

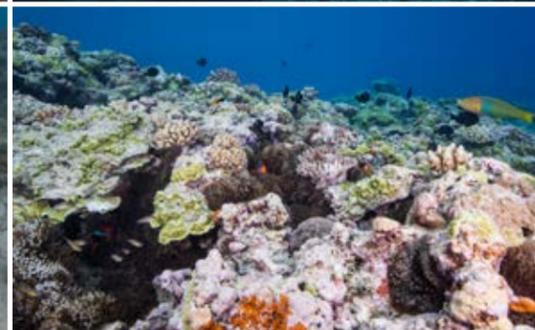
OUVÉA

THE DOORWAY TO PARADISE

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PHILIPPE LECOMTE** TRANSLATION FROM FRENCH **ALLY LANDES**

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The word "Island", is a magical word. It makes us dream of a heavenly place with sun lit, vast sandy white beaches, surrounded by turquoise, crystal blue seas. This perfectly represents the magic of Ouvéa.

Ouvéa is a commune in the Loyalty Islands Province of New Caledonia, an overseas territory of France in the Pacific Ocean. With a flight to Sydney via New Caledonia, you will then need to take another 40 minute flight to reach the island.

There are 4 Loyalty Islands: Maré, Lifou, Tiga and Ouvéa. Ouvéa possesses the biggest lagoon and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in July 2008. Absent from any pollution and mass tourism, you can discover a truly unique environment on this paradise island. Ouvéa's income comes from fishing and from the culture of coconut palms (the island possesses an oil and soap factory). With only 3,400 habitants, the locals are incredibly welcoming, inviting you to partake in their daily activities such as fishing, hunting in the local

fauna or showing you how to culture vanilla. Ouvéa is full of surprises to be discovered.

There are 2 hotels on the island or you can rent a typical holiday cottage, or choose to stay in a local home.

You will instantly be seduced with Ouvéa's 25km white coral sandy beach, the beautiful rocky coastline eroded by the waves and the picturesque vertiginous cliffs in Lekiny. There are a number of natural marvels hidden on the island. Among them are the waterholes; these are natural, perfectly vertical wells in the ground. Some are connected directly to the sea, others are not. With their water colours of deep blue or blueish green, these holes have not yet been fully explored. Jacques-Yves Cousteau explored some of these blue holes, but did not reach the bottom of his last exploration and estimated the bottom to be more than a hundred meters deep. There are roughly a dozen blue holes on the island, but the two best known are the Blue Hole of Anawa and Turtle Hole. They are easily

accessible and the locals will not miss the opportunity to help you discover them and offer you their stories.

If you decide to walk around the island, do not hesitate to speak with the locals, they will share their way of life with you and show you how things are done on their island. If you walk along the beaches, you will see fishermen casting round nets out to get their daily catch. Some people will show you how to catch the coconut palm crabs. These prehistoric looking crabs feed exclusively on coconuts. With their powerful claws, they are capable of breaking the coconut shells to feast on the interior's soft flesh. The mangrove crabs prove to be very tasty and are often found as snacks on roadside menus. The fauna may seem uninhabited at first sight, but if you keep an eye out, you will see the green parakeet of Ouvéa, an endemic species, or the giant bats of the island. These bats feed mainly on fruits and pollen and fly by both, day and night. There are plenty of other residents on the island, such as multicoloured butterflies, lizards and other sea birds.

When it comes to diving, Ouvéa will delight you. In the South, just before the bridge which connects the main island with the island of Mouli, you will find a campsite on the left. This is where to find the only dive centre on the island and the only guide for your family excursions whose name is, Pierre. Pierre will set you on a discovery of the South, introducing you to manta rays, grey sharks and other marvels of the lagoon. At the very tip of the south, the road terminates at a small parking lot where you gain access to a small beach. Strewed with fossilized coral, crevices and its white sandy beach, this place invites you to take a plunge into the turquoise blue waters. You must be aware of the current here, especially in shallow water. By going on further right, you will find a small lagoon in a calm area with a maximum bottom depth of 8-10m. The caves, cliffs and other rocks are covered with corals of all colours.

Moving on to the opposite direction in the north, make a booking with Antoine, the local guide on the other side of the island. He will

take you over to 'The Shark Nursery'. You will be led over to the end of the path and continue to walk onto the beach to cross a small pass which leads to the entrance of the mangroves, which guards the lemon sharks. During the summer months, dozens of lemon sharks come to the lagoon to mate and put the beat back into the mangrove's swamp.

A little further along the beach, you can stop and grab a small snack with a view that will take your breath away as you come to face two islands and a small lagoon. You will take the moment to dive in once again into the turquoise blue water for an extra hour or two. Here, the turtles, the whitetip sharks, the large stingrays and other tropical fish will leave you with unforgettable memories.

As you can see, Ouvéa is an island where time stands still and life is enjoyed to the max. It carries its name well, as the island that describes itself as paradise. Let us hope that this wonderful place continues to stay so for years to come.

