

Malekula



Ever since Commander Cook named this island Mallicollo, people have invented colourful stories about why the name means 'bad bottom'. Most stories involve mischievous villagers, plants that contain a strong skin irritant, kava, and French sailors clutching their rear ends, shouting '*Mal à cul!*'.

Shaped like a sitting dog, Malekula has two highland areas connected by the 'dog's neck'. The uplands, intersected by narrow valleys, rise to over 800m in the southern centre. This area, and the southwest coast, are extremely rugged and inhospitable.

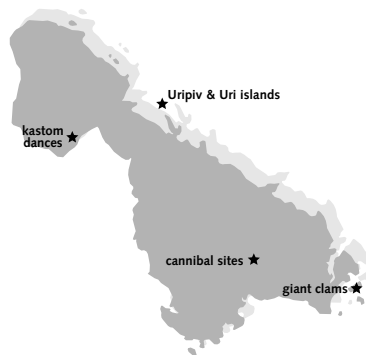
Malekula is linguistically and culturally diverse: there are 28 languages spoken, and it's a favoured stamping ground for anthropologists. Two of its major cultural groups are the Big Nambas and Small Nambas, originating from the size of the men's *nambas* (penis sheath). A southern *kastom* group, traditionally called ManBush, have also been named Small Nambas of late.

In the southwest, male babies' heads were wrapped tightly, so the soft skull bone was moulded high, in a shape that later made the man look more distinguished. You may still see a few old men with elongated heads.

There's no malaria in Malekula's mountainous central region, whereas the coast is infested with it. ManBush Small Nambas people used to refuse to even look at the ocean for fear of catching the disease. However, when the chief of a local *kastom* village died recently, his wives moved down to the coastal region and turned to Christianity so they could send their children to school in the east.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Learning about the **ancient traditions** (p117) of the Small Nambas and Big Nambas people
- Admiring the **kastom dances** (p112) of Malekula's diverse cultural groups
- Snorkelling or swimming around the delightful **Uripiv and Uri islands** (p114)
- Visiting beautiful coral gardens and seeing colourful **giant clams** (p117)
- Hiking up to the old **cannibal sites** (p112) and into **spirit caves** (p185)



■ POPULATION: 25,000

■ AREA: 2023 SQ KM

History

Southern islanders say that their cultural hero, Ambat, had two children with white skin and long, straight hair. Like Adam and Eve, these children ate a rose apple despite their father's order not to do so. For their crime they were turned black. They were also required to wear *nambas* and to remain isolated in the island's south.

The people of the North believed in Tagaro, creator of everything – also known as Tangaroa, God of the Sea in Polynesia.

When Europe started screaming for cotton during the American Civil War, settlers in Malekula cleared much of the eastern coastal plain for cotton and coconut plantations, but malaria, cyclones and cannibalism drove the early settlers away.

During the 1880s, the French Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides (CCNH) bought up large tracts of the eastern coast and today, now named PRV (Plantations Réunies de Vanuatu), it remains the largest plantation in the country. Because of constant friction between English and French planters over land ownership, French troops landed in Port Sandwich in 1886 but left two years later, the trouble by no means resolved.

Vanuatu's last *kaekae man* (victim of cannibalism), went into a Big Nambas ground oven in 1969. The Condominium government of New Hebrides respected the traditional rights of the natives, circumstances that allowed human flesh to be eaten quite close to police stations at Norsup and Lakatoro.

A more common form of cannibalism continued for some years: the ritual eating of flesh from a deceased relative, to keep something of the beloved among the living.

Local Customs

Most people strongly believe in spirits ('devils' in Bislama). They also believe that some places are *tabu* (sacred and forbidden) to certain families, and that if their members go there, they will get sick and possibly die. Sorcerers used to speak into *tabu* instruments concealed in the ground whenever villagers came for advice or a prophecy. The eerily resonating sound was attributed to ancestors. This left the clients suitably impressed!

Men from Malekula's northeastern offshore islands traditionally use a *natsaro* (dance area) as their meeting place. The clearings

have huge standing stones and low stone platforms lining one side. The platforms are used as seats or as 'altars' where pigs are killed during *nimangki* (grade-taking) ceremonies. These small islands are among the world's last megalithic cultures and many of the old sites and customs are being restored. Paddle dances are common among the island communities along the east coast.

BIG NAMBAS

These tribesmen wind large purple pandanus fibres around their penises, securing the loose ends by thick bark belts and leaving the testicles exposed. By the early 20th century they had earned an awesome warlike reputation. No foreigner dared venture into their territory. Even police expeditions, which came to punish them for killing traders, were ambushed and dispersed.

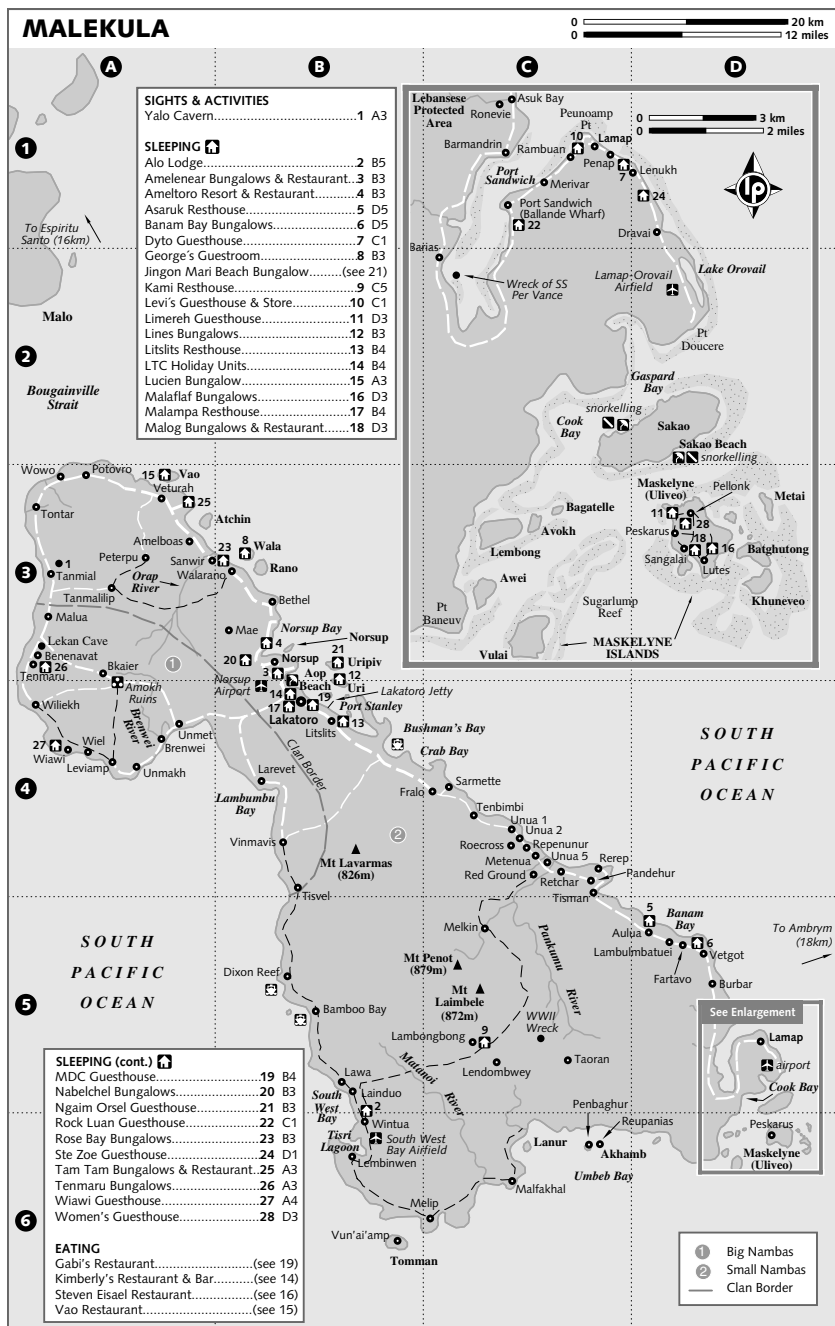
The Big Nambas kept a stone fireplace where unwelcome outsiders were ritually cooked and eaten. When a man of another tribe offended them, they would send a messenger to warn him of his likely fate. If he persisted – and few did – he ended up in the ceremonial fireplace. You can see cannibal sites at Unmet and near Sanwir.

The Big Nambas are the only tribe in northern Vanuatu with heredity-paramount chiefs. Power is gradually transferred to the eldest son starting at about the age of 20. The father eventually acts as adviser.

Big Nambas *erpnaveit* (grade-taking) ceremonies are preceded by lengthy rehearsals. The men cover themselves in charcoal and coconut oil, tie nut rattles around their ankles and wear feathers in their hair. At the highest level, a man has the powerful characteristics of a hawk and a hawk dance is performed by a spirit man. Try to see the dance – the outfit, the movement and the spirit are stunning, unforgettable.

Although Big Nambas women traditionally did not cover their breasts, it was *tabu* for a man to see them without their head-dresses or grass skirts on. The headdress of purple pandanus fibres hung down from the brow to below the hips. Today, women wear long tops over their skirts to cover their outline.

If a Big Nambas woman had pleased her husband, he would permit her to have her two front teeth knocked out by hammering them with a rock. The privilege cost a large



number of pigs, paid to the chief, her husband's relatives and the teeth extractors.

SMALL NAMBAS

Small Nambas men wear only one leaf of dried fibre around their penises, tucking it into their bark belts. The semi-kastom communities are built around a central dance area with up to five tamtam (slit-drums). A funeral platform, where dead bodies lie, usually stands nearby, with large tree-fern statues erected in front of it. It's forbidden for women to go anywhere near the nakamal (clubhouse).

The Small Nambas believe people only die due to old age or sorcery. When a young person dies, the spirits are consulted and the sorcerer is fined two curve-tusked pigs. A man who has gone far in his nimangki grades becomes a powerful spirit when he dies. It's the beginning of a new astral life, in which he may haunt his village and family if his spirit is not adequately appeased. His principal male relative has to ensure complex of funeral ceremonies, or be haunted.

Small Nambas women have their own nimangki system. While they are considered inferior to men, as long as they take their grades their spirits are as powerful as any man's after death. They call their nimangki process the namanggitenge.

MANBUSH SMALL NAMBAS

There are fewer than 1000 of these people, living in tiny mountain villages in the rugged interior, and in South West Bay. They have two distinct (but related) languages and cultures and have retained their customs longer than any of the other Small Nambas people. Their nambas are made of fresh green leaves, and the men take many grades, up to 35, in their bid for authority and spiritual power. Isolated from sea products and from potential partners of lighter-coloured skin, they are often smaller and darker than the coastal people, and have mistakenly been described as pygmies.

Environment

Unlike the other islands, much of Malekula's coastline is lined with mangroves. The waters teem with sharks, especially along the east coast. There have been fatalities from Atchin down to the Maskelynes. Ask before swimming – locals know where it's safe.

Inland are 20 orchid species, mainly in the upland areas. The cocoa grown here is certified organic and exported.

Malekula is one of the few islands with a large population of Pacific boas. It is also the principal habitat of the endemic Vanuatu (or chestnut-bellied) kingfisher. The interior has a large stock of wild cattle and ancient Sus papuense feral pigs, said to be the best eating pigs in the world.

Information

There are no ATMs and all places accept only cash. The NBV bank in Lakatoro will change travellers cheques and Australian dollars, but you can't access cash through your accounts, so take heaps of vatu as you'll want to do many of the great tours.

The **Tourism Officer** (☎ 48491; malpc@vanuatu.com.vu) is based at the Council Offices and can help with any aspect of tourism in the province. There's a **hospital** (☎ 48410) situated at Norsup.

Getting There & Away

AIR

At least twice a day, **Vanair** (☎ 25025) flies via Norsup on the Vila/Luganville route. Three times a week flights also stop at Lamap. Planes fly to South West Bay when required. A twice-weekly loop links Norsup with Ambrym, Paama and Epi.

BOAT

For boats that call into Malekula, see p113. A chartered speedboat ride from Wala in northern Malekula to Luganville costs around 18,000Vt.

Getting Around

Roads run from Norsup to the other side of the 'dog's neck' and around the north coast. One road heads down the east coast to Lamap. The roads are rough, rutted and ford many riverbeds, so in the wet season they are often closed. There are no roads in southern Malekula.

It costs 300/100Vt by taxi/minibus from Norsup airport into Lakatoro, but on weekends, there's not many around. Boats often arrive at Litslits in the early evening, and a taxi then is also unlikely. If you haven't arranged to be collected, try to hitch if you see a vehicle. Otherwise you may have to walk, which is not easy in the dark.

A **truck** (☎ 48594) operates along the east coast between Lakatoro and Lamap (1000Vt) on weekdays, leaving Lamap at 5am, then returning from Lakatoro at 1pm. On weekends you need to charter the truck (16,000Vt) but don't balk at the price. It's a fabulous half-day journey along a stunning coastline, through rivers and lily ponds, past bays and forests and charming villages. You may see the local lads walking home with the wild pigs they've caught, slung across poles. Besides, you'll be helping the locals, who'll hop on your truck along the way.

Trucks run more frequently between Lakatoro and Veturah (200Vt), in the north opposite Vao.

Most public transport leaves Lakatoro from the MDC General Store (p114).

Speedboats are the only form of transport in the south. All inhabited islands are linked to the mainland by either speedboats or canoes.

THE DOG'S HEAD

The northern Malekulan coast is one of Vanuatu's most densely populated areas and it looks prosperous. Many people live on small islands between Vao and Lakatoro. They mostly speak French and Bislama; Atchin and Uripiv islanders use English. Vao and Atchin are carving centres for both timber and stone objects. Their speciality is carved **model canoes** complete with stylised frigate bird figureheads and sails.

Sights & Activities

Take your bloodthirsty self on a demanding half-day-return walk to the Big Nambas **cannibal site** deep in the forest behind Sanwir – it's complete with a stone fireplace, stone tables where corpses were dismembered, and many bones.

The **two-day trek** across the rugged 'dog's head' takes you from Rose Bay Bungalows in Sanwir to Malua, on the west coast, where you pick up transport for the return. This trek has been documented by the Australian Heritage Foundation as it combines natural and cultural treasures with magnificent scenery, caves, waterfalls and *kastom* villages.

Tours go to Small Nambas **kastom dancing** on Rano, or at Amelboas; and to Big Nambas dances at Unmet and Mae.

There's a half-day tour to the spectacular **caves** near Tannial. Tours to Wala and

Vao take you into clearings lined with **stone monoliths** and ancient **tamtam** up to 3m high. These are the old *natsaros*.

Walarano is a good place to buy carvings, particularly of dolphins and canoes. The village, together with its large Catholic mission, was established after the 1959 cyclone by people from the nearby islands of Wala and Rano, hence its name.

Wala Mainland & Island

Wala Mainland has coral gardens easily accessed from the shore. A short boat trip offshore is Wala Island, with excellent **snorkelling** out to a steep drop-off, but sharks are plentiful past the drop-off. A walk around the island takes you past the **Lalaman historic site** where there are 100 pig-counting rocks, set in lines to keep a tally as the pigs are killed. There are also massive monoliths brought to the island by manpower – the locals say the men ate more taro in those days, which made them strong. There's an ancient **stone initiation house** for the young men, and a huge *tamtam* that resonated loudly enough to send messages to the mainland.

Transport from the airport costs 900Vt, or 200Vt if you find a bus. A boat across to Wala Island costs around 1000Vt, shared between six people. Cruise ships come here once a month, when you'll see stirring, colourful dances and hear the local string band.

SLEEPING & EATING

George's Guestroom (☎ 48673; s with meals 2500Vt) You can spend time among the charming people in the village on Wala Island, staying in George's small house, which has room for one or two people.

Rose Bay Bungalows (☎ /fax 48602; Rosebay@vanuatu.com.vu; dm incl breakfast 2480Vt, s/d with all meals 4000/8000Vt) On the mainland near the mouth of Orap River, this is a charming group of traditional bungalows with bathrooms, set in gardens on a small black-sand bay. The food is good, but bring your own drinks in the unlikely case the surroundings aren't intoxicating enough. Visa and MasterCard accepted.

Vao Mainland & Island

Traditional customs have survived well on Vao. Initiation is an important rite for young boys. Once they are circumcised, they live in a special initiates' hut where they are taunted

for a month. They must grin and bear it, otherwise they'll be forbidden to marry.

Vao islanders paddle across to the mainland opposite to tend their gardens. Some footpaths on Vao are for males only; others are for females. The chief will arrange an escort to ensure you don't breach any *tabu*.

Vao has many **old natsaros** lined with stone monoliths and ancient *tamtams*, where your guide may demonstrate drumming.

The people make fascinating **wooden masks, clubs** and **ceremonial bowls**. **St Paul's church** has a beautiful carved Madonna in a canoe.

SLEEPING & EATING

Tam Tam Bungalows & Restaurant (☎ 48926; Veturah; s/d 1500/3000Vt) In a colourful garden with flower-lined paths around rock pools where pristine coral is plentiful. Owner Jean-Michel has bikes and snorkel gear; a speedboat and spear fishing can be arranged. There's power until 9pm, a store selling crafts, and a grand *nakamal* for drinking kava. Tours can be arranged to Tanmaru caves, Vao and *kastom* dances. Your guide, August, will lead you on many different walks. Meals are 500Vt.

Next to the store in Vao is colourful little **Lucien Bungalow** (☎ 48895; Vao; s/d 1000/2000Vt) made of dyed, woven bamboo. Nearby, **Vao Restaurant** (☎ 48895) serves island meals.

WEST COAST

Near **Tannial** is the large and spectacular **Yalo Cavern** (admission 400Vt) which has a hole in its roof. The Small Nambas used to bury their dead chiefs here, so their spirits could rise up through this hole. There are several handprints uncannily high up on the ceiling made by the spirits. You must enter the cave in pairs, but before you do, your guide will call into a small hole; the eerie trumpeting noise this makes warns the spirits that you're coming.

Malua, Tenmaru & Around

These Big Nambas villages once warred constantly, but now they're the best of friends. Malua is built around a Seventh-Day Adventist Mission. Ask for a guide to take you up to the long glorious cascades, dropping for 2km through the rainforest, over bat caves, in and out blue holes – you could try cliff jumping here.

Benenavat means End of Stone, and the village marks where the sandy beach goes along

to Tenmaru. Ask the chief at Benenavat for permission, and a guide, to see the **Lekan** or **Apiyalo Spirit Cave** (admission 400Vt) where people probably hid during cyclones; marvel at the handprints way up on the wall, and the wall paintings. Go look at the bats in the second chamber but stay clear of the walls, which are crawling with cockroaches.

Old traditions are still seen in **Tenmaru: kastom** dancing is a popular entertainment, and a visit to a *natsaro* to see rows of stones for pig killing costs 500Vt. From Lakatoro by local truck it's 500Vt.

Tenmaru Bungalows (SDA Mission, Tenmaru; beds 1500Vt) are basic rooms off a corridor in a large bamboo building that sits between the church and the beach. There's a water-seal toilet and you can wash in the pretty river. Contact Chief John Peter who is very hospitable.

The *nakamal* at **Unmet** (☎ 48464) is one of the best places to see Big Nambas *kastom* dancing. From Unmet, the road heads into the interior, to **Bkaeir**, the most *kastom*-oriented of the Big Nambas villages; it's a good place to see traditional houses and watch the dancing.

A grand trek to Bkaeir starts at **Wiawi** on the coast and crosses **primeval forests**; the trek is hard and takes about four hours. Guides can be hired in Wiawi, where there's the small **Wiawi Guesthouse** (beds 1500Vt).

EAST COAST

Norsup's commercial activities all revolve around the PRV company, whose **coconut plantations** border the town. This is Vanuatu's largest copra producer.

Just beyond the airport terminal is the sandy **Aop Beach**, whose palms and turquoise water make it a pretty spot to wait for your plane. A long stretch of beautiful coral reef stretches southwards from Aop Beach to Litslits, the main port for this area.

Lakatoro

Set at the foot of a tall ridge, this attractive place, with many shady trees, is Malampa province's administrative capital and main town, with a lot of development going on. It was the British government centre during Condominium days, so is mainly English-speaking.

The village is on two levels divided by a steep slope. On the top level, the **government**

office (☎ 48503) can tell you about tours and accommodation. The **Cultural Centre** (☎ 48651) up here has some fascinating exhibits and photos. On the bottom level, at the northern end of town, there's the LTC Co-op, NBV bank, post office, bakery and Vanair office. Halfway along the bottom road is charming **Seven Leven** (☎ 5-10pm). It's a kava bar and *nakamal* set out like a miniature resort, with a great atmosphere, soft music and an electric grinder for the kava. The southern end has the **MDC general store** (☎ 48443) and a **market** every day except Sunday. Ask here about hiring fishing boats, or taking a boat out to Uripiv and Uri islands.

Lakatoro has mains electricity.

SLEEPING

Nabelchel Bungalows (☎ 48899, 48602; s/child B&B with bathroom 2500/1200Vt) Just five minutes from the airport, the double rooms share a central sitting area. This is the perfect place for hikers, as there are 25 different treks on offer, including the three-day hike across central Malekula (28,800Vt; see opposite).

Amelto Resort (☎ 42724; B&B with bathroom 3000Vt) Cute egg-shaped bungalows, sparkly new, yet totally traditional. They're in a peaceful garden, right on the water – look across to Norsup and Norsup island. Walk down the drive to pick up a transport truck to wherever you want to go (they pass every 15 minutes).

Ameleneer Bungalows (☎ 48773, 53962; s/d with bathroom & all meals 2500/5000Vt) New bungalows just at the end of the airstrip. Sit on the porch and look across the ocean to Lakatoro, or walk along to attractive Aop Beach – the best place to swim. Tours from here include a trip to see the giant clams and *kastom* dances at Uri island.

Malampa Resthouse (☎ 48491; fax 48442; beds 1500Vt) Uptown, this place is basic with a large communal room, good kitchen and three bedrooms with eight beds in each. There are some separate units behind – ask if any are free.

MDC Guesthouse (☎/fax 48445; r with fan/air con 2500/5000Vt; ☎) At the southern end of town; this is actually a motel (two storey!) with spacious rooms, and shared kitchen and facilities. Davina will look after you very well, even arranging a laundry service.

LTC Holiday Units (☎ 48554, fax 48656; units with fan/air con 4000/6750Vt; ☎) Next door to the LTC Co-

op; has eight self-contained, one-bedroom units set in grassland between banana trees. Walk through to mangrove swamps.

EATING

Ameleneer Restaurant (meals 200Vt; ☎ breakfast & lunch Mon-Fri) A small thatched building right by the airstrip. Local food is served – such as baked fish with rice – and there's a small range of soft drinks.

Kimberly's Restaurant & Bar (☎ 54312; meals 200-350Vt; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) A cute place with colourful tablecloths and resident geckoes for luck. The drinks are cold and Kimberly's oven-baked poulet fish in curried coconut milk with local vegetables is excellent.

Amelto Restaurant (set meals 350Vt; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, weekend by arrangement) Uses shells, pebbles, bamboo, and pandanus to give the restaurant a warm tropical feel. Your wonderful host, Rona, will set you up on the veranda with a drink to watch the sunset, then invite you inside to a meal prepared with finesse. Rona blends flavours to bring the best of French influence to island foods.

Gabi's Restaurant (meals 250-450Vt; ☎ 7.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Next door to the MDC store; is clean and spacious with an amazing mural. It serves dishes such as steak and rice, or lobster for 450Vt. Gabi will open for dinner if you book.

Uripiv & Uri

Both these islands have a **marine reserve** proclaimed by the chief. The sanctuary at Uri is designed to protect the mangroves and reef, and there's the rare opportunity to see colourful giant clams. The islands have everything for the snorkeller – beautiful coral, small colourful fish, and turtles.

Jingon Mari Beach Bungalow (☎ 48939; Uripiv; s with all meals 1500Vt) is at the northern end of the village, on the beach. The simple bungalow is basically like camping. Ask for Rachel Fraser when you ring.

On your own beach on Uri, you can play Robinson Crusoe at **Lines Bungalows** (☎ 48939; Uri; s with all meals 1500Vt). There are two bungalows, an outside toilet and shower, and tank water for drinking. Walk around to Uri village, but ask permission from the chief before entering the village. Bring snorkelling gear to see the giant clams in the marine reserve.

Ngaim Orsel Guesthouse (☎ 48564; Uripiv; PO Box 62; s/d with all meals 2500/5000Vt) is a friendly place

THE MANBUSH WALK

A fantastic walk starts from the bush track, off to the right about 200m north of the Pankumu at Retchar. First ask at Unua 3 for Elijah. He can arrange your homestay in Melkin, his family village. Drive up to Red Ground, behind Unua 5, then it's a 10km, two-hour walk along the Pankumu as it narrows into winding channels, isolated pools and a series of minor cascades. Melkin has the head *nakamal* for Small Nambas, but you can't look at it. There's dancing grounds, *tamtams*, drums and stone carvings. It's totally *kastom*, right in the centre of ManBush.

The walk continues next day with a seriously gruelling six-hour climb to Lambongbong, an old trading centre where you could exchange goods for pigs. Up here, villagers still make fire by rubbing sticks together. It's so beautiful that it's seriously worth the agony. Then there's an easier six-hour walk over mountains past waterfalls to South West Bay.

in the middle of an old *natsaro* filled with exotic plants. It's the perfect place for a get-away. There's a bungalow, library and a quaint house with three bedrooms, a kitchen, lounge and electricity when needed. Kalki will arrange trips to the marine reserve (600Vt for canoe, guide and fees), or an island feast with a string band (300Vt for a group).

GETTING AROUND

You can get to the islands by canoe or speedboat from the Lakatoro jetty. There are plenty of canoes going across between 4pm and 4.30pm, when it costs 100Vt for a ride. Otherwise, a speedboat charter is 1500Vt.

If you're staying on Uripiv, ask your host about borrowing a canoe for snorkelling, or to arrange permission to paddle across to Uri.

Litslits

Lakatoro's port is at the entrance to Port Stanley, a wide inlet that offers the best anchorage on this section of coast. The village is crowded, and lacks a great view but the simple **Litslits Resthouse** is here if you're stranded.

CENTRAL COAST

Unua is actually five villages, Unua 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. They have white-sand beaches fringed by coral growth. Men from this area used to land-dive as part of the village's grade-taking. Roecross, behind Unua 2, is a Small Nambas *kastom* village where chief Walard has a *tamtam* group and dancing grounds. A truck can drive up to it.

Pankumu River is Vanuatu's longest watercourse outside Santo. The river has repeatedly changed course, leaving a large wetland

of oxbows and bayous. It is a great spot for **bird-watching**.

Tisman was the home of legendary Norwegian expat planter, Oscar Newman, the uncrowned 'king' of Malekula. Newman had six wives, each of whom was housed separately, and numerous children. He died just after Vanuatu's independence.

At **Aulua** the Presbyterian Women's **Asaruk Resthouse** (beds 500Vt) is in a beautiful setting, overlooking the bay, where you can join in village activities. Rom dances have been brought here from Ambrym. In August **Kastom Man**, in a mask, wig and banana leaves, chases the villagers and beats anyone he catches (not visitors, fortunately).

Banam Bay

There's good **swimming** in the bay, and guided walks into the hills to pretty **waterfalls** and a wet **cave**. By far the main attraction is the Small Nambas **kastom dancing** (3000Vt) put on by the Hefa Sar Culture Club; one of the men's dances features Romlike costumes (see p120). Also see demonstrations of **magic**, go on hunting expeditions, fish, and bushwalk to caves and waterfalls.

Leave a message for James Andrews if you wish to stay at **Banam Bay Bungalows** (☎ 48561, 48890; s/d with meals 4500/5700Vt). The bungalows are right on the beach but look rather rundown. The little restaurant is cute, and serves local food; you must book.

Banam Bay offers a sheltered anchorage for yachts, but be careful of coral rocks and reefs. Transport from Lamap airport costs 400/4000Vt by truck/taxi and at least 600/8000Vt from Lakatoro.

If the road south of here becomes impassable, **Asuk Bay**, 8km away, is where you'd find a speedboat to the Port Sandwich wharf.

SOUTHEAST MALEKULA

South Malekula is well known for its traditional way of life and customs. In **Ronevie**, on Asuk Bay, many villagers only migrated from the bush in 1969 to lead Christian lives, and they still retain many customs learned from their ancestors and continue to practise them. Asuk Bay is another place where villagers bathe in the river rather than the sea for fear of sharks.

Libansese Protected Area

This community-based and -managed forest and beach area is totally beautiful, with a backdrop of mountains and a wide crystal-clear river overhung with tropical trees and vines. Take a great **half-day tour** (☎ 48594; 1000Vt) that starts with a greeting in **Ronevie**, then a canoe trip up the river. Dive in the clear waters to see eels and fish, bushwalk and have lunch with the villagers. After, you can snorkel in the **marine sanctuary** (200Vt) in the bay. An overnight trip to *kastom* villages in the bush, with hunting and gathering for food, can be arranged – speak to Bongman James or Chief Philip Dalley.

EVERYBODY CARES

One Libansese signpost shows that the conservationist message is the same in any language: 'Lukaotem Gud Envearonmen'.

Port Sandwich

Malekula's very safest **anchorage** was named after the Earl of Sandwich, a former British prime minister, and is favoured by touring yachts.

At the wharf a small golden beach may tempt you in for a swim. Don't do it! Don't even paddle. This is the worst place for shark attacks.

From the wharf you can get a speedboat across to the wreck of the **SS Per Vance**, a copra boat that was grounded during a cyclone in the 1950s. The hulk is sitting upright in the shallows and has mangroves growing on top; you can climb aboard and see its old steam engine.

Several corroded **aeroplane engines** lie along the beach. During WWII, these US aircraft were forced to land here. The villagers salvaged everything they could, but the engines proved too heavy to move.

Rock Luan Guesthouse (☎ 48663; s 1500Vt), overlooking the bay, is big and beautiful with several bedrooms around a large sitting area. Rock is an expert on all things local, and will entertain you with great stories over a cold beer.

Lamap

Lamap is a derelict shadow of its former self, as the principal French government centre. This is where you organise taxis and speedboats. It has a hospital, store, post office and NBV bank. The truck for Lakatoro (1000Vt) leaves each weekday, at 5am. Ask at the **store** (☎ 48663).

The **Roman Catholic mission** is a large, modern church with interesting wall paintings modelled on traditional sand-drawing designs. A three-day **Art Festival** rotates around the area every two years. It's a celebration of local culture, song and *kastom* dances; it will next be in Lamap in 2008. Contact the **Area Council Secretary** (☎ 48470) or the **Provincial Tourism Officer** (malpc@vanuatu.com.vu) for details.

It's a pleasant, 45-minute walk from Lamap to the wharf on Port Sandwich. There are tours to Small Nambas *kastom* dances at Labreau and Penap, and mangrove or bush excursions.

Levi's Guesthouse (☎ 48663; beds 1500Vt), behind Levi's store; has six beds in three rooms, and a large kitchen. There's electricity in the evening. Transport from the airport is 500Vt.

Two pleasant places on the road to the airport are sometimes available; ring to inquire: **Dyto Guesthouse** (☎ 48663; adult/child 1000/600Vt) with two bedrooms and kitchen (bring your own food as there's no store); and **Ste Zoe Guesthouse** (☎ 48663; beds 1500Vt; meals 200-500Vt) overlooking an attractive beach, 2km from the airport.

THE MASKELYNES

The road from Lamap ends at a sandy beach, **Point Doucere**, the major landing (strip of sand actually) for **canoes** and **speedboats** going out to the Maskelynes. It's a 20-minute walk from the airport through coconut plantations.

The Maskelynes are just gorgeous. Most have coral reefs with excellent **diving** and **snorkelling**, but be *very* careful of strong currents between the islands. Some of

the islands are very rugged. Others have patches of mangrove-lined coast, or sandy beaches.

Maskelyne (Ulivo)

This island is the hub of the Maskelynes and its major village is **Peskarus**. It's a very friendly, busy place, and beautiful to stroll around. You can watch the villagers make canoes, weave, string necklaces and planters, and hunt for edible sea creatures when the tide is out. Go out in an outrigger to snorkel in warm shallow water over colourful coral gardens.

Take a tour to **Ringi Te Suh Marine Conservation Area**, a 100-hectare protected reef with a manmade island that's perfect for a picnic after you've snorkelled over the beautiful **giant clams**.

The **Mangrove Discovery Tour** in an outrigger canoe teaches you about this ecologically valuable resource. There is great snorkelling at **Sakao Beach**, located across from Point Doucere, with barbecue lunch provided. Or visit **Lutes**, to see schoolchildren dancing.

Other villages overlook small mangrove islets and **Khuneveo**, an island surrounded by golden sand. The Milky Way is sparkling clear out here.

The oldest settlement is **Pellonk** which has an interesting cemetery, and an obelisk commemorating Paton's arrival here in 1897. Large sailing canoes, sturdy enough to get to Port Sandwich, operate regularly from Pellonk. Ask a villager to take you out in a kayak to call the turtles.

SLEEPING & EATING

Malafalaf Bungalows (☎ 48458; s/d with all meals 3000/4000Vt) At Lutes, there's some new bungalows with their own little paths, and shared small washroom and toilet. It has its own sand beach. Further along is the cookhouse where your host creates interesting meals including chicken in red-lime sauce with manioc flowers.

Limerh Guesthouse (☎ 48930; beds with all meals 3200Vt) At the quiet end of Peskarus is this clean and basic bungalow. One room has a bathroom.

Women's Guesthouse (☎ 48519; beds 1200Vt) A concrete place in pretty little Pellonk is clean and spacious, with a kitchen and shared outside facilities.

Malog Bungalows (☎ 48930, 48519; islands@vanuatu.com.vu; s/d with breakfast 2750/5000Vt) Has three all-traditional rooms on the shore between the mangroves. Owners Kalo and Nina will introduce you to village life and arrange tours and activities. Go in their outrigger to an excellent reef for beginner's snorkelling; it's shallow, clear, still and pretty. You can camp for 500Vt. The restaurant (meals 400Vt to 1900Vt) is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner in a tropical pagoda where Nina's menu includes lobster in lime sauce, or fillet steak with garlic.

Steven Eisael Restaurant (mains 900-2700Vt) Out on the point at Lutes, this great little place sits out over the water, so enjoy the view while you enjoy your fish and chips, or your lobster extravaganza.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Trucks run from Lamap or the airport to Pt Doucere (1500Vt) from where it's a pleasant boat trip across to Peskarus (2500Vt). On arrival, your boatman will introduce you to a member of the council, who'll show you around.

SOUTH WEST BAY

The traditions of the Small Nambas people are well preserved in southwestern Malekula. *Nakamal* and dancing grounds are being opened to tourists and grade-taking is becoming more popular. You can learn about local traditions on tours from Wintua.

Wintua

Wintua faces South West Bay's broad expanse; high forested hills are behind it, with the Tsiri Lagoon off to one side. The lagoon, fringed by mangroves, is an important fish nursery and the area offers good **fishing**. Wintua is the local administrative centre.

Alo Lodge (☎ /fax 48659; s/d B&B 4300/5800Vt), near the airport, has four bedrooms and a wide veranda covered in grand artwork, where you eat. George Thompson, the owner, meets most flights. He can arrange transport, guides, deep-sea fishing or tours out of Wintua, but check what's involved in the tours before you set out.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Three *kastom* villages, just north of Wintua, **Looranba'an**, **Veremboas** and **Mendua**, put

on demonstrations, dancing and displays of traditional artefacts, including two-sided masks (5000Vt), but you need to give plenty of notice.

There's safe **swimming** off the western end of the airstrip and a canoe trip to the fish nursery at **Tsiri Lagoon**. The three-hour **waterfall** walk takes you through rainforest to a deep plunge pool, the home of large eels.

You can walk to **Lawa** (1½ hours), or go by speedboat (1000Vt). Lawa is the gateway to the interior, where several walking tracks start and a sandy beach extends to **Dixon Reef**. Chief Alben Reuben will take you to a **village site** with broad coral paths, dry-stone walls, burial places and ceremonial sites bounded by standing stones up to 1.8m high.

There's the great **Manbush Walk** across to the east coast (p115).

A fairly easy walk goes south to **Melip** (six hours), which has one of the best beaches, 1.5km long and very sheltered. The chief at Melip may let you camp there – check with George Thompson.

Tomman

If you love coral gardens and golden sand, you will love Tomman. This island has a

fascinating, living culture. The colourful 'Ambat and the Giant Clam' dance tells the myth of the creation of Tomman and locals have a ceremony commemorating the wife of a long-dead cultural hero. Their headdresses represent the woman, while the small figure carried on their hips is her baby.

In the past, Tomman people made effigies of their dead, similar to those of the Small Nambas (see p40). These funerary objects are called *narambarambs* and the custom is being revived.

You can cross from Melip by canoe. A speedboat from South West Bay is around 8000Vt for a half-day return.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are **Vanair** (☎ 25025) flights to South West Bay when required, if the airfield is not under water. If you are stranded, George Thompson can organise a turbulent boat trip north to Lambumbu Bay (8000Vt; no phone or accommodation) where you can go by truck to Norsup (2000Vt), if you have arranged for the truck to be there.

There are two-day treks available to South West Bay from Lamap.