

Pacific Perfection

Combining spectacular natural beauty, ancient Melanesian culture and a soupçon of Gallic je ne sais quoi, the South Pacific archipelago of New Caledonia has it all, as *Paul Kay* discovers

INTO THE BLUE A pristine islet bathed by the crystal-clear waters of New Caledonia

SOME ISLANDS ARE BLESSED with beautiful beaches and crystal-clear waters, others with incredible biodiversity, fascinating indigenous culture or continental charm, but it's rare indeed to find a place that has them all—which is why the South Pacific archipelago of New Caledonia is such an extraordinary find.

Located 1,500 kilometres off the northeast coast of Australia and 1,300 kilometres southwest of Fiji, the remote islands have marked the outer reaches of the French empire since 1853, when Napoleon III decreed the foundation of a penal colony there. The ensuing century and a half of Gallic influence, blended with the territory's ancient Kanak culture, has created a place and a character that is quite unique, a proud and multicultural society where French cuisine and love of wine sit side by side with tribal heritage and an adventurer spirit, all set against a backdrop of stunning natural beauty.

The archipelago is generally synonymous with its largest island, Grande Terre, the 500-kilometre-long “mainland” surrounded by the world's largest coral lagoon. Shielded by a reef that stretches more than 1,600 kilometres around its circumference, this 24,000sqkm body of sheltered water makes the island a hotspot for a raft of aquatic pursuits, including scuba diving, windsurfing and kitesurfing, as well as providing a haven for approximately 7,500 species of marine life.

The biodiversity is just as impressive inland, with around 4,300 species of animals and some 3,500 varieties of plants, three-quarters of which are endemic to the archipelago. And, of course, there are beaches galore, particularly on the paradisiacal Isle of Pines, while the Belep, Loyalty and Chesterfield groups of islands each offer their own distinct charm.

But for most visitors, the first taste of New Caledonia is Nouméa, the territory's laid-back capital city. Home to around a third of the archipelago's 270,000 inhabitants, Nouméa occupies a peninsula on Grande Terre's southwest coast and gives off a breezy, low-key vibe with a distinctly French feel. Crêperies, bistros and wine shops dot the city, along with a surprisingly cosmopolitan assortment of restaurants serving Japanese, Vietnamese and other Asian cuisines.



IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY/ARGUSPHOTO; HEMIS.FR/ARGUSPHOTO



GO WILD Clockwise from left: A diver floats above a shoal of yellow spot emperor fish; Wapan dancers don traditional costume on the Isle of Pines; a traditional outrigger sales in the waters of Isle of Pines; totem poles are an important part of the local Kanak culture



Fringed by beaches, the city is a Mecca for kitesurfers, whose curved sails invariably speckle the horizon at dawn and dusk, while the harbour is home to an abundance of yachts and other small craft. There's also a championship golf course 10 minutes from downtown, one of four on Grand Terre, and a series of lofty vantage points in the adjacent hills from which to take in sweeping views of the city, the coastline and the reef beyond.

Arguably the most striking sight in Nouméa, however, is the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, a collection of highly symbolic eco-structures designed by Pritzker Prize-winning Italian architect Renzo Piano. Opened in 1998 and costing US\$70 million to build, the centre pays tribute to traditional and contemporary Kanak art and culture, as well as the islands' often turbulent political past. Named after the leader of New Caledonia's independence movement, who was assassinated in 1989, the centre comprises 10 pavilions, each shaped like a bisected traditional Kanak hut to signify openness. Indeed, there is symbolism in virtually every element of the centre; its three main towers represent the three administrative divisions of New Caledonia and their height, 28 metres, corresponds to the 28 official Kanak languages spoken in the territory.

Charming though it is, it would be foolish to spend too long in Nouméa when there are so many other parts of the territory to



NATURAL BEAUTY Above: Coloured vegetation forms one of New Caledonia’s most popular attractions, the Heart of Voh. Opposite page: a serene natural pool on the Isle of Pines

explore, and Blue River Provincial Park offers a cornucopia of compelling vistas and natural wonders an easy day trip from the city. With its rust-coloured soil and strange tree silhouettes, some parts of the landscape could easily be mistaken for Africa, perhaps even Madagascar, while others are characterised by lush forest and meandering rivers. Strange flora and fauna abound, including insect-eating pitcher plants and a giant 1,000-year-old *Agathis lanceolata* tree, but the park’s most famous resident is undoubtedly the kagu, New Caledonia’s flightless national bird. Close to extinction just a few decades ago, the kagu has been nursed back from the brink by conservation efforts in recent years, and around 2,000 now remain, 700 of which can be seen rustling through the undergrowth in Blue River Provincial Park.

Those with a thirst for adventure are also well catered for in New Caledonia,

particularly in Bourail in the Deva domain, an 8,000-hectare expanse on Grande Terre’s central west coast. Criss-crossed by hundreds of kilometres of hiking trails, horse-riding tracks and mountain-bike paths, the area offers endless possibilities for getting the heart and the adrenaline pumping. For activities of a rather more sedate pace, Deva also offers opportunities for big game fishing, bird watching and golf, or simply strolling along the dramatic cliffs as the waves crash relentlessly on the rocks below.

The area is also known for its cattle farms and the modern-day cowboys who operate them. One such stockman is Gabriel Hernu, who combines the farming life with tourism, running a small hotel-restaurant with his wife in the heart of cattle country. Built by Hernu’s father in 1988, La Nera serves classic French rustic food with a New Caledonian twist. As well as exceptional beef, it’s known

for its creative use of venison, including a memorable dish made from raw citrus-marinated baby deer, using meat from deer Hernu hunts himself. For the cattle farmer

French cuisine and love of wine sit side by side with tribal heritage



in New Caledonia, deer are pests and culling is a necessity, so Hernu makes the most of the situation both in his restaurant and by leading recreational hunting trips.

Up the coast in North Province is one of the country’s most photographed spots, the Heart of Voh. A perennial favourite of aerial photographers such as Yann Arthus-Bertrand, who featured it on the cover of one of his books, this natural landmark comprises differing types of coloured vegetation that form what looks like a giant love heart when seen from above. Beyond that, to the northeast, are the lush hills that spawned the territory’s name; Captain James Cook, who in 1774 became the first European to sight New Caledonia, named the islands in honour of Scotland because the rolling hills of the northeast reminded him of it as he sailed past.

Of all New Caledonia’s myriad attractions, however, none is more emblematic of the territory’s natural beauty than the Isle of Pines—and with good reason. Less than 30 minutes by air from Nouméa, the isle features some of the most incredible white-sand beaches and crystal-clear waters on the planet, replete with marine life including sea turtles, manta rays and dolphins. Gazing out across this picture-postcard slice of paradise, it’s hard not to muse that some islands really do have all the luck. 🌴

Paul Kay travelled to New Caledonia courtesy of Air Calin and with the help of PAM Holidays in Hong Kong and Tourism New Caledonia.
visitnewcaledonia.com

WHERE TO STAY

New Caledonia boasts sumptuous lodgings to match the compelling scenery



NOUMÉA

Located at the end of a sweeping bay at the city’s most southerly point, Le Méridien Nouméa offers the perfect base from which to explore New Caledonia’s capital. The hotel features a calming Deep Nature Spa and five restaurants, including a beachfront bar. lemeridiennoumea.com



BOURAIL

Barely a year old, the Sheraton New Caledonia Deva Resort & Spa is the archipelago’s newest hotel. For a touch of local flair, be sure to book into one of the spacious rotunda-like bungalows, which are inspired by the architectural traditions of Kanak culture. sher.at/deva



ISLE OF PINES

Oro Bay is one of the most picturesque spots on the Isle of Pines—which is really saying something. Le Méridien offers unrivalled views of its impossibly blue waters and a coastline peppered with the long, leaning pine trees that give the island its name. lemeridieniledespins.com