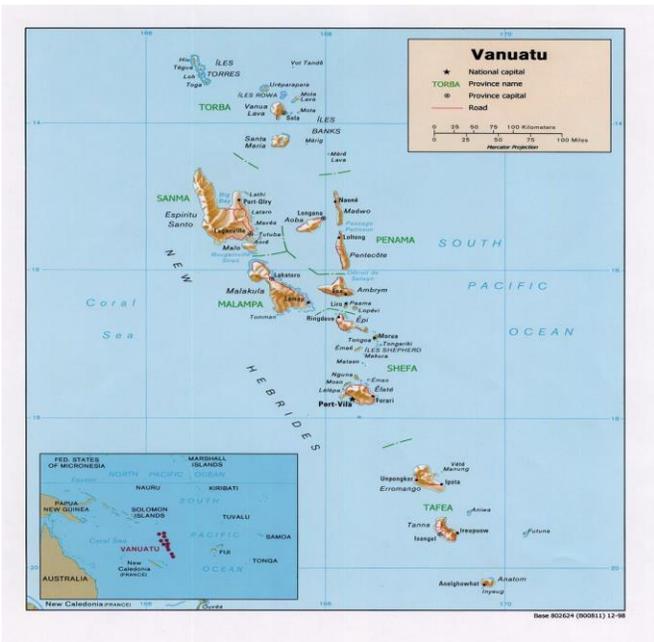


Country Information - Vanuatu



Geography: Vanuatu is a Y-shaped tropical archipelago, mostly volcanic, located in the South Pacific Ocean with over eighty islands, sixty-five of which are inhabited. The Solomon Islands lie to the north, New Caledonia to the south, Fiji to the east, and the Coral Sea and Australia to the west. The islands have black and white sandy beaches, and beautiful coral reefs with tropical colored fishes. Forests are full of beautiful birds, flora, and fauna.

The islands are prone to natural disasters including earthquakes, cyclones, and volcanic eruptions. There are seven active volcanoes scattered throughout the islands. Rising sea levels threaten to erode the land.

The Honorable retired pastor Sethy Regenvanu, former Deputy Prime Minister of Lands, once stated: “Land to a Ni-Vanuatu is what a mother is to a baby. It is with land that he defines his identity, and it is with land that he maintains his spiritual strength.”

The People: The inhabitants of Vanuatu, who are mostly rural, are known as Ni-Vanuatu. Many are of Melanesian descent with a Polynesian minority on the outlying islands. A mix of Europeans, Asians and other Pacific Islanders also live on the archipelago. Studies predict that by 2021 Vanuatu will have 312,000 citizens. Port Vila is the largest city with 45,000 residents. The traditional Vanuatu family had a built-in social security system where there is a place for everybody. Poverty did not exist as people worked their own land and made what they needed.

However, with the current monetized system, and changing agricultural trends, economic gaps are evident. Data shows an increase in movement from rural to urban areas by young people for education, training and employment opportunities. Internet access in urban areas has rapidly increased but remains limited in rural areas.

Languages: Almost 100 dialects are spoken in Vanuatu. Due to the country's colonial history, English and French have been adopted as the official languages of education. A Ni-Vanuatu usually speaks the village language and Bislama before learning English or French.

Food: Ni-Vanuatu staple foods include yam, taro, banana, coconut, sugarcane, tropical nuts, greens, pork, fowl, and seafood. The national ceremonial dish is *lap lap*. It is a pudding made of grated root crops or plantain mixed with coconut milk and sometimes greens and meat, wrapped in leaves, then baked for hours in a traditional earth oven. The exchange, preparation, and consumption of kava (a beverage made from kava roots) are integral parts of ceremonial occasions.

Religion: The islands were distributed among the Christian denominations in the 19th century. Today, Christianity comprises approximately 83% of the total population, while 17% is made up of other religious groups, customary beliefs and cults. The Vanuatu Christian Council provides a platform for churches to work together ecumenically across the islands.

Christianity deeply impacted ancestral culture and religious practices as well as the system of governance and social life.

History/Government: Vanuatu ancestors lived on their own islands, in their own villages. Homes were thatched (thatched not hatched) dwellings made from leaves and trees hewn with stone axes. Each island and village had their own government, god, languages, food, styles of clothing, traditional healers and midwives.

In 1774, Captain James Cook came to the islands and named them the New Hebrides, because the islands reminded him of his homeland, the Hebrides of Scotland. Black birding was especially prevalent between 1847 and 1904, when South Pacific islanders were kidnapped, tricked or coerced into working on the cotton and sugar plantations in Queensland, Fiji and Hawaii.

In 1906, the New Hebrides became a colony with a more centralized government ruled jointly by Great Britain and France. Life under the two colonial powers was difficult as they had different agendas.

By 1978, the people were calling for independence. It was declared on July 30th, 1980, and a parliamentary democracy was installed. The country was renamed Vanuatu, which literally means 'country that stands up', and the motto "In God we stand" was adopted.

In the current Vanuatu democracy, there are provisions in the Constitution for gender equity but limited political will to implement them (refers to provisions).

Economy: Vanuatu's temperate climate and arable land, while limited, is viable (good) for agriculture and the grazing of cattle. The traditional practice of land and sea conservation allows rotating areas to be used for fishing, gardening, and hunting. Yams, bananas, taro, kumara, cassava fruits and nuts may be organically cultivated. Coconut, coffee, sandalwood, white-wood, cocoa and kava are grown, as well. The coconut tree is viewed as the tree of life because all its parts are useful.

Vanuatu's economic growth is based on tourism, construction and offshore financial services. Big hotels and resorts are owned by foreigners and these proceeds primarily leave the country. There are minor income earning activities such as the Nagol (land diving) and the traditional weaving of mats and baskets. Manufacturing industries contribute only 5 to 9% of the Gross Domestic Product.

Arts and Entertainment: Most Vanuatu people love music and dancing. Traditional instruments such as carved slotted gongs, slit bamboo beaten with a stick, bamboo flutes, and seed rattlers are used to create a rhythmic sound, along with voices, clapping hands, and stomping feet. There are modern bands as well as local string groups. In contemporary Vanuatu, people enjoy sports such as soccer, volleyball, basketball, and boxing.

Education: In the first three years of school, children in the towns learn Bislama, while children in the more rural areas learn their own local language.

Primary education is not free or compulsory. It is provided by law with three main objectives: access, quality and management. The government assists its schools by subsidizing the tuition fees for the first six years.

Secondary education is only available to those who can provide the fees. Many families can only afford to educate their firstborn child.

Health: Since Vanuatu ratified the convention on the Rights of a Child in 1992, women's and children's health have been key national priorities of the government. However, Vanuatu failed to achieve its 2015 Millennium Development goals to reduce maternal and infant mortality. Most deaths in children under 5 are estimated to be due to malnutrition, and the increase in stunting is more likely linked to improper feeding practices.

It is estimated that 75% of the population live in rural areas with poor transport and communications, less qualified health care givers, fewer human resources and inadequate health facilities. Since screening and treatment are limited, a major health issue for women's breast and cervical cancer.

Access to safe drinking water and acceptable sanitation facilities is a big concern in Vanuatu. The population has poor water sources such as unprotected wells, springs and surface water.

Women: In the past 20 years, there have been changes for women in Vanuatu. The gender gap in literacy and education has narrowed. However, recent reports indicate that women represent just 3% of total senior/executive government positions.

Women represent 40% of the labour force in both public and private sectors. Women are usually the full-time homemakers caring for children, the elderly, people with disabilities and other family members.

Gender-based violence is a serious issue affecting women and girls. Approximately 60% of women in Vanuatu have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lives, of which 21% were left with permanent injuries. Religious institutions are encouraged to do more to urge women to use their potential.

World Day of Prayer was introduced to Vanuatu by two female Canadian missionaries with the first service taking place in 1946. The current WDP Committee wishes to develop initiatives to assist young, rural women by creating employment and educational opportunities. They also wish to help with health programs focusing on maternal concerns, children's health, and cancer.