

Medical Mission 3 (July 2009) - A Summary

Change of Crew

Early July saw the changing of the guard aboard Chimere. After successfully transporting medical team 2 along the northern coast of Ambae (throughout the second half of June), the crew of 6, led by Bob Brenac, flew home to Australia. In their place came a fresh contingent, comprising Robert Latimer, Mike Clarke, Terrence Mackaness, Chris Martinu, Johanna Lewis and Graeme Duke.

The task ahead involved something of a "medical milk run", north through the numerous islands of the Banks and Torres.

Often referred to as the forgotten islands, the Banks and Torres Groups comprise the two large islands of Gaua (aka Santa Maria) and Vanua Lava, plus a myriad of smaller islands, many no more than dots on the map. Knowledge of some islands and coastlines is scarce, with the charts, cruising guides and Admiralty Pilot offering little assistance. In these cases, local knowledge would be of particular value.

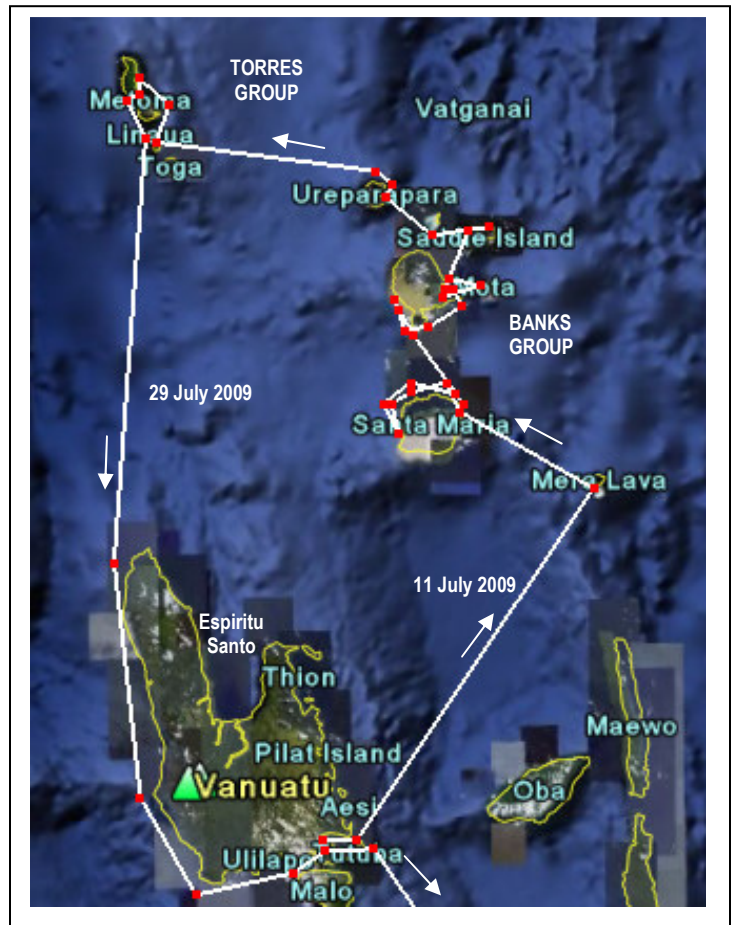
The Task Ahead

The agenda for the third medical mission was to first transport a Ni-van medical team (supported by crew member Dr Graeme Duke) from Luganville on Saturday 11 July, conducting clinics on Mere Lava and Gaua, before meeting up with the Australian medical volunteers on Friday 17 July, also on Gaua, before transporting them north, island-hopping all the way.

The Ni-van and Aussie volunteer medical personnel (including Dr Graeme Duke) would then fly home from the northern island of Loh on 30 July, with the remaining crew delivering the boat, (first) back to Luganville, then onto Pt Vila for 6 August.

The plan was to conduct eye and medical health clinics at the following locations: (refer to the map for further details)

- Mere Lava Is** - Villages of Lequel and Tasmal on north coast
- Gaua Is** (aka Santa Maria) - Village of Tolap on the west coast & Losolava on northeast coast
- Vanua Lava Is** - Villages of Vureas Bay & Vatrata on the west coast & Sola on the east coast
- Mota Is** - Single clinic at village on north coast
- Mota Lava Is** - Single clinic at village on north west coast
- Ureparapara** - Clinic at Dives Bay inside crater and at West coast village of Lehali
- Loh Is** - (Torres Group)
- Hui Is** - (Torres Group)



Tegua Is - (Torres Group)

Toga Is - (Torres Group)

First Stop - Mere Lava

The afternoon of Saturday 11 July came around soon enough and after preparing for sea, we made our way east along the Second Channel, out of Lugonville and then north east about 100 mile, overnight, to the island of Mere Lava. The sun was setting a glorious red behind us as we cleared the harbour.

The medical team was to comprise, Richard, Jessy and up to three Government health works, however, for various reasons the Government health workers were not able to join us. Instead we were joined by a young German backpacker, Simon, who'd met the Government health worker, Franklin, in a Kava Bar the day before and was told he could go in his place. This was on account of Simon's qualifications as an electrician and mechanic and because the hospital generator at Sola on Vanua Lava was not working (read: had never worked). The hope was that maybe Simon could get it working where others before had failed.

We wouldn't be in Sola for another week, but given Simon's skills, the fact that we had a spare bunk aboard and I'd learnt to basically "go with the flow", I introduced myself, had a brief chat and welcomed him as part of the team.

Mere Lava appeared grey in the morning mist, rising from a grey sea, with grey clouds shrouding the top half of the 1,000 metre peak which dominates this 15km x 10km roundish island.

It's an island that rates special mention because it left such a lasting impression on all of us. Maybe it was the fact that it was our first island of the tour; a welcome sight after a long (first) night at sea. Or maybe the fact that it is just so remote, with almost no reference to it in any available cruising guides. But in the end, I think it left an impression because of the overwhelmingly joyful, generous and enthusiastic welcome we received and the way we were received into their village-world so completely.



Over 1,000m high, Mere Lava appears through the morning mist



The amazing welcome at Mere Lava

Clinics were conducted in two villages along the coast and in addition we ran two "movie nights", involving the transportation of our portable generator, projector, computer and sound system from the yacht to the village, high up the mountain slope and a long way from the rocky headland, with surging swell, which passed for a dinghy "landing spot".

Whilst each clinic focuses on eyecare and the provision of glasses, patients also have their general health checked, including blood pressure

and blood sugar levels. During one of these checks Graeme discovered a pregnant young woman requiring a caesarian delivery in about 14 days, but with no available facilities locally and no way to get off the island. What's more, there hadn't been a visiting boat for many months and even if the small local runabout had fuel, it was over 30 miles to the nearest island with an airstrip and the open sea was too rough.

It's a long story, but when we sailed off the next morning the young mother-to-be, Linda, was with us, along with her mother, Rose. We carried them the 6 hours to the town of Losolava on the island of Gaua, where the Vanuatu Prevention of Blindness Project (using money raised by Graeme Duke in his walk4icare bushwalk) paid for a flight to the hospital at Luganville.



Regular visitors at Mere Lava



Jo with new friends at Mere Lava

Travelling North

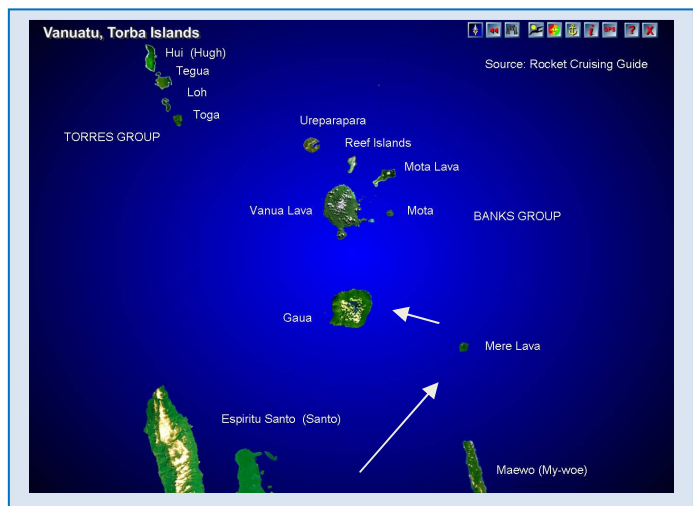
Evacuating Linda and her mother Rose caused us to rearrange our clinics on the island of Gaua, requiring us to sail the next day to the west coast of the island, to conduct a clinic in the village of Tolap, (where we had intended to work the previous day) and then back to where we started, at Losolava the day after, where we would conduct another clinic, while meeting up with the arriving Australian volunteers - Ann and Ian, Rochelle, Janelle, Tim and Helen - plus of course, Don and Meg

Our time at Losolava coincided with Richard Tatwin's assistant Jessy, coming down with a bout of malaria, which caused her to be placed on

some heavy-duty medications and flown out. Fortunately, she recovered quickly and was back at work within 3 days.

While the clinic was underway, Simon and Robert set about re-building the stairs at the front of the local clinic, a task made easier by the presence of suitable timber under a nearby house and plenty of tools and fasteners on board Chimere.

While on the west coast of Gaua a man requiring a lift to our next destination, Vanua Lava, introduced himself to us. It was Paramount Chief John Star, of West Gaua. He was heading to a meeting of chiefs where issues of economic sustainability would be discussed. John Star was a quiet, unassuming man, who explained many things to us about the role of the chief and life in Vanuatu.





Jo fixes hair clips to a canoe baby, Vureas Bay

Vanua Lava

The trip north to the west coast of Vanua Lava, saw us do clinics in two places, Vureas Bay and a bit further north at Vatrata. We also dropped in at the well-named Waterfall Bay, an hour or two up the coast, where Don and Meg were reacquainted with the young lad Adison who was taken to Australia three years earlier for life saving cranial/facial surgery. The visit was an emotional one, given that this boy, from this incredibly remote part of the world, had spent nearly a year with the MacRailds in Australia. It was also a chance for Dr Graeme Duke to make an assessment of the boy's medical progress, which, when you see the "before" photos, is nothing short of a miracle.



Don and Meg with young Adison, Waterfall Bay, Vanua Lava

Leaving the remote west coast of Vanua Lava early in the morning, it was 4 hours before we had the medical team safely anchored in Sola on the east coast. But not before experiencing some lumpy weather around the southern tip of the island into a stiff south east breeze.



Waterfall Bay, Vanua Lava

While in Sola, our German backpacker man, Simon, and crewmember Chris had a look at the silent generator up at the hospital. In keeping with others before them, they were not able to get it working, and the story we heard was that it hadn't worked from the day it was installed a few years earlier.

Mota

What we thought would be a short hop out to the island of Mota, turned out to be an exercise in endurance, with the 10 short miles taking around 3 hours into 30+knot winds and very high seas.

Aboard for the day was a Government Womens' Health Worker, Cheryl, who had planned to travel to Mota the same day as us, however, her (local boat) transport had been cancelled on account of the rough weather. Accompanying Cheryl was a Radio Vanuatu reporter, Marie and a retired Scottish nurse, who was backpacker her way around the world and who had offered her service for the day.

Once at Mota, we were very relieved to discover some sheltered water close in the lee of the island, with a suitable spot to drop the anchor – at least for the duration of the clinic.

The return trip took a little over one hour, with our speed for a brief moment, down the face of a wave, tipping 10.1 knots.

The next day, Wednesday 22 July, was declared a "layday", which gave us a chance to tidy up the ship and for the medical volunteers to do some more work at the Sola hospital. One particular patient was a young lad who had broken his wrist some days before (by falling out of a tree) and who they'd seen on the other side of the island. (Vureas Bay) The boy and his father walked the 3 hours across the island to Sola and the lad was very brave as Ian and Graeme did the best they could to re-set and plaster the arm, without an x-ray and with minimal equipment.



Approaching Mota – three hours to cover 10 miles, but just one hour for the return journey.

Mota Lava & Ureparapara

All aboard again for an early morning start, with medical volunteers, their packs, day packs and all the boxes stowed for the relatively short sail out to Mota Lava.

Again, we were very well received on this island and ran two clinics due to the demand and the fact that they had lost their nurse practitioner to the Torres Group up north and were without any local medical assistance.



Mota – one of the better landing spots

Ian and Graeme were presented with another medical emergency. This time it was a woman who arrived for an eye check, and when asked about her general health it was discovered she had a gangrenous finger - which had been getting steadily worse since suffering an accident 2 weeks before.

Fortunately, Ian (supported by Graeme) was able to amputate the worst of the infection with all the required anesthetics, antibiotics and materials being carried aboard.



Dr Ian, patient and happy husband after successful figure amputation, Mota Lava

Mota Lava was another one of those places where anchorages were a long way from the village. Local knowledge, in particular from a chap called Johnny, who was in charge of security on the island and the grandson of the paramount chief, was a valuable addition.

The trip north to Ureparapara was done in the afternoon, with our arrival coinciding with the setting sun, leaving just enough time to do the usual unloading of passengers, bags and medical boxes before dark.

Our anchorage here was at Dives Bay, at the head of the wide inlet that extends in from the sea and which is totally surrounded by the steep volcanic rim of this



Sailing into Ureparapara was truly a highlight

extinct volcano; truly a spectacular spot. A successful clinic was conducted here and to ensure the village on the outside perimeter of the round volcanic island was also serviced, we attached our 15hp outboard to the back of a local fiberglass boat (and provided fuel) so a team could make the hour journey, out and around to the west coast.

Further North to the Torres

Our time at Ureparapara ended with the village of Dives Bay putting on a farewell meal, with our plan at the conclusion of this, being to travel overnight to the island of Loh in the Torres Group.

Apprehension on the part of some medical volunteers was placated with some soothing words - and possibly the promise of chocolate - and whilst it wasn't the most comfortable of nights, (after all, it was always going to be a challenge squeezing 15 people, plus their gear and all the medical boxes aboard for a comfy night when available bunks extended to "approximately" seven) the next day was Sunday and a day of rest.

Our three days in the Torres was a full-on experience, made more challenging because, again, the anchorages were not conveniently located near the villages and because the wind remained strong from the south east and the seas were persistently high.



Further north to the Torres Group



Crew member, Dr Graeme Duke and health worker Zebulon in the Torres Group

After the much needed Sunday-Restday we took aboard the local health practitioner, Zebulon (who until quite recently had been located at Mota Lava for the past 18 years) plus local boatman Atchin and his offsider Stalyn, along with the medical volunteers, for a dash north 18 miles to the island of Hui.

The village where the clinic was to be conducted sat halfway along the weather east coast, behind the small island/peninsular of Nenia, (aka Batsale Island). No mention of the anchorage appeared in any of our cruising guides, or on the chart, and so it was with local knowledge that we negotiated the narrow entrance to a pocket-sized indentation on the coast surrounded by headlands and a rock ledge on which the swell broke relentlessly just a short distance away.

The clinic was very well received, given their isolation and as we departed we were told we were the first yacht to have anchored in their bay. Unfortunately our departure from the island was later in the day than planned, due to the number of people seen at the clinic. We made good time, but still we arrived in darkness back at our Loh Island anchorage, requiring all of our "passengers" to walk a kilometre or so back to their onshore, bungalow accommodation.



Boat man Atchin gets to drive

A clinic was conducted the next day at the southern island of Toga, however, this was done by means of the local fiberglass boat, again, equipped with our outboard motor and fuel. The local boat man, Atchin, took the medical party south and again the strong south east winds caused problems, requiring him to anchor on the northern tip of the island with the medical team walking overland, 2 hours to the village and 2 hours back. To say it was a big day for the volunteers is something of an understatement, particularly coming on the back of the work on Hui the day before.



Optometrist volunteer Tim and eye-care project co-ordinator Richard Tatwin proving that not all Ni-vans can paddle a canoe

The planned clinic on the nearby island of Tegua was cancelled due to a lack of time, and again the strong south east wind, making access to the village difficult. We did, however, loan the outboard and more fuel again to Atchin, who was able to dash across to the island in order to evacuate a woman who was expecting a baby in the next few days. Wednesday 29th July was our last day in the Torres and after retrieving our outboard motor from the local boat, saying good-bye to the medical team and our Ni-van friends, and getting Chimere ship-shape, we began the two day voyage south to Santo around 7:00pm.



The crew "after" shot, Graeme, Terrence, Jo, Mike, Chris and Rob

The medical team would fly out two days later, with Chris and Jo leaving Chimere in Luganville and Andrew joining us on 3 August for the three day hop further south back to Port Vila.

A summary of the medical stats for the tour are as follows:

1. Patients seen

626 patient seen in 15 clinics across Banks & Torres.
Plus 242 school children screened = 869 total patients.

2. The estimated prevalence rates were:

Hypertension 18%
Confirmed or suspected diabetes 12%
This is worrying but useful information.



Local fast boat to the nearby island of Toga

3. Referral rates

10% overall, including

Eye surgery 6%

Other surgery: 2%

Other referrals for specialist care 2%

And 20% need follow-up or review when the Team returns in 2-3yrs.

Finally, and not to be "outdone", we had 3 unwell out of 15 team members = 20% incidence of illness or injury! The good news is that all recovered.

So ended our transport work with Medical Team 3.

Robert Latimer

www.msm.org.au



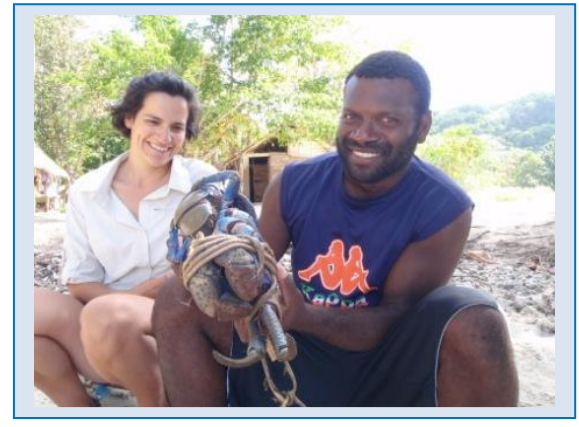
Tour 3 medical team
Back l-r, Meg, Ann, Tim, Iain, Graeme, Richard
Front l-r, Helen, Rochelle, Janelle, Don



"Before" and "after" shots of the Loso Lava clinic front steps at Gaua.
While the medicos worked inside, the crew of Chimere worked outside building new stairs



Graeme with some happy patients



Local project coordinator Richard Tatwin holds a well secured coconut crab while Jo looks on