

Travel Tales

So, You Wanna Be a Land Diver, Right? [Part 3]

by

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So, you wanna become a land diver and throw yourself off a perfectly good 97-foot tower, right? No problem. Other foreigners have been just as crazy as you. Normally you must be born into the Namba tribe on south Pentecost island in Vanuatu. But if you messed up there, you can always get adopted into the Namba tribe. Surprisingly, this is not as difficult as it sounds. Since this is not the US of A, no lawyers or government agencies are involved. Everything is handled by the chiefs.



This could be you!

Just put on your best T-shirt and flip-flops, and visit one of the local villages. Approach the chief and respectfully state your request. Say you are willing to abide by all the rules, and wish to be adopted into a local family. You will probably have to make a financial

donation, perhaps \$300 or so, or donate a sacred pig with circular tusks. You will definitely have to live in the nakamal – the chief’s ceremonial building, for a week before the ceremony, eat special food, and abstain from sex. Oh, and you better be in darn good shape. As explained last month, if you can’t jump a long way out from the tower, you’re toast.

According to Jonas Tabikuran of the South Pentecost Tourism Board, at least two foreigners, a French doctor and a Chinese national, have jumped and survived. According to some sources, several other foreigners have dived, but one had to live with the tribe for seven months before he was given permission.



The guy on the right once jumped off a two meter diving board into a pool! What a man!



Christian Lala has been diving all his life, and so far is uninjured

Of course non-survival is a definite possibility. One of the deaths recorded in land diving couldn’t have happened at a worse moment – a local diver in 1974 was seriously injured (and later died) in front of Queen Elizabeth II, who was visiting this former Anglo-Franco colony. Most accounts state that the diving was done in the wrong season, and the vines were too dry and broke. But Douglas Asal, a 19-year-old land diver, has a different analysis. “My father was the first diver that day in front of the Queen,” he said. “Then 23 divers jumped successfully. The diver who was killed was the 25th and last diver of the day. Both his vines broke. He was in his 30s and left a wife and two children. I think that either the vines were reused and worn out, or more likely, he did not follow all the diet and purification rules, and brought death on himself.”

Asal stated, “I know men who have been injured, and have seen vines break several times, usually near the man’s ankles. About five men are injured each year, and a death occurs about every five years.”

Considering this is a sport with no protective gear other than a penis sheath – compare that to football! -- it is amazing that more deaths do not occur.

Based on the number of divers at the five sites, and figuring that most men dive only once per year (but a few do two dives on their day of glory), I estimate about 500 men and boys dive each year.

The Vanuatu Supreme Court has ruled that no other Vanuatu islands can break the Pentacost land-diving monopoly. The Court also acknowledged that the commercial exploitation of “nagol” should be regulated by local chiefs. Using this power, for a time the chiefs recently forbade commercial filming of the event, but now that can be done, for the high price of \$40,000.



Philippa Tabisari, 15, dives off the four meter board



A diver comes crashing down at breakneck speed – literally

Land diving inspired bungee jumping, a huge sport which began in 1987 with an unauthorized but instantly famous jump from the Eiffel Tower. According to Jonas Tabikuran, former Member of Parliament from Pentecost, Vanuatuans launched a patent suit against the inventors of bungee jumping, claiming their idea was stolen. But their case fell flat.

There are five land diving locations on Pentecost:

Lonorore Airport, on the coast. Oriented toward fly-in tourists, who fly from Port Vila (the capital, 50 minutes away); see the land diving just 200 meters from the airport; and fly back in one day; about \$450 per person including the \$90 entry fee. The crowd of only 70 makes it easy to see. About 10 boys and men dive from five platforms ranging from 6 to 30 meters high. Only on Saturdays, April to June.

Pangi Village, on the coast. Oriented towards cruise ship passengers. Tours are offered on board, or just walk-in for \$90 per person. The crowded audience numbers up to 1000. About 15 divers usually jump from platforms ranging from 8 to 30 meters high. On any day that a cruise ship stops at Pangi, from April to June. .

Londot Village, on the coast. Oriented towards walk-in and fly-in tourists; about an hour from Lonora Airport. Crowd of about 70. About 16 men dive from platforms ranging up to 30 meters. Saturdays April through June.

Bunlap Village, inland about 1.5 hours over very rough roads. Virtually no tourists, only locals. Admission fee varies. About 30 divers jump over an entire day, from a tower that can exceed 35 meters. Only on one day in May on short notice, during the yam festival.

Various villages near Bunlap. Similar to Bunlap, but about 30-40 divers jump in one village that rotates each year. Inquire locally.



A land diver of Vanuatu comes flying down from the sky

A good place to stay near the Lonorore Airport, with 4 bedrooms, good food, cold shower, and genial host, is the Vanambil Guesthouse, owned by Jonas Tabikuran (head of

the South Pentecost Tourism Board), in Barvet village, about 3000 Vatu (\$33) per night B&B, tel.: 77 23 374, or 324-8846.

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Lew Toulmin once dove off a two meter diving board into the deep end of a swimming pool. He survived, and now lives in Vanuatu and Silver Spring.

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