



At sea: Australian yacht Chimere, used by Medical Sailing Ministries, arriving in Port Vila; Rob Latimer on the Chimere; crew members load supplies; a Chimere crewman takes a dip with Ni-Vanuatu people.

for periods of one month for the sailors and two weeks for the medicos. Each mission has five sailing crews – including delivery there and back, and three medical teams – a total of 35 volunteers, for its four-month program.

“We try to be as self-funding as possible,” organiser Rob Latimer says. “Word gets out and it is amazing, the generosity of people and their willingness to get involved!”

On the first leg of last year’s trip, the team sailed for two weeks around remote islands before a fresh crew flew into Port Vila for the next stage.

In that first fortnight, the team visited four small islands, dispensing 41 sets of spectacles and performing 49 dental extractions in more than 200 individual consultations.

For the next leg the team sailed north from Port Vila, using the prevailing south-east wind to push on to the Maskelynes and the west coast of Malekula Island. The final leg ventured north through the Banks Group and finally, to the very remote “forgotten” Torres Group of islands.

In total, 33 clinics were conducted on 15 separate islands with more than 1500 people receiving treatment, including 579 extractions and 550 pairs of glasses.

The work of Medical Sailing Ministries complements other medical teams who fly into grass airfields and use local boats and trucks to reach communities on the 80 or so islands stretching more than 800 kilometres from north to south.

Some of the islands of Vanuatu have been populated for thousands of years but others are uninhabited.

The commonly held theory of Vanuatu’s prehistory from archaeological evidence supports that people speaking Austronesian languages first came to the islands 4000 to 6000 years ago. Pottery fragments have been found dating back to 1300BC.

The chain of islands was named the New Hebrides by Captain Cook in 1774.

France and Britain agreed in 1906 to administer the islands jointly, under a unique form of government known as a condominium. The nation gained independence in 1980 and celebrates the event on July 30 each year.

Vanuatu’s friendly people attract a huge volume of visitors – including at least five cruise ships a month on average – and divers who come to swim over the wrecks of World War II ships and aircraft and enjoy the pristine clear water.

English and French are spoken throughout Vanuatu, along with over 100 regional languages. However, most people speak the national language known as Bislama – a pidgin language of English origins but with a very local flavour when it comes to spelling, grammar and pronunciation.

In 2004, Latimer, a Melbourne financial planner, was inspired by an article about island-hopping yachts carrying medical teams from a group known as Pacific Yacht Ministries.

“I was hit by this thought that I’d love to do that but at the time I had no boat, no knowledge of Vanuatu and no medical background,” he says.

He had grown up sailing Bass Strait with its notoriously rough seas but it wasn’t until 2009 that he finally had the boat and resources to start Medical Sailing Ministries.

“Using the yacht means the medical team can get to some of the more remote areas where before it was quite risky, or they simply couldn’t go there,” he says.

Now they can, on the yacht he co-owns – but it’s not always smooth sailing.

“We’ve had some terrible weather during the last mission,” Latimer says.

“On the first tour last year we planned to visit seven

islands but unfortunately there were three [others] we could not get to because it was too rough.

“That was very disappointing, because they don’t get much attention.

“At one island that’s just like a big pinnacle rising from the sea, we came in close but the wind bullets off the island were hitting us at about 60 knots and we realised it was too dangerous to stop there.”

The Chimere is clearly powered by goodwill, especially considering the cramped quarters onboard for the team of nine Australians and two indigenous (Ni-Van) health workers who spend two weeks together over the course of each tour.

“Volunteers come from all walks of life, but often it’s people who’ve got to a certain age, they’re established and can take some time off work,” Rob Latimer says.

“Many people are looking to do things that are worthwhile, where they can utilise their skills. You just have to create something they can get aboard.”

The Chimere has completed three missions, with the previous ones in 2009 and 2010.

Latimer recalls the joy of children watching *Ice Age* in a remote village on a previous voyage. “That island is just a cone that sticks up out of the sea – four kilometres wide and one kilometre high,” he says.

“While we were showing movies in a bamboo hut, our team doctor had diagnosed that a woman there needed a caesarean delivery in a few weeks’ time.

“We were the first boat they’d seen in six months and we offered to help her but she had already left to walk back to her village, two hours away.

“Someone went through the night to collect her and at 7am the next morning she was standing on the rock ledge with her mother, waiting to be picked up. It’s a volcanic island so there were no sandy beaches to pull up on.

“We took her further north to an island with a grass airstrip and then arranged her flight to a hospital!”

The following year the crew went out of their way to check up on the young woman’s progress but the baby had not survived.

Rob Latimer recalls an unusual conversation with the baby’s father who related that his sister – the young woman’s aunt – had given birth to twins around the same time. “In a matter-of-fact way he went on to say, ‘because she have two babies and my daughter’s baby die, she give her one of hers’ – a very practical ‘village solution!’”

At another island Rob Latimer told this story to the local nurse who had assisted two mothers who delivered around the same time – one to her fifth son, the other to her fifth daughter. The nurse said each mother was keen to have a baby of the opposite sex, so before going home to their village they swapped babies.

As an adjunct to the medical clinics, Latimer also demonstrates the making of low smoke cooking stoves using mud bricks made with locally sourced clay in the villages.

Studies have shown that more people die from smoke inhalation worldwide than malaria. “So any improvement you can make on open-fire cooking must have lasting benefits,” he says.

Now Rob Latimer is keen to hear from Canberra people with sailing or medical skills – doctors, dentists, optometrists and nurses – who are interested in joining their future missions.

■ For more information on Medical Sailing Ministries visit [msm.org.au](http://msm.org.au).

■ The writer travelled to Vanuatu at his own expense.

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