

When I went for a week to do some work in Vanuatu

Greg Baker

25th April - 2nd May 2009

1 Saturday 25th April 2009



The flight was pretty empty, in fact I got the whole row (both aisles) to myself. I guessed it would be when I saw the number of people at the lounge.



I told Edmund that he couldn't following me into outwards immigration without a ticket, so he told me to get a ticket for him. Edmund cried as I left him. I'm not sure. whether this was because he didn't get to see the airport construction site, or because I was going on a big plane (he wanted me to go on a small one), or because I was leaving.

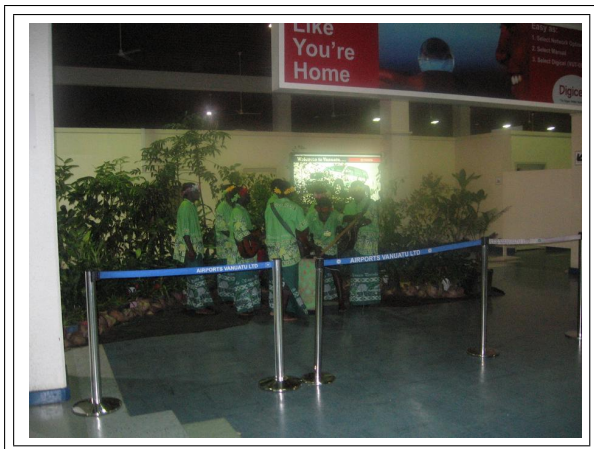


I didn't take a picture of the Korean couple who went business class but put their children into economy. But I did get the giant purple bear which could

have required its own seating allocation but was stuffed into an overhead locker by its ni-Vanuatuan owners.



It stopped raining the moment I left the plane. I think I must be a sun god, but only for small areas of the earth's surface.



But of course, I hadn't filled out my immigration form on the plane, since the flight was only three hours. While I was filling it out and deciding which of the (two) immigration counters I should stand in front of, this group of musicians whose job it is to sing patriotic songs about Vanuatu in Bislama to tourists, who are unlikely to know enough Bislama to know that they are singing patriotic songs about Vanuatu.



The bass player plays a box-broomstick-and-string of his own making. The tension on the broomstick determines the note. At least the fingering is easy, even if the tricep-ing takes a bit of practice – I couldn't even play a full octave.

2 *Sunday 26th April 2009*





I slept in long enough to miss any chance of getting to Poanangisu in time, so I wandered around Port Vila on foot. On Sunday morning, all locals go to church where they sing Hillsongs. Actually, they sing songs from the Hillsong repertoire all week, when cleaning rooms, filling their cars with petrol, while working at restaurants and so on.

So on Sunday nothing was open. Well, the pictured pot was open, but that's because it's been that way for several centuries. The anchor is all that remains of La Perouse's ship, which vanished with him and his crew after he left the area in Sydney we call La Perouse – he went to Vanuatu and became shipwrecked there.



The view out my hotel room in the morning was 180° over the bay. It was the same view as in the night, but I didn't see it then.

Does Vanuatu have a government department looking after small fuzzy creatures from Melmak, or is

it an outreach to them from the local churches? And what if they move premises? Do they take the gate with them?



The statue is supposed to mean something. The man points to the field in front of the cultural centre. It was also the direction of a building out of which sounded Hillsong, very loudly.



This is the new parliament building. I wasn't working here, even though I thought I was. This was about the best view of it I could get, because being Sunday the gates were locked. Even the guards were at church (presumably singing Hillsong).



This is the new parliament building, taken a few days later in the evening, showing off Pizza Hut's architects talents at their best.



I think this says that if you speak Bislama, you get free entry to the cultural centre, but those tourists who only speak English and French have to pay.



The tree in front of the cultural centre was fabulous, nice and shady.



It also covered up the sign.



And in time, I hope the tree covers the roadway, and

makes it over the other side to the parliament house.



The French school has a very French sign, and a very French bus stop.



The signs aren't even in Bislama (because teachers hit students who use Bislama), so I don't know whether you are supposed to be cautious and pay attention because there is a school, or whether this is the French school where children learn to be cautious and pay attention.



Somehow the French school being on Wales Street diminishes its impact. But at least it's still Celtic. And it's actually "Rue de Wales Street".



I have no idea what this is. But taking it used up the last of the batteries in my camera.



The view down this street was fabulous. I thought this was the way to the Old Court House (which is on top of the hill). Then I went downhill in another direction, and still didn't get to the top of the hill. Finally – having bought some dried banana chips for sustenance – in Australian dollars because I didn't have change – I figured that I needed to take the road leading up.



I also have no idea what this is, but it was right beside the other thing.



The Supreme Court of Vanuatu is not a large building. And I don't think it's the one on the right.



I found it by moving down the hill towards it, directed by a local guy, who didn't understand my English nor my Bislama. But he did understand my French, and I was also able to remember how to say "war memorial" in French.



The war memorial was strangely moving. Actually it was standing still, but I found it moving.



I don't think there's another Anzac Day service in the world which is attended by both the Australians and New Zealanders together.



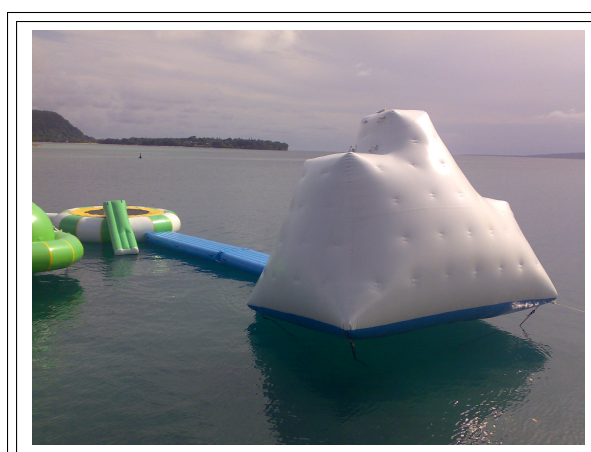
I find it strangely tragic that some ni-Vanuatu lost their lives before they acquired surnames. Not that I think a surname is more important than a life, but still.



I was afraid to go inside. I might get mis-spelt. Actually, I passed this earlier in the day and was afraid to stop. Some young (primary school age?) children were on the street, and all of them asked me for a small donation for their school or soccer team. But I don't think they've started English classes yet, so it was kind of formulaic. I was worried that if I got money out from the Westpac ATM (on the opposite side of the street to the above photograph) that they might want to take a commission.



This could be from Chinatown in Malaysia, Indonesia, or umm, actually just about anywhere.



It looked weirder from further away when the connecting inflatable bits were hidden by the bay wall.



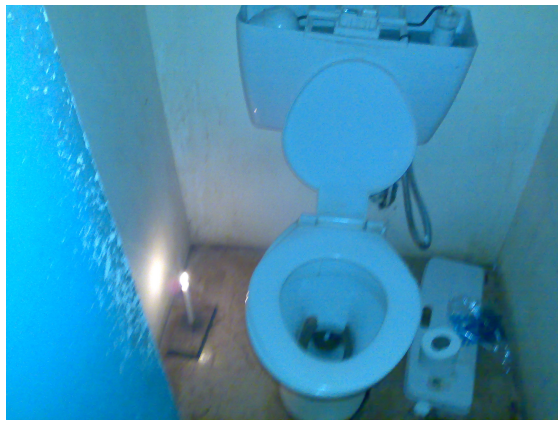
It looks kind of fun, but still I worry about the commercial shipping and cruise liners that you're sharing the bay with.



It said number one, so that's where I went first. I had both lunch and dinner here. Lunch because it was nearby, and dinner because of the aforementioned movies.

I ended up playing cards with two medical students from London while we waited for the movies. The rules of the game are:

- *Deal 3 cards face down to each player*
- *Deal 3 face-up to each player*
- *Deal 3 cards which are given to each player*
- *The player can swap any number of cards out of their hand with the face-up cards they were dealt.*
- *The player with the 2♠ plays first, and puts it onto the stack.*
- *If a 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, J, Q, K or A is played, then the next player has to place a card of the same value or higher; if they can place a pair of such cards (or even a triple or quadruple) they can do this also.*
- *If a 7 is played, the next player has to place cards of lower value.*
- *You can play a 2 on anything.*



I went to see a free outdoor movie, and just before the movie started I went to the toilet. Unfortunately, the movie can't start until well after sunset, and there are no electric lights in the toilets there. Most of the light in this picture came from my phone camera's flash.

- If an 8 is played, the direction of play reverses 3 *Monday 27th April 2009*

- If a 10 is played, the stack is put aside and a new stack is started by the same player (who can play anything they want).

- If 4 cards of the same value are sitting on the top of the stack (regardless of who put them there), the stack is put aside.

- If you can play a card, you must play it.

- If you can't play a card, you pick up the stack.

- If you have less than 3 cards in your hand and there are cards remaining in the un-dealt deck, you pick one up.

- If you have run out of cards in your hand, you start to play using the face-up cards which have been sitting there since the beginning of the game.

- Once you have run out of face-up cards, you can turn over one face-down card. If this makes a pair (or triplet or quadruple) with the card you just played, you can put this onto the stack if the next player hasn't yet gone. (And you would then turn over another face-down card, which you might be able to play.)

- The first player to run out of all cards wins.



I mistook this for a bus or taxi. As I was walking into town the driver called to me. I declined the lift, but he was very insistent. When he finally said "are you Greg?", I realised that this was Andre's car, and that Andre – the head of IT at the Ministry for Finance – had come to pick me up.



The class is in the old parliament building. In fact, it's in the old parliament.

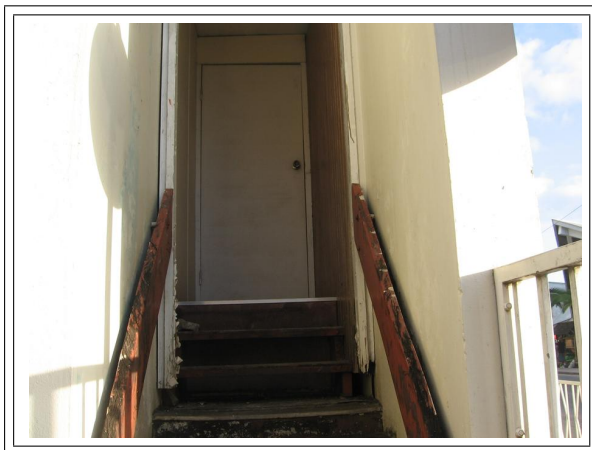


I didn't get any simultaneous translators, but the facility was there.

I did sit my laptop where the opposition party leaders used to sit. They had far more room because there were so few of them.



One of the secret exits leads you out, down the stairs, up some other stairs, and across to meet the non-secret exit. It's good for when you want to slip out and say "boo" to frighten the press photographers who will be blocking your way out.



The secret exits the parliament still work.

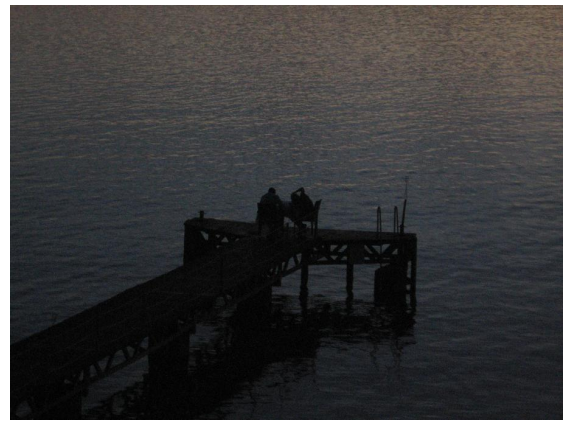


Opposite the parliament building is the markets. I didn't recognise most of the fruits on sale, nor the other things that people were eating. I did see some rice, but it didn't inspire confidence. These were the most recognisably-yellow bananas on sale.



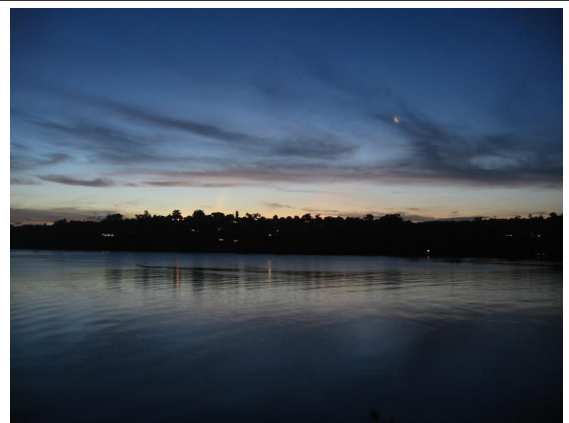
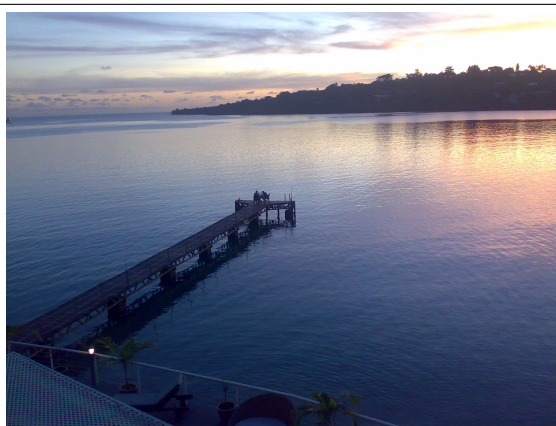
After the class, I went searching for a book on Bislama and some local music. Vanuatu has with no copyright laws. As a result, the local book and music industry is not very strong. Strangely, you still end up going to Chinatown – I guess the Chinese are really, really experienced at ignoring copyright.

I asked about pop music, but due to differences in accents and expectations, the shop owner thought I was asking about “Bob” music. As in, Bob Marley. Apparently they have both kinds of music here: Hillsong and Reggae. I fear the day when Darlene Zschech releases something with more of an island feel...



Last night I sat on this jetty, reading New Scientist thinking that it would be relaxing, dangling my legs over the edge. Actually, I kept thinking “I hope my shoes don’t fall off” and “I hope I don’t drop this copy of New Scientist” and “what happens if my phone falls out of my pocket?”

The pictured couple above could have asked me that, no, it would just be far too stressful sitting on the edge of a jetty in a tropical island paradise with fine food and good table service. But did they ask? Of course not. Copycats. Ignorant copycats.



The moon was low, the sunset fabulous, but what interested me was the faint curved luminous band stretching up from where the sun had set up towards the cloud.



The Waterfront restaurant claims to have a cat which rings a bell when it wants to be fed some fish. There are magicians some times. They give you a free drink if you present a boarding pass less than 24 hours old.

I didn't see the cat, nor a magician (unless he'd made himself disappear) and I was a day late for the free drink.

But we did have a power outage during the meal, and at least the restaurant music was something I recognised. He started with a rendition of "Give Thanks" and then got on with his core repertoire of Hillsongs.

4 Tuesday 28th April 2009



Yes, I ate the fruit, so that I could pour the milk on and have a proper breakfast. Every day for breakfast. Sometimes they changed the fruit (the only ones I recognise are sliced bananas), and occasionally there was sour cream (I think).



Breakfast cannot be rushed. You take your seat. You wait, and then you will be asked for your order, which consists of which cereal you want, and what juice you want. Later in the week I was even asked once what condiment I want on the toast. One day there was no thick toast, only thin toast. I was asked (after a wait) whether this was OK.

You will wait.

The milk will be delivered in a little jug.

Then you wait some more.

The juice will come out next.

Then you wait some more.

The cereal is brought to you.

After you have finished it, you wait.

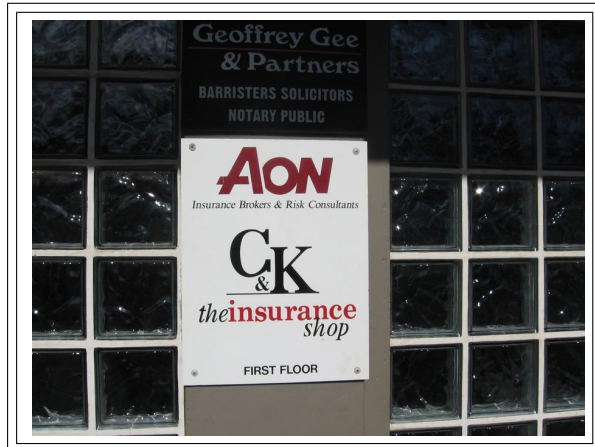
Someone will clear away the bowl.

Then you wait.

Then you will be brought the toast.

Presumably I could wait after the toast, too, if I wanted, but generally I rushed back upstairs to brush my teeth and walk into town very quickly since yet again I hadn't allowed enough time for the Zen-like infinity of contemplation and prayer which is the

right and only way to eat breakfast.



After the class I went to the Aon office in order to do one task that the Unix team needed (a console IP address fix up). After I'd done this, plugged three bits of networking gear into the UPS, installed a UPS console card, attached a temperature probe to the UPS and found a network cable to connect the UPS into the switch, I proudly announced that I'd completed 5 out of the 1 tasks I had to do. I completely forget to take pictures to prove it, and also to show how I kludged around the short power cables.

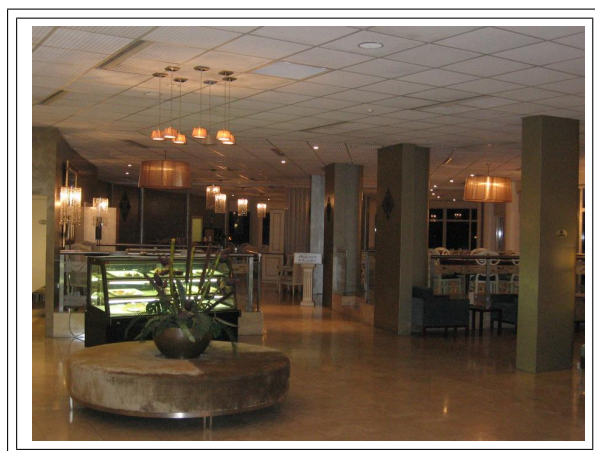


This is the Sebel hotel, which is next to the casino. Alistair (the ex-pat head of Aon) recommended I try the restaurant.

It was curry night.

I ordered home-made pasta with prawns and clams (which for some reason are called "Natalie" in Bismalama). They ran out of clams.

Then, after I had eaten and paid the bill, one of the waiters (with a security guard) ran out after me, thinking I hadn't paid.





Chantilly's, as seen from the road.

Today there was a major government conference here – something about the lease on power generation for much of the country. I didn't notice.

5 Wednesday 29th April 2009

I asked the class today for some Bislama translations of English words we were using.

- *tape tep*
- *hard disk disk*
- *backup (noun) bakap*
- *backup (transitive verb) bakemup*

They decided that a condition of employment as a sysadmin in Vanuatu should be to have front teeth. Many ni-Vanuatu pronounce "b" as "f" because they don't have front teeth – because of bad dentistry, as a symbol that a woman is available for marriage, or for other reasons.



Last night at Aon, I had to do some screwdriver work on their UPS. Most people can do this sort of thing without too much trouble, but I managed to split my pants on the inside leg stretching down to tighten some screws.

I left one pair of trousers at home, so that left me with one pair of trousers – the one I was wearing at the time.

I received an email from the head of IT at the Reserve Bank arranging a time for us to meet tomorrow (Thursday). I decided that I couldn't meet the Reserve Bank in torn trousers, nor in unwashed trousers. Therefore, the only solution was to buy a pair of size 44 trousers.

I wandered in and out of every shop in Port Vila. I went into the Chinese-owned stores. I even asked nicely in Chinese whether these were the biggest available, because I needed 44. The Chinese owner, listening to her Mandarin talk-back show on the radio, beckoned to the local assistant because being white I obviously must have been speaking French or something. On my second try she started giggling, as did her daughter. And no, even for comical Westerners she had nothing beyond a size 40.

The photograph above is of the last size 44 trousers available for sale in Port Vila.



The one-of-a-kind size 44 trousers were found here, recommended to me by John, one of my students. Both the shop attendant and myself rummaged through every pair of sparingly-labelled trousers in the shop to conclude that there were no others.



The petrol stations are open until 10pm at night. After all, who would go driving around town that late?



Do you think the prosperity gospel has caught someone in Vanuatu? Or is he just trying to say something to take people's minds off his name?



But the night market is open 24 hours. Maybe it's because you might not last the night through without some fruit. Or maybe it's because it doesn't have doors or walls.



Yes, the humidity might be 100%, the temperature in the 30s, a sea breeze blowing through the palm trees into the front of the store, but sacre bleu, we are French, and we will allow dogs in our French pastry store just like we would in France.



In the evening I went to Vanuatu Telekom to help out with a couple of issues they had. Independence Park completely blocks any view of their data centre. Of the four problems they had, I was able to observe that one of them was the correct behaviour, one was completely mystifying, and the other two would require an enormous download which I didn't have at hand.



And repas porté from a French bakery is a work of pyramidal art, not one of those miserable paper bags the English use.

I confess – I began the order in French, but my first umm was obviously not French enough, and I was replied to in English.



Independence Park does have some swings and play equipment though – but they are a long way away from the playing field and Vanuatu Telekom.

6 Thursday 30th April 2009



But Vanuatu Telekom have a satellite dish like I've not seen before. It's their main outward link. Of course, by the time I'd arrived at TVL, the main gate was padlocked, and I had to walk around into the carpark to take the photograph above.

Several TVL employees were wondering who this white person was, and why he just wandered in and started taking photographs.

I told them who I was coming to see, but I had forgotten that Esther had married since I taught her in Sydney and so they didn't recognise the surname.



People greet you as you walk past. Even the flowers bid you good morning. But these flowers were planted like this on a small mound too low to see from a car. Only if you were walking towards Port Vila from Chantilly's on the side of the road where there is no footpath, in the way of the oncoming traffic would you be able to see it. Who planted it here and why? And am I the only person who didn't use the footpath?



Christianity is so strong here, that you don't hold a tent crusade. You just set up a TV with music pumped through loudspeakers, and a crowd will form around it.



This was lunch, bought from the French supermarket which has a genuinely French bakery section. What other choice of lunch comes even close?

There are so many alternative uses for a spikey piece of bread that I felt guilty eating it and depriving the world of opportunities for visual humour. The croissant was nice too, tasting more French than non-French croissants do.



This is the Reserve Bank building. The guard escorted me out asking whether my car would be picking me up. Actually, it was a really productive meeting with the head of IT there, and I think there's great potential for open source in Vanuatu. Louise is very keen to learn more about Linux so that she can help out at the computer lab at her children's school



I took this photograph on Friday. After the Reserve Bank, I went out to El Gecko to eat dinner. A little while after I arrived, another "table for one" diner arrived, and on a whim I suggested we sit together and talk. Roy was a lawyer working with P&O cruises, and he had flown into join the Pacific Dawn arriving tomorrow.

I told him of my discoveries about Vanuatu law – no copyright and no land ownership (you can buy and sell very long-term leases though). He surprised me – I didn't expect to find that even commercial lawyers are now aware of open source.

7 Friday 1st May 2009



The Pacific Dawn came into Port Vila. This was taken at around 6:30am, just to prove that I was getting up at that time each day.



We must wash the third floor windows. At least the bucket gets a rope so he doesn't have to traipse down to the ground floor if he drops it.



Thank you for the helicopter ride off the Pacific Dawn (or wherever). Now how do I get to shore?



Cruise ships bring lots of people. Lots of people means lots of traffic.



Tragedy struck. The French supermarket was closed for Labour Day. And the passengers weren't helping the waiting time at the restaurants and cafés in Port Vila. And UHT milk + Switi icecream makes for a very strange milkshake.

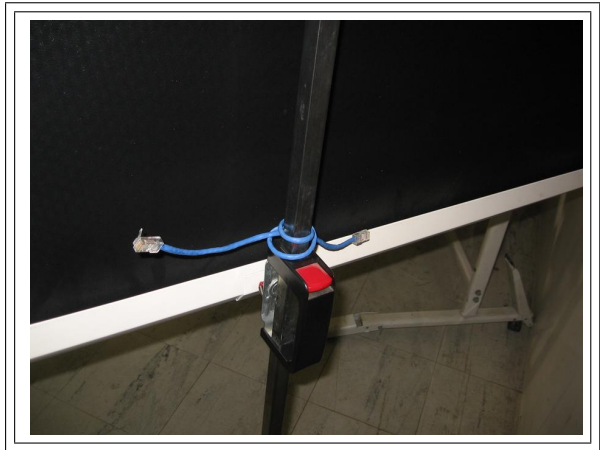


By prior arrangement, the sails are in position to make this boat actually sail. I didn't ask her name, but for 100 Vatu she modified one of the other model boats she had made.



HP USA sent certificates on which you have to write the student's name and what course it was. I used my Oracle pen just to spite them.

Back row: Emma, Nicky, me, Bjorn. Front row: John, Glennys.



Some people think that networking solves every problem. I only noticed this as I was bringing the projector screen down.



The students presented me with gifts. John volunteered to give a speech of thanks. You're supposed to sneak out from a class, and ignore contractors, not treat them like VIPs.

The wooden thing is essentially a gong which you hit with anything wooden and teachers use it to bring the class to attention. The shirt was just a matching size with the trousers from Wednesday.



Volcanic islands have a lot of volcanic rock. Then I realised that the dark stuff is just mud, and the light stuff is surplus concrete.



Get your Szeto Wangs while they're cheap. We have the best selection in town.



Maybe another picture of the Pacific Dawn might take my mind away from volcanic rock?



This offer would be much more generous if there were anywhere in the whole country which charged for parking.



They had just finished drafting the constitution, and got everyone to agree on it. They wanted to celebrate, but they had been arguing until 4:00am in the morning. So they went past L'Houstalet, which had been operating by then for seven years without a menu change and saw the owner outside. They said "we want to celebrate"...

Never leave a roundabout unadorned. If Louis XIV's era had had roundabouts, this is what he would have done with them.



The flashlight reflected in the dust give a fairytale effect.

I had spent a week in the parliament building, so where better to go than to follow the paths of the founders of modern Vanuatu.



I didn't order the flying fox. Filet de Boeuf Roquefort (in French) is pretty adventurous for me.



And no-one can fault my choice of dessert.



...and at 4:00am in the morning, Clement opened up the restaurant, and played his part in the founding of a nation.

Over-awed, I had asked Clement about the forming of the constitution, and that is the story he told me. He was happy to have a photo taken with me. I paid my bill, and left. He followed me out, and

when I said I was walking back to Chantilly's, he insisted on driving me back. What do you talk about to one of the most well-known national treasures? (I found out that he has 9 children, spread out over 36 years. Vanuatu hadn't changed much until 2003 when the real estate boom came.).

And twenty-nine years after independence, the menu still hasn't changed.

8 Saturday 2nd May 2009

With great enthusiasm I got up early so that I would have time to go to the cultural centre. By the time I had packed up, had a leisurely breakfast (there isn't any other kind is there?), I decided it was all too much effort. So I finished this travelogue and sat by the water to learn the rest of the Bislama vocabulary for half an hour until my ride to the airport arrived.

On the flight home, one of the flight attendants was Elizabeth, the elder sister of Emma who was on this week's course.