

Vanuatu – Paradise or Hell?



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

On the morning of 4 March, 2015, the luxurious cruise ship, Rhapsody Of The Seas, dropped anchor about 500m from the shore at Mystery Island in the South Pacific and prepared to send its 2,300 passengers ashore via three tenders, each with a capacity of transporting more than 100 people. These were busy shuttling between the ship and the makeshift floating landing jetty on the island.

My wife and I were on board the ship for an 8-day cruise from Sydney, Australia, to three South Pacific islands.

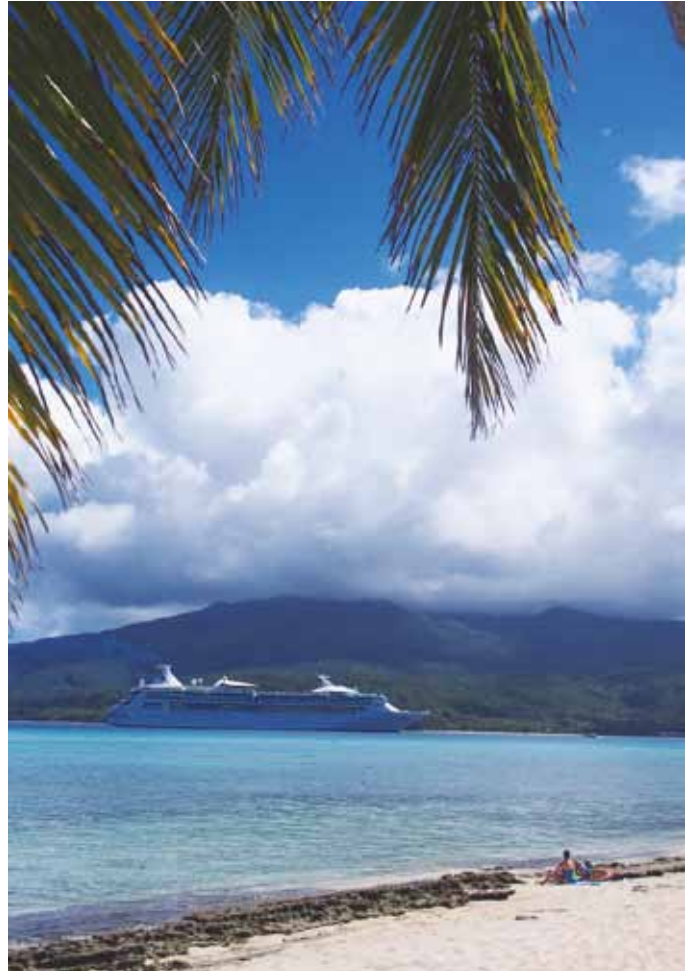
After two days of sailing on the open seas, we arrived at Isle Of Pines, an island measuring 15km by 13km in the archipelago of New Caledonia, an overseas collectivity of France. With its many beautiful pine trees, crescent-shaped beaches of powdery fine sand and crystal clear turquoise sea water, this island is often dubbed "the island closest to paradise".

We arrived at Mystery Island on Day 4. This uninhabited island of only one square km in area, is the southernmost of the 83 islands that make up the archipelago of Vanuatu, formerly known as New Hebrides. The elongated sausage-like island has fine sandy beaches all round. It even has an airstrip. Queen Elizabeth II visited the island in 1974.

When cruise ship passengers arrive, Melanesian villagers from nearby Anatom Island come over in small boats to spread their warmth, culture and wares. It is certainly a paradise for those who prefer the quiet, peaceful solitude and exclusivity of a tropical island. The many pandanus trees on the island are home to small skinks, spiders and insects.

On day 5, we visited Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia, on the main island of Grande Terre before we sailed back to Sydney.

On 14 March, just 3 days after we reached home and 10 days after we visited Mystery Island, Typhoon Pam hit Vanuatu, almost completely



wiping out the buildings in its capital city, Port Vila, and devastated some other islands in the South Pacific.

The poor islanders had to face the destruction caused by the ultra-violent typhoon. With a maximum speed that exceeded 300kph, Typhoon Pam hit the islands Haiyan with a force comparable to that of Typhoon Haiyan which caused extensive damage in The Philippines in 2013. The toll tally at the time of writing was 24 dead, scores injured and more than 3,300 people made homeless.

International aid had started to pour in for this unfortunate island nation which also happened to be one of the poorest nations in the world.

Some of Vanuatu's islands may seem like paradise to those who love the three "S" (sun, sand and sea) but the truth is that its people often live in hell. ■