Travel Writing - I Survived Tanna Island

*Are you sick of the same old holiday places? Do you want to find a place untouched by the Western hand?* *Well listen in, and I will tell you about the most magnificent, yet dangerous place on earth. The only question is, will you be able to survive it?*

I was 10. Sitting on the edge of a crater, as large, luminescent balls of fire rocketed towards me. “We’re seeing a volcano,” my parents had said. No. We weren’t just *seeing* a volcano. We were trudging up a steep mountain (made purely of ash and rock), putting our livelihood at risk, and let’s not forget the boiling hot toilet seat experience. One of the tour guides described a woman who fell into a volcano a couple of years back. I situated myself a *healthy* distance from the crater after that.

“Be comfortable with the uncomfortable,” was the motto my parents had said to me as we arrived on Tanna, a small remote island of Vanuatu. What was involved with the word ‘uncomfortable’ did not journey long around my ten-year-old brain. This ‘so-called’ *holiday* was surviving 2 cyclones, an active volcano, wood-hard beds, ash-infused water, and mouldy clothes. Memories of Tanna were like biting into a delicious mango, only to find that the stone occupies 99% of it.

My parents always had the travelling itch, or more accurately, the travelling ‘rash.’ So we ended up having a 3-month experience on an isolated island (and no, I will not be using the word holiday). Although isolated, Tanna was the definition of freedom (a child’s paradise). I remember being barefoot, a machete in one hand and a coconut in the other. “A little girl with a huge machete?” my grandparents would text, gaping at the pictures my mum would send to them. In a Western civilisation, you would be detained. But this was no murder device (no matter how much I wanted it to be); it was used to cut fresh fruit and get through the tropical jungle.

Located on top of a mountain ridge called Loanialu Kapalpal (don’t even attempt to say it), smack bang in the middle of the island, was a sturdy little workers’ hut where we slept and cooked. But within this hut, there were a few frightening experiences that made me want to pack up my mouldy clothes and swim across the Coral Sea.

It hadn’t rained for a few weeks, and so the soft pattering of rain on the tin roof caught us by surprise. However, in a matter of seconds, it was as if someone had tipped the entire ocean onto Tanna Island. Torrential rain and 90km winds threatened the survival of our hut. I imagined a rock band had situated themselves on the roof, smashing their drums as hard as they could. In that moment, I thought that my grave would be on the hut floor, with a wind-beaten tin roof over it. But I survived (you thought I died didn’t you).

As the weeks passed, I developed an illness called technology deprivation (which was an awful thing to me). So on one particular day, I was using my mum’s phone, desperate to look at some pictures or play a game. My little brother had snatched it off me, and as I tried to get it back, the ground started shaking and moving around. My family were yelling at me to, “Get out of the house!” My face was pale as a ghost, and I thought it was the end of the world. It was an earthquake. Not a bad one, but bad enough for me to think my time had come.

But it wasn’t always perilous, Tanna Island also held breathtaking beauty. At first, I had thought Australia was a paradise, with its *glorious* dry deserts, *safe* wildlife, and ever-present sun that remained a comfortable temperature of 40 degrees Celsius (I was wrong of course). Tanna was like a different planet, with crystal-clear waterfalls, rolling valleys, mountain ridges, and vast black-sand beaches.

One beautiful sight we saw was a gushing waterfall, surrounded by vibrant green ferns. As my family went to see the waterfall, we walked like tourists, camera in one hand, walking stick in the other, covered head to toe in greasy white sunscreen. We huffed and puffed all the way down, as the locals led the way, *running.* I tried to catch up to them, but soon accepted my fate and trudged down the mountain with the rest of my unfit family. Of course, the view of the waterfall was absolutely spellbinding, but it took a while for us to look up at it as we were bent over, hands on our knees, catching our breath.

There were also black sand beaches, with rolling blue waves, filled with an abundance of coral, fish and sweet-smelling coconuts. And as always, the locals would run down the mountain ridges and our family would huff and puff. The locals would jump into the crystal water in their clothes, but we didn’t because we were a pale-skinned, Western family. This meant we would find large boulders to hide behind, use towels to change into our bathers, slather on sunscreen, wait 10 minutes for it to soak in, put on a hat, and then slowly dip into the water (it was always too cold for our liking).

So even though Tanna was sometimes scary or uncomfortable, the beautiful sights always took my breath away. #IsurvivedTannaIsland was my mum’s caption at the bottom of her Instagram post. But she was right. Multiple times I thought I would experience death because of earthquakes, cyclones, and volcanoes. But it’s what made Tanna so much more beautiful. It’s dangerous, it’s unique. It’s a place where life is slow, and nature is full. So don’t worry, I survived Tanna, and you will too #onlyjust.

Word count: 972