

# Ten great reasons to visit New Caledonia

By Carla Grossetti



## 1 Proximity:

The fact that the pretty islands of New Caledonia are accessible without a long-haul flight makes the French territory even more attractive as a destination. Those with an itch to travel will be satisfied in just over 2.5 hours - which is the flight time to get to New Caledonia from Auckland. The archipelago includes the main island of Grande Terre, The Loyalty Islands, The Chesterfield Islands, The Belep archipelago and the Isle of Pines as well as a few more secluded islets. Bonjour Nouvelle Calédonie!

## 2 Practice your French:

While there are 28 Kanak languages spoken in New Caledonia, French is the official language and it is spoken even in the most remote villages. Practice *la langue Française* as you haggle for handicrafts at the stalls that fringe the main Noumea Market, where the fusion of French and Melanesian flavours is everywhere. Despite being 16,136 km east of metropolitan France, you will still find stalls devoted to selling buttery croissants and killer Croque monsieurs. The traditional part of the market is where you will find freshly baked bread, fruit and vegetables, meat and fish. Oh, and there's free WiFi. Noumea Market, Port Moselle Marina. Open daily 5am to 11am.

## 3 Scuba dive in waters off the Iles de Pins:

Home to turtles, fish of every stripe and colourful reefs, snorkelling and diving in the warm waters off the Isle of Pines is hard to beat. Make a beeline for Bay de Ouameo, which is like a giant underwater aquarium with 21 dive spots that include dramatic drop-offs, passes, walls and caves. More experienced divers can up the adrenaline with a night dive or freshwater caving adventure. Ouameo Bay is located at the northwest end of the Isle of Pines and is home to the Gadji Tribe. Kunie Scuba Centre also welcomes non-divers to ogle the reef with goggles, fins and snorkel.



#### 4 Maurice Bay, on the Isle of Pines:

Nowhere is that juxtaposition of cultures on the Isle of Pines more evident than at the Statue of St Maurice, which commemorates the first Catholic service ever to take place on the island on August 15 1848, following the arrival of the first missionaries. The statue is guarded by a fence of hand-carved totems made by all the clans on the Isle of Pines. There are more totems down by the water, which when grouped together, form a wonderfully weathered sculptural barricade. Maurice Bay is one of the stop-offs on an island minibus tour driven by locals who only speak a smattering of English.

#### 5 For a taste of cuisine Caledonienne:

Join hungry hordes of locals at Perle Deram in Noumea for a serving of bougna. The word for the traditional feast dish of the Kanak people means 'bundle' and the aromatic banana-leaf package combines chicken, lobster or fish with yams, bananas and sweet potatoes cooked in coconut milk in an earth oven. For those after French cuisine, try Chez Toto in the Latin Quarter where you can sample signatures such as terrine of foie gras and calf's head with sauce gribiche. Aux Delices de Noumea is worth a visit for its range of freshly baked breads, rainbow of macarons, croissants and whimsical cakes.

#### 6 Kayak below limestone rocks:

Located on the east coast of Grande Terre, the Linderalique Rocks are loveliest at dusk when pink light paints the sky. Keen kayakers can slice through the turquoise seas to the Grotte de Linderalique, a large cavern in one of the rocks. The jagged structure rises up to 60m out of the sea in the nature park, which starts east of Hienghene and continues to the Bay of Hienghene. Don't miss the Poule Couveuse - or the Brooding Hen - the most famous of the dramatic rock formations.

#### 7 Reflect on New Cal's past:

The spectacular Tjibaou Cultural Centre (Rue des Accords de Matignon) designed by renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano is



#### facts:

Carla Grossetti travelled to New Caledonia courtesy of Carnival Spirit.

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worth a visit in its own right. While the Museum of New Caledonia presents the colonial history of the archipelago, this new contemporary cultural institution is more focused on honouring the indigenous perspective and celebrating the Kanak identity.

#### 8 Enjoy a day trip to Amadee Island:

This small but perfectly formed speck of an island is located just off the south west coast of Noumea and is part of the New Caledonia Barrier Reef - the world's largest lagoon. A day trip to this UNESCO heritage site - voted the No.1 attraction in New Caledonia - presents an opportunity for everything from beachcombing under blue skies to glass-bottomed boat rides, snorkelling tours and a sumptuous buffet lunch. Yes indeed it is a postcard-worthy location - especially when you can send your hand-written message from the smallest post office in the world.



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**facts:**

International airline of New Caledonia Aircalin operates 3 flights every week between Auckland and Noumea - Tuesday/Friday/Sunday

- Auckland to Noumea: 14.15hrs/15.10hrs
- Noumea to Auckland: 08.00hrs/12.40hrs
- A320-200 aircraft
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**9 Take a stroll around Mare:**

Mare is the second largest of the four Loyalty Islands and it has a wild untamed beauty about it. A popular port of call with the Carnival Cruise Lines and P&O Cruise ships, the rustic loveliness of Yedjele Beach is just a 15-minute bus ride from the main village. There are thatched huts that line the beach where you can buy a beer or have your hair braided. Join the locals walking up the beach at an unhurried pace and marvel at the 50 shades of aquamarine.

**10 Tread lightly through Grande Terre:**

The more intrepid should tackle the Grande Randonnee trail, which snakes some 100km through an undulating landscape that starts in Prony and heads north to Dumbea. While the stupidly fit might enjoy setting off on the trail in its entirety, you can also divide the walk into eight connecting hikes, which can be walked over several days. While the trails start out at the so-called turquoise coast, it continues along a shrub-dominated habitat before winding into ancient woodlands. Ornithologists take note: keep your peepers peeled for the Cagou, the endangered bird that is also the emblem of New Caledonia. Horse-riding enthusiasts can also clip-clop along this great hiking trail. ■

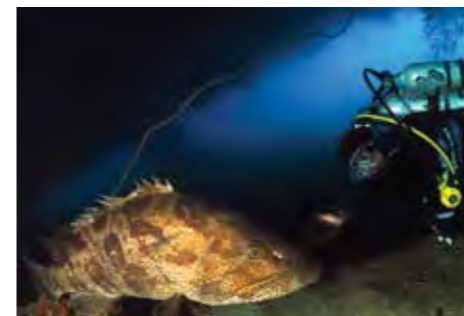


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