



SUE MATURIN

Aid money is not always spent wisely. Many foolproof projects dreamed up in air-conditioned offices fall over under the tropical sun and the weight of misunderstanding. Vathe is not immune. For example, someone had advised the villagers to provide showers and flush toilets for the visitors' bungalows. But the water wasn't connected, a cyclone had toppled the water tower . . . Sue Maturin sighed. 'We really should have had dry toilets and simple, solar-bag showers.'

Alley cropping is a good idea that has so far foundered. Traditionally, villagers have cleared patches of forest to grow their crops. When the soil is exhausted, they clear another patch and shift the gardens, planting coconut palms in the abandoned clearings. But around the growing village of Matantas there is no more land to cultivate without moving into the conservation forest. So Sue Maturin came up with the idea *Forest and Bird* tour party in the forest of Vathe. They stand among the buttressed roots of a nakatambol tree.



SUE MATURIN



GARY WARE

A typical tourist bungalow in the village of Matantas.

of alley cropping, which involves planting crops between hedges of nitrogen-fixing plants. When the crop is harvested, the hedge foliage is cut and composted in the rows between, enriching the ground for the next crop, and the next and the next.

But introducing new technology into a 4000-year-old culture is difficult. Sue has high hopes for Eric, the full-time Peace Corps volunteer living at Matantas.

'He'll have to sweat away digging with the gardeners,' says Sue. 'Telling people what to do and leaving them to do it just doesn't work. You've got to get stuck in alongside them.'

Mistakes and problems aside, the Vathe conservation project is working. The people are proud of their forest and keen to show and share it with their visitors. Their friendliness and good manners put many New Zealand tour operators to shame. If sufficient tourists come – and it need not be many – their money will provide the modest wants of the village. There is no local school, and for most families, their largest financial commitment is the 18,000 vatu (\$NZ250) a year needed to send a child away for education.

Besides the Vathe conservation project, there is lots to see and do in Vanuatu.

After five days at Vathe we went to Lonnoc, to the famous Champagne beach considered one of the most beautiful beaches in the world and destination of the cruise ships. For us – happily – it was deserted, as was Elephant Island where we picnicked and swam and played card games on the fine silver sand.

Then we flew south to the cooler island of Tanna where crimson splashes of a rata-like flowering tree lit the higher altitude forest. There we looked into the crater of the active

volcano Mount Yasur which, apart from a few red splutters, was resting that night. We snorkelled through soft coral gardens where I had my most memorable encounter of the trip. For 10 minutes or more I swam slowly beside a dugong, a great, gentle beast with a calm eye and a pilot fish suckered to his belly.

Finally we returned to Port Vila on the island of Efate, the portal for international flights to Vanuatu. A stone's throw from the town, we stayed on Hideaway Island where the fish and the hard coral are the most beautiful and diverse I have ever seen. I saw an anemone a metre wide with bold little clown fish swimming amongst its tentacles. I saw tube worms, like the blue tentacled ones with chalky white tubes glued on the rocks of home. But the big tropical ones have tentacles of every imaginable colour and their red, blue, pink, orange and even striped cones disappear at a snap of your fingers.

The fishes vied to outdo each other in colour, pattern and shape and it was a delight to watch one stand on its tail, vibrate its fins and have a busy cleaner fish dash in and service it! Even the non-swimmers of our party could share the experience as the reef is so shallow that, with a mask on your face, you can crouch down and look at the fish and coral under the water.

So the trip had something for everyone, and for me, it made me proud that *Forest and Bird*, my conservation society, was playing such a vital part in conservation in the Pacific.



ANN GRAEME runs *Forest and Bird's* Kiwi Conservation Club from her base in Tauranga.