

# Let Me Explain Myself

As a Peace Corps Volunteer serving on the outer island of Aneityum, I often find myself explaining my presence here in Vanuatu.

People are curious to know what motivates a person to leave behind family, friends, a career and a completely different culture.

Why would a person volunteer to abandon the familiar?

Many people consider me odd.

Why trade in electricity for kerosene lanterns?

Flushing toilets for a long drop smolhaos. Pizza deliveries for banana laplap.

Owning a car, air conditioner, television or computer is thought to be a universal status symbol.

Surely, I must have always been happy before and led a life of ease.

It makes no sense to leave these material objects behind - to some.

Many Ni-Vans I story with hold the United States of America in the highest regard. "Kaontri blong yu, i gud tumas, be Vanuatu hemi gud smol."

I have become accustomed to hearing apologies for "Black Man Fashion".

As if Ni-Van customs and lifestyle were something to be ashamed of and not something to preserve, cherish and celebrate.

Some people assume that international volunteers must be sacrificing so much to live here in Vanuatu.

It is not just Ni-Vans who share in this mentality.

There are many Americans who cannot understand why I would choose to live in a third world country.

The implication is that the Ni-Van way of life is primitive, backward or in some way sub par when compared to other cultures.

This could not be further from the truth.

Vanuatu's an incredible country with so much to offer. The people are amongst the friendliest in the world, welcoming newcomers into their communities and families with open arms. Vanuatuis innocent to many problems in the developed world.

I often have to explain the concept of homelessness to villagers, who cannot entirely grasp why a powerful nation would allow this problem to occur.

The lifestyle here is rewarding in itself. There is something innately gratifying about building your own shelter; about knowing that dinner is the result of laboring with just your bare hands and a bush knife.

The scenery may be vastly different on each island, but the awe inspiring beauty is commonplace.

Part of my job as a Peace Corps Volunteer is to share this message with Ni-Vans and Americans alike.

I try to relate that our cultures and countries should be respected and admired for their differences.

International Volunteer Day was yesterday, Friday 5 December.

It recognized the effort and contributions from international volunteers serving all over the world. Vanuatu benefits from the work of many international volunteer agencies, including my own organization, Peace Corps.

As volunteers, we do not receive payment for the work that we perform.

Most aid agencies cover the travel, medical and living expenses of their volunteers only.

But in lieu of monetary payment, volunteers are rewarded with life-long friendships, insights to a new culture and the opportunity to help worthy causes.

These rewards far outweigh any petty inconveniences about life here and loss of material goods.

We are embraced by our communities, whom we work hand-in-hand alongside.

This is why we are here.

**Matthew Hardwick**  
**Anelcauhat, Aneityum**