



HOW TO: VANUATU

- Situated between Fiji, New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu is over 1,700km from Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.
- Direct flights to the capital, Port Vila (on the island of Efate), can be taken from Brisbane (2.5hrs), Auckland (3hrs), Sydney (3.5hrs), and Melbourne (4hrs), as well as neighbouring Pacific island states.
- Consisting of 83 islands stretching across 1,300km of ocean, Vanuatu is best explored by Air Vanuatu, the nation's only domestic carrier, or numerous scheduled and touring passenger boats.



From left to right: one of the many island groups who come to perform at Fest'Napuan; Marcel Meltherorng (right), with guest saxophonist Tony Subam; the potent local drink is kava, which is boiled and then strained and served in coconut shells; Natalie Pa'apa'a from Blue King Brown who is performing at this year's event



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

FEST'NAPUAN

PORT VILA, VANUATU

Seth Jordan reports from this annual Melanesian gathering showcasing local Vanuatu traditions, alongside guests from the Pacific region

With some 80 islands and over 100 indigenous tribal languages, Vanuatu's cultural diversity is also its strength. Populated for at least 4,000 years before being 'discovered' in 1605 by a Portuguese explorer who thought he'd found Australia, it was then 'rediscovered' over 160 years later when both the French and English stumbled across it. Captain Cook named it the New Hebrides, but it wasn't until 1906 that a rare French-British condominium arrangement was finally formed, bizarrely administering the islands jointly but with separate governmental systems. It stayed that way until the Republic of Vanuatu (*vanua* 'land' and *tu* 'stand') proclaimed its independence in 1980.

Since then, as in many former Pacific colonies, there has been a rebirth of indigenous pride and culture, which was

the genesis of the first Fest'Napuan in 1996, marking the anniversary of the opening of Vanuatu's National Museum and Cultural Centre. "When we started this festival it was pretty basic," remembers the event's founder and former chairman Ralph Regenvanu. "We had gravel heaped up as the stage. We rolled it flat, stuck bits of plywood on it, put telephone poles up and strung a tarpaulin as the roof."

These days there's a proper stage, lighting and last year's event saw the addition of a hi-tech digital screen. While that might be considered as basic requirements for any nation's biggest cultural event, Vanuatu remains a poor third-world country with a population of just 250,000, and Regenvanu – who is also a controversial, independent anti-corruption MP and former federal lands and justice minister – is justly proud of the festival's achievements to date. "We've come a long way in 15 years, and these days Fest'Napuan attracts some 40,000 people."

The free five-day event is actually several festivals in one – Napuan means 'music and dance' in one of Tanna Island's traditional languages – and Bislama pidgin is the common tongue shared across all of Vanuatu's multilingual islands. The opening night is dubbed Fest'Nalenga and features 'string-band' music – the acoustic-based genre, widely popular across Melanesia, which utilises guitars, ukuleles and tea-chest bush bass. That's followed by three nights of Fest'Napuan itself – a youth and family-oriented mix of contemporary pop, reggae and hip-hop – with the closing night given over to the righteous gospel sounds of Zion Fest.

Taking place in Port Vila's Saralana Park, the crowd casually assembles just before sunset each evening, stopping first at the many palm-thatched stalls ringing the showground for fried fish, coconuts and various sweets. But the biggest crowds are around the back, at the dimly-lit *kava*

bars, known locally as *nakamals*. The well-practiced *kava* merchants create their potent brews by pounding out the roots, boiling them up, straining the muddy results into buckets, and serving it in coconut shells. The slightly pepper-ish drink is gently intoxicating and its relaxing effects are a national pastime in Vanuatu, where its use is much more socially acceptable than excessive alcohol.

On last year's opening night, the lively string bands came together from a variety of nearby islands, displaying the many regional influences of this upbeat Melanesian-European hybrid genre. The most impressive act was local Mele village band Jipajiroa, who were augmented by Australian percussionist Nicky Bomba on steel pan.

Fest'Napuan's main three nights were an eclectic blend of both local and wider Pacific acts. Standouts included Vanuatu superstar Marcel Meltherorng (aka Mars Melto), with guest saxophonist Tony Subam from veteran PNG group Sanguma; Melbourne's dub-reggae masters The Red Eyes; and young Aboriginal band East Journey from Arnhem Land. Last year's winners of Radio Australia's 'Pacific Break' competition – an annual contest for unsigned Pacific acts, with first prize being a performance spot at Fest'Napuan – were young Fijian hip-hop quintet BSQ, who acquitted themselves admirably in front of an appreciative crowd, the largest they'd ever played to.

On the final festival day, I visited Vanuatu's National Photo, Film and Sound Archives, which are housed within the nearby Cultural Centre. I met curator

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Ambong Thompson, a former producer with Radio Vanuatu, who showed me the carefully preserved and air-conditioned sound library that he oversees. "We have old audio here going back to the first recordings made by early European ethnologists," he says. "Our aim is to preserve the musical history and traditions of the country, and to educate people about the past. Our country is very dispersed and culturally diverse, but through this collection our people can learn about cultures from other areas of the country, about which they may have little prior knowledge. And future generations can learn of the activities of their parents' and grandparents' generations. Most of our collection is on reel-to-reel and cassette tapes, and we have a copy of just about every traditional and popular music recording made over the past five decades."

As I re-emerge into the bright afternoon sunlight, that history comes alive, as

kastom (traditional) dance and music is being performed in front of the festival stage. Continuous waves of tribal groups come forward – some nearly naked, some in flamboyantly coloured costumes – wearing full face and body paint and representing many differing island cultures. Giant wooden slit drums are erected, various idiophone percussion and flutes are employed, and with more than a hint of competitiveness, each island group demonstrates its living tradition. It's a wonderful cacophony of sound and it goes on for hours.

Under the direction of new festival director Richard Shing, in addition to the local musicians, this year's event line-up includes Australian festival favourites Blue King Brown, featuring Samoan singer Natalie Pa'apa'a; Maori reggae band House of Shem; Solomon Islands ensembles Narasirato and Kaumakoma and Melbourne-based West Papuan band Tabura.

A new sister festival, *Lukaotem Gud Santo*, which only began in 2011 on the northern Vanuatu island of Espirito Santo, will be taking place again the weekend prior (September 21-22), with some of the same international guests as Fest'Napuan. This year's environmental theme is '*Lukaotem Gud Santo – Mekem i klin mo i krin*' (Look after Santo, make it clean and green). **M**

DATES This year's festival takes place from September 26-30 2012

ONLINE www.festnapuan.org