

travel

# HAPPINESS IS A WARM ISLAND

IN VANUATU, SMILES ARE THE REAL THING

BY MARK SCHREIBER



**IN JULY 2006, THE NEW ECONOMICS FOUNDATION (NEF),** a London-based think tank, released its "Happy Planet Index." Disregarding economic criteria such as gross domestic product, it based its ratings of 178 nations and regions instead on consumption levels, life expectancy and so-called "reasonable ideals." In first place, and giving it the right to call itself the "happiest place on earth," was the Republic of Vanuatu.\*

For most, the reaction to this bit of news is probably, "Vanuatu? Where's that?"

The answer, of course, is in Melanesia, northeast of New Caledonia. Vanuatu—which means "Land Eternal"—consists of 83 islands (65 of which are inhabited) that were formerly known as New Hebrides. The islands were administered jointly by Great Britain and France from 1906 until 1980, when they gained full independence.

But for Ofer Shagan, the news about Vanuatu came as no surprise. The 42-year-old Tokyo-based art dealer, who hails from Israel, had already been on intimate terms with the South Pacific nation for years, and considers himself among the island nation's 210,000 ecstatic inhabitants.

In November 2005, Shagan donned a traditional costume of palm fronds and a lei of white orchids, and was solemnly initiated as a chief in the village of Tautu on the island of Malekula, at which time he was bestowed with the name "Apia Nantenamal," which means "the eyes of the chiefs." This, he says, was only the second known case of Vanuatuans having accorded a white man with such a singular honor.

Aside from the fact that Vanuatu maintains no standing army,

imposes no income taxes, no withholding taxes, no capital gains taxes, no inheritance taxes and no exchange controls, what is it about the place that makes its people so happy?

"The place is totally unspoiled, and absolutely beautiful," raves Shagan. "Just the air, the smell of the air is exotic," he says, gesturing with his hands, as if drawing the air into his nose. He inhales deeply and smiles. His body might be in Harajuku, where we are talking over lunch, but his mind is clearly on a white sand beach.

Shagan, a dealer in antique art in Tokyo for nearly two decades, heard about Vanuatu, went there, and discovered that it completely lived up to its description as an unspoiled Pacific paradise.

Shagan kept returning whenever time permitted, relaxing, exploring the island and acquiring works of native art and befriending the locals, which was to eventually culminate in his acceptance and initiation as a chief.

**E**ach of the islands, with its own distinct variety of natural beauty and anthropological diversity, offered an astonishing new discovery. Malekula, for viewing tribal costumes and native arts; Espiritu Santo, with its breathtaking scenic beauty; Pentacost, the place to see bungee jumpers in action; and Ambrym, whose friendly people produce some of the Pacific's most exotic wood carvings. Ambrym's elaborate *tamtam* (slit gongs), carved from the trunks of breadfruit trees, measure up to 2.5m, placing them among the world's largest musical instruments.

Shagan's growing affinity for Vanuatu has made him determined to give something in return, such as by philanthropic activities that contribute to the islanders' health and well-being, in addition to providing funds to restore Tautu Village's water supply, gifts to the local Cultural Center, uniforms for a local soccer team and the presentation of a fragment of an ancient Hebrew bible—written on deerskin and believed to be 600 years old—to the Vanuatu National Museum.

Now its unofficial ambassador to Japan, Shagan continues to make himself a bridge between his two adopted countries, Japan and Vanuatu. He energetically promotes it as a travel destination to anyone who will listen and flies down several times a year to escort TV camera crews.

Mark Halpern, a Canadian attorney, finally acquiesced to Shagan's persistent urging and flew south for a visit. Did Vanuatu live up to his expectations?

Clockwise from left: A verdant waterfall in Port Vila; just one of Vanuatu's many white-sand beaches; Million Dollar Point's WWII wrecks are a diver's paradise; a VJF member listens for waves; an antiquated tree dwarfs a minivan; a few of Vanuatu's traditional sculptures that dot the landscape





"Ohhhh, did it," he smiles. "The natural surroundings are spectacular, but it's not just that. The people were absolutely wonderful. From their culture I was really able to learn something about human dignity!"

Halpern, who says he's looking forward to his next trip, strongly recommends making time to see some of the outlying islands, where visitors can encounter traditional native culture.

Convinced that there are more people who share his affinity for Vanuatu, in 2006, Shagan and several partners established a *kabushiki kaisha* (corporation) in Japan. The Vanuatu Japan Friendship KK ([www.vjf-mc.com](http://www.vjf-mc.com)) is now marketing memberships that include the right to build on 2,000m<sup>2</sup> plots of land near the capital of Port Vila—but more on this later.

**F**or too long, perhaps, you've been living life in the fast lane. Do you ever yearn for a chance to break away, for something completely different? Can you handle clean air, pristine white sand beaches, pure rivers and people whose instinctive reaction to outsiders is a wave and a smile? Who take life as it comes? And whose lives are not dictated by corporate MBAs and spreadsheets? As Shagan would ask: Are you prepared to be happy in the "Land Eternal"?

Vanuatu awaits.

[\* The next five were Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominica, Panama and Cuba. Other major countries included Vietnam (12th); China (31st); Brazil (63rd); Italy (66th); Netherlands (70th); Germany (81st); New Zealand (94th); Japan (95th); S. Korea (102nd); UK (108th); Canada (111th); Israel (117th); Australia (139th); USA (150th); Russia (172nd); Ukraine (174th); and Zimbabwe (178th). For the full list, go to [www.happyplanetindex.org](http://www.happyplanetindex.org)]

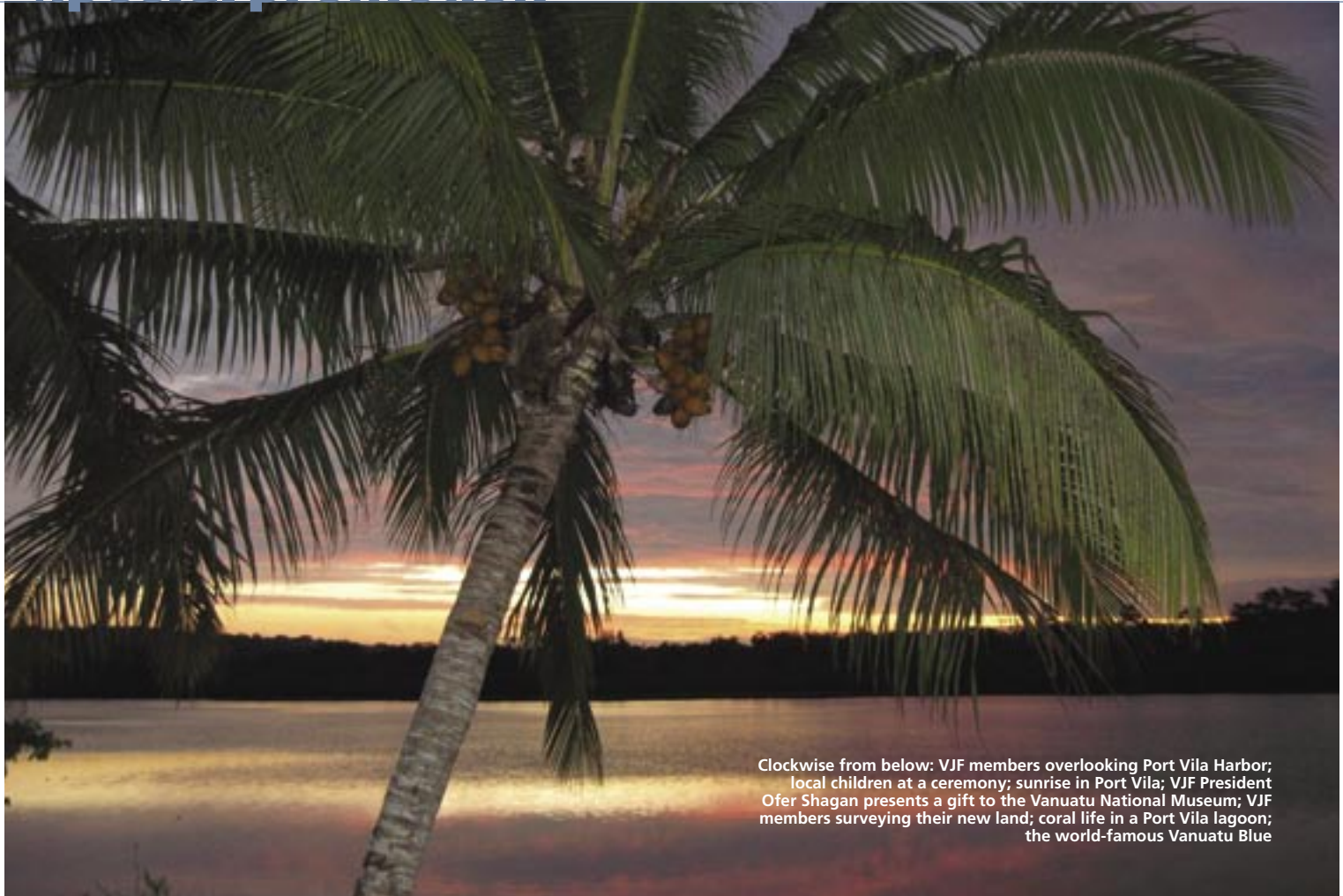
## VANUATU: A TRAVELER'S GUIDE

Vanuatu, referred to as "Ripablik blong Vanuatu" by its citizens, lies in the tropics near the 17th parallel. At GMT +11, it is two time zones ahead of Japan. It boasts a total land area of 12,000km<sup>2</sup>, making it slightly larger than the US State of Connecticut.

The climate is tropical year-round, with high daytime temperatures that cool down by evening. Rains are heaviest from January to April.

Over 100 distinct languages are spoken throughout the islands. While English and French are dominant, the natives communicate with each other in a *lingua franca* called Bislama, a form of pidgin. The English word "belong" is used as a substitute for "of" to form the possessive, e.g., a missionary might be referred to as "man blong Jesus." →





Clockwise from below: VJF members overlooking Port Vila Harbor; local children at a ceremony; sunrise in Port Vila; VJF President Ofer Shagan presents a gift to the Vanuatu National Museum; VJF members surveying their new land; coral life in a Port Vila lagoon; the world-famous Vanuatu Blue



→ The word meaning we or us, “yumi,” is formed by combining “you” and “me.” The words of the national anthem, therefore, are: “Yumi, Yumi, Yumi, God i givim ples ya long yumi; Yumi glat tumas long hem; Yumi strong mo yumi fri long hem; Yumi brata evriwan!” (Translation: God has given us this land; This gives us great cause for rejoicing. We are strong, we are free in this land; we are all brothers.)

In addition to being the happiest country on the planet, Vanuatu can make several other claims to fame. For one, it is recognized as the birthplace of bungee jumping, originally performed by young men using vines as a test of their courage. Vanuatu is also the world’s largest producer and source of kava root (*Piper methysticum*), which,

consumed as a beverage, has been known to induce a mellow, laid-back feeling. More recent medical research by the University of Aberdeen in Scotland suggests it may have remedial effects for certain forms of cancers.

## TOURING

Vanuatu boasts three spots designed to please even the most jaded travelers. One is the USS President Coolidge, said to be the largest, most intact and most accessible wreck of World War II. The former luxury cruise ship had been converted into a troop carrier. In October 1942, in the leadup to the battle of Guadalcanal, the ship struck a mine in the



harbor of Espiritu Santo and sank. (Most of the 5,000 soldiers on board were rescued.) It has since become a haven for diving enthusiasts.

Another must-see attraction is Vanuatu's "Underwater Post Office," particularly popular since the success of the 2003 hit film *Finding Nemo*. Situated within a marine sanctuary off Hideaway Island a short distance from Port Vila, the post office can receive mail delivered in person if you are a visiting diver or snorkeller, or sent via the main post office to ensure all items receive a special cancellation. Fortunately it is only 50m offshore and about three meters deep. Special waterproof postcards are collected regularly by one of Vanuatu Post's four trained scuba divers and "cancelled" underwater with an embossing cachet.

Visitors to Tanna Island in the south of the archipelago, meanwhile, can send letters from the world's only "volcano post," a mailbox located close to the smoking crater of Mt. Yasur—a very active volcano that on occasion shakes and spews lava. Since it's only 360m above sea level, the courageous (or foolhardy) can dash up its ash-strewn slopes to post special singed (as in burnt) postcards.

## GETTING THERE

Port Vila, the capital city and gateway to Vanuatu, is on the island of Efate, about 90 minutes by air from Fiji and New Caledonia, and 3 hours from Auckland, New Zealand and Brisbane, Australia. Roundtrip airfare from Japan for individual travelers depends on the season and connections, but bargain hunters may be able to find tickets for under ¥100,000. Television news, newspapers, telephone and internet connections keep visitors in touch with the rest of the world.

## YOUR OWN LITTLE PIECE OF PARADISE

The notion of residing in a tropical island paradise with beautiful virgin beaches and rivers you can drink from may seem like something out of a Bob Denver sitcom, but it's neither as difficult nor as dangerous as one might think. The government of Vanuatu welcomes investment and has made it easy for individuals to buy property and become residents.

Convinced that more people would come to love the islands as he does, if they would just fly down for a visit, Ofer Shagan last year established a corporation, the Vanuatu Japan Friendship KK (hereafter VJF), which is offering property based on payment of a one-time membership fee. Payment of US \$10,500 (as of this writing) accords members with the rights to build on a 2,000m<sup>2</sup> lot.

VJF is currently focusing on development of a seaside community located about 15 minutes by car from Port Vila.

Members, it should be noted, do not "own" the land outright, but obtain a 75-year lease (renewable) giving them exclusive rights to build on the property. By building a house on the lot, the owner is also accorded the right to reside in Vanuatu. Owners, moreover, can receive income from subletting and if the property appreciates will not be taxed on capital gains.

As VJF membership manager Carlo La Porta explains, "For the buyer, we're providing an opportunity to invest in a property that we feel will increase substantially in value over the short to medium term, while at the same time organizing as a club-style environment, to let like-minded individuals meet, help and enjoy each other's company.

"At the same time, we want to help the citizens of Vanuatu—both directly, with more job opportunities through our developments, as well as indirectly, through our investments. I guess you can say our objective is to contribute to Vanuatu's development in ways that are least harmful to the environment, to preserve its rich natural surroundings for future generations."

Ofer Shagan says he's found that getting people excited about Vanuatu has been easier than he anticipated, once they're persuaded to visit and see it for themselves. This modern-day Robinson Crusoe is planning his next trip down south in April, where, between laid-back kava ceremonies with his "tribe," he'll be escorting several TV camera crews around to shoot scenes in the "happiest place on earth." ☺



For more information on the Vanuatu Japan Friendship Corporation, contact Carlo La Porta via cellphone (090-3843-4545) or email (carlo@vjf-mc.com). [www.vjf-mc.com](http://www.vjf-mc.com)

