

DISCOVERING New Caledonia

Before we sailed through the Havannah Pass and into the lagoon that surrounds “La Grande Terre” we’d heard very little about New Caledonia. The few people we met who had stopped in there said it was little more than a way to break up what can be a rough passage to Australia; a safe harbor to wait out weather, restock supplies and make repairs **by Heather Francis**

But we weren’t heading to Australia. In fact New Caledonia wasn’t even on our radar until cyclone Pam thrashed her way across the South Pacific, leaving our long awaited destination of Vanuatu in tatters. So when we left Fiji in May, New Caledonia seemed like nothing more than a diversion,

little did we know what awaited us. New Caledonia is one of the world’s largest atolls and to sneak inside its protected lagoon we first had to traverse Havannah Pass. Arriving anywhere new can be nerve-wracking but with the wrong combination of winds and tides this pass is known for its steep and often dangerous overfalls. Thankfully, due to a sudden but light

westerly wind shift, we arrived at the pass not only at first light but just after slack tide. We raced over smooth water with 10 knots on the nose and only the headsail flying, watching the SOG climb close to 9 knots. The leads high above on Cape Ndoua were just as the book described, very conspicuous.

Much to our delight the French do not use the “black stick and rebar”



over land. That's not to say that we took our eyes off things, but it did relieve that tightness in the pit of my stomach that I often get when sailing somewhere unfamiliar.

LANDFALL

It was late afternoon before we rounded the corner and made our way through the channel markers and into Noumea Harbor. Boats of every size, shape and stage of decay cluttered the harbor, there was little room to drop the hook. If we did we'd be on a lee shore and if the winds changed direction we'd have very little swing room. Although we pre-

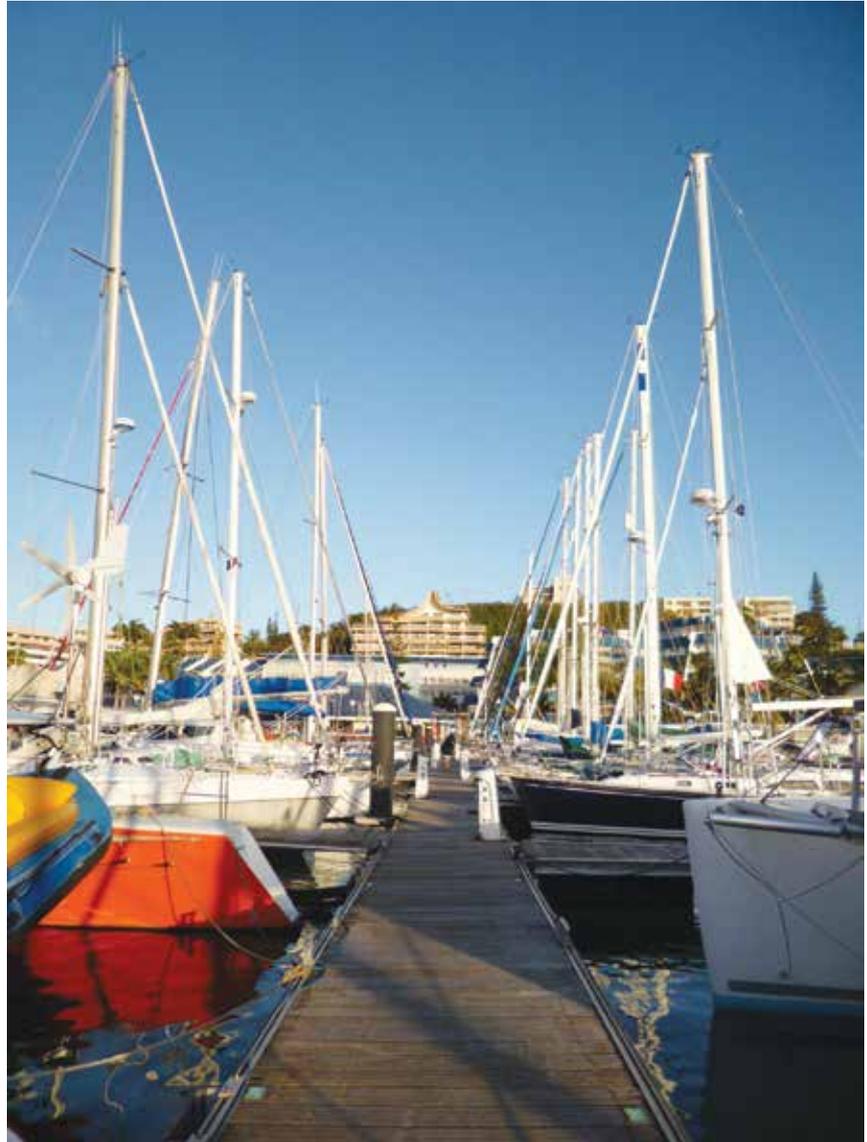
fer to anchor, it just wasn't an option.

We hailed Port Moselle Marina on the VHF hoping they would have space on their visitors dock. Although they were unseasonably busy, it seemed cyclone Pam had diverted several other boats to New Caledonia. Happily, they could squeeze us in. In fact, they will grant any foreign flagged vessel at least three days alongside if they have room. Although we arrived after the marina office had closed, the on-call staff were friendly and helpful. After lending a

Opposite page; Woodin Canal without a breath of wind, this page; passing a cardinal mark, the visitors dock at Port Moselle Marina



method of navigation that plagues much of the South Pacific. The reefs are not dotted with wrecks but cardinal markers, and channels had leads and sector lights, all of which illuminate at night. And, as in other Pacific French islands we've visited, the charts were not only complete but correct. There was no watching our little boat on the chartplotter sail





Top; masts as far as the eye can see, bottom; relaxing in the hot springs

hand to help us tie up they made sure we had check-in instructions for the next day, and perhaps more importantly a key for the shower block and a password for the free Wi-Fi network.

After a cold beer, a hot shower and a full night sleep, we got an early start the next morning. We expected the official visits and time consuming paperwork that usually accompany check-ins. We were pleasantly sur-

prised when the marina office said they could file our inbound customs clearance for us and no visit was needed to the Port Captain. All that was required of us was to make it to the Immigration office before they shut for the day at 11:30 a.m., then return to the boat to wait for Quarantine to visit. Not only was check-in uncomplicated and quick, but it was free, a rarity these days.

Now that we had all the formalities out of the way it was time to explore. Like all Overseas French Territories (OFT), Noumea has all the trappings of France; good wine selection, cheap baguettes and an overwhelming cheese aisle in the grocery store. It is also home to the “Parc Zoologique et Forestier Michel Corbasson”, probably the best, and perhaps only, chance to see a Cagou.

The Cagou (or Kagu) is a shy and endemic bird that lives only in the interior highlands of New Caledonia. Featured on the South Pacific franc the Cagou is not only a point of pride for New Caledonians but also an endangered species. It is an almost flightless bird whose numbers are threatened by introduced dogs, cats and pigs and loss of habitat, all thanks to us humans. It was well worth the \$5 entrance fee and walk up the rather steep hill.

After a couple of days at the marina, we were ready to untie the dock lines. We were suffering from culture shock, not because we were in an OFT and my high school French was stretched to the max, but because we hadn't been around this many boats in years. Port Moselle Marina has five finger pontoons each accommodating



over 60 boats, and except for the few spots left at the visitor's dock there was almost no vacancy. Coupled with the congestion outside the breakwater it seemed like there were masts as far as the eye could see. It was time to get away from the crowds.

TIME FOR EXPLORATION

We decided to sail back southeast to explore a large inlet we had seen on the way in, Baie de Prony. The charts and guides indicated that there were several anchorages in the area, there was a good spot to hide if a westerly happened to blow through and even a recommended "hurricane hole."

On our sail into Noumea, we had somehow timed our passage correctly not only through the Havannah Pass but also through the Woodin Canal, a wide but dog-legged channel that is prone to tidal currents. Our trip back south would prove to be a little more challenging. With winds and tide against us it was rapidly apparent that we would not make it to the western end of Woodin Canal before dark, or more importantly at slack water. We had our pick of anchorages north of the canal and tucked into Baie Uie for the evening. The tall hills provided plenty of protection from the wind and the slowly shoaling bottom of the deep inlet was excellent holding, a perfect combination for a good night sleep. On the morning tide we slipped through Woodin Canal and even found room to tack around shipping traffic.

The weather report had the trades freshen for the next several days so we made our way to an anchorage in the northeast corner of Baie de Prony and threw the hook in sticky red mud in a secluded bay surrounded by tall colonial pine trees. That afternoon, while dragging a lure behind the dinghy, we



Top; beautiful Views of Baie de Prony from Cap Ndoua, bottom; Pic Ndoua looking south

found a shallow river that snaked into the forest; we made plans to explore the following morning on high tide.

We woke early to a clear morning, packed a light breakfast and filled the thermal mugs with coffee. We tucked in behind a sandbar at the mouth of the river and found that it opened up into a wide, shallow waterway. Hidden on the banks were the ruins of an old penal colony, the almost foot thick stone walls still intact. The river meandered through the woods and then terminated in a small waterfall that was bathed in warm morning sunlight and protected from the wind by trees. We sat quietly on the rocks, eating breakfast and listening to the gurgle of cool, clear water collecting in a bathtub size pool at our feet. It was soon agreed that a picnic lunch and afternoon swim were in order, even if we had to carry the dinghy back over the bar.

For the next few weeks we moved around the large bay, spending a few nights in an anchorage before sailing to the next. We spent days exploring beaches, snorkeling on vibrant coral reefs and watching peregrine falcons loop and reel above us as we both fished for our dinner.

Although we saw several other yachts in Baie de Prony we only shared an an-

chorage when we pick up a mooring in Baie Majik. The moorings were laid to protect the coral and marine zones throughout the bay. They are well-maintained and free, two words you don't often hear in the same sentence.

We wanted to hike up to Pic Ndoua, the lighthouse and leads that can be seen on the cape. The lighthouse was originally built in the 1880's, first serving as a telegraph station and beacon guiding vessels through the Havannah Pass. As viewed from the pass it sits atop a 200 meter red earth cliff that drops steeply into the ocean but it is obscured by the rolling hillside in the anchorage.

The guidebook doesn't mention that the hike is particularly difficult so we were expecting to find a long winding walking trail when we got ashore. Instead we walked along a one lane road that was groomed and in some places paved. For 30 minutes we marched a near vertical straight line through the forest and onto red dirt plains. By the time we reached the top my cheeks were rosy and I had to brace myself against fresh trade winds that blow uninterrupted across the barren hillside.

The day was clear and the views were breathtaking, or it could have just been that my lungs were still





Hidden river adventure, this page; Kate at anchor in Baie de Prony, opposite page

burning from the hike up. We took refuge in the wooden visitor center that was sheltered from the wind; below the reefs and islets that we'd have to avoid when sailing south were clearly visible. We didn't spot any whales but on the hazy horizon we could make out L'île des Pins.

With provisions dwindling and a few boat projects on the list we decided to head back to town. It was a downwind run and with light winds we hoisted the kite and sped down the channel under sunny skies. As we got closer to town, we saw that several others were out taking advantage of the good weather; colourful kites and sails danced along the horizon. As in many atolls and French territories we visited there was an active kiteboarding and windsurfing community in New Caledonia, as well as several sailing clubs that offer dinghy sailing lessons for kids and adults.

After a couple of nights on the dock,

a few trips to the market and several piles of dirty laundry washed we were ready to escape again. We were drawn back to Baie de Prony with hopes that a passing system forecast for the following week would bring some northerly winds and from there we would be in a good position to sail south to the famed L'île des Pins, or Isle of Pines. For the blow that was forecast we decided to try the suggested hurricane hole, a large protected haven tucked into the far northern corner of the bay. Again we were surprised to have the place to ourselves having seen several boats moving around early in the day.

The guidebook said there was a hot spring nearby so we set off in the dinghy hoping to find a worn path or perhaps a small sign indicating where it might be. As we motored around the corner we were surprised to see a well-built wharf complete with a shiny stainless boarding ladder at the end. The path from the long jetty disappeared into the under

bush; no building, no privacy sign, no people. We stopped to take a look and were delighted to find not a just a natural hot spring lined with rocks but large wooden floored pool that was refreshed with an underwater vent and was surrounded by benches and picnic tables. So civilized, so French!

In the following weeks the winds didn't blow as predicted, instead they remained fresh and southerly; there was no good window to sail south. We kept ourselves busy exploring until the outboard conked out and a trip to town was required to see if we could round up parts. We set out on an overcast morning, the winds fresh and from the south-east, as they had been for weeks.

By the time we got close enough to town that it should be visible a heavy fog and rain had settled in and we could barely see 30 meters ahead of us. Just when the weather seemed to clear, I noticed a flapping noise coming from the bow and looked up to

find the headsail ripped from the UV strip to the luff two thirds of the way up. As I rolled the headsail away the grey day seem even gloomier.

TIME TO GO

It turned out that this would be our last trip to town, fate had rolled the dice for us and an unexpected email meant we had a date with a mooring ball in Vanuatu. Checking out was bittersweet but just as easy as our arrival; to clearance charges or harbor fees to pay. We were officially given 48 hours to leave the country, but even that was not enough time for the weather to clear. When we untied the dock lines for the last time at Port Moselle, we stuck our nose out into 20-25 knot trade winds. It took us a whole day of hard sailing, every inch a fight against the wind and tide, and we barely made it to our intended anchorage before dark. We squeaked through Woodin Canal for the last time, another half an hour and the current probably would have made things a lot more interesting.

It was a lather, rinse, repeat performance the next day, it took us most of the morning to crawl the last 10 nautical miles to Port Bois, the closest anchorage close to Havannah Pass, where we had to overnight in order to catch the outgoing tide at daybreak. Looking over our track on the chartplotter as we finally cleared the reef, I counted almost 30 tacks between Noumea and Havannah Pass. It seemed like New Caledonia didn't want to let us go.

We thoroughly enjoyed our time sailing and exploring the Grande Terre. The large lagoon protected us from the open ocean swell but the trades winds blew steady, the sailing was world class. Anchorages were excellent and plentiful, and when we tired of the secluded surroundings, the city of Noumea was always there to welcome us back. We never made to the Isle of Pines, or got a chance to stop at the Loyalty Islands offshore, the winds just didn't cooperate. No matter where we go there

will always be a beautiful island we missed, or a perfect anchorage we never found, but as the French say, *c'est la vie!*

Heather Francis is from Nova Scotia, Canada and for over a decade has worked and lived on boats throughout the world. In 2008 she and Steve, her Aussie partner, bought Kate, a Newport 41', and have been sailing ever since. They are planning to do a lap around the planet, albeit slowly. To follow their adventures log onto www.yachtkate.com.

Now would be a good time to brush up on your French, especially meteorological terms. Daily forecasts are broadcast on the VHF throughout the day but not in English. Download a translation app (make sure it works offline) and head over to www.meteo.nc to start practicing today.

New Caledonia functions as an OFT (Overseas French Territory) and has the same visa requirements as France. Visa extensions while in New Caledonia are not easily granted and all applications and communications must be done "en francais", so plan ahead if you want to stay longer.

Provisioning is good in Noumea, but most things were not as cheap as Tonga, Fiji or Vanuatu. Limited fruit and vegetables sold in the grocery store, instead check out the municipal market for all your locally grown produce and fresh caught seafood. And be aware that alcohol sales are "interdit", or prohibited, after 1200 on Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday throughout the country.

With so many boats in Noumea it is not surprising that there are several well stocked chandleries about town. Despite our bumbling along in poor French trying to explain nautical terms, the staff at all the stores we visited were friendly and helpful, and the prices surprisingly fair.

