



Santo's Big Bay

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Top: Santo's high volcanic mountain range to the west. Top right: The Blue Holes a major attraction in Santo. Above: Exploring Jordan River.

THE BIG BAY AREA IS A TRULY AMAZING PLACE WITH A HIGH VOLCANIC MOUNTAIN RANGE TO THE WEST AND RAISED LIMESTONE RIDGES TO THE EAST. THE CENTRAL VALLEY IS WHERE THE JORDAN RIVER MEETS THE OCEAN.

When one mentions the Jordan River, what usually comes to mind is the river's historical and biblical history, and how the Jordan river is considered to be one of the world's most sacred rivers, and the scene of several miracles. But on the large island of Santo in Vanuatu, there is another river by the same name – the Jordan (Jourdain in French) that is unique in the Pacific region. It is unique in the sense that it exhibits characteristics of a braided river system, unseen in the Pacific islands except for a few rivers in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, which are dominantly continental islands with vast differences in geology compared to the volcanic and limestone islands of the South Pacific. The more common river system of the Pacific is that of a meandering type. I went to Santo to assist a colleague conduct her masters thesis fieldwork which involved a study of a braided river and why it has taken on these characteristics rather than those of a meandering system. Data on

various aspects of the river system were collected including geology, gradient, water flow, number and type of channels and history of the channels.

The island of Espiritu Santo, more commonly known as Santo, is the largest in the Vanuatu archipelago with an area of some 4000km². Pedró Fernandez de Quirós, a Spanish explorer, named it La Australia del Espiritu Santo (the Southern Land of the Holy Spirit). Santo has Vanuatu's second largest town, Luganville, a somewhat quiet town, with remnants of WWII in the form of dome shaped houses, bunkers, old airstrips and numerous wrecks now commonly used for commercial diving. Other attractions that Santo has include the highest peak in Mt. Tabwemasana (1879m), great diving, the famous blue holes, and the beautiful champagne beach of Port Olry.

But my adventure eventually took me to the north of the island, to the small village of Matantas in the Big Bay area, deep in the heartland of Santo. The village of Matantas is the setting



Green or Golden Bellfrog (*Litoria aurea*), critically endangered in its native range in Australia, and locally abundant on Santo.



Jordan River wetlands, a common breeding site for *Litoria aurea*.

for the Vathe Conservation Area and the adjacent Vathe lodge, which was to be our home for the coming two weeks. Days were spent exploring the Jordan River and its surrounding not only for clues as to why it might be braided, but also to gain an experience of the Vathe conservation area.

One of our interesting finds was the abundance of the Green and Golden Bellfrog (*Litoria aurea*) which was observed in great abundance in the numerous wetland systems of the area. This particular species was a subject of controversy as it was thought to be critically endangered and found to inhabit the Homebush wetlands of Sydney which were eventually reclaimed for the 2000 Olympics.

The Big Bay area is a truly amazing place with a high volcanic mountain range to the west and raised limestone ridges to the east. The central valley is where the Jordan River meets the ocean. There are no coral reefs offshore and this may be due to the high freshwater runoff from land. The Vathe conservation area also boasts pristine

native rainforest with high species diversity. The sea is generally very calm as the bay region is protected on both sides which is probably why Quirós took shelter here. Wetland ecosystems are a common sight with high fish abundance and floral diversity.

The Jordan River can usually be accessed by 4WD vehicle but on this occasion, the weather did not permit this so, each day, a boat was used to travel to the river mouth and then to trek upstream.

Any trip to Vanuatu would not be complete without a genuine Vanuatu kava experience. This was realized in Matantas village and I found it to be totally different from the Fiji yagona that I was accustomed to. Vanuatu kava is made from green kava (*Piper methysticum*) stem, chopped into pieces and then pounded to release the active ingredients. It is then mixed with a very small amount of water to produce a very concentrated lethal dose which can put you to sleep after the consumption of a few shells.

Another awesome feature of Santo

is its Blue Holes. These are freshwater holes where the underlying limestone has reached down to the water table, resulting in magnificently blue swimming holes in numerous locations on the island. The most popular and also the largest is the Matevulu blue hole on the eastern side of the island. Blue Holes also contain a number of freshwater fish species.

I also took some time to explore one of Santo's prized diving treasures, the USS President Coolidge. This was an old American cruise liner that was converted to a troop carrier during WWII. It met its fate on a fringing reef not far from Luganville as it hit a friendly mine entering the harbour. It lies just offshore in 20-70m of water, ideal for the perfect wreck dive. This dive was recently listed in a popular dive magazine as one of the top ten wreck dives in the world. Various war artifacts can also be observed here, including, rusty bullets, rifles, helmets, cannons, cooking utensils and other military equipment.