

Bountiful 'breadstick' – Nouvelle-Calédonie

ON A SMALL scale map of the Western Pacific, New Caledonia resembles a French 'breadstick' running some 400 km from South-east to North-west. Closer examination shows its edges are nibbled with coves, estuaries and indentations; resulting in 2250 km of tropical coastlines bordering the territory as a whole.

And east of the encircling 1600 km reef the largest continuous island reef on earth, three large and several smaller 'crumbs'; the Loyalty Islands, together form one of three administrative subdivisions.

As a first time visitor I discovered New Caledonia meets the expectations of its growing tourist industry with a high degree of quality and good taste; much of which stems from a blend of French sophistication and Melanesian (Kanak) cultural values. Here you'll look long and hard to find anything especially garish or tacky.

Within 10 years the industry has mushroomed with hotel extensions, upgrades, refurbishments and additional wings. A new highway links Kone and Touho to the north. And the international airport (La Tontouta) plus 10 smaller domestic airports belie the fact that New Caledonia has no more 205,000 people; 42% Melanesian, 37% European, 8.4% Wallisians; the rest largely Polynesians, Indonesians and Vietnamese.

I was especially surprised to find Noumea (Pop. 80,000) is as close to Auckland as Sydney, and rather nearer than Fiji. This may account for growing numbers of Kiwis who see New Caledonia as a natural holiday destination.

It may also explain a lessening of fervour in former vociferous calls for independence from France. These peaked in the late 1980s and early 90s. Now they are seldom heard and independence has been deferred to 2014 at the earliest.

Meanwhile the massive reserves of nickel are mined and exported bringing great wealth ... further major developments with Goro-nickel in the south are under way. Huge injections of French capital are providing for significant commercial development, improvements in the infrastructure and standards of accommodation and cuisine to rival those in Paris. Noumea alone has an estimated 130 restaurants.

I quickly discovered that life here is casual, with no need for visas, vaccinations, or tipping. Throughout the main island and in offshore habitations tap water is perfectly safe for drinking. Even better, hawkers and hassling are virtually unknown.

Deserted 'Robinson Crusoe' beaches, numerous tiny atolls, and dazzling creamy-white sand abound. Add to that adventure activities; from snorkelling to skydiving, diving, deer-hunting, kayaking, horse treks and burgeoning eco-tourism New Caledonia has 6500 mollusc types, dazzling marine life and 3000, indigenous plant and animal species; several unknown beyond the island and its satellites. Students of history may interest themselves in many architectural remnants of French colonial days.

So what's the catch, I ask myself ? It's definitely not the language though French is spoken throughout, and English commonly little understood. Indeed the French language lends this place an irrefutable degree of Gallic charm.

For many would-be visitors, the stumbling block is simply one of cost. It would be misleading to suggest that New Caledonia is anything but an expensive destination. Nonetheless a growing influx of Australians, Kiwis, Japanese and a smattering of Europeans head for this fascinating tropical haven; drawn here by attractive and inclusive holiday packages most start out at around \$1000.

Deals of this sort have fuelled a healthy tourism business and for Kiwis the attractions are obvious. Close to Bourail on the western highway you'll find the carefully tended World War 2 NZ Servicemen's Cemetery with its low plaques curving downhill to a wall of remembrance.

And nearby La Foa (Pop.3000) boasts the world's smallest French film festival. Each June the 80-seat Cinema screens 1st release productions in conjunction with the Film Festival of Paris and top French stars and directors come to tiny La Foa for the unique event. Amelie director, Jean Paul Jeunet and actress Catherine Jacob were recent visitors.

This one area, like the Wairarapa, has a busy and vital events calendar including horse racing at La Foa, a sound and light show at Fort Teremba, a nature festival at Sarramea and well-known triathlons.

In Noumea , Le Petite Train is a huge novelty. Indeed it resembles a locomotive from the early days of rail travel. All three petrol driven street trains are powered by old Ford engines and they struggle up hills in true "I think I can, I think I can" fashion, somewhat like the famous 'Little Train That Could'. All-in-all, a 1st rate tour of the city and its environs. A word of caution ... don't sit too far forward or the engine will drown an excellent recorded commentary in both French and English.

Ten or 15 minutes from town visitors can marvel at one of the world's architectural wonders , the Tjibaou Cultural Centre built at a cost of \$US55 million between 1995 and 1998. This breathtaking design by Renzo Piano uses steel together with Iroko wood from Ghana and its inspired vertical structure is a monument to the vitality of Pacific Art.

Today Piano retains intellectual ownership of the Tjibaou art and performance centre. Otherwise this has been gesture of faith in New Caledonia by the French Government itself.

From Noumea to The Isle of Pines south of La Grande Terre (the main island) by ATR42 turboprop takes some 20 minutes. Here Le Meridien hotel allows a choice from 10 hotel quarters central rooms or 29 luxury Kanak-style bungalows in tropical garden surroundings. The lunchtime menu is buffet style with mains served to order at the shaded barbecue – venison, unicorn fish, chicken, mahi mahi, marlin, lagoon fish – take your pick. You'd hardly think Isle of Pines has been inhabited for more than 2000 years and from 1872 to 1912 served as a penal colony.

Today ghostly reminders of those days are all that remain. What was once a place of penitentiary is now a petite paradise.

Though Noumea's La Vue de la Pacifique offers less than the pinnacle in cuisine, the food is perfectly acceptable and furthermore nuns prepare your food and wait at table. Still more intriguing, as you finish, these Godly ladies reappear bearing candles to serenade diners with a heartfelt round of 'Ave Maria'. Vraiment, I kid you not.

Like New Zealand this French possession has a flightless bird – the Cagou - as its emblem. Unlike the kiwi, the cagou runs around and barks.

Howard Smith [© 2003] was in New Caledonia by courtesy of New Calédonie Tourisme, Sud & Air Calin

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