



NEW CALEDONIA

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PHILIPPE LECOMTE**

We can still find some places where time stands still and where the modern world does not yet exist.



New Caledonia is an island that lies 1,500km off Brisbane's coast, Australia. This island has a certain mystery which contributes largely to its charm. A nature destination, measuring 400km long and 70km wide, it possesses the second largest lagoon in the world.

With its 120,000 habitants, the town of Nouméa concentrates nearly half of the population of the territory. Due to the risk of excessive urbanization, part of the coastline of Nouméa has recently been redeveloped

in a green pedestrian space which offers very enjoyable coastal walks and is a favorite jogging spot for the residents of Nouméa.

You can also enjoy sauntering in the "Place des Cocotiers" and dream of escaping reality on the pontoons of the marina of "Port Moselle", amongst the masses of sailing boats coming from all over the Pacific region.

Even if there may be too much asphalt, the municipal market is nonetheless worth the

visit for its highly colorful and richly scented fish, fruits and vegetables coming from all corners of the "Grande Terre".

With its marinas, trendy terraces and white sandy beaches, Nouméa has an all year long air of the tropical Saint Tropez. The Baie des Citrons and Vata Cove are tourist highlights of the capital that offer relaxation areas as well as sports activities. While strolling near the Meridian Hotel, one can admire the spectacular kitesurfing displays and the flurry

of rich coloured sails blowing in the wind.

With its stylish shops, night clubs and restaurants by the sea, The Baie des Citrons is a trendy spot for a shopping spree. At sunset, the terraces are swarming with tourists and residents of Nouméa who enjoy the gentle French-style way of life.

The Tjibaou Cultural Centre is also one place to go in order to discover the history of the island. A visit to the Nouméa Aquarium

should not be missed. An initiative of Dr Catala, the aquarium was created in 1956 and opened its new facilities in September 2007. The extended aquarium now has a 2,250m² surface area with a sea view opening onto the Vata Cove.

It welcomes over 150,000 visitors every year and focuses on educational aspects. The aquarium singles out above all for its open circuit functioning. The aquarium is directly supplied water from the lagoon which provides

all the elements required for the development of invertebrates and fish.

In the South of Nouméa, the Blue River park offers mountain biking or hiking day trips for families. With its paths running along an immense lake, this nature reserve will give you magnificent souvenirs. In the forests, the Gagou, an endemic bird of New Caledonia, is now protected. It is a flightless bird, once hunted by the colonists and had been on the brink of extinction.



Fortunately, with the work of scientists and protection plans put into place, we are still able to see this weird bird in the forests. Further north of Nouméa, along the coast, you will find fields and hills with cows, sheep and goats. If you are lucky, you'll have a chance to see deer: Indeed, during the colonization of the island, people imported the deer of Java as well as black pigs.

Now, these animals are free and hunted for their meat. The rest of the island is constituted by wet areas and mountains. The highest summit is 1,650m and is in the North of the island. White sandy beaches, creeks and other unoccupied islands can be counted by the tens. It just shows how much the island can offer you with the various dive spots, snorkeling and other places to be discovered.

Like most other islands, trade winds often blow and it is then not permitted for pedestrians or equestrian riders to be out or to take on other extreme sports such as kitesurfing, mountain biking, paddling in the mangrove swamps or rafting and paragliding. On the other hand, when the weather allows it, dives around Nouméa, is easily practiced. Lagoon, wreck, coral reef or passes, will delight you. Indeed, numerous islands and some parts of the barrier are declared nature reserves.

During the week, between island visits, resting or mountain biking, I chose the Iatok Diving Paradise Club to do some dives around Nouméa. Their team is great and they focus on dives only outside of the barrier in order to approach mantas, sharks and other big fish. They are very professional

and will be happy to help you discover the rich sea life of the reef.

They have 2 inflatables of 9 meters long and they are very comfortable. They offer 2 dives in the morning only because the winds get stronger in the afternoons. It will give you enough time to finish your day visiting the town.

Iatok Diving Paradise is situated at Moselle's Marina. You can visit the web site at: www.iatok-diving-noumea.com

As an avid freediver as well as diver, I did some research before going to New Caledonia on Facebook through divers' groups to see what underwater photos existed of this place. By chance, I found a group made by Jean-Rene

Deleforterie who was posting new photos on an almost daily basis. He does a lot of underwater photography by snorkeling and it just shows how rich the lagoon is.

I managed to contact him via Message and he invited me to meet with him when I arrived on the island. We dived together every weekend. He showed me some great places, such as Amedée Light Island, Ténia Island, and Mouara Beach next to Thio city on the East coast.

We also did a shore dive from Nouméa's town and I was surprised to see how much life was there. It was very rich even at the doorstep of a 150,000 populated town.

Jean-René has lived on the Island for 14 years now and gave me some good plans on where

to go and what to do. We spent 4 weekends together and did some amazing dives together.

FACEBOOK GROUP: Nouvelle-Calédonie, Photos Sous-Marines Bleu Lagon.

One of the most beautiful islands near Nouméa is the island of The Phare Amédée.

Phare Amédée, is an island just in front of Nouméa. A daily boat goes on the island. If you don't have your own boat, you have to book with a travel agency for the trip. It includes the round trip, a buffet and a Tahiti dance show. At only 20 minutes, you will arrive on a beautiful island with a huge light house in the middle. It's possible to visit it and give you a great panoramic view of the island and all around the barrier and the

lagoon. With a long white sandy beach and a lot of coconut trees, surrounded by a coral reef barrier, this island takes you directly to an unforgettable day.

René and I snorkeled for 3 hours in the morning, around the island. The sea life is wonderful and masses of fish with amazing colors don't stop swimming. We swam with beautiful green turtles, whitetip reef sharks and groupers. The visibility in Nouméa is 15 to 20 meters in a mini lagoon, and 20 to 30 meters outside the barrier. On this particular day, the clarity of the sea was +20 meters. The island is surrounded by a little barrier and it's easy to go on the side in order to snorkel along the deep part. In front of the beach, there is a sea grass area with a few rocks and sea turtles resting or eating around.

DIVING DESTINATIONS

Another weekend and we decided to drive to Thio, on the North East coast. This is a little town at only 120km from Nouméa. By car, you need 1h45 to reach the city. When you reach Thio, you have to go right at only 2-4km, toward a beach named Moara. You'll arrive to a place where there are facilities such as showers or toilets and a camping area too. The famous interest in this place are the manatees. In fact, for several years now, one manatee swam around the area without any fear of humans. So you can swim or dive with these amazing animals. Unfortunately, on this day, the manatee was not there, but the reef around will give you plenty of satisfaction. Corals just next to the beach don't look very healthy but if you go further, you will see some untouched reefs with beautiful colours. Huge anemones with clown fish, red gorgonians and caves with plenty of soft corals are still there, near the beach. It was so incredible to see so many fish and corals full of colour.

Another plan with Jean-René, was to book a little boat with a captain in order to visit some island further north of Nouméa at only a 45 minute car drive. Leaving Nouméa at 6am, we were 4 snorkelers to go to a little marina called, Port Ouenghi. From there, we went between the channel and the big island Hugo. It took 20 minutes and you then reach an area with just one or two boats around in the distance. You can see huge areas in the lagoon waiting to be visited not far from the city. This day, I had decided to do macro photography. The captain of the boat was very nice and brought us where we chose to go. At a depth of 4 to 12 meters, we visited some beautiful coral reef. As I have an interest in sharks, I looked around in order to find some. At the second spot, just 2 minutes after I jumped out of the boat, I rose my arm above the water and started to swim as fast as I could. Fortunately, my friends saw me and started to follow me. They were amazed to see a graceful leopard shark swimming just under me. Suddenly, it decided to rest on a white sandy patch. At this moment, we did several dives next to him. It was a great moment and Jean-René was very happy. During the rest of the day, we saw white tip sharks swimming or resting under rocks, a hawksbill turtle, clownfish, schools of surgeonfish, boxfish and lot of other fish. It's difficult to focus on only one species as there are more than 300 species reported in this lagoon.

During the last week, my family and I went to the north of the island at Hienghène city. Hienghène is on the East coast, a 4 to 5 hours drive from Nouméa. You definitely discover the beauty of this island by road. During the drive you will see clear rivers, canyons and a tropical forest. The magical side to the island is that just after a few kilometers you'll feel like you've changed island as the landscape, towns or villages are very different from the main city, Nouméa. Further North definitely brings you to the middle ages. Over there, the villages still

follow the traditions of visiting the chief and giving gifts in order to visit around.

At Hienghène village, there is only one dive centre, the Babou Dive Club. The manager's name is Thierry. He has been there for more than 10 years. He is in fact a friend of my childhood friend. I did only 2 dives but they were amazing. In the north of the main island, there are less divers than around Nouméa town. So, the dive spots are more beautiful than in the south. The dive club will reveal its favourite sites in order to see what the area's fantastic rock formations look like underwater. The seabed of Hienghène is renowned for its coral wealth and coral architecture carved with a multitude of arches, faults, tunnels and canyons. Some 320 coral species have been identified and the biodiversity is simply remarkable. A setting full of colour and abundant wildlife in the heart of the first Protected Marine Area off the World Heritage Site of the northeastern coast, draws divers from around the world. There is a large concentration of fauna and flora in the median area (up to 20 meters deep), allowing divers of all levels to enjoy these underwater treasures. Some 15 sites are regularly visited by beginners and seasoned divers alike. These playful dives also provide an opportunity for beautiful encounters in the blue depths, where one can come across various predators and impressive sea mammals such as the humpback whale, which visit these waters for a few months from July each year.

SECOND PART: LOYALTY ISLAND, LIFOU

During our 4 weeks holiday, we decided to visit one of the 4 Loyalty Islands. In fact, further East, approximately 100km off the coast of the main island, 4 isolated islands are forgotten from the rest of the world. Ouvéa, Maré, Tiga and Lifou will show you something different from the main land. It's another world and you will think you are in another country.

We decided to spend 3 nights at Lifou. Lifou is the biggest island of the group but with only a population of 10 thousand and 1,150km² of untouched coast. As soon as we were onboard the plane, we were surprised by the beauty of rain forest we could see all around

the island, small wooden houses, coconut tree plantations and a small road. It's easy to navigate your way around, so we rented a small car to do it ourselves.

Our hotel, The Drehu Village, lies on a pure white sandy beach surrounded with coconut trees. There is only one diving club situated at Easo. Easo is on the west coast of the island. This little village is situated on a beach 50km long till Peng. Above Easo, on the cliff, the little church, Notre-Dame de Lourdes gives a beautiful view of the island. Just behind Easo is a little bay nicknamed, The Aquarium, where you can see the beauty of the reef of Lifou. With easy access, snorkelers can get in and out with no fuss, so at this destination, I chose to take only my camera and snorkeling equipment. In fact, to go on these islands you have to take a small plane and KGs are limited to 12. But don't worry, snorkeling is more than enough to discover the beauty of the sea world around Lifou. At the dive club, rental equipment is also available. If you dive, you may have a chance to see the mysterious nautilus. In fact, you have a chance to observe this weird animal only in this part of the world. It only comes up to the surface at the end of the day and during the night in order to hunt. If like us, you take a walk on the beach, you may have a chance to find some of their shells instead of buying them. The nautilus is in fact a squid in a hard shell with white and red stripes.

One day, we spent an afternoon at the turtle beach. During this day, we swam with 4 to 5 green turtles next to a coral reef. The beaches, cliffs and rocky area are all beautiful on the island. If you drive across the island, you will see vanilla plantations. Do not hesitate to ask information about this delicious plant to the local people. They are very nice and helpful. They will appreciate to talk with foreigners, too. They can also show you some beautiful features on their island such as caves, which kind of plants they use for medicine or show you some amazing creatures such as the coconut crab. Going on the Loyalty Island is a wonderful experience and it was so magical. We can still find some places where time stands still and where the modern world does not yet exist.

