

Beach Holidays

New Caledonia: a slice of France in the South Pacific

Away from the Gallic bustle of Nouméa, rugged coastlines and dense rainforest await



Rocky outcrops off the coast at Koulnoué © 4corners

JUNE 9, 2017 by: **Nigel Tisdall**

It is a puzzle why Captain Cook gave New Caledonia its name. The explorer came across this South Pacific archipelago in 1774, and some say the tall pines and formidable mountains of its principal island, Grande Terre, reminded him of Scotland. Others argue that he simply followed the convention of describing new lands as offshoots of old Europe, as was the case with New Holland (now Australia), New Britain (today part of Papua New Guinea) and New South Wales.

Arriving from Brisbane, a two-hour flight away, I am relieved to find a seductive land of tropical heat, luscious mangoes and glistening reefs that couldn't be more different from the chill mists, prickly thistles and sullen lochs of the auld country. Unlike in neighbouring Vanuatu, which shares the Melanesian culture and bore Cook's absurd name of New Hebrides until 1980, here his original appellation has stuck, more or less. In 1853 New Caledonia was annexed by the French, who turned it into a penal settlement with the twin goals of "punishment and colonisation". From 1865, 21,700 convicts, including 525 women, were shipped here over three decades until an enlightened governor decided to "turn off the tap of dirty water".

Today Nouvelle-Calédonie remains an enigma. Travellers are well tuned to the charms of French Polynesia, but know little about this comparable overseas territory. Yet it seems equally blessed with the essentials for a memorable South Pacific holiday, including golden beaches, fine French food, islands to hop around, a necklace of World Heritage-listed lagoons and Le Cœur de Voh, a heart-shaped pattern in the mangroves made famous by aerial photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand. While there are tempting coral islands one could flop on, it is Grande Terre, 400km long and shaped like a baguette, that catches the eye with its twisting roads and spine of forest-clad peaks rising to 1,628 metres — perfect for an adventurous road trip.

It is a mistake, my wife and I soon realise, to hire an ancient Renault Clio that is quite unsuitable for the steep mountains, rough tracks and flooded roads that await. A car like this is fine as a runaround in the capital Nouméa, which has all the hallmarks of a French city, including aggressive drivers, convoluted one-way systems and massive out-of-town *hypermarchés*. Over a third of the island's 268,000 residents live here and the Gallic imprint is ubiquitous, from the chic shoppers trotting down avenue du Maréchal Foch to long lunch breaks, games of *pétanque* and lovers dallying under the trees in Place Feillet, which still has an octagonal bandstand, erected in 1879, where a prison band would play three times a week.

Nouméa is home to three museums that unlock the story of this not-quite paradise. Housed in the old town hall, the Musée de la Ville chronicles the struggles its colonists faced — in the first decade of the 20th century they were dying at such a rate that "cunning arrangements were made to make mourning dress fashionable".

A few blocks away, the Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie offers clues to the vanished world that preceded them, sketching out the resourceful lifestyle of the indigenous Kanak people with an

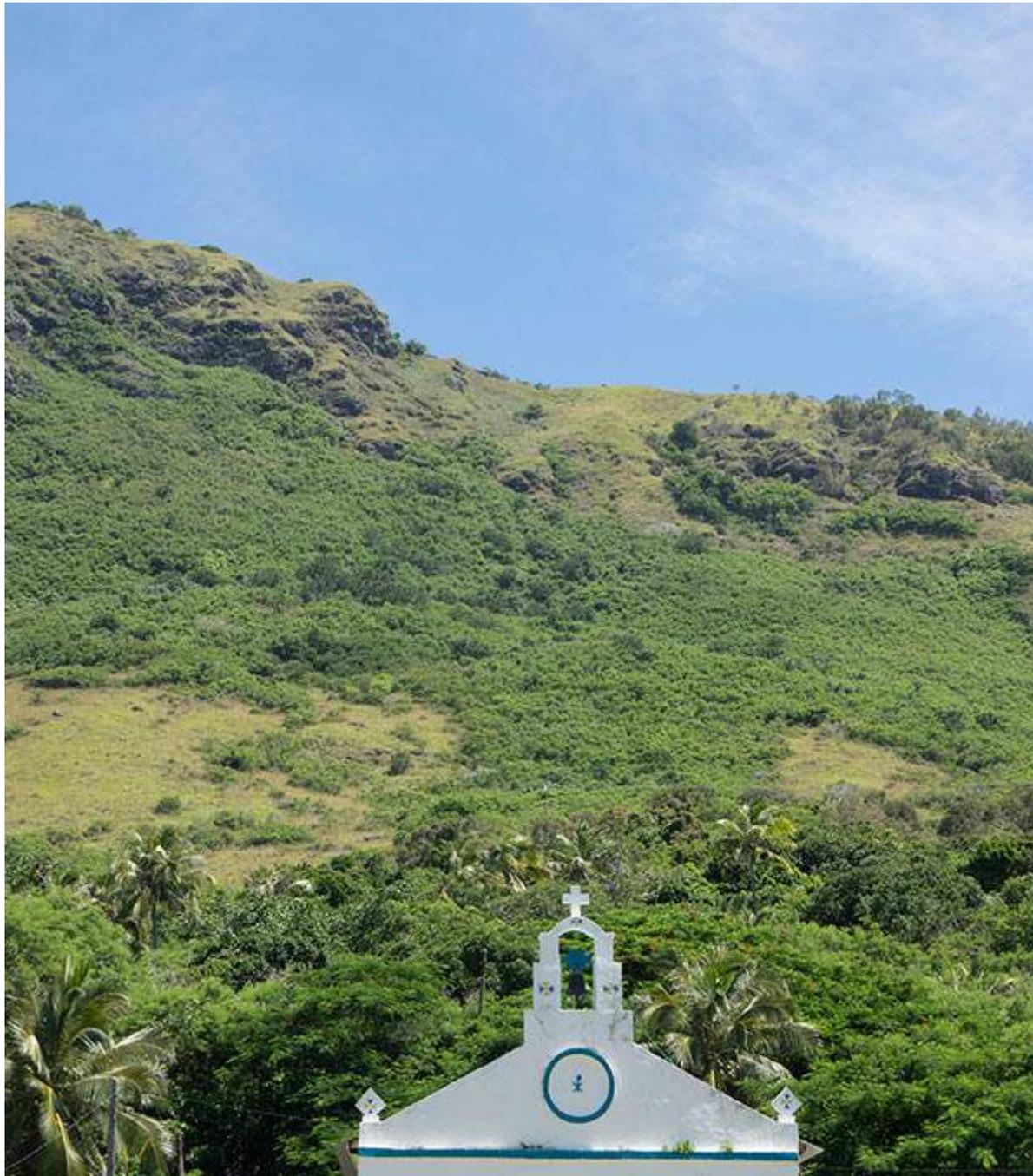


absorbing array of vividly carved *chambranles* (door frames), coconut-fibre shirts, fearsome wooden clubs and money made from shells, bone and flying-fox fur. And out on the Tinu peninsula, the Centre Culturel Tjibaou commemorates Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, who in 1987 called for “a cultural centre to tell the whites who we are” and was assassinated two years later. The last of François Mitterrand’s *grands projets*, this opened in 1989 and was designed by Renzo Piano as a row of 10 tall, egg-shaped pavilions that appear, as with his Shard skyscraper in London, to be unfinished at the top.

Out on the open road, a perplexing sign warns us of *nids-de-poules* (“chicken nests”), otherwise known as potholes. The south-east corner of the island, it transpires, is a badlands of lonely hills, black-sand beaches and shot-up road signs. The soil looks like instant coffee and it is all so

unlike the South Pacific idyll, with the ruins of an abandoned mine jutting into the ocean and a nickel smelting plant billowing steam, that we burst out laughing. A visit to Prony, where the mosquito-infested ruins of a settlement where convicts logged rosewood completes the dismal scene.

All road trips need a good soundtrack, and once we discover the upbeat tunes of the Kanak station Radio Djiido, our spirits rise. The landscape cheers up too, as we head north-west to cowboy country where descendants of early French settlers run cattle farms beside the shimmering Coral Sea. Small rural hotels offer forest walks or horse riding, and every other vehicle we see seems to be a four-wheel-drive pick-up.



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unsurfaced and wild horses roam, we find a laid-back *relais* by a beach with arty bungalows, and have lobster for dinner. It is the first hotel we really like – Grande Terre sadly lacks the starry and romantic accommodation that has made French Polynesia so popular.



The Renzo Piano-designed Centre Culturel Tjibaou in Nouméa © Getty

What it does have is empty roads curling through grand scenery, particularly on the north-east coast where most of the Kanak population live. Here are colourful houses with tropical gardens, and everyone from the verge strimmer to the telephone engineer up his pole gives us a friendly wave. Kanak ingenuity lives on in mailboxes fashioned from the casings of old computers and outboard motors, while honesty stalls sell fruit, jewellery and pot-plants — please leave your francs in the Bonne Maman jar. Add in some rum shops and you could be in the Caribbean, although here alcohol sales are severely restricted in an attempt to curb excessive drinking.

We fill up at small garages that won't take credit cards but can sell you a large tin of cassoulet, and we swerve around the snoozing dogs. Perhaps they are related to the ones Captain Cook left behind (along with some pigs) after he landed at Balade, which now has a whitewashed church where a stained-glass window depicts the Kanaks murdering Catholic missionaries in 1847. At Ouaième we cross the river in a little *bac* (ferry) and at Hienghène pull into cliff-top viewpoints to behold La Poule Couveuse, an offshore rock formation that really does look like a brooding hen.





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bamboo. Gathered beside the prawn-rich Wepoulet river, its cluster of houses seems large for a population of just 17. That is explained when we are taken to the plastic flower-covered graves of 10 villagers murdered in 1984 when the conflict between French loyalists and Kanak separatists boiled over. These include two brothers of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, who is also buried here.

At Kokengone we turn inland to cross back over the mountains, an exhilarating drive on a deserted road with panoramic views. Back on the west coast it is a shock to return to a stressed world of billboards and brusque waiters. We check into a well-appointed but soulless Sheraton resort bordering the white sands of Plage de Poé, the nearest Grande Terre gets to a tourist strip. The water here is rich with seagrass where turtles thrive, so you need to take a boat out to the reef to enjoy the excellent snorkelling. “How busy does it get?” I ask the skipper. He laughs. “There’s maybe two or three boats in high season.”

That is one advantage of travelling somewhere few people go — the archipelago gets fewer than 120,000 tourists per year — and after 10 days on the road it feels good to swim and relax. Our trusty Clio has clocked up 1,400km, and is so caked with red dust that the rental company charges us extra to wash it. We are nevertheless glad to have achieved our road trip round New Caledonia, a place which could soon disappear from the world map. The territory is committed to holding a referendum on independence from France by November 2018 and, should the “leave” faction triumph in this era of surprising votes, Captain Cook’s discovery could well get a new — and more appropriate — name.

Details

Nigel Tisdall was a guest of Nouvelle-Calédonie Tourisme Point Sud (nouvellecaledonie.travel), Atout-France (uk.france.fr) and Air Calin (aircalin.com). Flights from Paris to Nouméa via Tokyo cost from €1,469 return

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