Vanuatu

Location

The Republic of Vanuatu is a group of 83 islands located in the South Pacific Ocean. These islands are situated in between Australia and Hawaii (slightly closer to Australia) and south of the Solomon Islands. Vanuatu has about 860,000 square km, with 12,200 square km of land area (roughly equivalent to the size of Connecticut). The coordinates or the approximate center of the islands are 16°S latitude and 167°E longitude.

Geography

Vanuatu’s 83 islands are arranged in a “Y” shape and stretch 1176 km from North to South. Only 14 of the islands have an area of over 100 square km, the largest of which is named Espiritu Santo. Most of the land area is densely covered by tropical rainforests and receives a moderate amount of rainfall. The climate in Vanuatu is strongly influenced by southeast trade winds that often bring cyclones or typhoons. Vanuatu also faces natural disasters as the result of volcanic activity that causes small earthquakes. Vanuatu currently has nine active volcanoes that generate upwards of 2,000 seismic events each year. Of these events, 40 registered with magnitudes between 4.0 and 7.3.

Vanuatu’s many islands developed as a result of volcanic activity. This created numerous mountainous regions with small plains located near the coastlines. The
highest mountain in Vanuatu is Mount Tabwemasana and is 1,877 meters in height. Most of Vanuatu's land is very steep, with loose soil, and very little fresh water. The shores of Vanuatu are very rocky with intermittent reef outcroppings and have no continental shelf. This causes drastic drops in sea floor elevation, even within close proximity to the islands.

**Climate**

Most of Vanuatu’s weather is subtropical (rainy and warm). Beginning around October, the days get hotter, more humid, and Vanuatu experiences significant amounts of rainfall. December through April (summer) is the period in which cyclones are most likely to form since these are the hottest and wettest months. On average, Vanuatu experiences about 2,360 millimeters of rainfall per year, with the northern islands experiencing as much as 4,000 millimeters per year. Rainfall usually tapers off from June through November (winter), making these the driest months. In addition, the southeast trade winds are most active from May through October. The average daily air temperature ranges from 20°C to 32°C. In the summer the average daily water temperature ranges from 22°C to 28°C.

**History**

Although clay pottery fragments have been found in Vanuatu dating from as far back as 1300-1100 B.C., it is believed that the first settlers didn’t arrive at Vanuatu until about 4,000 years ago. Pedro Fernandes de Queiros of Portugal was the first man to officially discover the islands in 1606. The islands were then explored further and
named “New Hebrides” in 1774 by James Cook of Britain. Both Britain and France claimed that they owned the islands of Vanuatu and in 1906 they developed a condominium government for the country that allowed for joint rule.

Vanuatu grew very rapidly under this type of rule until around 1920. Missionaries and traders brought disease to the island that very drastically reduced the population and hurt the economy. The government also faced many challenges when America used Vanuatu as a base in World War II.

Father Walter Lini (who later became Vanuatu’s Prime Minister) was instrumental in forming Vanuatu’s first political party, “New Hebrides National Party.” This party was renamed Vanua’aku Pati in 1974 and went on to win independence for Vanuatu in 1980.

**Important Dates**

**Population**

The population of Vanuatu (estimated July 2008) is about 216,000 people, with most living in rural areas. Vanuatu’s largest city and capital, Port Vila, is home to more than 35,300 people. The population growth rate in 2008 was estimated to be 1.434 percent per year. The expected life span is approximately 64 years. About 98.5 of the native people (called Ni-Vanuatu) are of Melanesian decent with a few people from Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Isles. In addition, three islands are inhabited by Polynesian descendants. The most common languages are English, French, and Bislama (a mixture of English and Melanesian).

**Currency**

The official currency of Vanuatu is the Vatu (currency symbol VUV). 100 Vatu equals $0.84 USD. Vatu coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, and 100 VUV and are made from a mixture of copper and nickel metals. Today, notes in the denominations of 100, 200, 500, 1000, and 5000 are all in circulation. The current exchange rate (March 10, 2009) is $1.00 = 120.00 VUV.

**Education**

Schooling in Vanuatu is free and mandatory for children to attend for 7 years but most attend for an average of 10 years. In general, schools in Vanuatu are taught in either English or French. About 94 percent of school age children attend primary school with the number of children enrolled split almost exactly between males and females. The average student to teacher ratio for primary school is 20:1. The literacy rate for the
Vanuatu population is 74 percent and growing as more and more youth begin to attend school. About 23 percent of people enroll in secondary education which takes 8 years to complete. Overall, Vanuatu’s government spends 27 percent of its yearly expenditures on education.

The University of the South Pacific has a main campus in Port Vila, Vanuatu’s capitol, as well as three other locations in Vanuatu. This public university is home to a law school and facilitates extensive teaching and research on Pacific culture and environmental issues. For medical and technical training, students often attend school in Fiji, Australia, or New Zealand.

**Language**

There are 115 different languages spoken by the native people of Vanuatu, but the most common are English, French, and Bislama. Bislama, a mixture of English and Melanesian, is spoken as a second language by most people in Vanuatu. Vanuatu also has the highest language density in the entire world, with an average of only 2000 people speaking each language.

**Religion**

Christianity is the main religion of Vanuatu. As far back as the 19th century, a great deal of Christian missionary work was being done among the islands of Vanuatu. Today, fifty Percent of Vanuatu’s population is Presbyterian, while fifteen percent are Catholic, and another fifteen percent are Anglican. While there is a very small group of Muslims in Vanuatu, other types of Christianity make up the remainder of the population.
Agriculture

Due to mountainous terrain and loose soil, only 12 percent (1,470 square km) of Vanuatu’s land is currently used for agricultural purposes. On the other hand, over 70 percent of Vanuatu’s population makes a living from agriculture. Nearly 90 percent of the households in Vanuatu fish for personal consumption or trade. This intensive fishing has put extreme stress on the fish populations and is quickly depleting types of fish that live close to the coastlines.

In addition to fishing, Vanuatu produces large amounts of copra (dried coconut flesh), coconuts, cocoa, coffee, taro, yams, fruits, and vegetables. Most of these crops are raised for local trade and consumption with the exception of copra, cocoa, and coffee. These three crops are important cash crops for farmers since they are easily grown in Vanuatu’s climate and there is a demand for their export. For example, Vanuatu produced 43,000 tons of copra (mostly as a cash crop) in 1999. Beef accounts for about 10 percent of Vanuatu’s exports, making them the leading beef producer in the South Pacific. Beef is not only important as an export, but also as a means of clearing brush from around coconut trees.

Trade

The most important export that Vanuatu produces is coconut products. Copra is their most significant cash crop. Beef is also a significant export for Vanuatu. Since Vanuatu is the largest producer of beef in the south pacific, they often export meat products to
Japan and Melanesia. Vanuatu has been nationally recognized for both its exceptionally tender beef and certified organic beef farms. Recently, Vanuatu has been producing larger quantities of cocoa and coffee, but these crops have yet to reach the export magnitude of that of copra.

In addition to crops and livestock, logging is very important to Vanuatu’s economy. After copra, it is Vanuatu’s largest export. Both foreign loggers and small, locally owned companies harvest trees from Vanuatu’s abundant forests. In 1989 Vanuatu banned the export of whole logs to add value and jobs to the logging industry within the islands (cutting up the logs into boards before export for example). Although logging in Vanuatu has not grown as extremely rapidly as it is in nearby islands, the destruction of forests and erosion of soil is a concern.

Vanuatu’s exports totaled $23.2 million in 2002, while its imports came to $86.7. Since it has no natural resources of its own, Vanuatu must import all of its fuel. Machinery and equipment are also significant imports for the island.

**Food**

Most families in Vanuatu fish and grow their own garden which creates a very stable food supply. Papayas, pineapples, mangoes, plantains, sweet potatoes, and coconuts among others are commonly found in gardens. In addition, guavas, grapefruits, limes, papayas, mangoes, mandarins, pineapples, plantains, and yams are all common foods in Vanuatu. Coconuts grow in abundance in Vanuatu, making their
flesh and milk ideal for cooking and seasoning meals. The most common meats eaten in Vanuatu are fish, chicken, pork, and beef. Their national dish is called “lap-lap” (a mixture of vegetables cooked in coconut milk). Cooking is traditionally done on hot stones, or by steaming or boiling. Food markets in Vanuatu are open nearly 24/7 from Monday through Saturday. Vanuatu’s traditional cuisine has been greatly influenced by French, English, Italian, Indian, and Chinese flavors.

Landmarks

The highest mountain in Vanuatu is Mount Tabwemasana which is 1,877 meters in height. Pic Santo (1,704m high), Batnarouta (1,593m high), and Lolohoe (1,547m high) are Vanuatu's next tallest mountains.

Vanuatu is known for its fishing and diving. World War II wreckage can be found amongst its natural coral reefs. In addition, one of the world’s most active volcanoes, Yasur Volcano, can be found on Tanna Island in southern Vanuatu. Yasur Volcano peaks at 405 meters high and erupts up to several times per hour. Numerous tours are available for sightseeing around the Yasur Volcano including four wheel drive vehicles that drive you to the edge of the volcano’s crater and airplane tours that fly over the volcano at night.

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