

separated by a magnificent mountain chain running down the centre. Weather is typically tropical with the main surge in heat emerging during November to March, cooling down from June to August.

Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia, perches on a peninsula whose green and blue lagoon was created by a 1600 kilometre belt of coral running along the entire length of the main island.

Mooring in Noumea harbour

Mooring in the harbour allowed easy access to the centre of the city offering a strange but appealing mix of French and Polynesian influences including architecture, food, language and people. After tying up we walked through the central park where people ate, drank, walked, washed their dogs and strolled by, giving us a feeling for the place before we ventured out into the streets to explore old churches, museums and shops.

The city is serviced by an efficient network of spluttering buses which turned out to be very useful as walking the hilly city and its hinterland became quickly tiring in the heat.

Ever curious about indigenous culture we headed to the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, a tourist hotspot of Kanak culture. With its striking architecture looking like great spiky leaves pointing out of the lush green forest, the centre houses Polynesian cultural art and artefacts from around the Pacific.

We were a little disappointed in not finding historical Kanak material. This situation, explained our guide, is created by the fact that most of their artefacts are held far away in France. "We keep asking for our heritage back, but they won't budge," she explains.

This helped us reflect on French colonialism in the Pacific, which has not always had a positive history. The best part of the visit however involved the walk around the indigenous gardens with fascinating explanations about the native plants from which Kanak's get their food, building and craft fibres and spiritual sustenance.

We stayed in Noumea for a few days repairing and stocking up. Vessels are well serviced here and I couldn't help feeling we were one of countless visitors who had floated in from the sea in an ancient maritime practice stretching back centuries. It seemed so natural to arrive by boat that I could not imagine flying there.

The next week brought us to little outlying islands where we snorkelled, swam and lazed around on fine sandy beaches. The locals are proud of their natural resources and it's important not to fish in certain places and observe environmental laws such as making fires.



ABOVE: Traditional island transport – pirogues.



LEFT: Bougainvillea – an icon of the Pacific region.



BELOW: Isle of Pines beach.