

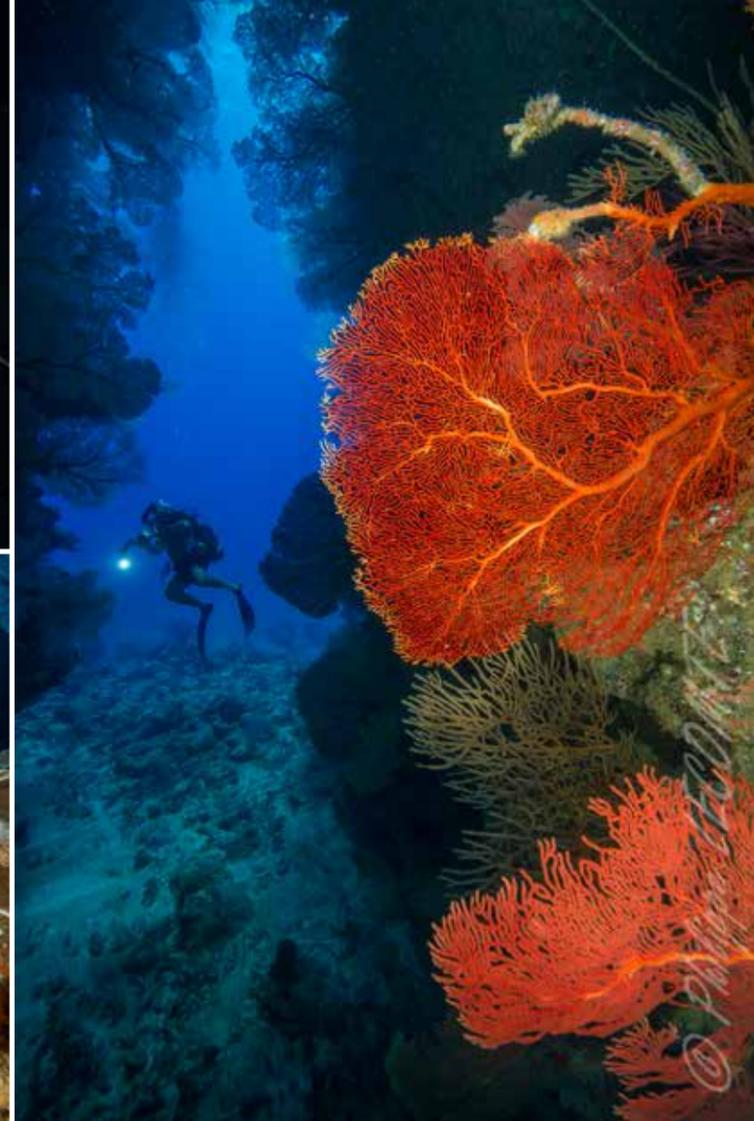
An underwater photograph of a coral reef. The dominant feature is a large, intricate, fan-shaped gorgonian coral in shades of red and orange. To its right, a smaller, more delicate yellow gorgonian is visible. A bright yellow fish with a white stripe is swimming near the base of the red coral. The background is a deep, clear blue, suggesting a deep-water environment. The overall scene is vibrant and detailed.

THE GORGONIAN GARDENS OF POINDIMIÉ NEW CALEDONIA

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PHILIPPE LECOMTE** – WWW.PLONGEE-PASSION-PHOTO.COM
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We entered the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean with the visibility stretched as far as 30 metres. You could already see the gorgonians from the surface with their colours of red, yellow and orange breaking through the water.

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Who has not yet seen red gorgonian sea fans showcased on steep wall dives? Gorgonians are in fact an animal with a very slow growth rate, and they become more majestic as they age. Through my travels to the different seas and oceans of the Red Sea, Bali, France, Borneo and Sulawesi, I have often come across beautiful and large gorgonians. I have a great admiration for these complex structures as they gently oscillate in the currents. While clinging to the vertical walls of rock from a single stem, they have seen many a fish and diver pass them by. What if you were faced with a gorgonian garden of different colours? Could a place such as this, really exist?

I found myself back on the island of New Caledonia. The name of Poindimié is embedded on a stone at the entrance of this small village found after a 4 hour drive from the capital of Noumea, and faces head on to the Pacific Ocean. It is a small town in the northern province with a population of 4,800 inhabitants. The city stretches along the coastline with very few residents inland as the terrain is steep. With 2 high schools, a college, stadiums and various supermarkets, Poindimié at first seems isolated, but the locals welcome you with their big smiles and open kindness. Just across from the city, 20 minutes by boat, lies the coral reef. On this

particular trip I chose to stay at the Tieti Hotel in the centre of town. This quiet and well-kept hotel has the choice of bungalows or individual rooms. You can relax and enjoy either the beach or pool after and between dives with Tieti Diving which is located just behind the hotel.

With the Picasso clownfish as their emblem, the dive centre is run by Laurent Cagnard. Laurent is a professional caving speciality and rebreather instructor. He has been responsible for the centre for 3 years. With 2 dives per day, he has accumulated himself more than 2,000 dives on the local dive sites. Guaranteed, Laurent will show you the best of these 50 sites, all accessible within 20-30 minutes by boat. The dive centre has two 6m semi-rigid inflatable boats equipped to host 6-8 divers.

New Caledonia has the largest lagoon in the world. Very few have explored it, let alone dived it due to its sheer size. The lagoon still has wonders yet to be discovered. This island is said to possess the largest endemic populations in the world, both on land and below the surface.

The lagoon of New Caledonia is known for its variety of fish and has one of the richest populations of reef fish. Of the 3,000 known

species in the tropical Pacific Ocean, it houses about 1,200 of them.

To give a few examples, the pelagic marine mollusc of the cephalopod family Nautilidae, the nautilus is found here, as is the Caledonian mitten lobster (*Parribacis caledonicus*) and the pascalus anthias (*Pseudanthias pascalus*).

Many people think that gorgonians are a type of plant. They are quite another thing! The gorgonian is actually an animal: a polyp. Made up of thousands of them, they form a colony. The count has rounded them up to about 1,200 species. These polyps, with their 8 legs of various shapes, animate the water in their hunt to catch plankton. These animals do not need sunlight to grow. This is why you will see them at the entrance of vaults at great depths, in caves or other locations where the sun's rays cannot reach thus far.

Gorgonians need a daily water movement loaded with rich nutrients as part of their perfect living conditions for their growth. This makes Poindimié the unspoiled and unique place to swim amongst a maze of healthy sea fans.

There are 2 passes at this coral reef, one of 4km wide and the other, 7km. The bottom of these passes does not exceed 30 metres.

Amidst the passes, you will find multiple coral heads scratching at the surface. You will find an extensive settlement of gorgonians of all colours and at different depths. Due to the daily tides, they can feed in abundance.

These can be tough dives as there can quite often be very strong currents. You must take care not to touch the walls and other corals and sea fans, as they are very fragile and their growth, very slow.

Make sure to keep a look out into the blue and towards the bottom. You will probably see gray sharks, silvertip sharks and king mackerels. Laurent is onsite almost every day and will tell you about the different species that can be seen. He has seen thresher sharks, great hammerheads, mantas, whale sharks, dolphins and humpback whales, to name a few.

On arriving at the hotel from Noumea, with my buddy Xavier, we made our way directly to the dive centre to meet Laurent to discuss our dive schedule for our 4 days to follow. Having concluded my purpose to visit Poindimié, I decided to do 2 days of diving with my wide angle and the next 2 with my macro lens.

After a good nights rest, we made our way back to the dive centre for our 7am start with all our

equipment. Laurent welcomes us into his 4X4 with the semi-rigid in tow on a 10 minute drive towards the jetty. The small marina is directly in front of a small island called Ilot Tibarama. Scientists have counted approximately 80% of plant species on the mainland of this unique island, hence why it was named the most beautiful island of New Caledonia.

We helped Laurent launch the boat to water, and then climbed aboard for our first trip out, headed to Pascaline. The wind blew from the southeast, but was predicted to remain stable throughout the day.

After a short briefing about the site and the direction in which to take, the 3 of us entered the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean with the visibility stretched as far as 30 metres. You could already see the gorgonians from the surface with their colours of red, yellow and orange breaking through the water.

Laurent took us straight down to 20 metres near a gorgonian wall. There, barely visible, was the entrance to a small tunnel that only regulars know about. We had to enter it gently as to not stir the sand in fear of disturbing the visibility. The area is covered in gorgonians making it very difficult to pick a photographic angle. At times, my 10mm fisheyes lens was too

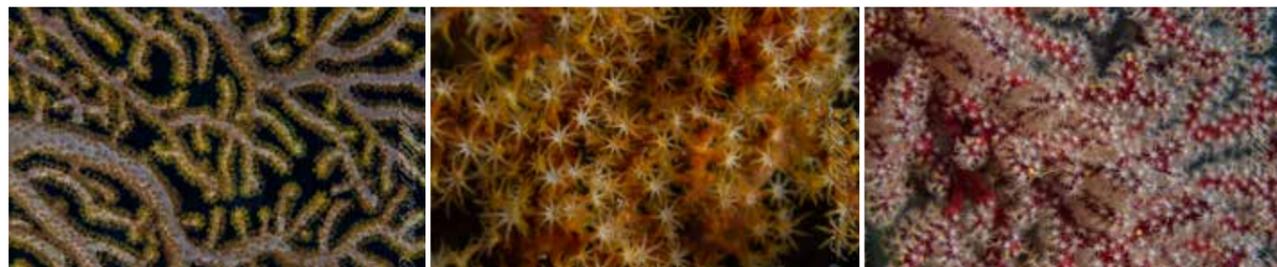
small to reproduce the colourful atmosphere that the corals' fans made you see and feel!

We headed towards the right, to a small canyon formed by two large coral heads, also covered with gorgonians. Laurent knew I was there on a photography mission, and with this respect, we moved slowly through the colourful maze. Within the architecture of all shapes, a pufferfish quietly slipped between the branches. Up ahead, a bright yellow fish posed in front of another bouquet of red gorgonians. After a twenty minute dive between diverse coral heads, Laurent led us directly to another tunnel.

It really does take the eye and experience of local divers to not get lost in this underwater realm. Having reached 40 minutes into the dive, Laurent waved us up to 10 metres to finish our first dive while revolving around the large coral where the boat was tied. It is during these special moments, you realize the beauty of these places are preserved due to the lack of human presence. The corals are intact and inhabited by the masses of multicoloured fish which make you turn your head in every direction. Once back on the boat, we could feel the need to go back in and do it all over again.

During the surface interval, we moved on to the next buoy only a few hundred metres

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further south. The Ark, our next next dive site, clearly reveals the clear turquoise water of the passage below from the surface. Laurent explained how the dive would unfold. With a synchronized backward roll, we returned to the world of silence. With only a few hundred metres apart from the last site, the shapes and coral structures were completely different. Laurent's experience greatly facilitates these dives who without, we would not have seen the wonders of these caves and tunnels hidden at each corner.

As Xavier and I slowly followed our guide's lead, marveling at the beauty surrounding us, my buddy signaled to me. In the blue, just behind us, 3 kingfish just a few metres away from us were hunting. The dive time past so fast and in these sublime places, we tend to forget about everything except for what is directly before us. Laurent offered us the option to do a night dive around the island of Tibarama. He explained that Ausi, further south, had even more gorgonians to see than the previous two sites we had just seen. With weather permitting, the following day's destination was decided.

Unfortunately, as it so happens sometimes, things did not go to plan due to strong winds and we headed in the same direction as the previous day, to the dive sites of Phuket and Tub's and Co.

Once again, the gorgonians of Poindimié did not disappoint. We met with a Napoleon, a gray in the blue and other delights in crossing. These two days were devoted to intense wide angle photography and had been full of surprises. We visited 4 charming sites, making it a top destination to recommend without hesitation.

With the night dive still on the agenda, I set my camera up for macro shots. Laurent had simplified things by leaving the boat in the small marina as there was a proximity of only 2 minutes to get to the chosen dive site on Tibarama Island. After having double checked our equipment and lights, we hit the water. This particular site did not have as much colour, but life exploded from all angles. The clownfish were fast asleep tucked away in their anemones. Shrimps of all forms emerged from their crevices in search of their evening meals. A porcelain lobster walked along the white sandy bottom, making him impossible to miss, while nudibranchs slithered their way

over the corals. While quietly submerged at 6-7 metres, Laurent led us to a small opening near the small lagoon. Here, other species of sea fans were clung to the wall, which rises to 12 metres. In the fault, electric file clams seemed to play with electricity from their lips. Time had yet again past far too quickly within the magical sights and it was time to head back up to the boat.

After a good night's sleep, I decided to devote myself to macro photography for the rest of the trip as I thought the opportunities were going to be endless with the proof from that wonderful start.



Aboard the boat, another diver joined our team. Laurent brought us to the site best known as, Bargibanti. At first glance, it looked just as nice as the ones before, but proved to be much more. Once in the water, Laurent asked us to follow him to a small rock at 18 metres where some red gorgonians flourished. Laurent approached one of them and began to carefully look amongst its branches to point to something. We had come to seek the beautiful and very small pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*) which lives on only one particular species of gorgonian known as, Muricella.

On this single gorgonian, Laurent found 6 more seahorses. By local knowledge, Laurent

knows several other spots where this unique species is found. After 15 minutes were spent around these fans, we slowly moved towards the larger coral heads where Laurent rested. Along the way, we disturbed a white tip reef shark that had been quietly laying on the white sandy bottom. Suddenly, my eye had been drawn to a quick and vivid moving colour belonging to a ribbon eel flowing in rhythmic motion, with her mouth wide open.

The rest of the dive constituted of circling the area filled with more gorgonians, anemones and other soft and hard corals. Among the multiple shelters, long-nose hawkfish, filefish, coral gobies, yellow and white nudibranchs and different species of blennies modeled for their close-ups. A dancing aeolid nudibranch balanced on a small sponge. A trumpetfish snuck up on its prey, hiding behind another gorgonian. While trying to photograph a coral ghost goby on red coral, Laurent pointed out that the goby's resting place was actually the rare coral, *Solenocaulon akalyx*. It is a coral of deep red with speckled branches of white. Along the way, hidden in a bubble-tip anemone, an almost transparent bubble coral shrimp looked up. At first, only its antennas were visible. On the whip coral, a pair of Zanzibar whip coral shrimp moved around in order to hide from my camera. A clownfish family made their way without hesitation among the poisonous tentacles of their anemone firmly clung to the rock. Half hidden on the edge of the anemone, I caught a porcelain crab filtering the water to recover microscopic larvae. With so many diverse creatures as equally interesting and unusual from one to the next, I gained a new collection of about 250 photos per day.

With only four days, divided in two between macro and wide angle lenses, it was not enough to cover all that the reef had to offer. This was perhaps one of the most beautiful places I had visited to date. To understand the magic, you would have to experience it for yourselves. Laurent and his team would be delighted to show you the beauty of the multiple sites found far from the maddening crowds so often faced everywhere else.

It was with much regret that Xavier and I had to leave Poindimié. Its simplicity, its beauty and tranquility were so relaxing and incredibly memorable. Another visit will be made at some point to instill more surprises which the ocean and its marine life entrusts in us.

