

Bonjour paradise!

By Richard Asher

OUR FRENCH NEIGHBOUR IN THE PACIFIC OFFERS A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN BEACHES, PALM TREES AND SUN LOUNGERS. MIND YOU, IT DOES THOSE PRETTY WELL TOO...

Of all the things I don't expect to find on a French island in the South Pacific, a cricket pitch is pretty high on the list. Yet my driver on the mythical Isle of Pines assures me this is a cricket field, and it's used regularly by the locals. I'm coming to realise that New Caledonia and Australia have more in common than one might think.

For many east coast Australians, the archipelago of New Caledonia is their nearest neighbour. And thanks to colonial France's prisoner-export policies, New Caledonia also has a convict heritage of sorts.

With an elusive, flightless bird as its national symbol, New Caledonia also has a hint of New Zealand about it. Despite

its political status as part of France, then, there's a lot that makes New Caledonia an entirely appropriate next-door country.

On the way from the airport to the capital, Nouméa, I'm struck by how dry and brown some parts of Grande Terre, the main island, are. It's my first visit to a Pacific island, so I shouldn't really be surprised by anything, but aren't these places supposed to be nothing but palm trees and white beaches?

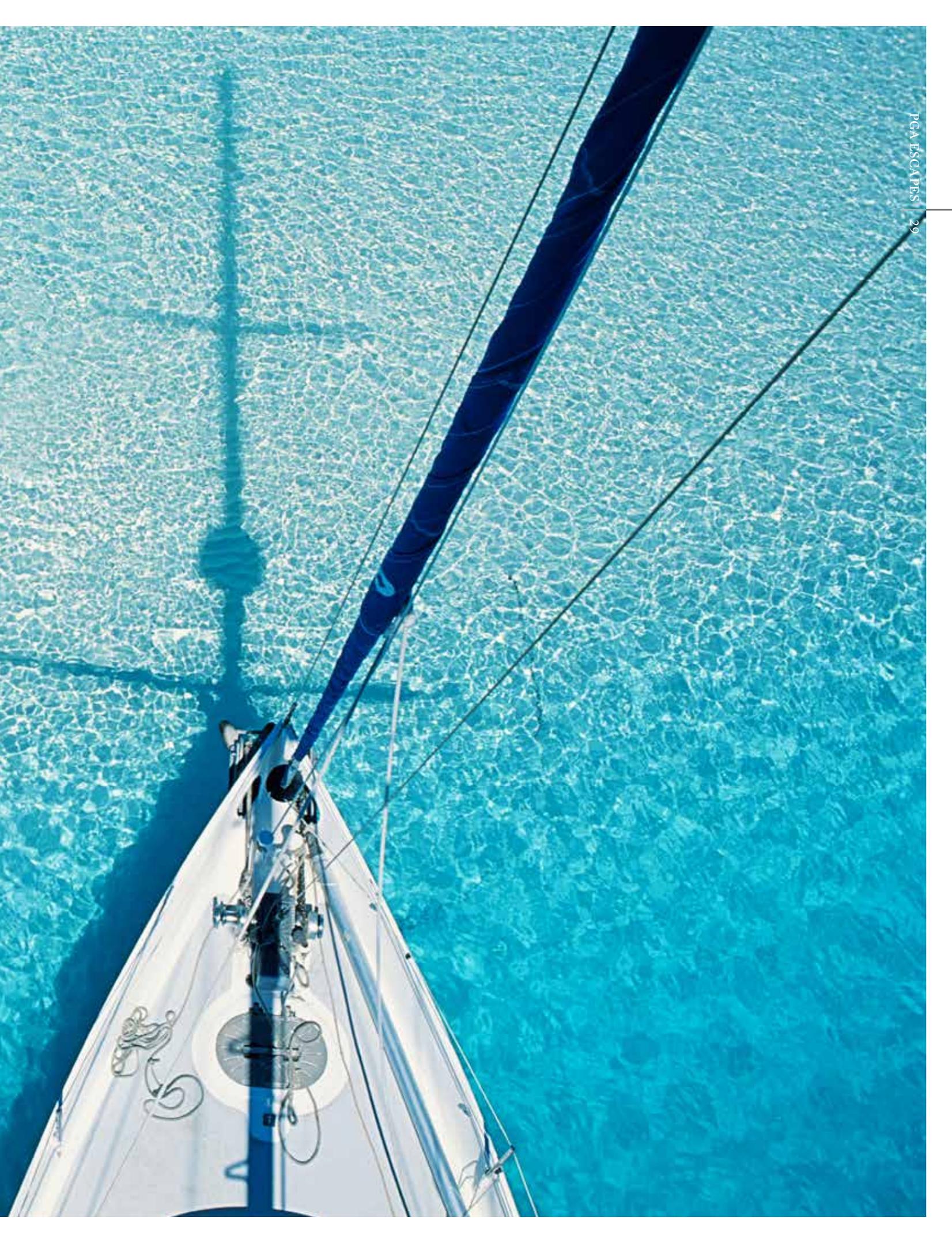
Postcards can be misleading. I'd never really considered that there might be something behind the beaches; an interior of sorts. Quite a discovery. But I guess discovery is why I'm here.

We drive through the Nouméa rush hour, which involves more sitting still than anything. What really stands out as town approaches is the newer buildings

— and not in a good way. There are certain kinds of grey monstrosities that may work just fine on the outskirts of Paris, but it's criminal to allow them in the south Pacific.

At the quay we pass another vast edifice of sorts, although this one is a little more fitting. It's the *Pacific Dawn*, a cruise liner that completely dwarfs the city. Turns out this is precisely the 1500th P&O docking in Nouméa.

The sun's almost setting when I check in at the modern Royal Tera Beach Resort, so I sprint up to my room just in time to snap it sliding beneath the Pacific, beneath dulcet layers of mango and Miami blue. To my right, the lights of Nouméa are springing into action. And on a hulk of rock overlooking the hotel, I can just make out the shape of some horses. Ah yes, I remember



reading about that: no shortage of these noble ungulates in New Cal.

The outdoor pool having shut down for the day, I shuffle to the spa in search of an indoor swim. But my non-regulation trunks earned me a definitive *'pas acceptable'* from the ladies at the front desk. Of course: France is strictly Speedo territory! It's practically a national law, and one that reaches to the furthest outposts of the empire. "Tomorrow, maybe?" says one of them as I made for the door.

Non, not tomorrow. Not ever. Curious people, the French.

FRENCH APPEAL

Boy, is this place French. Make no mistake about it. Expect to drive on the right and hand over coins at highway toll gates. The road signs are invariably just like those you'd find around Paris. It's baguettes for breakfast and boules for sundowners. The good news is that there's not much of a wacky Creole here, so your high school French will work fine.

Back upstairs, I investigate my self-catering suite more closely. There are the usual big-hotel irritations:

televisions springing into life in every room without being asked; a bizarre shower with two heads running at two different temperatures. Otherwise, it's a treat. The balcony is long (it could easily sleep four), there's good natural lighting, the shower is spacious and the kitchen well-equipped. Expect to pay 25,600 Francs (\$265) for my 'beach view' room.

I wander down the beach to the shops and restaurants of l'Anse Vata. I withdraw some Francs, and get the fright of my life. The 5000 Franc just doesn't look like real money. It reminds me of a cheap Christmas card. It's so big that it pokes out the top of my wallet. I later learn that counterfeits are a bit of an issue, and can't say I'm surprised. A child of six could scrawl a passable copy.

I wolf down a soggy (it's the French way) pizza in a restaurant named 'Pizza and pasta'. Creative it isn't, but it did lure me in, to be fair. As I eat I watch some locals playing night pétanque across the road, on a pitch so close to the beach that high tide must stop play at times. How very French.

En route home, now relieved of one enormous banknote, I stop and chat to a pair of fisherman. One tells me he grew



Bright colours abound, from clothing to people's homes

‘Locals play night pétanque on a pitch so close to the beach that high tide must stop play at times’



The beauty of New Caledonia and its islands is plain to see

‘The yam is sacred to the local Kanak people and central to the traditional bougna feast’



An indigenous Melanesian child on the Ile des Pins



A view of the enjoyable Tina International Golf Course

up here before years working abroad. A year ago he returned to New Caledonia to enjoy his retirement. He reckons life's pretty good here – even if the calamari aren't biting tonight.

MARKET DRIVEN

My driver for the day, who shall remain nameless, has a favourite English word: 'boolsheet'. It's a popular word over here. His French expressions are even more colourful; driving makes him angry. So do New Caledonian prices – he tells me he's spent 23 years sailing around the world, and this is the most expensive place of them all. I'd say that with the current state of the dollar, though, prices are much like home.

My driver takes me to the morning market by the harbour, where the wacky produce of the tropics smacks the senses at every turn. There is the yam, sacred to the local Kanak people and central to the traditional Bougna feast, when it's wrapped in banana leaves and roasted. Then there's the taro, not dissimilar to a sweet potato. There's another type of

taro that grows in the mangrove sands – looks like a wet turnip.

I am persuaded to buy a 'vine potato' (which turns out to be passion fruit) and a *cherimoya*. You can eat the latter with a spoon, like passion fruit, but the inside is more akin to sweet yoghurt. Good stuff. Tip: don't put it in your bag and lug it around all day. It's soft enough to burst its milky goodness all over the place with the slightest knock...

TO THE COURSE

Time to get golfing, then. I do a quick tour of Golf

International de Dumbéa, an inland course half an hour north of Nouméa. The name's a bit much – there isn't even a clubhouse – but it's a forgiving place to iron the kinks out of your swing.

It's surrounded by Grand Terre's craggy mountains, but mostly flat apart from a steep hill shared by the 10th (which goes up it), the 11th and 18th (both of which, mercifully, go down it).

The 10th tee is not for those of nervy disposition. It's wedged into the crook of a busy crossroads, so you're likely to hit away in full view of passing motorists. If that ain't bad enough, you've got every chance of breaking a windscreen if you

KEEP AN EYE
OUT FOR THE...
Sheraton Resort

Slated to open in December 2013, the SHERATON DEVA Golf Resort and Spa in Bourail should take luxury tourism in New Caledonia to a new level. And its Pete Dye golf course might well put Tina in the shade!

HAVING A PINE OLD TIME

The golf-free Ile des Pins (Isle of Pines) is pretty much a compulsory side-trip for anyone visiting New Caledonia.

This is the archipelago's shop window, a snapper's wonderland of Pacific imagery. It's where you'll find New Caledonia's whitest sand and most turquoise water. If you don't go, people who've been will keep pestering you about the omission when you get home.

If it's a taste of paradise you want, the Ile des Pins would be a perfect holiday in itself. It's only a 20-minute flight from Nouméa, though admittedly not from the same airport international flights use.

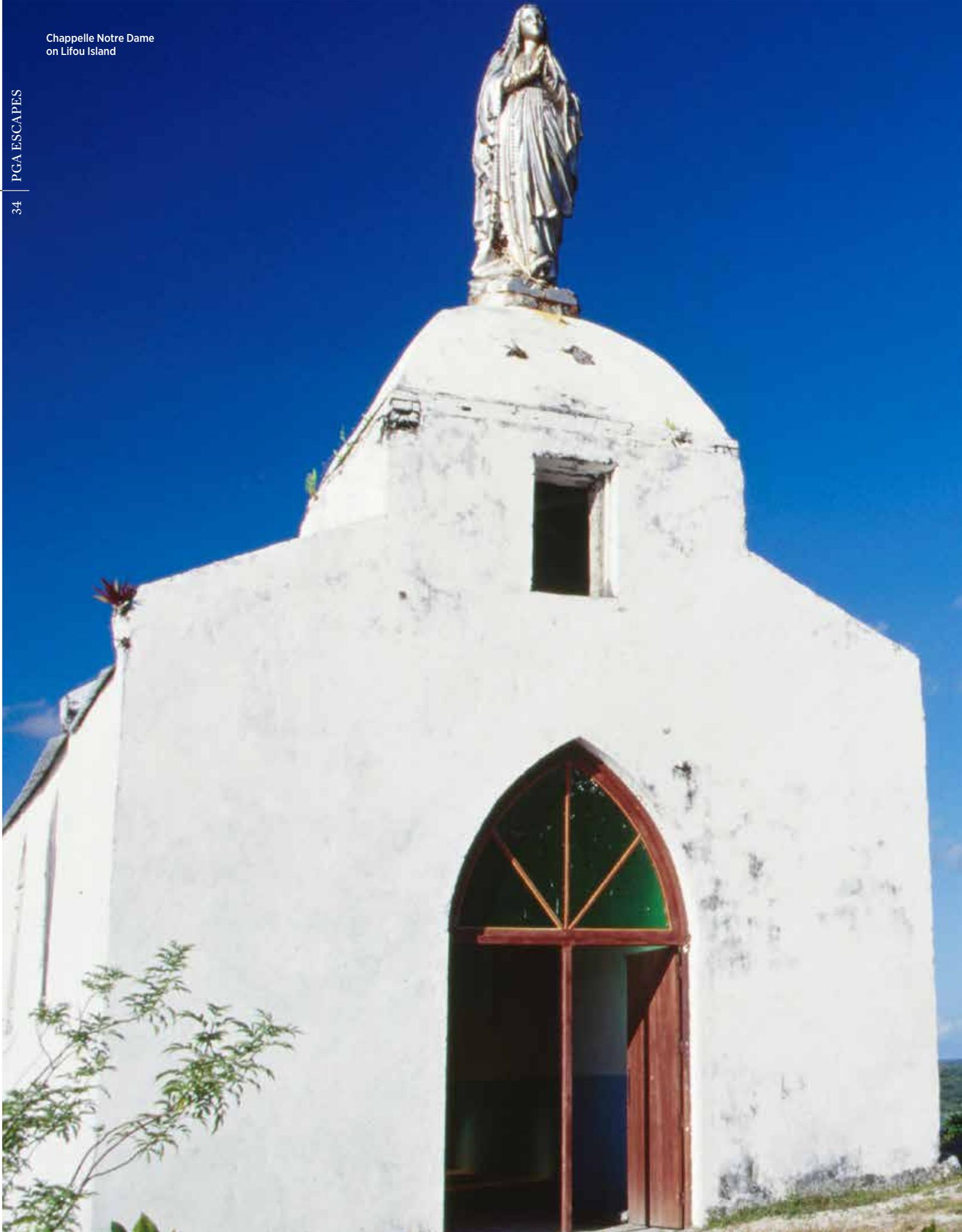
WHAT TO DO ON ILE DES PINS

Once you're there, you'll find a couple of luxury hotels, but they're truly discreet. Best of these is the low-rise Le Méridien. It has a pristine beach and pool, and you can't go wrong with all-you-can-eat lunch on the terrace, where the chef cooks your meat and fish on demand.

Le Méridien is also close to the *piscine naturelle* ('natural swimming pool' doesn't have quite the same ring), said to be unforgettable. It's about a half-hour walk from reception, but navigation can be confusing, so grab a map and expect to wade across water to get there. A quick detour down the Rivière de Sable is worthwhile for the sheer serenity of the place, particularly in twilight.

Spend at least a day looking around the rest of the 18km-long island. Check out the spooky remains of the old jail, and the even spookier Queen Hortense Cave, where you can feel a palpable haunting even in broad daylight. Less scary are the famous beaches at Kanumera and Kuto, a pirogue ride on the Baie d'Upi and check out Vao, the only village worthy of the name.

Chappelle Notre Dame
on Lifou Island



go over the fence that runs tight down the left. Imagine playing the 18th at St Andrews backwards, but with more cars, and you've got the picture.

The next morning I'm on the tee at Golf de Tina, New Caledonia's premier golf course and host of the PGA Tour of Australasia's South Pacific Open Golf Championship. I'm delighted to see a stroke index of 18 on the par 4 first. A seven iron down a steep drop to a broad fairway is about as welcoming a start as you can hope for in golf, but my usual fat block means I'm quickly ball-hunting in the wooded crook of the dogleg. I spend the entire first two holes ball-hunting. It takes 40 minutes to reach the third tee. I'm rushing and panicking and trying to drive the cart up impossible slopes. I get berated by a pompous lady for doing so.

ON THE UP

Things start to get better towards the turn, though, and I have to admit that I'm enjoying the golf course. It's all ups and downs, with trouble lurking everywhere, so it couldn't be more different from Dumbéa. Although it's a true tiddler at 5889 metres, and the par fives are short enough to be reachable by any half-decent hacker, you can tell that some thought has gone into the design.

The deeper into the course you get, the more apparent this becomes. The back nine

is completely different: trouble still lurks, but now it takes the form of mangrove swamps. Or the Pacific Ocean. It's a clockwise swing around the edge of a peninsula, so the watery perils are almost invariably on your left. Hookers beware.

SWAMPED DOWN

Because I'm fast running out of balls, I'm not inclined to let a bad shot go without a decent search. So I get to know the swamps. Strange fish hop along the muddy surface water. Or are they tadpoles? Tadfrogs? Who knows. I also notice an unusual amount of floating footwear – was half the island walking around with a shoe missing? Then, I find a bunker rake in a swamp near the 11th green. What a tantrum that must have been!

Both scenery and design really hot up after the 14th. I stop a moment on the path to the 15th tee, and challenge any first-timer not to do the same. This is where the ocean vista really opens up. Islands dot the horizon, palm trees litter the littoral. I hear faint applause, which seems appropriate. Or is it the sound of another rain shower? Neither: it's actually a curious percussion effect produced by the breeze and a certain kind of palm leaf.

The signature 15th is your classic cut-off-as-much-corner-as-you-dare driveable par four over water, but 16 is for my money the best

PEOPLE FROM ALL CORNERS



The great voyaging canoes of the Melanesian people sailed into New Caledonia two or three thousand years ago. But it was Captain Cook who named the land in memory of his beloved Scotland when he arrived here en route to New Zealand in 1774.

The land was sighted again, in 1792, by Frenchman d'Entrecasteaux. In September 1853 Admiral Febvrier-Despointes claimed New Caledonia as a French territory.

This opened the floodgates for hundreds of French settlers and deported convicts. In the 1890s migrants from Indonesia and Java arrived, completing the cultural mix.



The lush fairways at Tina use the landscape to great effect

‘Lined with swamps and featuring a wickedly small landing area, the 16th can gobble up shots that look great in the air’

BONJOUR!

A bit of French to get you started:

■ *Où devrions-nous aller ce soir?*

Where should we go tonight?

■ *Une bouteille de vin s’il vous plaît*

A bottle of wine please.

hole on the course. A par 5 of a mere 410 metres, it looks a doddle on the scorecard. But, lined with swamps and featuring a wickedly small landing area, it can gobble up shots that look great in the air – my tee shot included. The hole twists every which way, so anyone planning on hitting the green from more than 100 metres out had better be ready for a blind approach. The hole plays as a par 4 for the Professionals, the thought of which gives me the shakes. Holes 17 and 18 are almost as tight, with swamps and out-of-bounds waiting to catch anything stray. The finishing holes are a real sting in the tail.

Though the clubhouse facilities are highly rudimentary, this is definitely the course to play if you’re only planning one game in New Caledonia.

WHEEL FUN

Now armed with a dinky Citroën, I drive back whence I came. Well, almost. I’m moving into the hotel next door, the venerable Le Méridien. It is anything but a twin of the Royal Tera. The vast reception area strikes me as a bit Soviet, a bit Sixties. Which is odd, because the hotel was built in the Nineties.

Though it backs onto the Royal Tera, Méridien faces the other way, so it can’t match the sunsets or city views. If you

prefer a sweeping ocean view, though, you’ll likely do better at Méridien. You’ll also spend less: my top-floor room cost 16,500 francs (\$173).

For that, though, you’ll have to do without the modern décor, kitchen and multiple flat screens of Royal Tera. Some have suggested Le Méridien’s rooms are a bit reminiscent of your granny’s flat, but I can’t say it bothers me much. A bed’s a bed, as they say. I just want comfort, space and practicality, the latter of which is usually far more evident when ‘interior designers’ have been kept well away.

In this respect, Le Méridien was arguably better. Just one shower head, just one room key and a solid old-school bench for my suitcase. Lovely. If only the balcony railing wasn’t directly at eye level for a person sitting on the deck chair, and if only the bath plug would actually stop the water draining away, I’d give it a perfect 10.



The water provides a nice sea breeze



New Caledonian *bonhomie* runs through the generations

MORE DRIVING

On the way to dinner I notice a wonderful feature for golfers: there's an indoor driving range! It had been closed for a month when I stayed, but one assumes it'll be back in action soon.

My evening meal at Hippocampe is the feeding highlight of the trip. Le Méridien's quartet of restaurants have a good reputation, and this is the ultra-posh, not-for-kids alternative. I am thus grossly out of place at the Hippocampe. Nonetheless, the seafood carpaccio starter is the highlight. The grapefruit works well with the *fruits de mer*, though it does give me a malicious squirt in the eye after one ill-judged stab of my fork. Grapefruit juice really stings.

After dinner I wander to the on-site casino, which appears to be Nouméa's major gambling joint. I ponder joining the Texas Hold'em table, but conclude

that trying to play poker in French is a recipe for trouble. Roulette is a safer option, and it's not long before I call it a night with a slight profit.

NEWS JUST IN

The *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes* newspaper makes for interesting reading at breakfast. There's a story about the island's need for more ultra-luxury tourism facilities, and another one about a rural power cut caused by an errant duck! It seems there may be a way to go.

I drive north past the airport to Les

Paillottes de la Ouenghi, the third of New Caledonia's courses. I play the front nine with Nicolas, the club's genial Pro. Putting aside my shocking play, it's a lovely morning. If you want a course entirely to yourself, this place on a weekday is your best chance because it's relatively far from Nouméa. Like Dumbéa it's most definitely an inland course, although you can see the distant ocean from the spectacular sixth tee.

This is where Nicolas gets excited: he can see a large herd of deer grazing in the fields across the road. Like so many

NEW CALEDONIA: TOP TIPS

- New Caledonia is big! If you want to explore it all, allow a couple of weeks.
- Hiring a car is a good plan, but be ready to ask for directions. Signposts are not a strong point, and GPS doesn't work in New Caledonia.
- You're not missing much if you skip Nouméa's centre. On a weeknight it can be scarily deserted, and driving around its one-way system in the daytime is no fun either.
- A smattering of French is definitely useful, but you'll get by with English.
- New Caledonia has a discernible winter, so bring some light warm gear around July or August.
- Expect curious inconsistencies, like a sparkling golf course with practically no clubhouse, or a gourmet restaurant attached to a middling hotel.
- Keep an eye out for New Caledonia's fourth golf course, due to open in Bourail in 2013, designed by Pete Dye.
- Try a Bougna, a traditional Melanesian dish of fruit, vegetables, pork, fish, chicken and lobster wrapped in banana leaves.



locals he's a keen hunter, and enjoys New Caledonia's laid-back approach to hunting and just about everything else. It may be part of France, but there's far less worry about rules and regulations (swimming attire being the clear exception). The no-worries attitude is something that the scores of French expats adore about the place.

Back in Nouméa, I check in at the three-star Le Stanley. It's a little out of town, in a quiet, upmarket suburb. It's built right on the edge of the ocean, which laps away gently (thanks to the reef around the island, waves are nonexistent) outside my room, a suite worth 11,300 francs (\$118). The view is of small boats, verdant islands and water, rather than Nouméa itself, so Le Stanley is ideal for those who like their serenity.

On my final morning I browse the news again. There's more on the mystery death in Voh: they've tracked down the deceased's brother, who explains that he discovered the corpse in the dead man's

car, which was parked in such a way that it was obstructing traffic. Then the story gets a bit *Fawlty Towers*: the brother didn't notice he was dead, despite getting in and moving the car off the road! Only a few hours later did the penny drop. Talk about laid-back...

On my last day, I'm determined to find a wild and quiet place for a swim or a walk. New Caledonia is rife with this kind of opportunity: there is a beach for every man, and plenty of wild forest where you could – with the permission of the local chief, I'm told – just go and pitch a tent.

SWEET SERENITY

For reasons not entirely unconnected with the careless loss of my wallet the day before, I find myself back up the coast to reclaim it from the good people at Les Paillottes de la Ouanghi. From here it's not hard to find serenity. I head for Bouraké, which is basically a beach, a mangrove swamp and a handful of smallholdings. I carefully lock the car,

bury the key and set off for a swim across a tranquil corner of the bay.

When I get to the other side, I hover in the water and survey the early-evening scene. The hills across the water are layered brown, grey and green against the soft, deepening sky. Not a ripple: I've seen lakes choppy than this. Aside from the drone of a distant motorboat and a house or two on the shore, there's no sign of life. Behind me is nothing but bush.

This is what I've been searching for ever since I looked down on this very spot as we descended into Tontouta Airport. A place you can make your own. And I know there are a thousand such spots like this in this raw, earthy land of beaches and uninhabited islets.

Mass tourism hasn't come to New Caledonia, and that's exactly what I like about it right now. This land makes few pretences, and nor should it.

When I get back to my car, I find that my locking wasn't so good after all: I've



ALL YOUR TRAVEL DETAILS

GOLFING, SLEEPING AND EATING IN NEW CALEDONIA

WHERE TO STAY

ROYAL TERA BEACH RESORT Nouméa's premier hotel option offering 108 spacious suites located on seven levels, all with balcony, lounge, full kitchen and one or two bedrooms each with private bathroom.

140 Promenade Roger Laroque, Anse Vata, Nouméa

+687 296 400

www.tera-hotels-resorts.com

LE MÉRIDIEN NOUMÉA Chic European décor embraces elements of Pacific island ambience. Each room features a balcony where you can take in views of the spectacular lagoon, pool, or the New Caledonian Garden.

Pointe Magnin, Nouméa

+687 265 000

LE MÉRIDIEN ILE DES PINS

One of the resorts of choice on the Isle of Pines. The beach is great but do take the time to explore the local footpaths and the *piscine naturelle*.

Baie d'Oro, Isle of Pines

+687 461 515

WHERE TO PLAY

GOLF DE TINA

New Caledonia's number one course by a country mile.

Rue du Golf de Tina, Nouméa

+687 43 82 83

LES PAILLOTES DE LA OUENGIH

Quiet and scenic rural 18-holer worthy of a visit.

About 70km from Nouméa, near Boulouparis north of

Tontouta Airport

+687 351 735

FOOD AND RESTAURANTS

L'HIPPOCAMPE Exclusive, intimate gourmet restaurant for a pricy night to remember.

Le Méridien Nouméa, Pointe Magnin, Nouméa

+687 265 000

LE 360 Revolving restaurant with views over Anse Vata.

Ramada Plaza Hotel, 7 rue Louis Blériot, Anse Vata

+687 23 90 00

LE ROOF Top-notch gastronomic food over the water at Anse Vata. The food, service and setting are all impeccable.

134 prom Roger Laroque Ouen Toro Area

+687 25 07 00

LA BASTIDE This hilltop restaurant on Mont Venus has views over baie de l'Orphelinat and tables set around a swimming pool. It specialises in seafood.

3 rue René Coty Mont Venus

+687 27 63 70

LA CRÊPERIE BRETONNE This cosy family restaurant in Trianon serves galettes (thin, savoury pancakes) and crepes, for a real taste of France.

5 rue Ange Bérioz Mont Venus

+687 273 714

FLIGHTS

Qantas and New Caledonian airline Aircalin both fly from Sydney and Brisbane. Air Caledonie operates domestic services from Grande Terre to the Loyalty Islands or the Isle of Pines.

Tontouta International Airport is 45km northwest of Nouméa. Coach companies, public buses and taxis operate regular transfers between Tontouta and Nouméa.

left a window wide open! For the second time in 24 hours I've done my very best to let somebody steal my wallet. Again, the New Caledonians have come through for me: I can say only good things about their honesty.

But just before I get carried away with thoughts of Eden, a horde of mosquitoes descends. They embark on the most vicious bout of blood theft I've ever encountered. It's shameless larceny. I give up watching the moon rise, and make a beeline for the car.

In a way that sums it all up. Not everything is easy in New Caledonia. Not every day ends in a fairytale. This place is rich, real and full of surprises. But it gives you the freedom to make of it what you want. Whether that's hitting the golf course, lounging beneath a palm tree, posing with a totem, discovering the wilderness of the interior, or all of the above, I say take the chance – before the rest of the world moves in.

Just add towel and cocktails for perfection

