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Champagne Beach in Vanuatu is known as one of the most beautiful in the South Pacific. Image by Caroline Riches/AAP PHOTOS

TOURISM AND LEISURE

Timeless Vanuatu shines in world of change

By Caroline Riches

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We're on a family beach holiday on Vanuatu's Espiritu Santo without enough swimming goggles and now we're going to pay the price – if only we could find some.

But it's tricky to find a lot of things in the island's main town Luganville including someone who speaks English, or French, or even the local tongue Bislama for that matter.

A lot has changed in the eight years since I last visited Vanuatu, and a lot hasn't. Beijing's interest in the region has increased hugely, with Chinese-backed infrastructure and development projects slowly changing the face of this Pacific paradise.

It's making the locals a little uneasy.

"I think 90 per cent of Luganville's shops are now owned by the Chinese," our driver Gregory tells us. He doesn't seem happy about it. And indeed, the shops now sell the same things: plastic goods imported from Chinese factories.

But turn away from the town towards the water and things are as tranquil, jovial and beautiful as always.

I fell in love with Vanuatu when I visited in 2011 on a media familiarisation with Australian Associated Press. It felt like Fiji from decades gone by, a place that time had left behind.

It was overwhelmingly rural and indigenous, unheard of in the 21st century. A place where villages were communal, where a fishing catch was shared out for dinner, and where a couple with fertility problems was given a child from a neighbouring family (yes, that happened).

All this goodwill is infectious. While its GDP is dwarfed by Australia's, Vanuatu has ranked high on the Happy Planet Index results for many years.

On a personal front, I found out I was with child in Vanuatu back then, so the place had always signalled life and love for me.

In 2020, as part of the final media familiarisation I would do for AAP before the newswire closes, I have my eight-year-old daughter in tow, alongside two more daughters and my life's love.

I told my eight-year-old Sasha she was the only one who had been here before.

"You'll love it," I tell them all. "It's beautiful, and special – at least it was back then."

Champagne Beach hasn't changed. It's still as sparkly as its name, its sand a squeaky white and its turquoise depths home to gliding turtles. We may not have goggles, but thank goodness for snorkels.

It's one of various glorious beaches on Santo's coastline, where you can lie in lapping clear water, kick back in a ramshackle beach cafe or spend hours jumping off a floating pontoon. This place is always deliciously quiet, until a cruise ship rolls into town.

Million Dollar Point, on the other hand, has transformed from how it used to be. Once just another beach on Santo's coast, the US military dumped goods such as cannons and trucks into the deep water at the end of World War II so the British and the French couldn't have them.

You can still view war's jetsam both on the beach and beneath the waves, though the water can be a little choppy.

For scuba drivers, the SS President Coolidge – a luxury American ocean liner sunk by mines during the war – is one of several shipwrecks off Vanuatu's coastline that attracts divers from around the world.

While the dumping and the wrecks were never supposed to happen, they have made Santo far more interesting.

But inland is where the real water fun can be had. Santo is famous for its clear blue holes hiding amid lush jungle – freshwater pools formed from springs trickling down from the mountains in the island's heart.

The minerals and limestone make the water gleam, and the kids squeal as they throw themselves in from rope swings.

Our guide Simon takes a dip while we play then takes us home in his kayak along a small river buzzing with life, but nothing dangerous.

"There are no dangerous snakes or spiders here, nothing that can hurt you," he tells us. In fact, due to the island chain's relative youth and isolation, the only native land animals are 12 species of bat. The girls drag their fingers happily through the still water.

While local demographics are changing in Vanuatu there are still remarkably few tourists, which amazes me considering the islands' beauty.

The blue holes are still blue, not faded by sunscreen. The locals don't perform songs for you, they simply smile and chat. They don't seem to care if you spend money or not, or if you find goggles or not.

They are just pleased to have you here, and to tell you about their country and how they don't want it to change.

But a lot has changed, for me and for Vanuatu. The world is changing, particularly when it comes to travel. But any crisis is temporary and what's on the other side is often better.

At its heart Santo is still unique – stunning, full of history, warm and welcoming. And that won't change.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Air Vanuatu flies from many Australian cities to Vanuatu's capital Port Vila, with regular connecting flights available to Espiritu Santo. Visit airvanuatu.com.

STAYING AND PLAYING THERE: A 20-minute boat ride from Santo, Aore Island Resort is a welcoming boutique escape offering bures (huts) for both couples and families (on separate sides of the resort) from \$A275 per room per night. The resort can organise all activities, including tours of Espiritu Santo.

For more, visit <https://aoreislandresorts.com/>

The writer travelled as a guest of Aore Island Resort.

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