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## [The Islands of the Last Cannibals](#)

*Did bungee jumping start here?*

Vanuatu (formerly called New Hebrides before gaining independence in 1980) is located in southwestern Pacific, half way between Australia and Fiji. The archipelago is made of 80 islands and has a "Y" shape. The islands appeared following the crash of tectonic plates, forming huge mountains that are mainly covered by waters. The highest peaks come out of the water forming Vanuatu and its rough terrain. Even today the movement of the tectonic plates triggers numerous earthquakes. At the joint of the plates there are 9 active volcanoes (Vanuatu is part of the famous Pacific Fire Ring). The islands are covered by lush forests, dominated by banyans, a type of fig trees that form a huge treetop. There are over 150 species of orchids and 250 species of ferns in these forests. The beaches are neighbored by coral reefs and this is one of the few places where a type of sea cow, the dugong, lives. The people of Vanuatu belong to the Asian Black race, which entered the islands about 25,000-30,000 years ago coming from southeastern Asia. Geneticists have discovered that populations of Vanuatu and neighboring New Guinea and Solomon islands have one of the highest genetic diversity amongst human populations. In this part of the Pacific there are big differences between groups just from one island to the next - one might have to name five or six new races on this basis. 3,000 ago the first Malayo-Polynesian group, Lapita people, reached these islands coming from Philippines via New Guinea. They were of mixed Mongoloid-Black Asian type and imposed Malayo-Polynesians languages in the islands as well as an advanced farm culture, pigs being among the most common animals around the farms. When the first Europeans stepped on Vanuatu in 1606, the islands were inhabited by tribes that commonly practiced cannibalism. The forests were rich in sandalwood and the Europeans exploited heavily these resources. Later, they "recruited" work power from these islands for the sugarcane and cotton plantations from Samoa, Fiji and Australia. Theoretically, men signed a three-year contract but most of them were actually kidnapped. When this reached its peak, by the end of the 19th century, over half of the men of Vanuatu worked in other countries. Most of them never came back, killed by diseases. Diseases brought by Europeans, like measles, cholera or smallpox, ravaged local populations. The first missionaries sent to these islands had success... as the main dish!... But in time, Christianity imposed and today 80% of the islanders declare themselves Catholic or Protestant. But this is a syncretic Christianity, as people still worship the shaman of the village and use spirit-possessed stones in their magic rites for luring a new lover, fatten a pig or kill an enemy. In Vanuatu the Cargoboat cult, also found in New Guinea, still stands. During the Second World War, 500,000 American soldiers passed through Vanuatu on their way to the war zones in the Pacific. The locals wondered seeing the goods brought to them by cargoboats and planes. At the end of the war the American soldiers left the archipelago and the extra equipment and gear, valuing millions of dollars, was thrown into the sea. To bring back those visitors, religious groups called cargoboat cults built wharfs and landing runways and simulated training using imitations of the military equipment, so that those soldiers come back with a lot of affluences. Vanuatu is considered the richest country as regards the number of languages: in an area about one third of Belgium 105 languages are spoken. The official languages are Bislama (local lingua franca), English and French. The most famous ritual of Vanuatu is the dangerous land diving (called N'gol). Some think it stays behind the bungee jumping. It is practiced by the indigenous of southern Pentecost Island. The local legend attributes the origin of the ritual to the legend of Tamale. He beat his woman and she ran away. She hid in a tall tree. Tamale climbed to her but as he made his final grab, she leaped. Tamale jumped after her, but while his wife had tied vines around her ankles and survived the fall, he crushed to the soil. Men and boys, some as young as seven years, leap from the platforms in a show of strength and a statement to women that they can never be tricked again. The locals keep the ceremony to ensure a good crop of yams, their main food. As the vines stretch, the land divers' heads curl under and their shoulders touch the ground, making it fertile for the following year's yam harvest. Every year, as soon as the first yam crop begins to show its green tips in early April, islanders begin building at least one huge wooden tower in each village, often as high as 25 m. The ceremony lasts one or two days from April to early June. Only circumcised men jump from these towers with only two long, elastic vines tied to their ankles to break the fall.

The divers' hair is meant to touch the ground to fertilize it. Fundamentally, all the men of the village execute the ritual. It occurs annually but it can be canceled for various reasons: too many men gone to work on plantations, rebuilding of a common house, late land works due to rainfalls, yam's composition. When the ceremony is to take place, the villagers look for a site to build the tower. The main condition is finding a slope with a moderate bias. One that is too steep would harden the work; one too low would amplify the risks during the jump. The tower has as central pillar a tree trunk cleaned from branches. About 12 trunks 12-25 m tall are planted around the main trunk. The trunks are bound only with branches and vines, very elastic after the rainy season. The tower is rectangular till 16 m and after that it curves until the height of 25 m. The tower is divided horizontally in 12 levels, every part corresponding to a part of the body from ankle to head. On these levels platforms of woven leaves and branches from where the men will jump are placed. The last platform is situated on the highest level. Every man builds his own platform, using 2 trunks of about 3 m in length and chooses the height from where he wants to jump and he can perform this several times if he wishes to do so. The ground where the performers will land is previously prepared, all the rocks being removed. The soil is crumbled to a depth of 20 cm. The 7-8 year old boys are the first to jump from lower platforms at a height of 6 m. Men will jump from upper platforms. As each man mentally prepares himself to jump, his friends tie vines to his ankles and when he raises his hands the people below stop their singing, dancing and whistling. Before diving he tells the crowd his most intimate thoughts, which may include family and marital problems. Because these could be his last words the women below remain silent despite any public revealing of family secrets. Each performer crosses his arms over his chest and leans forward until he falls over the edge. When his body becomes horizontal, he jumps out as far as he can, avoiding impact. If the diver were to fall straight down, he would hit the ground before being restrained by the vines, because they are measured some extra feet. The extra couple of feet added to the dive by jumping out enable the ropes to pull back the diver. Sometimes, the vine breaks but the slope and the loosened soil will avoid severe accidents. Usually, everybody's all right at the end of the ritual, except for some scratched ankles. Only one land diver is known to have died during a visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 1974 when the Vanuatu was still a British colony. This occurred during a dry season, when vines were drier and less elastic and several of them broke. The Vanuatu government forbade the N'gol in 1995 as it had become too commercialized and wanted to keep the ritual's cultural value. Two sites at Pangli and Rangasusu, set aside for the entertainment of tourists, are the only ones where now locals from all around the island can execute their ritual. On the island of Malekula the tribes of Namba have practiced cannibalism 'till 1974. Until a few years ago they used to tie the heads of the male infants so that they could grow "beautiful" long skulls. One of the social issues of Vanuatu is kava, a bitter peppery concoction famous for its medicinal, stress-relieving but also hallucinogenic properties, inducing effects similar to alcohol intake. It can induce severe liver toxicity to some people. Kava plays an important role in the Vanuatu culture, remaining an essential evening ritual. The roots of the Piper methysticum plant are washed, chopped, mashed (best with a dry coral stick) and strained into coconut cups. The onset of kava is 20-30 minutes, with effects usually lasting for two hours, but sometimes even up to eight hours after ingestion. In a survey made in 2006, Vanuatu was found to be the country with the happiest people on the planet, considering personal satisfaction, longevity and impact on the environment: the average lifespan is about 70 years and the environment is largely unspoiled. And if you go now to Vanuatu, they won't serve you human flesh, but kava and perhaps palolo, the eggs and sperm of a marine ringed worm, mucous and rich in vitamins, minerals, proteins and fats. Some westerners say about the palolo's taste to be fishy, scratchy, salty, tart, even like a mix of seaweed and... caviar (!), but it may also be a strange taste and most westerners reject it.