From the moment you arrive in Vanuatu, the rest of the world seems to just fall away. We tend to accept as a fact of life that virtually every corner of the globe has been mapped out by commerce, colonized by Western brands and culture — however far we travel, there are the recognizable signposts of common restaurants, shops and hotel chains. For many travellers, this familiarity is comforting, a buffer against the fear and disorientation of a new place. But for others, it creates the disappointing sense that all of the world’s mysteries are fast being destroyed. And so they seek out something else — something wilder.

It’s arguably one of the few countries left with virtually no name recognition, as I discovered when I told colleagues about my absence to visit a new private island resort with a few other writers. “Vanu – where?”, as it came to be known, in fact lies just north of New Zealand and to the east of Australia – it’s about three hours from Brisbane by Qantas Air, who offer flights in partnership with Air Vanuatu.

Stepping off the plane into the heat of the black-tar runway at the airport on Espiritu Santo – a relatively populous island, albeit in a remote part of the country – the view was dominated by legions of towering coconut palms, Vanuatu’s most visible legacy of French and British colonization. From the airport it was a brief 20 minutes by car to Ratua’s jetty, passing through a sparse town offering a handful of expat-owned businesses.

After a half-hour jaunt by speedboat, we were at the island — and greeted by Victoria and Frederik, the island’s Australian and French management couple — then handed a welcome glass of chilled pink grapefruit juice by smiling staff. As we all discovered throughout our days on the island, the loudly expressive happiness of the Ni-Vanuatu people, or Ni-Van for short, was something truly extraordinary. Wandering through the paths that cut throughout the island, I often heard their ebullient laughter sounding as though it was right behind me — only to see a few of the girls chatting as they walked to their staff quarters, faint amid the palms in the distance. In 2006, the country was famously decreed “The Happiest Place on Earth” by a UK economic think tank.

Even to a hardened urbanite, that designation certainly applies to Ratua. Designed with an eclectic South Asian flair, the island has a beautiful scattering of authentic Balinese bungalows — more than 100 years old, tinged with the smell of incense — each uniquely furnished with hardwood antiques, leading out to a private beach, and secluded from the others by tall garden fronds. Engaged with the local community, Ratua is run as a non-profit — proceeds from the island’s rental benefit residents in the main town on Espiritu Santo — currently
projects include hiring doctors from New Caledonia and providing clean water for the town’s school. The island is also highly eco-friendly, using solar and other renewable energy sources – even much of the food served to guests is raised or grown in gardens on Ratua, or caught from the surrounding waters.

It’s no surprise then, that meals on the island are bliss – the freshest vegetables and fish prepared by Candy, a talented young New Zealand chef who has roots in Vanuatu. The majority of the staff members are Ni-Van – the resort’s French developer created it in partnership with the island’s owner, a local chief. Many of the excursions – diving wreck sites, picnicking on nearby uninhabited Turtle Island, and canoeing through forests on the mainland to the surreal Blue Hole – are all enhanced by the detailed history and lore given by Ni-Van guides. For the adventurous, there is a “Kava” ceremony, officiated in a traditional style by the chief. Led through the darkness to a hut in the heart of Ratua’s forests, we each drank a small seashell of the peppery, mildly intoxicating beverage, tossing the last drop on the ground as an offering to the gods.

Late one evening, I watched as a large, bird-like moth grazed the ceiling in the waterfront lounge, following the trail of light offered by an ornate chandelier, and dipped perilously close to the steady blades of the wooden fan. “They are beautiful”, said Frederik. “But they live like that just two days.” What a striking similarity to Vanuatu itself. It’s imbedded in the culture of this isolated land to live for the moment, enjoying each gorgeous day and taking care of needs as they arise. Despite the abundance in the surrounding waters, Frederik told us receiving regular deliveries of fresh fish often posed a challenge – local Ni-Van fishermen will work only if they need to pay the occasional bill, and otherwise see no reason. Is it any wonder they’re so happy?

But as pleasant as this laissez-faire existence may sound, there is a fundamental conflict between this style of living and building a solid foundation for progress within the modern world – which, romantic notions to the contrary, the people of Vanuatu are being inexorably drawn into. The absence of fast-food chains and other symptoms of Westernization may create a fantasy-like atmosphere for visitors, but the country is sorely lacking in good hospitals and schools, a professional middle class, steady tourism, and dependable public services.

Vanuatu has heretofore escaped many of the common ills of the developing world, like rampant crime and substance abuse, but now stands at a point where the local people must experience social and economic progress or the country will certainly decline. Ratua is effectively creating a bridge to an optimistic future; raising the country’s international profile as a tropical destination, while ensuring that the Ni-Van are benefiting from – and integrated with – the development process. And just as importantly, they are doing so in a way that strives in all aspects to preserve the beauty and mystery of this wild paradise.

For more information on Ratua Private Island, visit www.ratua.com.au