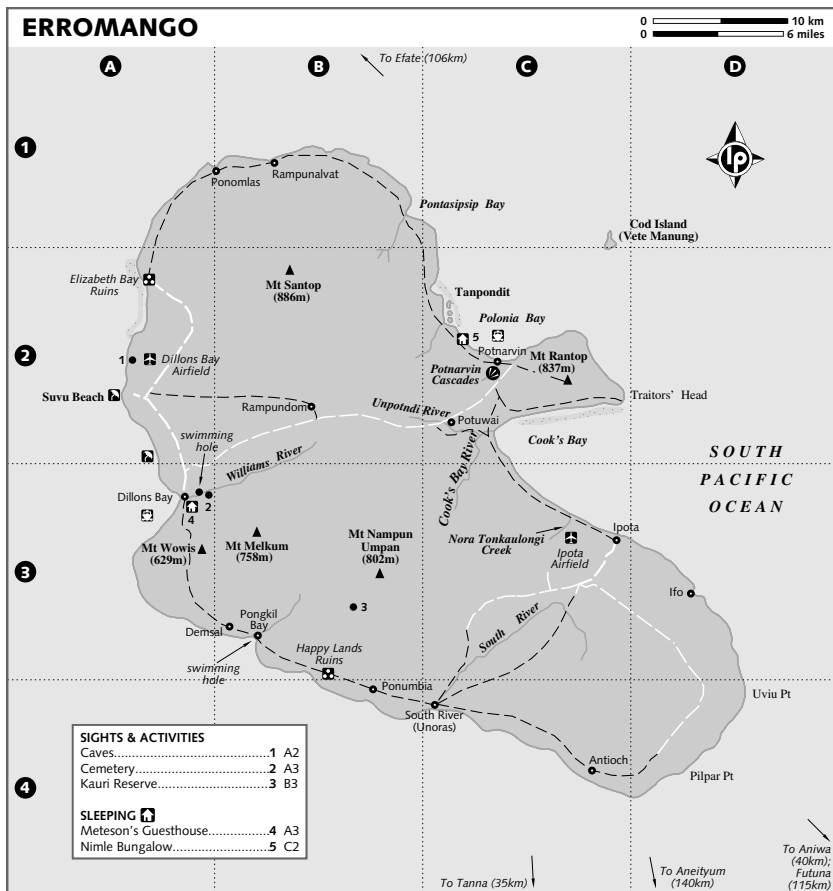
## MISSIONARIES

In 1839 Presbyterians John Williams and James Harris landed at Dillons Bay. Trad-ers had murdered five villagers just days

before, so the locals were hostile. Chief Kowiwi warned the foreigners to stay near their boat. When they came further ashore they were killed and eaten.

In 1857 George and Ellen Gordon came to Dillons Bay from Canada and were allowed to build a house, but the island was swept by successive epidemics of whooping cough, dysentery, VD and measles, and struck by a cyclone. The Gordons were held responsible for the tragedies and killed. In 1864 James Gordon, George's brother, came to Dillons Bay and became the last missionary to be murdered on Erromango.

Erromango's population, perhaps as high as 10,000 in Cook's time, fell to about 400 people within 70 years. Erromangans will tell you that this was God's punishment for their killing the missionaries.



## WALKING THE ERROMANGO WALK

For a great experience, take three or four days to walk from Dillons Bay to Ipota via South River (Unoras). The 2004 cyclone wiped out many villages, but they've been rebuilt and the path has been cleared. However, the path to Antioch is not yet passable. Arrange your guide at Dillons Bay (1500Vt a day).

## Down to South River

The first section is generally easy apart from several steep drops and gruelling climbs in and out of deep, fjordlike valleys. The path takes you along the top of high coastal cliffs, which offer magnificent views.

As you climb Mt Wowis, you'll first see yam and taro gardens, then **tropical rainforests** and open grasslands. Continuing on from Mt Wowis you pass through Demsal, then scramble down the 300m-high escarpment to scenic **Pongkil Bay**. (You can take a 1½ hour speedboat ride here for 6000Vt.)

This family station has a *nakamal* (clubhouse) where you can spend the night, and there's good swimming in a freshwater hole behind the beach – this is the last chance for a wash in freshwater before South River. You then have to climb up the scarp to get back onto the path to **Happy Lands**, where you can spend the night (1000Vt). Take a day to do a side trip to the nearby **kauri reserve** where 40m-high kauri trees grow on the steep slopes below Mt Nampun Umpan. Enthusiasts will appreciate the diversity of plant life in the area. It's a moderately difficult two-hour walk from the village; you may be able to camp in the reserve, or return to Happy Lands for another night.

The three-hour walk to South River offers extensive views along the cliff-girt coast and across to Tanna. There's a final steep descent to **South River**, beside a picturesque estuary, where there's a *nakamal*, a small store and a HF radio. If you prefer to go on to Ipota by speedboat, this is where to arrange it.

## Across to the East

There are two routes east. The first follows the South River, with much boulder-hopping and fords – this track meets the road outside Ipota soonest.

The other route climbs the scarp and crosses higher country, coming out near the Ipota airfield where you pass through forestry plantations of South American hardwood.

## Information

Erromangan villages have simple beds available in *nakamal* (clubhouses) for visitors. Often, the only payment is that you sit and talk with the people. Take your own bedding and food, or buy food cooked by your hosts. If you go walking, take a tent and ask the local chief for permission to camp.

The island's main villages, Dillons Bay in the west and Potnarvin in the east, have small stores selling a limited range of goods. June to August can be cool and wet, particularly in upland areas, so take appropriate clothing.

## Getting There & Around

The island's airfields are at Dillons Bay and Ipota. **Vanair** (☎ 25025) has three weekly flights from Vila to Tanna via both airfields. There's a road between the airfield and Dillons Bay (1000Vt), but if there's no truck or fuel your host from Meteson's (below) will meet you and help carry your luggage to the coast (an arduous one-hour walk), to take a boat from there.

There is good anchorage at Dillons Bay. For boats that call into Erromango, see p185.

You can hire speedboats at Dillons Bay and Potnarvin, if there is fuel available, or arrange a charter from Dillons Bay to Potnarvin (15,000Vt, three hours).

## DILLONS BAY

The gardens at this pretty village spread along broad and beautiful William River up to the huge crystal-clear swimming hole formed by the river as it turns to the sea. The river isn't clean enough for drinking; use the local rainwater tanks.

At the mouth of the Williams River **Meteson's Guesthouse** (☎ /fax 68792; islands@vanuatu.com.vu; s/d incl breakfast 4200/5600Vt) has been extended to sleep 10, but is a bit run down. Chief William is very knowledgeable about the island and can arrange tours, transport and guides. Meals are 350Vt.

## Sights & Activities

Several missionaries are buried in a small **cemetery** on the river's southern bank. Nearby is a rock that shows the outline of Williams, the first missionary to be killed. They laid the body, which was short and stout, on the rock and chipped around it prior to cooking and eating it.

You can do a day trek to the *kastom* (ancient ancestral legacies and customs) **kauri reserve**, to witness the breathtaking beauty of these ancient trees.

There's a three-day **trek**, with guides, tents and food provided, to an inland **forest reserve** near Rampundom. You'll go into the central ranges for breathtaking views, past grasslands where wild horses graze, and back down to the coast at Suvu Beach, a scenic, white-sand beach.

**Caves** at Suvu Beach, just down the cliff from Dillons Bay airfield, hold many ancient bones and skulls encrusted with crystals. One cave features hand stencils on its walls and the second, higher cave contains skeletons, apparently of a chief and his family.

There's reasonable **snorkelling** over the fringing coral reef at high tide. You'll need a guide to explore this peaceful spot. A day tour with a picnic lunch is 3940Vt for two.

## POTNARVIN

It's an interesting full-day walk across undulating country to the east coast. Potnarvin is a pleasant settlement of 400 people, stretching along a long black-sand beach with good **surf** and pretty cascades 1km inland. Towering above is Mt Rantop (837m). Below, on its southern side, is a long white-sand beach with coral shallows.

About 2km north of Potnarvin, Harry Naiwan offers basic, but very pleasant accommodation in **Nimle Bungalow** (beds 1000Vt), a timber bush cottage. He's an enthusiast about all things Erromangan.

## Activities

Harry arranges some great tours (1000Vt to 2500Vt): a challenging five-hour **jungle walk** to see kauri and *tamanu* trees; a half-day **canoe trip** along Cook's Bay river; an overnight river trip, camping on the beach; a night snorkel and **lobster hunt**; and excellent **fishing trips** to top spots such as Cod Island.

From Potnarvin, you can set out on the south road as far as Cook's Bay, then follow the shore to **Ipota**. There's some nice coastal scenery and large caves, but it's rugged. Harry will arrange the guide for the five-hour walk, and accommodation for you at Ipota, if you're flying out (1500Vt).

Ipota and its airstrip were built by a French logging company in 1969, but today fewer than 150 people live here, as most

villagers were moved to larger settlements after the 2004 cyclone.

# ANIWA & FUTUNA

## Getting There & Away

**Vanair** (☎ 25025) has two weekly flights from Vila to Tanna that call at Aniwa and Futuna.

## ANIWA

Tiny Aniwa is a raised coral atoll, a little pancake, its highest point only 42m above sea level. A beautiful lagoon, Itcharo, fills the northern half of the island, with its calm blue water surrounded by white beaches and tall coconuts. There is good snorkelling in coral gardens, but be careful of currents at the lagoon's entrance; ask the villagers to watch over you if you go swimming. They'll happily follow you in a dugout. Aniwa is an exporter of oranges and is the best place to see sandalwood.

## FUTUNA

Futuna is a top hat: seven Polynesian villages cling to the great limestone cliffs and narrow coastline. The villagers have a fascinating way of life, largely because of this unusual topography. Stainless-steel ladders and concrete steps, coral paths and vine hand-holds help them get from village to village, up to the taro garden, down to the warmer slopes where tropical crops are grown. In times of plenty locals make a mash of bananas or breadfruit, wrap the *laplap* (doughy mixture) in banana leaves and bury it in dry ground, which provides a food reserve during cyclones or drought.

Futunans are musical and theatrical – if you hear haunting melodies that remind you of Hawaiian love songs, that's a Futuna band. Interestingly, the local language is the same as what is spoken in Samoa. They practise the distinctly Polynesian custom of wearing grass skirts and tapa, a cloth woven from leaves of the pandanus plant, at traditional ceremonies. They make finely woven, intricate pandanus baskets, and elegant mats made from a single weave. Other specialities include model canoes and war clubs.

Local fishermen have an ingenious way to catch flying fish, using a torch made of coconut fronds. The fish are attracted by

the light, fly over the canoe and are scooped up with nets.

Futuna and Aneityum are free of malaria. So when passengers fly in from an island that has the disease, their finger will be pricked (not tourists' fingers) and their blood looked at under a microscope that's on a bench in the tin-shed airport. It's quite bizarre, but most successful.

# ANEITYUM

pop 1100 / area 162 sq km

Aneityum has beautiful white-sand beaches and a reef that surrounds three-quarters of the island: an ideal spot for snorkellers and scuba divers. There are 84 species of orchid here, more than anywhere else in Vanuatu.

The land is fertile and there is abundant evidence of old irrigation channels, which suggests a much higher population in the past. Aneityum was a major centre for sandalwood logging in the 1840s; then kauri was exported until it almost disappeared. These days, New Zealand Forestries has pine plantations on several mountainsides that the villagers maintain and log for export to Vila, but the industry has many problems, especially with fires, when campfires in the villages trigger outbreaks.

The Australian goshawk, an attractive bird of prey, lives here in the temperate climate, and the flora is different to the rest of Vanuatu, being more akin to that of Australia and New Caledonia.

And then there's Mystery Island. Cruise ships come here for the day, about every six weeks; any other time you're likely to have the whole island to yourself.

## HISTORY

Scattered around the island are rocks decorated with petroglyphs, including representations of the sun, stars, people, birds and fish, as well as spirals and other geometrical designs. The Aneityumese traded occasionally with New Caledonia, over 300km away. When they saw their first sailing ship on 16 April 1793, they thought it was a sea spirit. It was in fact the French navigator D'Entrecasteaux, searching for his lost compatriot La Pérouse. Island legend says that a large offering of coconut and yams displayed on the beach

persuaded the mysterious apparition to depart.

### Traders

The first permanent European presence in Aneityum was that of James Paddon, owner of a trading station in operation from 1844 to 1852. Paddon's main interest was sandalwood, but he also replenished passing whaling ships and satisfied a huge demand for jew's-harps among local villagers. Unlike many traders of his time, Paddon treated the islanders with respect.

Business boomed as up to 40 ships a year called until most of the sandalwood was logged out. Whalers continued to come ashore, using huge pots to melt their whale blubber into oil until the industry ceased in the early 1870s.

### Missionaries

John Geddie, a Presbyterian minister from eastern Canada, arrived in May 1848. In 13 years, he converted 3000 people to Christianity – more than three-quarters of Aneityum's population. He learnt Aneityum's main language, translated the Bible into it, had it printed on the island's own press and set up schools where islanders were taught to read it. He built a large stone church, large enough to seat 2000 people, and a stone manse.

Geddie brought peace to Aneityum, and tried to stop the custom of strangling wives on their husbands' death. To his dismay the women insisted on their right to die with their spouses.

### CLIMATE

Aneityum's climate is Vanuatu's most pleasant. Rainfall averages 300mm per month in the first quarter and about 150mm per month for the remainder of the year. Temperatures range from 23°C to 30°C in the wet season from January to March. In July and August the average is 16°C to 23°C.

### INFORMATION

Anelcauhat is the main centre for the island. It has a village council office, a large co-op and a clinic. Solar panels provide some lighting and cool the iceboxes for the snapper or swordfish caught for Vila restaurants. For tourist information contact **Barry Nangia** (☎ 68888, 68907) or **Nejom William** (☎ 68896) of the Aneityum Tourist Project.

### WHO BELIEVES IN GHOSTS?

One of the guests on Mystery Island was outside at 4am, frozen silent in the hot night air. A strong torchlight was approaching, veering off behind the bungalow and on towards the beach. There was no crunch of footsteps, no swaying of the light, no one on the beach, and no boats on the water. Mmm.

### MYSTERY ISLAND

This beautiful sandy islet is surrounded by a broad sandbank and dazzling coral in an azure sea, just like in the movies. Garden paths crisscross the island, many leading to little thatched toilets. The area has been designated a marine sanctuary, with a ban on fishing, except for sport.

Aneityum people believe it to be the home of ghosts, so they happily sold it to Paddon in 1844. Even today, no one will live there.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

**Snorkelling** is fantastic on the reefs around the mainland, at the end of the runway on Mystery Island, and on a couple of sunken wrecks (a trawler and small cargo vessel) in the bay. **Anelcauhat** and the island have white, sandy **swimming beaches**.

Guided walks from Anelcauhat take you through thick bush to the impressive **Inwan Leleghei Waterfall**; to Anawonse to see the **whaling industry ruins**; and through the village to visit the school and see **Geddie's church**, ruined by a tsunami in 1875. **John Fred** (☎ 68907) is an excellent guide with good English and a wicked sense of humour.

A challenging climb to the top of **Inrerow Atahein** (852m), an extinct volcano, will get you an excellent view into the crater and over most of Aneityum and the islands of southern Tafea. The scenery is fabulous, with large kauri trees, high waterfalls and orchids that bloom all year.

Anelcauhat villagers can arrange canoes to paddle over the reefs and watch the turtles surface, or an outrigger to go **deep-sea fishing**.

There's good **surfing** and **surf-skiing** around at Umetch due to the east winds. Umetch is a traditional village that nestles around a charming bay, where the river forms an island. The black-sand beach is fishing with white sand. Camping is

good and nearby fresh water bubbles up at Ahatchom Point at the water's edge, pure enough to drink.

If you're in a group of six or more, the villagers will prepare a **feast** with great music and the Nonyac (their *kastom* dance). They can also take a group on a coconut and pandanus tour or through their tourist's cultural village on Mystery Island.

The old **irrigation channels** are being studied by archaeologists, and many are being repaired and reused to cultivate water taro. They are great to explore.

It's a stunning eight-hour walk from Anelcauhat to **Port Patrick**, a quiet village with picture-postcard beaches, waving palms and turquoise water. A marine sanctuary has been created at Port Patrick to protect the turtles that feed along the reef. Contact **John Karuopi** (☎ 68800) if you are going to visit.

### SLEEPING & EATING

There's safe camping all around the mainland. Ask William about getting permission, or you can organise to stay with villagers around the island.

**William's Guesthouse** (☎ 68896; beds 1500Vt) Has four twin rooms in a lovely garden just past the village and steps from the beach. It's a bit run-down, but you can buy meals (200Vt) here to take across to Mystery Island.

**Mystery Island Bungalows** (☎ 68896, 68688; beds 2250Vt) Cute as little buttons, these are comfortable; try for the bigger one with a balcony. You should BYO food and coffee but Louis comes each day and will bring supplies for you from the mainland shop. Mystery Island Restaurant is a little bit closed, but opens on cruise ship days and if you give them some notice. You can cook in the restaurant kitchen. And guess what. You can book out the whole island for 6750Vt!

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Aneityum's grass airstrip is on Mystery Island. Many villagers row across from the mainland to welcome the new arrivals. **Van-air** (☎ 25025) operates two round-trips per week from Vila, currently on Monday afternoon and Thursday morning. Passengers (not tourists) arriving from islands where malaria exists will receive a finger-prick test for it at the airport.

A motorboat to take you around to Anelcauhat (400Vt) is available when there's fuel. A speedboat around the island will cost at least 10,000Vt.

Anelcauhat is a popular anchorage for cruising yachts as it offers a secure shelter from all but the west wind. Itchepthav Bay in the north offers a deep-water anchorage.

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