

Noumea

Just when I thought the world has run out of deserted islands, I discovered Ouvea, part of the Loyalty Islands in New Caledonia.

It is promoted as the island closest to paradise – and I will agree with that.

Never before in my life have I seen a more pristine beach – the sand so white you need your sunglasses and the water so clear you can see the bottom of the ocean from the plane.

I was lucky enough to secure a place in the very popular Specialist Agents' Famil to New Caledonia last month and super lucky to score Ouvea when the group was divided up.



Our accommodation was the only hotel on the island, the Paradise Ouvea Hotel which features huge semi-outdoor dining and lounge areas and enormous bedrooms all overlooking the beach.

I don't think I have ever slept so close to the beach.

Each bungalow has a wide deck fronting the beach which is only a few metres away.

We also inspected a few homestays, called tribal accommodation. They are very basic and very cheap and some of them offered camping facilities for even less money.



I don't know if it is possible to pitch a tent so close to the beach for so little money anywhere in the world – and I am talking about the cleanest beach and the clearest water in the world. So committed are the locals to protecting their precious island that they are talking about banning cruise ships from mooring at Ouvea because of the damage this causes to the reef. They are happy to forego a few instant tourist dollars for the sake of the long-term future of their island.

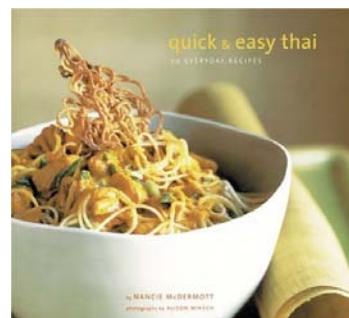
French is still widely spoken and for once in a non-English speaking country I was not swarmed by kids trying to practice their "hello" on me.

Instead I got a friendly nonchalant 'bonjour' from the school kids I passed on a narrow road while riding my hired bicycle along the coast late one afternoon.

The French also left a legacy behind with their food.

A typical island breakfast consists of crusty baguettes, a selection of European cheeses, tropical fruit and good coffee.

We tasted many cheeses which are not allowed into Australia because of the method of processing used in Europe.



We also ate a lot of Melanesian style salads such as shredded fresh coconut with home made dressing and lightly fried papaya (pawpaw) – usually with a feast of crabs the size of giant lobsters or freshly caught fish.

The lifestyle is simple and very relaxed. Tonight's meal consists of what was caught or harvested today.

Tables are traditionally decorated with fresh bougainvillea and franchipani flowers and more often than not the roof of the restaurant is made of banana leaves and the floor is the beach itself.

We watched our bags being unloaded at the airport – amidst a huge pumpkin and a taro plant; both dutifully tagged with airline labels. There is no carousel; bags are passed through a roll-up door at a leisurely pace.

The Loyalty Islands comprise Ouvea, Lifou and Mare – set in the Pacific Ocean. Ouvea Lagoon is one of the richest and most beautiful in the world and was listed by UNESCO last year as part of the World Heritage.

The islands are among the rare gems on the planet still safe from the stresses of civilisation. I walked for two hours on the most beautiful beach on this planet, taking in the colours of the ocean which vary from the deepest indigo to the purest turquoise ... and never passed a soul on my journey.

[My trip to Ouvea and Noumea was made possible by New Caledonia Tourism, Aircalin and Destination Loyalty Islands.](#)