

The Search for the Real Bali Ha'i

by

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Bali Ha'i will whisper, on the winds of the sea:
"Here am I, your special island, come to me, come to me."
South Pacific



Author Lew Toulmin sails a tall ship along the coast of the real Bali Hai, in Vanuatu

I grew up in Haiti and Thailand in the 1950s and '60s, where we had no TV and only a record player for entertainment. As a kid I listened to the record from the movie *South Pacific* at least 1000 times, and was obsessed with the movie's island paradise of Bali Ha'i – lush, exotic, and populated with beautiful girls -- which I was convinced was a real place. I wanted to live on that "special island" that was constantly calling "come to me." I was not alone. Millions of Americans listened to the magical song and dreamed about visiting the island.

As an adult, I realized that the tale and the island were fictional, but I was still obsessed. I read the original book *Tales of the South Pacific* by James Michener, read his autobiography and other novels, saw the play and movie and later TV mini-series, and researched the Pacific theater

of World War II. I determined to solve the mystery of which island inspired Michener to write about Bali Ha'i, and to see for myself what the real island was like. This mystery is one of the greatest inspiration puzzles in literature.



The author interviewed Chief Bue in his quest to find traces of World War II activity on Ambae/Bali Hai

To solve the puzzle, I had to re-examine the *Tales* for clues. As you may know, the *Tales* state that the large island of Espiritu Santo in the northwest New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) is where the characters in the story are stationed. They are in a rear base, supporting the fierce battle against the Japanese on Guadalcanal, 800 kilometers to the northwest. It is on Espiritu Santo where nurse Nellie Forbush meets and loves French plantation owner Emile De Becque. It is from Espiritu Santo that Marine Lieutenant Joe Cable sails across to the small island of Bali Ha'i, and meets the beautiful Tonkinese (Vietnamese) girl Liat, daughter of the famous beetle-nut-chewing "Bloody Mary." Clearly the fictional Bali Ha'i is very close to the real Espiritu Santo.

The *Tales* say Bali Ha'i is a "small...neat...jewel-like" island, with "banyans, giant ferns, and ..lovely gardens," and a small hospital run by French nuns. It is where the French authorities have hidden "all the young women of the islands" to keep them away from the hundreds of thousands of American men passing through Santo. Bali Ha'i lies "within the protective arm" of a bay on the much larger "Vanicoro." There is a narrow channel between Bali Ha'i and Vanicoro. Unfortunately, Vanicoro is not a real name for any island in Vanuatu. It is described as being "large and brooding," having four volcanos, with lakes in one of the volcanoes. Cannibalism is still practiced there, and it has primitive natives who wear penis sheaths.

Vanicoro is located “sixteen miles [24 kilometers]...east” of Espiritu Santo or (in one contradictory description) “south” of Espiritu Santo.

I studied maps and concluded that Ambae (also known as Aoba), about 50 kilometers east of Espiritu Santo, was the most likely model for Bali Ha’i. Ambae was in fact where the French hid the women of the islands away from the Americans during the war. But there were problems with Ambae -- it is not small and jewel-like, it is 40 kilometers long. It has no small islands next to it, so it cannot be “Vanicoro,” either. It has one large central volcano, not four (although it does have three lakes at the top of its volcano). It did not have any French nuns in residence. It did not have cannibals wearing penis sheaths.

I noticed that Malakula, a large island south of Espiritu Santo, did have several small islands on its north shore, lying in a protective bay, facing Santo. Malakula has a mountainous interior with tribes who wore penis sheaths and practiced cannibalism until the 1960s.

In 1994, still fascinated by Bali Ha’i, I wrote to Michener and proposed that he had taken Ambae, combined Malakula (as “Vanicoro”) and one of the small islands on its north shore, employed his own touch of genius, and created the fictional Bali Ha’i. On June 8, 1994, Michener kindly wrote back through his aide, and said that only Ambae was his inspiration.



Northern Vanuatu, with Ambae in the top center and little Wala island off the coast of Malakula, below

I had to go. It took me a few years to organize my trip, but in 2001 I spent 10 days exploring the island, interviewing chiefs, residents and the Secretary-General, and documenting the World War II experiences of the islanders. I learned that virtually no other travel writers or explorers had been to Ambae, and that it was largely forgotten by the rest of the world, despite its famous fictional name.

I confirmed many of Michener’s descriptions of the island. He said that Bali Ha’i was dominated by a pig-killing cult, in which the chiefs raise large pigs, knock out their lower

incisors, let the upper ones grow in a circular shape, then sacrifice them in sacred ceremonies. I confirmed that this cult is still very important on Ambae and on many Vanuatu islands, such that a circular tusk was placed on the national flag.

I found that Ambae was lush and tropical, and could mysteriously disappear and re-appear, as described in the *Tales*. It is usually obscured by a stream of dust and water vapor coming from a volcano on Ambrym island. This stream is usually blown north-northwest, and prevents observers on Espiritu Santo from seeing Ambae. But after a rainstorm that washes out the stream, or a major wind shift, Ambae seems to appear out of nowhere. As described in the song, Ambae's single volcano is often covered by a "low flying cloud."

I interviewed some of the island residents, including Wilson Wiri, a catechist in the Anglican Church. In 1942 he was ordered to leave Lolowai on Ambae to work on Espiritu Santo in the war effort. He labored for six months building roads, watering down dusty runways, and unloading some of the 150 supply ships that typically crowded the Luganville harbor. Wiri said, "For recreation we saw a cinema every night. The Americans had built over 40 cinemas on Santo, to keep all the troops and workers happy. I was thirty years old and had never seen a movie before. It was numbaone!"

While visiting Ambae I stayed in guest houses made of grass and mats for a few dollars a night. I took "utes" (open utility trucks) as taxis, and found that there were no paved roads, and very limited tourist facilities, despite its 10,000 residents. Almost all the population lived in small mat and grass homes with corrugated iron roofs, and worked as subsistence farmers. But everyone I met was happy and cheerful.

I found a crashed US World War II fighter plane, and was told that the pilot survived the crash. I learned that the women of western Ambae are more Eurasian than in other islands, and was told that perhaps this results from French men intermarrying with the hidden women of the war. I found that malaria was endemic, and that precautions were mandatory. The island was lush, with rich volcanic soil, and as it said in a song in the movie, there were "mangos and bananas you could pick right off the tree."

For a while I was content. I had found Bali Ha'i, solved the mystery, and liked the reality.

But a few points still nagged at me. Where was the "small, jewel-like island"? Where were the cannibals, the penis sheaths, the French nuns and the other elements? Were they all the products of Michener's fertile imagination?

In June 2012 I took a job with the government of Vanuatu, working as a policy advisor in e-government. I determined to use that opportunity to explore my other theory about Bali Ha'i, and go to the mysterious island of Malakula.

Malakula could well be the fictional “Vanicoro” described in the *Tales*. Malakula is only about 30 kilometers south and a little east of Espiritu Santo, and like Vanicoro, Malakula had cannibalism (until the 1960s), and has tribes who wore penis sheaths all the time in the 1940s (and still do today on ceremonial occasions). In Michener’s book of essays *Return to Paradise*, he makes it clear that he was quite familiar with Malakula. Malakula has four small, round islands on its north shore, any of which might be the model for the “small, jewel-like island” of Bali Ha’i. But none of the four have ever previously been identified as such.

I researched all four islands. Vao has always been a bit stand-offish towards visitors, while Atchin is very densely populated and Rano is rather low and flat. Wala was by far the most promising, so I decided to visit it. Surprisingly, none of these islands are discussed in current guidebooks such as *Lonely Planet*, so I had to ask my colleagues at work to learn about them.

I flew Air Vanuatu from Port Vila to Norsup Airport in central Malakula. I was surprised to find that the airport terminal had been burned down years ago by a disgruntled loser in a land dispute, and had never been rebuilt, since it would likely be burned down again! Luckily the airstrip still functions.



Little Wala island, off Malakula, may have been a partial inspiration to Michener for “Bali Hai”

I took a 4WD Toyota HiLux, one of toughest trucks in the world and hence the most popular vehicle in Vanuatu, north along the rough road toward the Wala area. Due to the large potholes, we could only drive about 20 kilometers per hour, and it took us about an hour to get to the mainland part of the Wala neighborhood. I had made a reservation at the best place to stay in the area, the Nawori Bungalow, run by Etienne Tiasinmal. I stayed in the three-room bungalow with

mosquito nets, thatched roof and walls, cold shower in a shared bathroom, and a good view of Wala island (<http://vanuatu.travel.fr/>; tel: 678-48888 or 678-5685852; email: nawori.bungalows@malampa.travel; prices from about 3000 Vatu per night per room).

Etienne, our friendly and approachable host, who doubles as the chairman of the local tourism committee, offered to take me on a tour of Wala island, about 900 meters offshore. Etienne spoke excellent English and French, and said that his island was named after Chief Wala, who was the first to settle the island some 1200 years ago.

I clambered over the rough coral reef just off the mainland shore, in water up to my shins (bring reef shoes!) to board the eight-meter-long transit boat. Upon arrival at the short floating dock on Wala island, I was pleased to see a nice swimming area and an attractive white sand beach.

I walked up to the little village of grass and corrugated iron huts just above the beach. There I met 90-year-old Chief Vincent Taissets, who told me about his service with the US Navy in World War II. He said that he was 20 in 1942 when an American military team asked him to come to Espiritu Santo to help in the war effort. Vincent worked there for 18 months in construction as a civilian employee, but was also trained to use a machine gun. He saw attacks by Japanese planes on the five large American bases on the island, but they did virtually no damage, only killing a single cow! He was present when the troopship *President Coolidge* hit a friendly mine, and sank to become what is today one of the world's greatest wreck dives. He said, "I was paid well for my war work, and I still am grateful to you Americans. Thanks!"



Chief Vincent Taissets of Wala island, who worked for the US forces in World War II

Etienne took me on a one-hour tour of the island. He said the island's small population of 200 is divided into five tribes. He told me that the island did not have a hospital staffed with French nuns (as Bali Ha'i did in the *Tales*), but it did have a Catholic church – now ruined – with French nuns formerly in residence. He said that there is no electricity on the island (except solar chargers and a few diesel generators), no cars, no landline telephones, and no worries!

We hiked up to the top of the 27-meter-high hill at the center of the island. This was not as high as the 100 meter cliffs that Bali Ha'i is supposed to have, but it is the highest island on the Malakula coast.

We hiked across the 1.5 kilometer-wide island, through the lush, rainy, jungle interior. The island was “jewel-like,” with the tall palm trees, gardens, ferns and banyans described by Michener. It fit many of the elements of Michener's classic Bali Ha'i, and covers almost all the features that Ambae – the primary inspiration -- lacks. I concluded that Wala was very likely a secondary but important contributor to Michener's creation. Michener stated in his letter to me that only Ambae was his inspiration, but in television interviews he acknowledged that he had done so much research on so many topics, that after a few years he couldn't remember all his facts, sources and inspirations.



Etienne Tiasinmal beside his 17-generation family stone on Wala island

Etienne showed me some attractions on Wala not mentioned by Michener: the exotic and atmospheric “nasaras.” These are ritual locations marked by lines of large standing stones -- one for each family -- where chiefs were promoted based on how many pigs they sacrificed. Etienne stood beside his family stone in the spooky, misty jungle, under a huge banyan tree. He said that his ancestors would present a large pig with circular tusks to the Paramount Chief at the stone, and if the offering was acceptable, the Chief would bestow land rights, give out “kastom” (custom) names, and approve marriages. Etienne said he could recite his ancestry for 17 generations, and is trying to revive the

nasara rituals, which have fallen into disuse.

As we walked back to the small dock, I was amazed to learn from Etienne that the small island is a regular stop for P&O cruise ships that sail from Sydney. About 18 P&O cruise voyages and

several Carnival cruises in 2013 are expected to stop at Wala for the day, each bringing ashore about 1000 tourists, mostly Australians. The passengers use tenders to get to the floating dock built by P&O on the island. They then take walking tours to the nasaras, lie on the beach, have a barbeque, snorkel on the nearby reef, or watch a “kastom” dance. According to Etienne, neither he nor any of the thousands of cruise ship visitors have ever realized that they might be relaxing on the most famous South Pacific island of all – Bali Ha’i!

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Lew Toulmin has worked in 30 developing countries on e-government and telecommunications projects sponsored by the World Bank, USAID and AusAID and traveled to 138 countries. He is from Silver Spring, Maryland in the United States, and is a member of The Explorers Club and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He notes that accommodations for tourists have recently improved on Ambae, and bungalows can be reserved for about 2200 Vatu per night; see the listings on the website www.positiveearth.org/bungalows/penama/ambae.htm.

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