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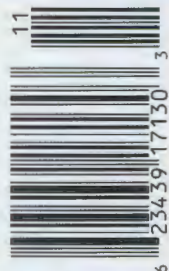
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*Opposite: Tanna is a spiritual Disneyland. This page: Followers of Fred partake in a traditional dance, exactly as another local diety, John Frum, advocated.*



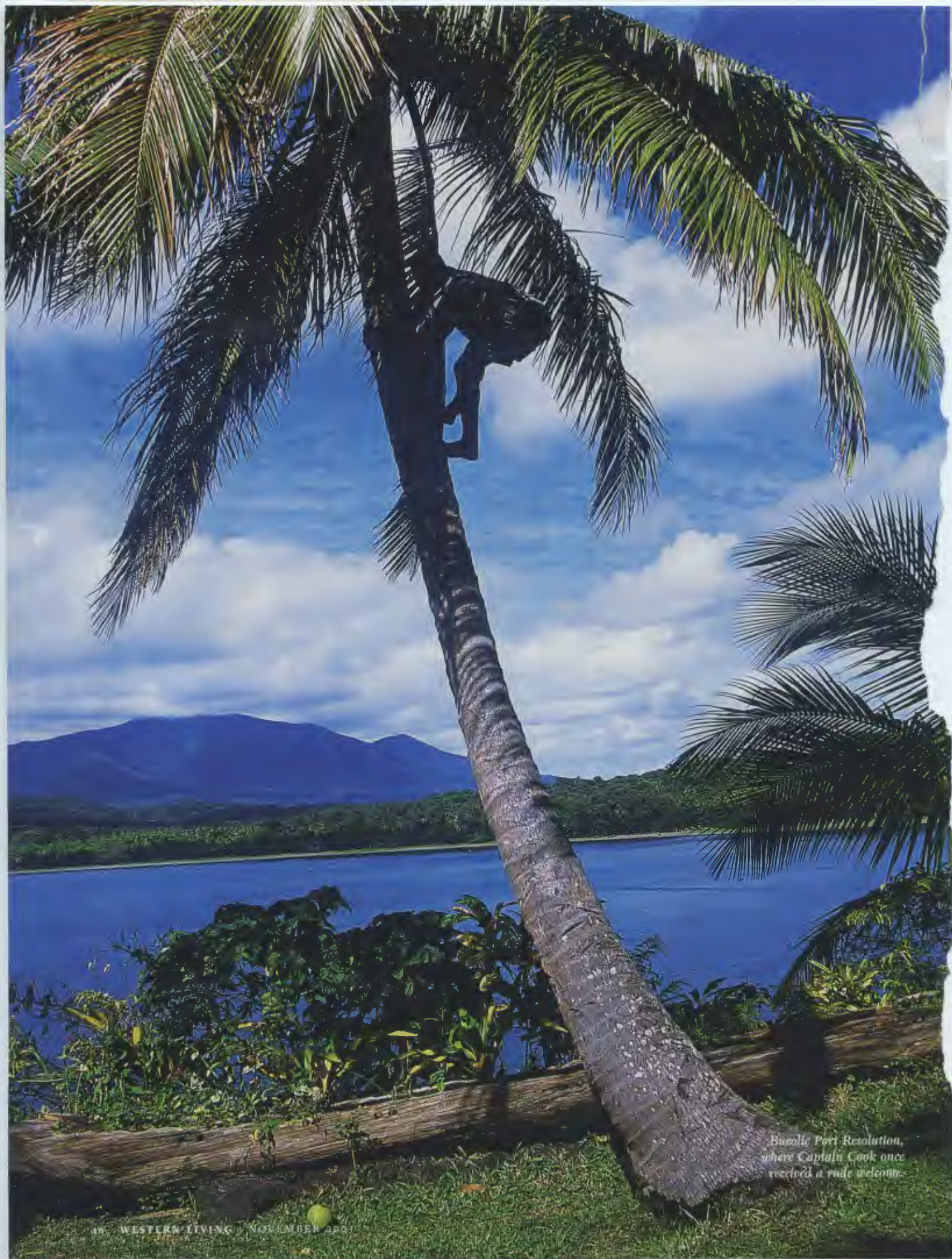
sun—there is that. But a chance to play God makes for an even better vacation thrill.

HEAVEN  
can

wait

*story & photographs by* CHARLES MONTGOMERY





*Buzolle Port Resolution,  
where Captain Cook once  
received a rude welcome.*



# I MET THE DOCTOR JUST AS THE SUN WAS SINKING BEYOND THE POOL BAR AT IRIRIKI ISLAND RESORT. I WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE CARGO CULT.

The doctor told me to forget about the cult. He had a better story, and he would share it with me if I bought him dinner.

The doctor's name was Don Fockler. He looked like he had fallen off one of the yachts the South Pacific trades blew in to Port Vila, capital of Vanuatu, the group of islands formerly called the New Hebrides. He had the Tevas, the crow's feet and the easy slouch of a man who had lived rough and was pleased about it. He could have done with a shave. He was on his way back home to Vancouver Island.

Fockler polished off a Fiji Bitter and told me how he came to meet the prophet. Six months earlier he had signed up with the Victoria-Vanuatu Physician Project, an aid group that dropped Canadian doctors, one at a time, on a volcanic lump 250 kilometres south of Port Vila. Tanna Island was not like the capital of Vanuatu, he said. It was not a place of swimming pools, cold beer and duty-free shopping. It was on the very edge of things. He had been there only a week when he received a scribbled note summoning him to a village on the far side of the island. The request was vague, but it seemed to have originated from the national police, who were so concerned about the prophet they had sailed their only frigate down from Port Vila.

The prophet's name was Fred. Apparently he had led hundreds of followers to a makeshift camp on the shoulder of Tanna's volcano. They were waiting to be carried to heaven. Or something.

"Rumour had it that Fred had gone off the deep end," said Fockler. "He was having all kinds of visions, and apparently he was up to no good."

"What kind of no good?"

"I don't know, ritual child abuse or something like that. There were all kinds of stories, but the police never found any evidence. At first I didn't realize they were looking for a reason to lock the guy up."

Befuddled but curious, Fockler had loaded two of his kids and a bag full of antipsychotic drugs into the hospital truck and driven across the island. The police weren't there, but the hospital's matron was, with a new allegation. He said the prophet had leprosy. If so, Fred would have to be removed and quarantined in order to save his neighbours from the horrific flesh-melting disease.

Fockler was met near the base of the volcano by a gauntlet of 300

of Fred's stone-faced followers, all men. He wished he had not brought his kids. The men knew why the doctor was there. Fockler used a translator to negotiate with the villagers, who reluctantly permitted him to pass. Such was the authority a foreign doctor wielded.

Fockler had barely begun to trek up the mountain when he came face to face with the prophet, who was a big man with very messy hair. It was clear that Fred had indeed suffered from leprosy. His eyebrows and hands were slightly misshapen, but the condition was obviously inactive and not contagious. They sat down by the trail. Fockler

pretended to examine the prophet's skin while actually conducting a quickie mental assessment: "I asked him if he saw visions, you know, or heard any messages, and he said 'I can't tell you that; that's the source of my power.' That pretty much shut down my psychological assessment. At least he didn't seem overtly psychotic."

Fockler must have heard the stories. He must have been told about Fred's claim to have pulled a Moses and drained the lake at the base of the volcano. About the hundreds of people who had abandoned their home villages to join the prophet. About the squalor at the mountain squat. And in those moments the doctor must also have realized that he wielded tremendous power in his diagnosis.

Should Fred stay or should he go? The doctor closed his medical case and marched back down the mountain with his children. When he reached Sulphur

Bay the crowd of 300 men was still there, waiting for his decision. Fockler decided it was not his job to do the police's dirty work—or to play God. He told the men he was not going to take Fred away. He would let them keep their prophet. The men cheered. The police sailed their frigate back to Port Vila. And Fred was left to count his visions.

Fockler looked at me and grinned.

"Now what about my dinner?" he said.

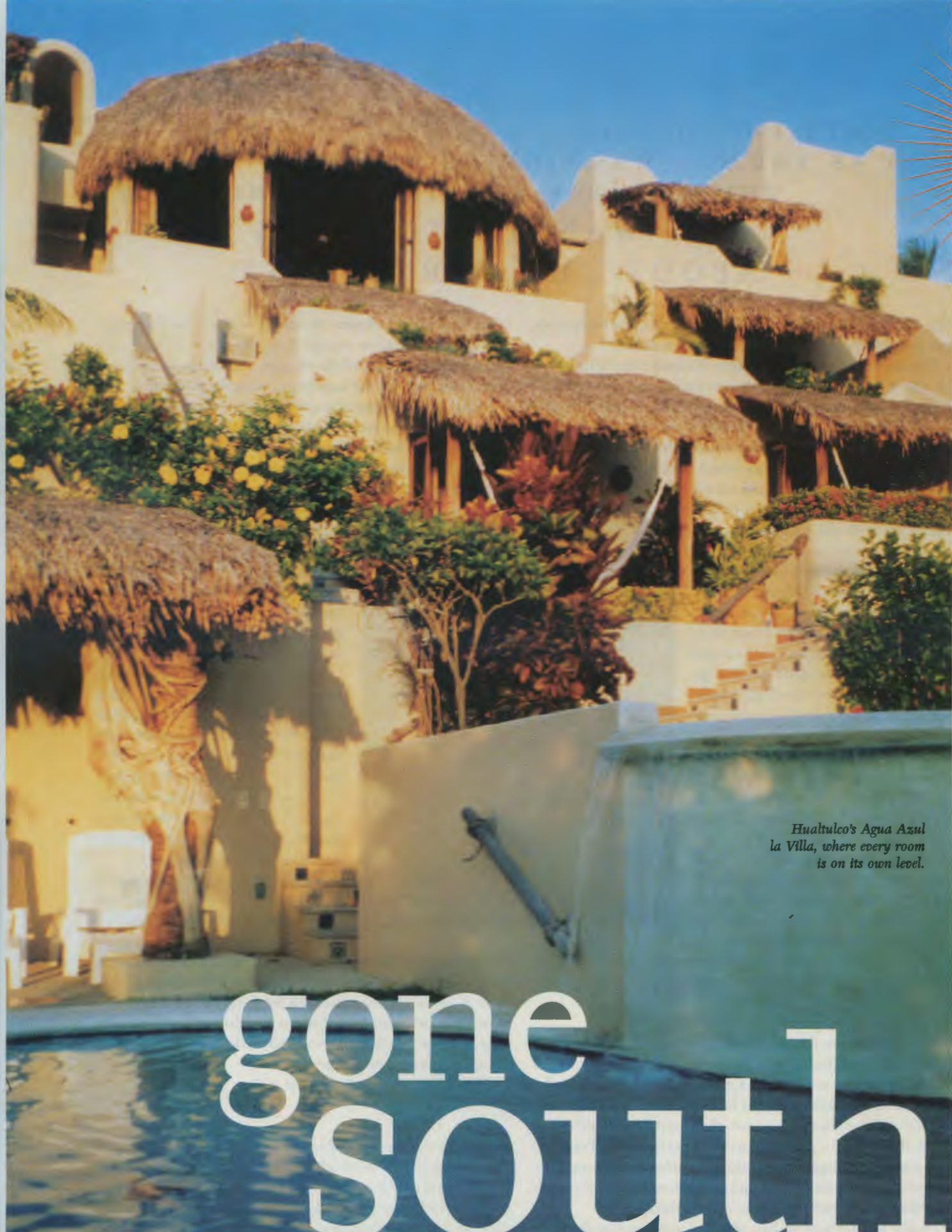
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White men have been trying to play God in Melanesia (the name given to that part of the South Pacific inhabited by black-skinned people—hence the Greek *mela*, meaning black) for nearly two centuries. By that I mean they have been alternately bombing, kidnapping and evangelizing the islanders. (Continued on page 52)



*Tanna men wearing traditional nambas—or penis sheaths.*





*Hualtulco's Agua Azul  
la Villa, where every room  
is on its own level.*

# gone south



(Continued from page 47) Especially evangelizing. The travel writer Paul Theroux once observed that rumours of cannibalism were like catnip to missionaries. It certainly seemed to be true in Melanesia.

Dozens of 19th-century missionaries perished in the archipelago. Among them were a hardy pair of Nova Scotian Presbyterians. The Reverend G.N. Gordon and his wife settled on Erromanga, a day's paddle from Tanna. The Gordons were popular until an outbreak of measles spread across the island. The locals blamed the new god, and then they ate the Gordons.

My great-grandfather cruised through Melanesia on an Anglican mission ship in 1892. I was following his route through the islands, researching a book, driven by reports that there were still some shores where the old spirits and traditions—all the things that islanders call *kastom*—still prevailed. I liked that idea. It made me feel as though the world was not so small.

Tanna was on the top of my list. It had a reputation for being a psycho-spiritual Disneyland, a place where mainline churches, holy-rolling fundamentalist preachers, pagan priests and witch doctors were still wrestling for souls. But what made Tanna the anthropologists' favourite was its cargo cult. Thousands of Tannese worshipped a spirit whose sole purpose seemed to be to quash Christianity.

The cult was born in 1941, when Vanuatu was still the New Hebrides, a colony jointly administered by Britain and France. A mysterious stranger was said to have summoned Tanna's chiefs to a secret meeting. He said they should turn their backs on the

Presbyterian missionaries who had banned their traditional dances. They should revive their old rainmaking magic and circumcision ceremonies. They should again prepare the narcotic drink kava from the roots of a local shrub, and they should guzzle it until the air was full of messages. The prophet promised that if they did all these things, he would return on a great white ship loaded with cargo from America. The man's name was John Frum.

Rumours flew: Some islanders said that John Frum was the king of America or perhaps the son of God. Others insisted that thousands of his soldiers were inside the volcano, waiting for the right moment to charge out of the bubbling caldera and chase the British

and French away. Colonial administrators were terrified the cult would lead to all-out rebellion. More than 140 followers were arrested and sent to jail in Port Vila.

Then the prophecies began to come true.

IT'S BEEN NOTED THAT  
RUMOURS OF CANNIBALISM  
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TO BE TRUE IN MELANESIA.

The American navy arrived in Port Vila shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Most of Tanna's men went to work for them. U.S. soldiers were spectacularly generous, handing out pots, pans, cigarettes and tinned meat. It was the cargo windfall the Frummers had waited for. One G.I. reportedly gave them a U.S. flag to fly above their village. He told them America would always be there to protect them from their colonial masters. For years the Frummers commemorated the bond every February 15, when the faithful donned U.S. Army surplus gear and marched in formation around the village of Sulphur Bay armed with homemade wooden rifles.

It was not hard to track down John Frum's followers. I caught a cargo boat south to Tanna, then hopped a ride across the island in the back of a pickup truck. A week after my dinner with Fockler I marched into the village of the cult's supposed leader. Isag Wan was a grizzled, bone-thin old fellow who was forever kicking at the mongrels that followed him through his hamlet of thatch huts. He wore a khaki jacket with "U.S. Army" stamped on the breast. I handed him a bag of rice and some tinned meat. The chief responded by handing me a half-coconut-shell cup full of kava.

This was not as pleasant a welcome as it might sound because the Tannese employ a distressing method of brewing their sacred drink. They feed the shrub's roots to young boys, who chew them, then regurgitate the



Fred, current  
object of Tannese  
idolization.





pulpy remains onto hankies. Water is poured over the fibre, and the drippings are collected in a coconut shell below.

The chief downed his cup in one gulp, then spat a bouquet of spray toward the forest, grunting a quiet incantation. Then it was my turn. As I drank, the phlegmish lad who had chewed my kava cleared his sinuses loudly. The kava tasted like dishwater and behaved like dental anaesthetic. My tongue went numb. After two more shells the night air began to feel like strands of gauze wrapping around me. It was exquisitely calm. Dogs and pigs wrestled in the shadows. I slept deeply on a bed of grass mats.

In the morning the chief woke me so we could stand at attention together as the U.S. flag was raised above the village. It was Friday, he said. John Frum's day. That night the people gathered beneath the flagpole. They played guitars, danced and sang songs about John Frum. Some of them pulled grass skirts up over their shorts. The cult did not feel like a cult. The night was cheery and playful, like a high-school sock hop. Nobody seemed to know—or particularly care—if John Frum would ever be conjured from across the sea.

When I cornered Isag Wan to ask him about Frum, he was much keener to rant about the prophet Fred. "Fred is not a real prophet," the chief told me. (Actually he said, "Fred hemi no stap wan prophet," using a pidgin that employs English words and island grammar.) "I know where Fred's power comes from. He is using the power of the black sea snake to trick us all."

It would be impossible for me to catalogue all the chief's accusations, but these were his key points: Fred had used some kind of magic



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involving the killing of 19 pigs to drain the lake at the bottom of the volcano Yasur. The resulting flood washed away several houses in Sulphur Bay. Fred had promised to turn all the old men of Sulphur Bay into children, but that was a lie because the old men were clearly still old men. Fred also promised that if all the people followed him to the shoulder of the volcano Jesus would come and take them all to heaven. That hadn't happened yet either.

Fred had eclipsed John Frum as the overriding concern on the island. Everyone had a rumour to pass on: Some accused Fred of cursing people. Others said that Fred was a pervert: according to one story, Fred enjoyed sitting in a pit above which were placed two thin boards. Women were forced to step across those boards so Fred could peer up their skirts. One Mormon missionary told me that Fred had thrown babies into the volcano.

Those were rumours. What seemed more alarming to me was the effect the prophet was having on human geography. Families from all over Tanna had abandoned their gardens and their pigs in order to join Fred on the volcano. Land was going fallow. Pigs were disappearing. Things were falling apart. Meanwhile, while Fred's followers

waited for their ride to heaven, they pilfered the gardens of the villages at the base of their mountain. It was rumoured that a handful of old folks and children had already died up at Fred's camp. People said the Canadian doctor could have put a stop to this. But he did not.

Of course I needed to meet Fred. The best way to reach his camp was a trail from Port Resolution, on the far side of the volcano. I left Sulphur Bay on foot. I walked to the base of the volcano. There was

a mile-wide plain of ash and scoured earth where once had been a lake. Yasur rose in the middle of it all like a great Saharan dune.

A Land Cruiser rumbled toward me across the plain. I hailed it and got in. We

were halfway across the ash plain when a deafening explosion shattered the afternoon. A salvo of rocks flew out of the mountaintop like pebbles thrown up by some giant hand. The mountain belched a black mushroom of smoke, then fell quiet again. The driver swerved for a moment, then we continued on our way.

Port Resolution was a postcard. The bay glowed electric blue. Men threw nets from outrigger canoes. Steam curled from the forested eastern foothills of the volcano. The bay had not always enjoyed a reputation for friendliness. Of his reception in 1774 Captain James

## THE NEXT YEAR FRED PREDICTED THE BOMBING OF THE WORLD TRADE CENTER. WHEN THAT PROVED TRUE HIS FOLLOWERS HAD A PARADE.



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*A Tamiere native looking out towards the volcano, a source of many island myths.*

Cook wrote, "One fellow shewed us his back side in such a manner that it was not necessary to have an interpreter to explain his meaning."

I found the chief of Port Resolution lying on a grass mat on the floor of his hut, clutching his abdomen. The chief had been sick for months. His family were sure it was Fred who had caused the malady.

The people were scared of Fred. It took me three days to convince anyone to lead me to his camp. When I did find a volunteer, he took me only as far as the base of the mountain, then he complained that just looking at the prophet would make him sick. He drew a map in the dirt, and I carried on alone.

I followed a well-trodden footpath up the mountain. Coconut palms gave way to jungle, which gave way to a broken landscape of stumps, cracked coconut palms and clinging brambles. I heard screams and hoots in the forest. Children with machetes hacked branches from breadfruit trees. I saw adults too, all coming down from the mountain with empty baskets and water jugs. One old man grabbed me by the shirtsleeve and pulled me close. "Go on," he hissed in my ear. "He is waiting for you."

I followed the path through a great maze of vines and spiraling banyan roots, up a series of cliffs and onto a ridge pock-marked with vents, which steamed and oozed iron-red mud. The rain hit just as I entered the camp. It was squalid. Hundreds of grass huts jostled for space between a series of mud ravines. Children shrieked and rolled in the muck. Sores glistened on their ankles and on their heads. There was a dirt parade ground too, with a bamboo pole planted dead centre. Dangling limply from it was the U.S. flag.

A man stepped forward.



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"Fred?" I asked.

"No, I'm Alfred. Come with me."

I followed him toward a broad, open-air shelter. Trailing behind us was what appeared to be the village idiot: a quiet fellow with an abnormally large head. He made me nervous. He walked so close I could see the patches of hair missing among his dreadlocks and the tears that streamed constantly from his left eye. He wore an untidy beard and a filthy ski parka. But it was the man's head that captivated me. It was as though it had been fashioned from rubber and then squeezed at the temples, or melted, so that his forehead seemed on the verge of collapsing around his eyes. He had no eyebrows. Of course. Leprosy. This was Fred.

We sat down and I explained that I had come to help Fred share his story with the world. It was almost true.

Fred did not speak like a prophet. He mumbled in his own language like a drunken teenager. He explained that all the rumours about him were untrue. He had not been playing with black magic and curses. He had simply been passing on God's messages. As Fred dabbed at his weeping eye with a rag, Alfred translated for me:

It had started on the ocean. Fred had worked for years as a deck hand on a Taiwanese fishing trawler. One day he saw lights in the sky. They shot straight at him. Fred wasn't afraid when the lights came. He just closed his eyes and went to sleep. That's when he heard the voice. It reassured him. It gave him clues about the future. Fred knew the voice was God talking to him. The voice told him he should return to Tanna and share the messages with his neighbours.

When Fred got back to Tanna the first thing the voice said to him was that the water in the lake beneath the volcano was polluted. Fred prayed for the water to drain and it did. People began to believe in him. The next year Fred predicted the bombing of the World Trade Center towers in New York. When that prophesy came true, Fred's followers staged a sympathetic parade in Port Vila. An appreciative American yachting gave Fred the Stars and Stripes. That gave Fred extra cred with the John Frummers.

"Any more miracles?" I asked.

Fred gave a long reply. Alfred gave me the *Reader's Digest* version:

"Before Fred came back, the volcano used to explode and kill many people. But Fred

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asked God to make it stop. It did. Oh, and the hurricanes. There will be no hurricanes on Tanna for five years."

"So what are you doing up here on the mountain?"

"God told Fred to bring the people together in Unity," said Alfred. "All the churches, John Frum people and kastom people must come together—one people in Unity. So we sing John Frum songs on Wednesday, and on Sunday we go to church."

The rest of the days, I thought, his hungry followers steal food from surrounding villages.

"How long will you stay up here?"

Alfred jumped in excitedly, "Fred had a vision about that too. He saw that 12 virgin boys would be circumcised. Only then will God tell us what we should do next."

"I thought all boys on Tanna were circumcised."

"Yes, but these boys would be circumcised

by God," said Alfred, quite excited now. "The miracle has begun. The first boy has been cut. Nobody touched him. His parents found him circumcised one morning last week."

Fred offered me his hand, which was as limp and cold as an oyster, then he wandered off to gaze at the clouds. Before I left, Alfred made me promise to return with my camera so the world would have proof of Unity.

The next morning Fred preached to a rapt crowd of 400. I couldn't understand any of

**THE MINISTER  
WASN'T  
BOTHERED BY  
FRED'S  
MESSIANIC  
SIDE, NOR BY  
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TOWARD  
MAGIC, SPIRIT  
WORSHIP AND  
JOHN FRUM.  
FRED WAS  
BRINGING THE  
PEOPLE BACK  
TO THE  
CHURCH.**

it other than the words "New Jerusalem," which he shouted over and over. Encouraged by Alfred, I climbed through the brambles at the edge of the clearing and took photos. That's when I learned there was no toilet in New Jerusalem.

Fred's followers wore rags. But today he was flanked by two men in white shirts and neckties. They were Presbyterian ministers. One told me he was delighted with Fred's teaching. Half a century after the John Frummers had tossed the Presbyterians out of Sulphur Bay, Fred was bringing the people back to the church. The minister wasn't bothered by Fred's messianic side, nor by the prophet's accommodating stand toward magic, spirit worship and John Frum.

"I thought the church was opposed to kastom," I said. He laughed and slapped me on

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the back.

"The Bible tells us that one day the world will become paradise. But kastom tells us that one day Tanna will become paradise, like a new Jerusalem. Tanna people know we have two choices. We pray for both of them."

"But is your saviour Jesus or John Frum? You have to choose, don't you?"

"My friend, we know God will give the answer, and it will be one of them."

The logic was mind-boggling. The English anthropologist Ben Burt once told me that what impressed him most about Melanesians was their capacity to hold onto apparently conflicting belief systems. Island Christians thought nothing of sneaking off after church to offer sacrifices to their ancestors. It was not a sign of intellectual weakness, Burt told me. In fact it required a sophisticated mind to perform such spiritual acrobatics. All I knew was that the Tannese seemed capable of believing in just about anything. If you wanted to be a messiah, there was no better place in the world to do it than Tanna.

By midday the crowd had changed out of their rags. The men came first, banana leaves tied around their heads and bare chests shining in the sun. Women followed. Their faces were painted yellow and orange

whorls, wailing and waving tree branches at the Stars and Stripes. They charged the flag, jumped back again and raced in circles until the plaza became a maelstrom of dust and leaping bodies.

I climbed to the roof of a hut and pulled out my camera. There was Fred, sitting alone on a footstool, watching the dance with one eye and me with the other. He nodded when I pointed my camera at him. I raised the camera to my eye, and the frame was filled with

dust and shining skin. I stood up, straddling the gable of the hut, raising my arms above my head, motioning for the crowd to move closer together. The crowd responded.

"Closer!" I shouted when the dance ended. The crowd moved closer. Adrenaline rushed through my veins.

"Raise your arms to the sky," I shouted. "Not Fred, just the rest of you!" They did as they were told, sweat-drenched men, dust-caked women, (*Continued on page 69*)

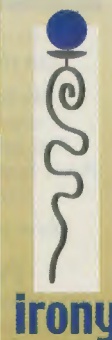
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I LOOKED DOWN  
AT THE  
PROPHET,  
STANDING  
AMONG HIS  
FOLLOWERS.  
THE DOCTOR  
HAD BEEN  
WRONG:  
**FRED WAS  
CLEARLY NUTS.**

like hornets. They wore feathers in their hair, and grass skirts dyed with rainbow checkers. Wreaths of Christmas tinsel dangled from their necks. Their dance was not like the cheery campfire rhumba Isag Wan had shown me. It was like a war. The men stamped the earth, grunted and exhaled simultaneously in great stormy whooshes. The women gathered around them in loose

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*Fred (front) and his flock, including the Presbyterian ministers directly behind him.*

(Continued from page 59) naked children, hundreds of them. Even the Presbyterian pastors stretched their arms in the air. It felt quite wonderful to see them obey.

I looked down at the prophet, standing serene among his followers. The doctor had been wrong about him. Fred was clearly nuts. His stairway to heaven was as likely to materialize as John Frum himself. His New Jerusalem was an environmental and social disaster. Fred's followers were sickly and thin. They could not stay on the mountain forever, raiding neighbours' gardens and cutting down the forest.

I gazed down upon them all. Yes, I thought, it would be easy to play God here, or play with God, as my great-grandfather had tried to do so many years ago. But when the dancers lowered their hands I didn't shout for them to abandon Fred to his visions. I did not order them to run back to their villages and their gardens, though in the moment I felt strangely sure they would obey. I took my photos and slid back down that thatch roof. I shook 200 hands and retreated, strangely humbled. Not because I was a convert to Unity. Not because I held up any hope for more spontaneous circumcisions. Not because playing God has fallen out of fashion among western travellers. But because, past the tree ferns and trembling banyans, the volcano had whistled and steamed, and the thump and rush of the dancers had obscured the eruption, and it was enough to remind me that the world was still not so small. And quite simply, I liked that idea. **W**

#### **BEING THERE**

*Prophets may come and go on Tanna, but two constants remain: the pyrotechnics of the volcano, Yasur, and Friday night John Frum dancing in Sulphur Bay. Island Safaris of Vanuatu ([www.islandsvanuatu.com](http://www.islandsvanuatu.com)) can arrange tours for both. Air Vanuatu flies weekly from Fiji to Port Vila; Van Air flies daily from there to Tanna Island. For more information contact [tourism@vanuatu.com.vu](mailto:tourism@vanuatu.com.vu) or call 678-22-685.*

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