

OFFBEAT DESTINATIONS





NEW CALEDONIA & THE ISLE OF PINES

Stories & Photos By Alison DaRosa

Tell your friends you're going to New Caledonia and chances are you'll be greeted with an enthusiastic blank stare. Sounds nice – but where the heck is it?

New Caledonia

It's a bucket list destination – well off the beaten track. But next time you're in Australia or New Zealand, be sure to add it to your travel plans.

New Caledonia is a remote archipelago in the Coral Sea – about a three-hour flight northeast of Sydney, Australia, or northwest of Auckland, New Zealand.

It's probably one of the most bio-diverse destinations on Earth – home to tropical rainforests, pristine white sand beaches, mineral-rich eerily primeval river valleys and the world's largest lagoon (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). For botany buffs, this place is the mothership: It's home to hundreds of plants and animals found nowhere else in the world – many from the late Cretaceous period, when dinosaurs ruled.

It's also about great beaches, fabulous French food and warm, friendly locals.

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Isle of Pines

You won't see a highrise, a stoplight, even a single neon sign here. What you will see are pines rising beside palms, papaya growing wild, miles of powdery white sand beaches and a sea in so many shades of blue – from pale turquoise to polished lapis, from cerulean to cobalt – that it defies description.

"I have to dig out my Crayola box to decide what color I'm about to float in," said Marybeth Bond, a San Franciscan snorkeling in the placid lagoon that surrounds the island.

Part of the French territory of New Caledonia, Isle of Pines is a 25-minute flight southeast of Noumea, situated almost astride the Tropic of Capricorn. The island measures 9.3 miles by 8.1 miles and is home to only about 2,000 people. Native Melaneseans (or Kanaks) account for about 95 percent of the island's population; they live in eight tribes, each with its own chief.

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The People of New Caledonia

Melanesians were here first. The Kanaks, as they're called, still account for more than 40 percent of the archipelago's population of around 250,000. Tribes own about a third of the land.

The French came in the latter half of the 1800s – prisoners, prostitutes, widows and orphans mostly. The former penal colony remains a French territory. A good number of Japanese and Indochinese came on contract in the 1890s to work New Caledonia's rich nickel mines – which still hold about 25 percent of the world's known nickel reserves.

Americans? More than a million spent time here during World War II, when New Caledonia was an important Allied base. These days only about 1,000 U.S. citizens visit the archipelago each year.

"Americans come mostly for the diving," said Jean-Michel Foutrein, director of New Caledonia Tourism. "When you dive here, you find

everything just as it was a thousand years ago – or even 150,000 years ago. You dive and see no other boats around; you don't share the reef with a thousand other tourists."



with locals," said guide Francois Tran of Caledonia Tours.

For a bit of historical perspective, walk a few blocks to the Noumea Town Museum, the city's oldest building (from 1874), steps from

But even those who don't dive, find plenty to see and do in New Caledonia.

Explore from Noumea

Noumea, the capital and only sizable city, is a good base from which to explore the main island, Grande Terre. Save time to visit some of the other islands in the archipelago, including Isle of Pines.

For early risers, the Noumea Market, a short walk from the cruise terminal, is a great place to start. It opens at 5 a.m. and operates until around noon daily. Buy everything from smoked sea salt to sarongs, from vegetables to videos. "It's also an excellent place to mingle

Noumea Town Square (known locally as Coconut Tree Square). Don't miss the museum's basement war room for a look at what the U.S. did here during World War II.

About five miles northeast of Noumea, find the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, named for the leader of the Kanak independence movement who was assassinated in 1989. Designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, the stunning complex was inspired by Melanesian tribal huts. It celebrates Kanak civilization – and in Piano's words, is a place that will "pass on their memory to their grandchildren."

Hikers' paradise

Hikers will love New Caledonia. At Giant Ferns Park Botanical Reserve about 90 minutes north of Noumea, get lost on trails that meander around and under giant tree ferns that stretch 60 to 70 feet high.

Or drive about 45 minutes east to the surreal landscape of Blue River Provincial Park, where the earth is so iron-rich it has the look of powdered rust. Park visitors will find the eerie remains of a rainforest that drowned when the Yate River was dammed a half century ago; the forest still stands, a haunting dry skeleton of its former self. Visitors also find hundreds of plants and animals that date to primeval times.

"The park is a living museum for the old plants of our planet," said tour guide Tran. "Ninety percent of the plants you'll find here are found nowhere else on Earth – because the soil is so alkaline.

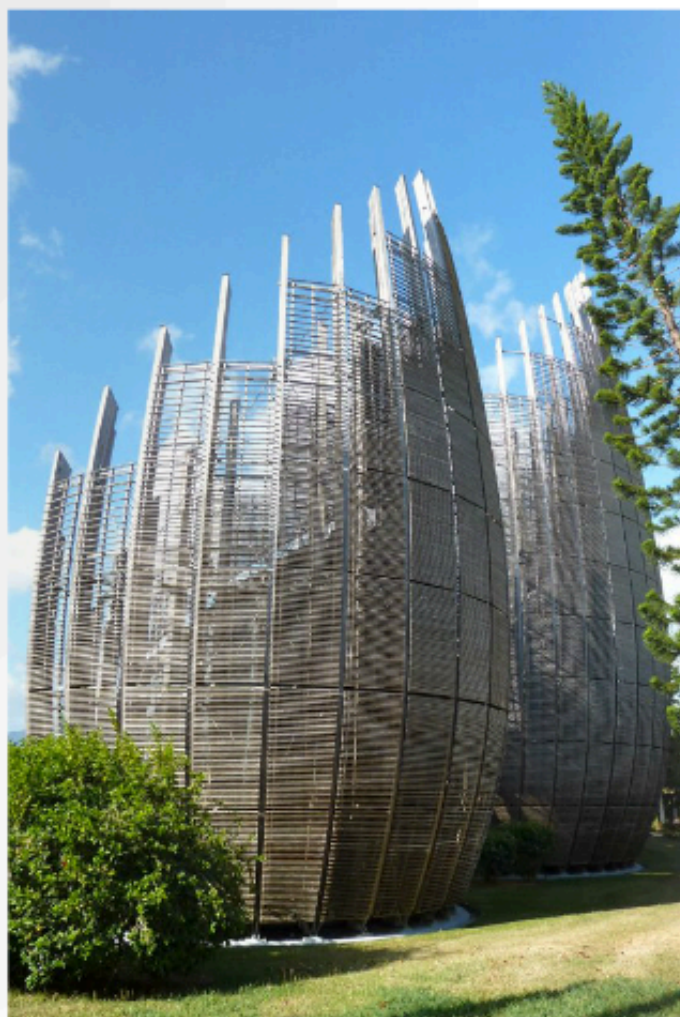
"Not even worms can live in this soil, but carnivorous plants can," he added, demonstrating the predatory mechanics of a carnivorous green pod that was growing near a delicate white orchid.

The region's fauna are unique, too. The cagou, a flightless bird and the country's emblem, is the fifth rarest bird in the world – with only about 800 left in the wild, all in New Caledonia. We spotted two in the park.

The boardwalk

Back in Noumea, reserve time to walk the boardwalk at sunset. See families packing up after a lazy day at the beach; watch men gathering hollow metal balls after an afternoon of petanque play; be awed by the gravity defying acrobatics of kite surfers.

Ahhh. Then ponder dinner. French cuisine, of course. ■■



The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre was designed by Renzo Piano. On opposite page, fresh fruit is center stage at the Noumea Market; water toys line the beach along Noumea bayfront.

If You Go: New Caledonia

Getting There: Aircalin, also known as Air Caledonie, is the international airline of New Caledonia. It offers flights from LAX, SFO (and South Pacific locales) to Tontouta International Airport in Noumea. www.aircalin.com

Staying There: Chateau Royal Beach Resort & Spa. A former Club Med reopened in 2011, offers 108 contemporary apartment-style units, pool, spa, gym, restaurant, bar, WiFi. Rates start at about \$260 per night, including breakfast. www.office-tourisme.nc/en/ch%C3%A2teau-royal-beach-resort-spa

Le Meridien Noumea. 245 rooms, pool, gym, business center, four restaurants, bar, free WiFi. Rates start at about \$215 per night, including breakfast. www.starwoodhotels.com/lemeridien.

Guide Service: Francois Tran can be contacted at caledoniattours@lagoon.nc or phone +687 786 838.

Know Before You Go: The best time to visit is April through December. Summer (mid-November through March) temps average 78-86. Winter (June through August) temps drop to the mid 70s during the day, about 60 at night.

New Caledonia uses the French Pacific Franc (XPF). Credit cards are accepted by most major retailers; US dollars are not. Don't be surprised to find long lines at Noumea ATMs; machines often run out of money by afternoon.

The official language is French, but English is widely spoken. Tap water is generally safe to drink. Tipping is not customary.

More Info: www.visitnewcaledonia.com

THE ISLE OF PINES

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Explore the culture

The Kanaks call their island Kunie. Captain Cook named it Isle of Pines in 1774 when he first spotted the spires of its native *Araucaria* pines.

An island tour doesn't take long. Vao is the only village – and there's not much to it: a general store, a gas station, a church (built in 1860) and a cemetery. The village stages a farmer's market on Wednesday and Saturday mornings.

There's no official museum here, but visiting the weathered wooden totems near St. Maurice Beach provides a better understanding of the cultural diversity of the island. The aged tribal carvings surround a Roman Catholic monument commemorating the first Mass on the island.

Savor the setting

The main reason people visit here is to play: to sink their toes into the warm talcum sands of the beaches that edge the island, to kayak the shades-of-blue lagoon that surrounds it, to snorkel its colorful reefs full of fish found nowhere else on Earth.

Don't miss an excursion to the stunning Nokanhui Atoll – a spit of powdery white sand surrounded by undulating azure. It's a 25-minute boat ride from the mainland – but visitors feel a world away, as if they've been magically plunked onto a South Pacific postcard. Stroll the narrow spit slowly, allowing its image to etch into your mind's eye – for easy recall later, when the trials of life intrude.

Nobody ever wants to leave Nokanhui, but departure is easier for those who know they're motoring off to Brush Island for lunch. While indigenous guides grill a feast of just-caught fish and huge spiny lobsters, visitors are on their own. They stroll the pine-fringed white sand and snorkel among colorful reef residents. They stretch out on towels, close their eyes, listen to the gentle tide lapping the shore, palm fronds clacking in the warm breeze – the simple sounds of paradise.

"Pinch yourself," said Bond, breaking the reverie. "This is really real." ■



Weathered totems were erected by the ancestors of the eight tribes that still populate Isle of Pines. On opposite page lunch on Brush Island is a seafood feast





➔ If you go: Isle of Pines

Getting there: Aircalin provides daily nonstop service linking Noumea's Magenta Airport with Isle of Pines. Flights take about 25 minutes and roundtrip fares start at about \$175. . www.aircalin.com.

On most Saturdays, Sundays and Wednesdays, the high-speed catamaran Betico offers roundtrip ferry service linking Noumea with Isle of Pines. The trip takes about 2 hours, 15 minutes each way and runs about half the price of air transportation.

Staying there: Le Meridien Isle of Pines is the most luxurious hotel on the island. 50 rooms, pool, full-service spa, complimentary use of snorkel gear, restaurant & bar. Rates start at about \$375 per night. www.starwoodhotels.com/lemeridien/.

Playing there: Your hotel can book boat trips to Nokanhui and Brush Island. Expect to pay anywhere from about \$90 to \$110 per person, depending on your lunch choice.

More info: www.isle-of-pines.com.