

# POSTCARD FROM VANUATU

Britt Lardelli

My final month living and working in Vanuatu was the most eventful of my six months stay. In a period of ten days I prosecuted my first Supreme Court trial wherein chickens mingled with interested observers, saw the Tokka custom dance, went to my first Ni-Vanuatu wedding, visited one of the most accessible volcanoes in the world and hosted a farewell party where a fellow Australian taught the waltz to several members of the Vanuatu Police Force to Madonna's "Material Girl".

The starting point of all these extraordinary events was the Supreme Court "tour" (the Vanuatu equivalent of a 'circuit') to the island of Tanna, south of Port Vila. I was greeted at the Tanna Airport by the Officer in Charge of the TAFEA Province Police Station and conveyed to the Isangel Police Station to commence preparation for the arrival of the Supreme Court judge visiting from Port Vila.

The TAFEA Police Station is situated in the town of Isangel, a beautiful, elevated provincial centre with ocean views. The courthouse is of an open design without walls that led to an interesting dilemma when court commenced.

On the second day of court sitting, I prosecuted my first Supreme Court trial on behalf of the Public Prosecutor. The case involved charges of sexual assault against a child. The issue of appropriate arrangements for vulnerable witnesses in Vanuatu is relatively new and the judge ordered the court to be closed. This was not a straightforward direction. Firstly, the Supreme Court only visits Tanna several times a year and is a considerable source of interest to the local Tannese. There was a large number of people that turned up to court on that Friday morning at 8am (court starts early in Vanuatu). Secondly, the court is without walls or doors and cannot be "closed" and marked accordingly as it would in Australia. However, members of the public gallery understood the directions given by the judge to stay well away from court.

The trial commenced and was completed by 8pm that night. The judge (trial is by judge alone in Vanuatu) then retired to consider the court's verdict. During



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proceedings, several chickens wandered through the courthouse and the protestations of a very loud bullock almost drowned out the closing submissions.

At 8pm I was escorted by police to several nakamals (kava bars) and enjoyed the Tannese kava. I drew the line at drinking kava chewed by men rather than ground in a meat grinder, the more common method of producing this murky green beverage. I was 'reliably' informed that it involves a lot of hard work and results in a potent brew. After drinking kava, I went to my first Ni-Vanuatu wedding of a couple from the nearby small island of Futuna.

The court delivered its verdict the next morning at 8:30am and the defendant was convicted and sentenced to imprisonment. The police then escorted me to the mighty Mt Yasur, one of the most accessible volcanoes in the world. Half way through the one hour drive we fortuitously came across the Tokka dance. Hundreds of people were dancing in a clearing surrounded by Banyan trees. The biannual festival involves the exchange of pigs and kava between two groups on Tanna and the women dress in multicoloured skirts and dance.

The next day I returned to Port Vila but almost missed the plane. I had to run onto the tarmac to prevent the plane from going without me. My lift was delayed by an intense and lengthy discussion in Bislama between two police officers and a gentleman driving public transport.

Unfortunately, my return to Port Vila, was near to the end of my six month adventure in Vanuatu and preparations commenced

for my farewell party. The venue was the office of the Public Prosecutor, the main drink was kava and all of the speeches were in Bislama. I was given several treasured gifts including His and Her's Vanuatu Police Force Crime Prevention 2000 T-Shirts, island dresses, carvings and a woven bag from the island of Pentecost. It was a memorable farewell party with the generous assistance of the police prosecutors who organised the music (a mix of Madonna, Pacific music and rock) and the nakamal where people drank kava and contemplated life in the Pacific with views of the Port Vila court house. As the night wore on my flatmate decided to teach several members of the Vanuatu Police Force the waltz to the music of Madonna's "Material Girl". It was a special farewell for an extraordinary six month stay in the South West Pacific.

My experience in Vanuatu has not however led me to forget my life as a lawyer in the Northern Territory. The regular arrival of *Balance* (Bigfela Thank You to the Law Society and to Sam) has kept me informed of matters of legal importance in the NT. Although I must admit I go straight to the social pages to see who is and who isn't behaving themselves at social functions. *Balance* has also served as an important moment for those friends and colleagues referred to and pictured in *Balance*.

In January 2001 I leave the saltwater, return to the desert and to life as a legal practitioner in Alice Springs. I will dearly miss those I have worked with and known whilst in Vanuatu and hope to return as often as possible.



Office of State Prosecutions (equivalent of Police Prosecutions): Alfred Wycliffe, Mary, Nixon, Rexton, Smithy (middle), OIC, Inspector Fred