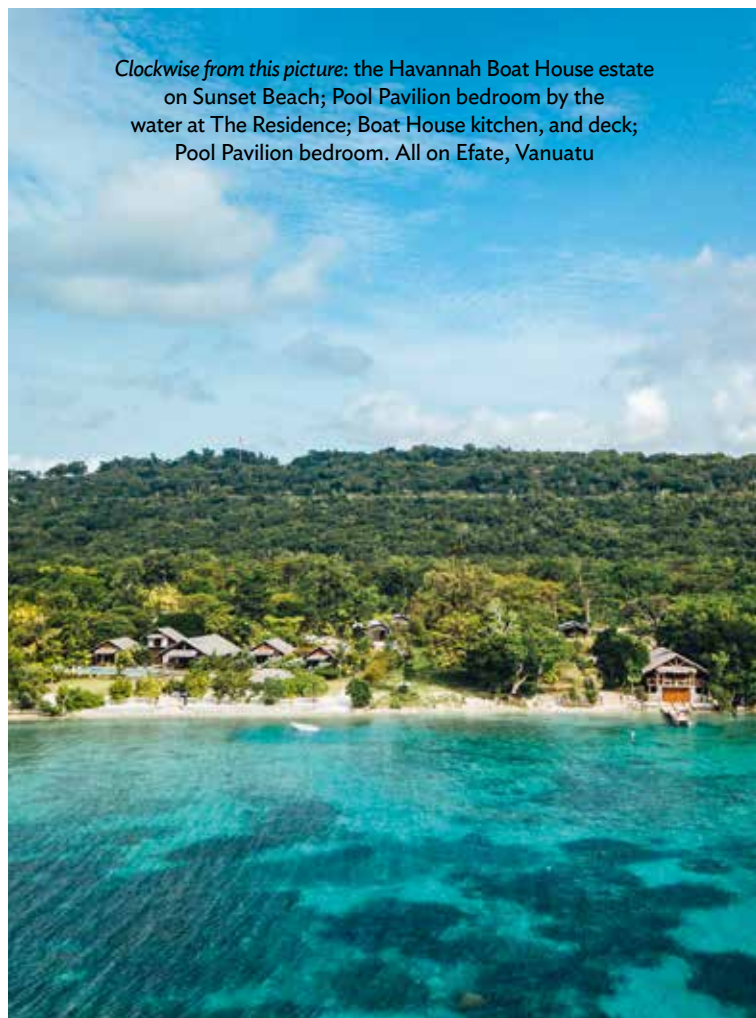


HOUSE CALL



Clockwise from this picture: the Havannah Boat House estate on Sunset Beach; Pool Pavilion bedroom by the water at The Residence; Boat House kitchen, and deck; Pool Pavilion bedroom. All on Efate, Vanuatu



TURNED INSIDE OUT

ON THIS SOUTH PACIFIC ARCHIPELAGO OF 80-ODD ISLES, A LOW-IMPACT BOLTHOLE TREADS LIGHTLY WHILE LIFTING UP THE COMMUNITY. TAKE IT OVER FOR A SLOW-MO RETREAT OF YOUR OWN

BY BRIAR JENSEN



PHOTOGRAPHS: GROOVY BANANA



THE NATION OF VANUATU CAN BE a little hazy in the imagination. A small Rorschach test of blobs south of the Solomons and east of Australia, it is made up of scores of islands dappled across 808 miles of ocean; many are inhabited by the sea-faring Melanesian people, who arrived here a couple of millennia before European explorers began naming them. There are many, many languages, but only three official ones: English, French and Bislama, the Creole dialect. In the latter, the Havannah Boat House, pitched among poinciana trees that flame with cherry-burst blossom on a beach named for its sunsets, is known as *haus blong Miranda*.

While the isles are among the least-visited places in the world, off-track to most, they are a manageable three-and-a-half-hour flight from Sydney. As well as New Zealanders and New Caledonians, they drew in South Australian visual artist Miranda Hodge and her family, who were initially attracted by the year-round warm waters but then found an affinity with the remoteness and sudden, unassuming friendliness of the locals. 'People are always ready to stop for a *storian*, or chat, and pass the time of day,' Hodge tells me during my visit last year. She built her house on the main island of Efate, intending to come every summer, but ended up living in Vanuatu for three years. 'My young daughter spent her weekends playing in waterfalls and jumping in muddy puddles during torrential rain, away from devices.'

TO ENCOURAGE THE SUCCESS OF THE YAM HARVEST ON PENTECOST ISLAND, MEN LEAP OFF PRECARIOUS WOODEN TOWERS 98FT HIGH, TREE VINES TIED TO THEIR ANKLES

Set on the quiet north-western Havannah Harbour, the property is laid out like a mini village, with four buildings and a living space scattered between the swimming pool and paths of crushed coral and wild frangipani, plus a self-contained Boat House at the water's edge. It was designed by sustainable Australian studio Troppo Architects, which Hodge discovered while studying architecture at the University of Adelaide. 'They were like rock stars to me,' she says, 'taking a moral approach and creating places in sympathy with the surrounding culture.' Unbeknown to her, the practice was already involved in community projects on Efate when she approached them.

The family moved to Vanuatu for the last six months of building so that Hodge, who styled the interiors, could source *kastom* crafts – *kastom* being the catch-all expression used for island traditions from medicine to economics, which has also been picked up as a rallying call for national, post-colonial identity. 'I wanted to embrace materials that would withstand the tropical weather,' she says. 'This took me to villages such as Lelepa, where women make incredible things using pandanus plants, and Mangaliliu, where the men weave bamboo.'

Roofs of *natangoura* thatch and *kwila* hardwood floors are striking and practical. There's no glass – laced-bamboo panels and louvre doors slide open to capture breezes and reduce wind pressure during cyclones. In my indoor-outdoor bathroom, screened by a walled garden courtyard, is a sunken tub from where I stargaze long into the night. In the mornings, birdsong seeps through the timber walls. The ebb and flow of time here is restorative. After morning yoga on the grass I kayak from the beach, drifting over iridescent damselfish darting between staghorn coral and

shadowing a turtle until it flippers away. Breakfast on my return is fruit, chia-seed yogurt and coffee beside the pool. Snacks of tuna carpaccio and *kumala* (sweet potato) chips topped with mango salsa are served with cocktails, while supper is a feast of fish curry with coconut rice in the open-sided *nakamal* on the sand.

Within a month of Havannah Boat House's completion in 2015, Vanuatu was hit by Cyclone Pam – one of the most powerful of its kind ever recorded in the South Pacific. Such was the integrity of the property's design, though, that it only suffered a ruffled roof. Friends and neighbours were not so fortunate, and many were left homeless. Hodge co-ordinated emergency aid and fundraising, then built an on-site creative studio called The Making Place. 'I wanted to give local artisans a place to work when they couldn't earn a living after the cyclone.' Today she collaborates with a potter, weaver, fabric artist and woodcarver, helping them to diversify their pieces and reach new markets – all are happy to run workshops for guests. As fishermen start to favour modern boats, demand for outrigger canoes whittled from a single tree has waned. 'The carver was pleased to be able to use his canoe-shaping skills in a different way.'

In the main villa, lampshades make sculptural statements and bush logs double as stools and tables. Bespoke ceramics and hand-painted materials that reflect Hodge's love of black-and-white stripes are set alongside brass urns and found items: a jar of buffed glass,

including Coca-Cola bottles that had been tossed into the harbour by American sailors in World War II; a framed fragment of Lapita pottery from the earliest settlers here about 3,300 years ago, discovered while planting the garden. In 2004, an archaeological dig near the capital Port Vila unearthed similar works.

The estate is well placed for exploring neighbouring isles. Away from Efate and Espiritu Santo, there's little infrastructure and ni-Vanuatu people live a subsistence village lifestyle. There are freshwater blue holes on Santo; women's water music on the Banks Islands, performed by beating the sea with their hands; and ritual land diving on Pentecost, which inspired bungee jumping (to encourage the success of the yam harvest, men leap off precarious wooden towers up to 98ft high, tree vines tied to their ankles). 'And some of the best snorkelling in the world is at the back of Lelepa island,' says Hodge. 'Emao has ancient stone fish traps, while on Nguna you can take a guided walk up an extinct volcano.'

Instead, I choose to spend time at The Making Place with Brent Malessas, Efate's only professional ni-Van potter. While I fumble to press the slab into a recognisable plate, Malessas explains how Melanesian life revolves around extended family. 'Everyone grows their own food, with extra to sell at the market to help pay school fees,' he says, squeezing the spinning clay, easing it outwards to form an elegant bowl. Havannah Boat House may look like an archetypal beach escape, but it's a place that is rooted in the community and spirit of this far-flung archipelago. 📍

Havannah Boat House is available to rent on an all-inclusive basis from about £1,950 per night (three nights minimum; sleeps 12). havannahboathouse.com

Opposite, clockwise from top left: woven lampshade in The Tree House bedroom at The Residence; beachside pool; The Making Place design studio; pool deck; sunken outdoor bathtub at the Pool Pavilion; pathway to The Residence; bespoke ceramics; The Residence living area; artwork in progress