

Destination Vanuatu & New Caledonia

These exotic countries have colourful histories to connect with: cannibal sites, penal settlements, spirit caves, shipwrecks, ancient forests. Exploring them could keep you busy for weeks. But tear yourself away to go diving on the healthy coral reefs; go wacky with extreme sports; boat, fly, climb, hike. Then stop to enjoy gourmet food; photograph a glorious view; laze in the sun, totally pampered; or get back to nature on outer islands where the quietly dignified local people welcome you into their communities.

Don't miss the vibrant capital cities, Port Vila and Noumea. Port Vila has its boutiques set along tumbling footpaths amid dusty stalls and colourful markets. Its roads twist up from a spectacular harbour of inlets and islets, white yachts and orange cargo boats. Noumea is where Europeans, Asians, Polynesians and West Indians create a wonderful ethnic diversity amid the indigenous Melanesian culture and elegant French influences. Both cities move at a tropical pace against the backdrop of grand buildings and interesting museums.

Vanuatu offers a range of best-in-the-world experiences from watching a volcano's fire-works to diving through a shipwrecked luxury liner. Witness ancient living cultures, cook in boiling blue or green lakes, and canoe through jungles.

New Caledonia's scenery is as diverse as its culture. Mountain ranges snake down Grande Terre (the main island) separating its western plains from the eastern slopes where waterfalls plunge down to the sea. Kanak *tribus* (small settlements) cluster on the Loyalty Islands, and majestic araucaria pines fringe soft beaches and azure lagoons on Île des Pins.

It's all so good in Vanuatu and New Caledonia.



Getting Started

Book a flight on the web, and grab your walking boots, reef shoes, snorkel gear, hat and, if you must, a spare set of clothes. That's it. You're ready. Off to paradise. The thing about these two exotic destinations is that everyone helps you with a smile, but nobody is hassling with 'Come to my hotel' or 'I'll give you the best deal'. It's all comfortably easy – everything you think'd be cool to do can be organised by any of the agents along the main streets of Vila and Noumea. They'll arrange tours, plus grand adventures to outer islands or away from the centres.

It's just a one-hour flight between New Caledonia and Vanuatu. If your timing is right, try a boat ride on *Havannah* (p192), which sails north each month.

If you like to have things organised, it's still dead easy. Start your adventure by booking flights on the web to both countries and to Vanuatu's outer islands. Choose your accommodation and book direct, with an email or phone call. Decide on tours, festivals, sights and activities and contact your chosen host or an agent to arrange them.

Prefer to have an agent arrange everything for you? Contact an agent mentioned in this book; listed on either the Vanuatu Tourism Office (VTO) website and the New Caledonia Tourism Point Sud (NCTPS) website; or your local agent. There are always package deals on offer, especially from Australia and New Zealand, so check all your options.

Many New Caledonia visitors come on package tours, which offer plenty of variety, such as island-hopping and do-it-yourself fly-drive packages (see entries under individual countries of origin, p195). But independent travellers only need to head out of Noumea to find unusual pristine landscapes, exciting activities, and small quaint islands suitable for a range of budgets – with few other tourists, and you'll meet the lovely locals too.

Cruise boats stop for a day or two in Noumea and stay overnight at more remote locations such as Lifou, in the Loyalty Islands. Then they continue north to idyllic Mystery Island, Port Vila and exotic spots around Vanuatu's northern islands.

If you're travelling to Vanuatu's outer islands, you'll need to start taking antimalaria tablets two weeks before you head out from Port Vila. There's no malaria in New Caledonia.

A range of comfortable, protective footwear is the most important thing to pack. Reef shoes are not for thumping around on coral reefs, but for the sharp coral and volcanic-rock beaches. They're a must for children.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Snorkel gear, although you can buy it duty-free in Vila and Noumea.
- Earplugs, eye mask, and torch or anything heavy for whacking roosters at 4am.
- A sweater for boats, backs of 4WDs, volcano rims, and when the temperature drops.
- A wrap, to use as a bed sheet, blanket, dressing gown, towel, skirt, sunshade, or scarf.
- Mosquito net if you think you'll be staying in resthouses.
- Water canteen and water purifier for long treks.
- Hat, sunglasses, sunscreen and insect repellent. Duh.
- Stout walking shoes for razor-sharp coral tracks and cliffs, and reef shoes for beaches.
- C-Card and logbook.
- Alcohol. It's the best thing for cleaning coral cuts and crocodile bites.
- Can-opener. Only one thing worse than canned food: canned food that you can't open.

There's no malaria on Aneityum and they want to keep it that way. So new arrivals (not tourists) go straight into the tiny tin-shed airport, where a pinprick of their blood is checked under a microscope.

Calling the seasons wet and dry implies rain and sun seasons. Not so. There can be long periods of calm, dry weather during the wet season, and days of low cloud and rain throughout the year.

Tropical cyclones are low-pressure systems that build up into highly devastating forces, with heavy seas, torrential rain, and winds rotating around an 'eye'. The ocean temperature must be around 28°C to generate a cyclone.

WHEN TO GO

These two Pacific countries are at their glorious best in the dry season from May to October in Vanuatu, to mid-December in New Caledonia. All the festivals and sporting contests are held in these months too. For walking or trekking, narrow it down to the cold season, June to August, when water temperatures drop to 21°C and the air is cooler – not the best time to visit if you're hoping to laze around on a beach. School holiday periods are busy, so flights, especially to Vanuatu's outer islands, need to be booked as far in advance as possible.

The climate varies from wet tropical in Vanuatu's north (over 4000mm of rainfall a year) to subtropical in New Caledonia, with dry rain-shadow areas in between. The prevailing winds throughout the year are from the southeast (the famous Southeast Trade Winds of sailing-ship days), bringing sunny days and cool nights. However, in the wet season the winds are more variable. Squalls can blow up in a few minutes, reaching 90km/h and presenting a real danger to any small sailing vessels.

The wet season runs from November to the end of April in Vanuatu, and from mid-December to mid-April in New Caledonia. These months give you higher temperatures, heavier rains, mosquitoes and cyclones. Cyclone time is no good in a yacht – in fact, any vessel caught in the open sea is in grave danger. Otherwise, just get a close-fitting hat. If you've booked a bungalow and it blows away, not to worry; your hosts will build another, pronto. They're used to cyclones.

An average of 2.5 cyclones strike Vanuatu each year. They cause extensive damage, not only to the land but to the coral reefs. However, they also clear a way through the jungle, taking out vines and overgrowth to allow new life to generate. Ni-Vans know instinctively when one is on its way – it's the talk of the town.

When a cyclone is heading towards New Caledonia, a rating-one warning is issued 24 hours before it is due to strike. Within four hours of crossing land, a cyclone warning two is announced. Shops and industries must close and some houses are evacuated. Any vessel should have sought shelter in Noumea's relatively protected harbour. The last major cyclones to hit New Caledonia were Drena (1997) and Franck (1999).

COSTS & MONEY

Both countries have boutique and luxury hotels and resorts where your delightful, spacious single or apartment might float out over the water, or your suite might hover high with stunning beach views. These cost anything between 9000Vt and 90,000Vt for a night in Vanuatu, and from 10,000 CFP to 80,000 CFP in New Caledonia.

Your time in Port Vila can cost as little or as much as you want. But when you hit Vanuatu's outer islands, it's difficult to spend too much, except on adventures – grand affairs costing a lot less than you'd pay back home. Transport anywhere is costly: fuel costs heaps and very expensive 4WD trucks fall apart in five years. Why? Super-rough roads, salt spray, and cyclones that ram coral dust, salt and acidic volcanic ash into every nook and crevice.

All Vanuatu's islands have cheerful, clean rooms available for as little as 1500Vt, so daily expenses might run from 3000Vt up to 7000Vt, depending on your activities. (Airfares from Port Vila cost between 7000Vt and 16,000Vt.) Camping in New Caledonia, or staying in a homestay or *gîte* (tourist bungalow) costs between 700 CFP and 1500 CFP per person, and from 5000 CFP for a double.

Vanuatu has surprisingly cheap beef and fish of great quality, as well as fruit and vegetables from local markets. You can eat fresh-cooked meals at Port Vila and Luganville markets or outer-island 'restaurants' for 200Vt. Self-cater for perhaps 800Vt a day. It's eating out at the irresistible restaurants that adds up: three restaurant meals a day could cost 6000Vt, especially if you're drinking wine.

Snack bars and cafes in New Caledonia offer substantial meals from about 350 CFP, while a three-course set meal starts at around 1600 CFP. On the islands, lobster or coconut crab is another speciality, costing from around 3000 CFP.

New Caledonia is a relatively rich country with a high cost of labour, so some products such as fish, fruit and vegetables can be expensive. Noumea sadly has a reputation as an expensive city, partly because it has little budget accommodation. To find some, just leave the city and head for the country's other great destinations. Car-hire rates are very competitive and transport by ferry to the Loyalty Islands and Île des Pins is affordable.

Some accommodation in Vanuatu has peak-season rates from June to September. There are no peak-season prices in New Caledonia, but places can book out quickly. Prices everywhere vary if you book through an agent, stay a while, take a special package and so on.

READING UP

Travel Literature

South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation by Subramani covers regional literature and includes work by ni-Vanuatu and Kanak writers.

Pacifica by Nadine Amadio is fascinating storytelling about local myths and traditions, along with superb photography to illustrate them. It covers all the Pacific islands.

Art in the New Pacific by Vilsoni Tausie explores Melanesian art, dance, sculpture and oral traditions.

Pacific by Judy Nunn is a tale of love, passion and sex that tracks the lives of two women in Vanuatu, one a WWII heroine, the other a young Australian actor. A fun read.

Try to find a copy of *Savage Civilization* by Tom Harrisson, who went 'native' in 1934. It is a fascinating first-hand account of cannibalism, sacrifice, rivalry and the reason behind many of Vanuatu's rituals. You won't be able to put it down.

The Lady and the President by Peter Stone has great photos of USS *President Coolidge* (luxury liner, troopship carrier, diveable wreck), which cover the tragedy of war and delights of scuba diving.

Vanuatu and New Caledonia by Carol Jones is a cheerful book about the region and its people, set out as postcards with lots of maps and photos. Perfect for children, and their parents, to read.

Lonely Planet publishes the *Pidgin* phrasebook, *Fast Talk French*, and many Pacific titles such as *South Pacific and Micronesia* and *Fiji*.

Internet Resources

Start your web explorations at the website of **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com). The Pacific Islands branch of the Thorn Tree bulletin board is where you can ask questions. Other useful sites include the following:

Jason's South Pacific Islands (www.pi-travel.co.nz) Interesting overview of the whole area.

New Caledonia Trio (www.kaori.nc, www.kaledonie.com, www.boomerang.nc) Informative websites with many links, but in French only.

Rocket Guide (www.vanuatu-vacations.com) A range of images and information about both countries.

HOW MUCH?

Trip to the national museum 500Vt/500 CFP

The local paper 100Vt/120 CFP

Car hire per day from 6500Vt/5000 CFP

Litre of petrol 168Vt/170 CFP

Litre of bottled water 120Vt/180 CFP

Tusker beer 450Vt/
Number One beer 350 CFP

Souvenir T-shirt 1800Vt/1800 CFP

Quarter-chicken, fries & salad 520Vt/700 CFP

Vanuatu's vatu (Vt) and New Caledonia's CFP have a similar value (CFP is around 10% higher).

Fan-palm leaves and wild taro leaves make excellent umbrellas.

South Pacific Tourism (www.spto.org) Pacific area information, with online accommodation booking service and links.

Tourism Point Sud (www.nctps.com) New Caledonia's excellent official sites in French, English and Japanese.

Vanuatu-Hotels (www.vanuatu-hotels.vu) Booking agency with information on activities, accommodation, tours, flights etc.

Vanuatu Tourism Office (www.vanuatu.travel) Official website, with a full range of information, including a calendar of events.

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Wan Smol Bag Theatre in Vila has produced several excellent videos that are for sale around Vila, or available for viewing at the museum. The theatre uses a light-handed approach to many sensitive issues, as in *Pacific Star*, a musical comedy about a remote Pacific island and the chaos when tourists arrive. A total romp. *On The Reef* is set guess where, with cartoon characters like triton shells and crabs. More serious is *Vanua-Tai of Land and Sea*, a film about turtle conservation in north Efate.

Little has been produced in English on Kanak culture, although the Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak (ADCK, Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture) sells a range of videos in French. Culture and the struggle for independence were the subjects of a 30-minute documentary entitled *Kanaky au Pouvoir* (Power to the Kanak People), made in 1988 by New Zealand filmmaker Kathy Dudding. You can view this film at the *médiathèque* (media library) at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Jeudis du Centre Ville (Thursday evening street market) A wildly popular street market at Place des Cocotiers in central Noumea with traditional dances, arts and crafts and local produce.

Naghol (land diving) Every April and May the men of South Pentecost make spectacular jumps from towers in a ritual to bless the yam harvest.

Independence Day Vanuatu's most important celebration is on 30 July with fun stalls, sporting events and *kastom* (ancient ancestral) dancing everywhere. Port Vila has a military parade, canoe and yacht races and string-band competitions.

Around-Island Relay Efate is the stage for a unique 138km relay through rainforest, villages, plantations and rivers at the end of July.

Live en Août A week-long live festival in August with musical performances in restaurants, bars and nightclubs around Noumea.

Equinox Every two years in October Noumea sees street and indoor theatre, music and dance.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

There is debate worldwide about the sustainability of the ocean's fish species. You may want to avoid eating fish that are known to be at risk of being depleted, although the main problem around the Pacific is the illegal fishing by large Asian nations, who come in with long lines.

For cultural pursuits, time your visit to coincide with one of the major events, such as land diving (*naghol*) in April and May or Pentecost (p94).

Packaged foods, which we depend on in the West, are imported and therefore expensive. Then again, you get gourmet foods from France for no more than you'd pay anywhere outside France. Indulge.

CONDUCT IN VANUATU & NEW CALEDONIA

Don't try to touch or ride on a turtle, even though such antics might be possible at theme parks. Just enjoy swimming near these shy creatures, who are easily terrified.

All hikers know about carrying their rubbish away with them. It'd also be good to take your plastic wrappings and drink containers away from your outer-island bungalow. Many islands don't have the means to dispose of non-organic rubbish.

Be mindful, when you meet someone, that you may be talking to a chief, even though he looks 15.

ECOTOURISM

Vanuatu and New Caledonia are perfect places for ecotourism. Power is used minimally and friendly energy sources like solar, thermal and mini-hydro are common. It makes a difference, but it's a lot of hard work too – sheets hand-washed and hung to dry; rooms swept not vacuumed etc.

Ecotourism is a great way to learn about how connected the islanders are to the rhythm of their sea and land. In Vanuatu, look out for the poles sticking out of the sand to indicate that fishing is *tabu* (forbidden) along certain parts of the shore. Ask about the restrictions on spear fishing, and the cycle of vegetable plantings. Visit the marine reserves, turtle sanctuaries and giant clam gardens.

One of the very positive aspects of ecotourism is that special features or species become an attraction. The sea and the forest are kept in their pristine state ready for the next tourist. Come and swim through the wonderland of coral reefs or walk through rainforests and marvel at nature.

Bungalows, guesthouses and homestays on Vanuatu's outer islands and in rural New Caledonia make it possible for you to visit these remote places, and witness their cultural ceremonies and dances. If you are asked to pay to walk through, swim in, or look at parts of their country, know it's a payment towards the future, because they believe in, and practise, nurturing the environment for the next generation.

When buying art, pay the price the artist asks. Don't buy objects that incorporate rare shells, coral or turtle shells. Buying whole turtle shells simply encourages further trade.

Snorkellers and divers should see the boxed text, p22.

Bushwalking places great pressure on the environment:

- use minimal packaging and carry out all your rubbish (don't bury it)
- when there are no toilets, bury your waste, including toilet paper
- use detergents or toothpaste at least 50m (55yd) from a watercourse, even if they are biodegradable
- if you use a fire, ensure that it is fully extinguished and cold, before covering it over.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

LOST IN ANOTHER REALITY

One Month

This will be fun, but there's so much to do. You need a week in Vila to plunge into tours, a Melanesian feast and a night on **Nguna** (p69). Sorry you can't stay; you must get the next flight to **Tanna** (p71).

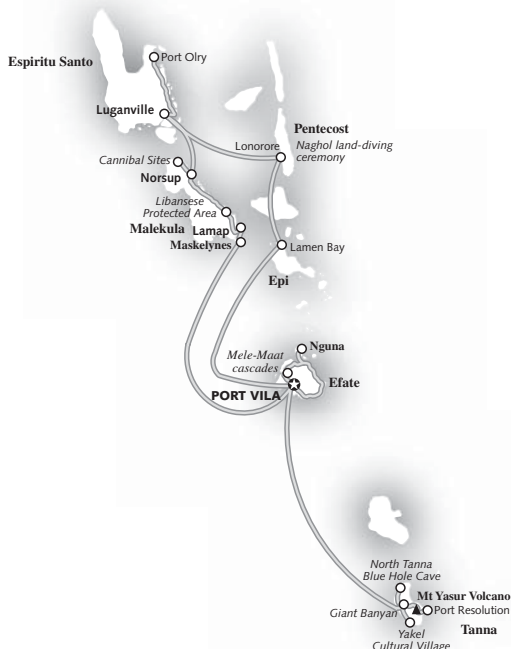
There are just five days here to see the mighty **volcano** (p82), the North Tanna Blue Hole Cave, wild horses, giant banyan, Yakel cultural village and Port Resolution. Breathless? Fly back to Vila for a night.

It's time for a relaxed trip to **Epi** (p69) to fish with the villagers, laze on the beach and swim with Bondas the dugong. Fly to **Pentecost** (p94) to watch men land-dive, an exhilarating cultural celebration. If it's not the *naghol* season, swim in waterfalls, catch river prawns and *toktok* with your hosts.

Fly to **Santo** (p85) for several magic days' diving, and to see Millennium Cave and Lonnoc Beach or **Port Olry** (p93). Then it's south to **Malekula** (p77) to watch *kastom* dances, visit cannibal sites and take the bus to gorgeous **Libansese Protected Area** (p80). Now it's a bus and boat to three days in the idyllic **Maskelynes** (p81), then a plane to Vila.

Spend your last day abseiling at **Mele-Maat cascades**. This is Vanuatu – one giant adventure and you never see it all.

Many of Vanuatu's hidden secrets are revealed to you in this adventure holiday. It will be a wrench to move onto each new leg, but there are always more delights to unfold. You find the tourist core, the earth's hot centre, glorious jungles, azure beaches, a hint of the mysteries in the basically stone-age, living culture and some of the extraordinary activities.



JOURNEY THROUGH PARADISE

Three Weeks

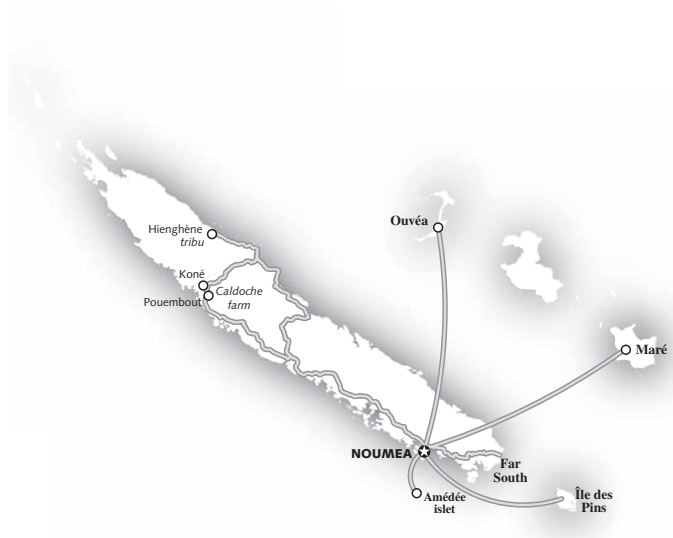
Start exploring in **Noumea** (p143) – set aside four days. Go shopping at the craft stalls in its colourful market and purchase your presents to take home. Now you're free to enjoy yourself. Head off on a **walking tour** (p150) of the city, take an exhilarating jet-ski ride across the lagoon, go on a shopping spree at Noumea's fabulous designer-wear **outlets** and treat yourself to an evening or four of fine wining and dining. Do a day trip to **Amédée Islet** (p160), snorkel in its clear waters and sunbathe on its dazzling white beach. Squeeze in a trip to the **Far South** (p157) for a day of kayaking, mountain biking or abseiling. And when all that's done, relax and catch your breath at Anse Vata or Baie des Citrons beaches.

Purchase an Air Calédonie pass and choose two destinations. **Maré** (p170), with its great coastal walks and welcoming *gîtes*, is a good choice. Sample the seafood, admire the sea views, look out for whales, lie back on the beaches and peer into the *trous bleues* (deep rock pools). Before you know it, three days have come and gone. Catch a flight back to Noumea and head straight to **Ouvéa** (p177) for a couple of days lazing on its soft beach and a boat trip to its southern islets.

Back in Noumea, visit the spectacular **Tjibaou Cultural Centre** (p149). The next day, rise early and catch the ferry to magical **Île des Pins** (p179). Spend four fantastic days sailing in a traditional *pirogue*, swimming in its exquisite *piscine naturelle*, exploring dark caves and old convict prison ruins, and lazing on the heavenly beaches.

Just one week to go and it's time to head north. Experience life in a traditional **tribu** (p168) at Hienghène and a **Caldoche farm** (p165) at Koné or Pouébo before heading back to Noumea and the end of your trip.

This holiday gives you a taste of New Caledonia's diverse landscapes and island destinations. You will discover superb beaches and magnificent coastal scenery, sample renowned French cuisine and experience a warm Kanak welcome at a rural homestay.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

UNDERWATER WORLD

This is another frontier, barely touched by humans. Start in Luganville on Espiritu Santo, dive capital of the world, to get your open-water certificate and start exploring **USS President Coolidge** (p23). You'll never finish, so tear yourself away for a couple of days out at Bokissa Island (p53), where the reefs are sparkling bright and there's an artist's frenzy of fish.

Next stop, Port Vila, where **Nautilus Watersports** has diver accommodation. The wrecks are fascinating. Try Anchor Reef, an anchor-turned-whitetip-shark-nursery, or *Star of Russia*, a romantic sailing ship.

Finally, take a day trip with Sailaway Cruises or Coongoola Day Cruise to snorkel or dive around Paul's Rock or Tranquility Island.

Then it's off to New Caledonia, heading straight to **Ouvéa** (p177). Take a boat across the tranquil lagoon to the Pléiades du Sud and dive off these small exquisite islets.

Next head to **Lifou** (p173) for underwater caves and fantastic coral.

Make sure you visit **Île des Pins** (p179), where you will discover abundant marine life including sharks and rays. For a true adventure, explore the secret tunnels of Grotte de la Troisième. In the evening struggle back into your wet suit and head across the dark lagoon for a night dive.

On Grande Terre there are magnificent sites all over the lagoon. Each dive club will reveal its favourite sites. Go to **Hienghène** (p168) to see what the area's fantastic rock formations look like underwater.

There are not many unexplored places left on the planet. But you don't need to set out in a tall ship. Go underwater, where it's untouched and you are alone with nature's most brilliant, colourful displays. It's fantastic to have so many glorious reliefs, fabulous wrecks, mysterious volcanic drop-offs and magic night vistas all in crystal-clear, warm water with visibility often to 40m.



DEVILS' & ANGELS' PLAYGROUNDS

Walk to beautiful Lake Letas on **Gaua** (p96), Vanuatu, and take an out-rigger across to Mt Garef, which will fume and burble sulphurous goo. Return past Siri Falls, for a challenging conclusion.

Fly back to Santo and on to **Ambrym** (p82). Motorboat to Ranvetlam, then trek through jungle and ash plains. Nature is the biggest drawcard of all. Tear yourself away from the Mt Marum and Mt Benbow volcanoes and continue down to Ulei through wild cane forests

Your flight back to Vila takes you over Paama, where the volcano, Lopevi, looks so attractive with its picture-perfect cone. Don't be fooled. Lopevi last erupted in 2003, creating a wilderness on Paama.

Change planes in Vila and go to **Tanna** (p71), where old man Yasur really communicates and grounds you – a blast of nature's best fireworks displays, an easy walk from the car park. Fly out of Vila to New Caledonia.

Stay at Le Méridien, Coral Palms Island Resort, Ramada Plaza or Nouvata Park Hôtel in **Noumea** (p152). Get pampered at the Ramada Plaza's spa and admire the panoramic views as you lunch at its revolving restaurant. Go shopping at the central-city designer-wear boutiques or laze on the beach at Anse Vata, then have a romantic dinner over the water at **Le Roof** (p154).

Around Noumea, take a **helicopter tour** (p186) over the azure lagoon or jet-ski to some of the offshore islets. Dine at the cosy **Auberge du Mont Koghi** (p162) then pick your way through the forest for a night in a treetop room and wake up with the birds.

Book an island tour and explore **Île des Pins**' (p179) caves and prison ruins, or simply relax in the idyllic settings of **Hôtel Ouré** (p182).

Get your hiking boots on and grab your gas mask. Yikes. That's right, you're off to Vanuatu's playground, where the mountains talk, yell, stink, smoke and shoot wild fireworks high in the sky for fun. Then swap the boots for diamond-soled shoes while you enjoy another playground, fit for angels, of azure lagoons and designer boutiques down in New Caledonia.



TAILORED TRIPS

FABULOUS WALKS

You can walk your socks off around Vanuatu. Hack through jungle and follow tracks wiped out by pigs and cyclones through rivers, waterfalls and tall forests and along rugged coasts and deep ravines. Add to your experience with guides who have that wicked local sense of humour, warm welcomes at the villages you pass, fun nights drinking kava so you won't feel the hard bed or hear the pre-dawn roosters' call, and soaks in hot pools that are there just when you need them. In addition to the following walks, don't forget the volcano trails (p19).



Vanua Lava Waterfall Walk (one day; p96) Motorboat from Sola to Waterfall Bay for culture and waterfall fun, then walk back through copra plantations and water taro gardens.

Manaro Crater Lakes (one to two days; p96) The track is kept clear so volcanologists can get to the lakes in a hurry. It's tough but manageable, with those colourful lakes for a thrilling end.

Malekula Manbush Walk (three days; p81) A challenging walk with stunning rewards and a wild boat trip back.

Wrecks to Rainforest trek (four days; p90) Stay in isolated villages where the MalMal people live.

Pentecost adventure walks (half day; p97) There's more to Pentecost than the *naghol*.

Walk through the jungle to waterfalls and spectacular coastal views.

Erromango (two to three days; p77) Walking the walk takes you past cannibal sites, through giant kauri forests and along stunning coastal cliffs.

ACTIVE ADVENTURES

Tourists to New Caledonia mainly stay in the capital. With its relaxing beaches, wide range of sights and activities and renowned gastronomy, who can blame them for not venturing further? So if you're searching for untrodden paths, just head out of Noumea where Grande Terre is waiting to be discovered.

Get active: drive to **Dumbéa River** (p150) on the city's northern outskirts for an energetic walk to some rock pools.

Then do the circular tour of the Far South. Walk the **GR1** (p159), pop in to **Chutes de la Madeleine** (p158), and kayak through Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue's **drowned forest** (p158).

Back in Noumea, take a glass-bottomed boat to **Île aux Canards** (p149) for some snorkelling before heading off around central and northern Grande Terre. Abseil down **Cascade de Ciu** (p164) and continue to Ponérihouen. The Tchamba valley is all yours to explore. Kayak beneath Hienghène's magnificent **rock formations** (p168), stay at a Kanak homestay and walk up to Cascade de Tao. Stay overnight at Col d'Amos then head across to the west coast and Voh for a scenic microlight flight over **Cœur de Voh** (p165), its famous heart. Do the scenic coastal walk in **Bourail** (p162) and a horse trek in the **La Foa region** (p161).

Back in Noumea once again, buy a ticket to **Maré** (p170). Finish your New Caledonian tour with the wonderful coastal walk to **Shabadran** (p172).



Diving

Jean-Bernard Carillet

HOW MUCH?

Two-tank dive: US\$110
(without gear), US\$130
(gear included)

Introductory dive: about
US\$95

Open-water certification:
about US\$500

Vanuatu and New Caledonia are as much a Garden of Eden below the water-line as on land. No doubt you'll impress your friends when you get home with stories of awesome walls, high-voltage drift dives, close encounters with sharks and manta rays, luscious soft and hard corals, iconic wrecks and gorgeous reefs replete with multihued tropical fish. As if that wasn't enough, visibility is excellent, waters are warm year-round, most dive centres are first-rate and conditions are magnificent at most times – think turquoise coral shallows, inky-blue seas and idyllic backdrops as you travel to and from the sites. Each island has its own personality and distinctive assets, which make for a seemingly endless diving repertoire.

DIVING CONDITIONS

Diving is possible year-round, although conditions vary according to the season and location. Visibility is reduced in the wet season as the water is muddied by sediment brought into the sea by the rivers, and areas that are exposed to currents might also become heavy with particles. On average, visibility ranges from 15m to 50m.

The water temperature peaks at a warm 29°C during the rainy season, but can drop to 20°C in some areas at certain times of the year. Though it's possible to dive without a wetsuit, most divers wear at least a Lycra outsuit to protect themselves from abrasions. A 3mm tropical wetsuit is most appropriate.

For advice on diving hazards, see p203.

DIVE SITES

New Caledonia

The lagoon in New Caledonia is so large that getting to most sites on the barrier reef involves a boat trip – some journeys last as long as 45 minutes. On the plus side, most sites are uncrowded.

New Caledonia's main claim to fame is its lagoon – one of the largest in the world. Off Noumea, an excellent site well worth bookmarking is Passe de Boulari. Coral is not the strong point of the dive, but for fish action it's unbeatable. Another exciting pass is Passe de Dumbéa, which plays home to schools of groupers from October to December. In Hienghène you can't help but be impressed by Tidwan, Cathédrale and Récif de Kaun, all boasting an outstanding topography comprising canyons, chasms and fissures, plus prolific marine life.

The area off Poindimié is more renowned for reef life, soft corals and nudibranchs. Most dive sites are located in Grande Passe de Payes and in Passe de la Fourmi.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Islands and atolls are ecologically vulnerable. By following these guidelines while diving, you can help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- Encourage dive operators in their efforts to establish permanent moorings at appropriate dive sites.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body and equipment.
- Take great care in underwater caves as your air bubbles can damage fragile organisms.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals.
- Take home all your trash and any litter you may find as well.
- Never stand on corals, even if they look solid and robust.

Île des Pins features some stunning sites. Vallée des Gorgones, off Gadji's reef, is a killer, with an excellent drop-off adorned with a profusion of graceful sea fans and a dense array of reef fish. Récif de Kasmira is another superb site, featuring a coral mound ranging from 3m to 17m. If you're after something unusual, try Grotte de la Troisième (Cave of the Third). About 8km north of Kuto, it features an inland cave filled with crystal-clear fresh water. You'll navigate inside the cave, at about 6m, wending your way among stalactites and stalagmites. Beware of silt build-up, though.

The sites in the Loyalty Islands are also well worth bookmarking. Lifou's signature dives are Gorgones Reef and Shoji Reef, with delicate sea fans wafting in the current the main attraction. Keep your eyes peeled for pelagic sightings, including tuna, sharks, rays and barracudas. Ouvéa offers pristine sites south of the atoll.

Vanuatu

A few fin strokes from the shore, the legendary *USS President Coolidge* is trumpeted as the best wreck dive in the world. The sheer proportions of this behemoth are overwhelming: resting on its side in 21m to 67m of water off Luganville (Santo), the *Coolidge* is 200m long and 25m wide. It's shrouded with a palpable aura, and much has been written about its history. Amazingly, more than 50 years after its demise it's still in very good shape. It's not heavily overgrown with marine life, so you will see numerous fittings and artefacts, including weaponry, gas masks, trenching tools, trucks, rows of toilets, a porcelain statue (the 'Lady'), a pool, personal belongings abandoned by 5000 soldiers, and all the fixtures of a luxury cruise liner. A minimum of five dives is recommended to get a glimpse of the whole vessel. Although nearly all dives on the *Coolidge* are deep (more than 30m), she is suitable for novice divers. You'll start at shallower depths (about 25m) and go progressively deeper as you become more familiar with the diving.

The only downside is that the *Coolidge* has overshadowed other dive sites in Vanuatu. In Santo, other wrecks worthy of exploration include the *Tui Tewate* and the *USS Tucker*.

If you need a break from wreck dives, don't miss the opportunity to sample some truly excellent reef dives off Santo, including Cindy's Reef and Tutuba Point. That said, Santo's prominent dive site is Million Dollar

The *USS President Coolidge* was a luxury cruise liner converted to a troop carrier during WWII. In 1942, while entering what the captain thought were safe waters in Vanuatu's Espiritu Santo harbour, the ship struck two mines and sank very close to the shore. Visit www.michaelmcfadyen.com for details on the history of the *Coolidge*.

Check out www.vanuatu.travel/scuba-diving for more information on Vanuatu's dive operators.

THE FIRST TIME

Vanuatu and New Caledonia provide ideal and safe conditions for beginners, with warm, crystal-line waters and prolific marine life. Arrange an introductory dive with a dive centre to give you a feel for what it's like to swim underwater. It will begin on dry land, where the instructor will run through basic safety procedures and show you the equipment.

The dive itself takes place in a safe location and lasts between 20 and 40 minutes under the guidance of the instructor.

You'll practise breathing with the regulator above the surface before going underwater. Then the instructor will hold your hand if need be and guide your movements at a depth of between 3m and 10m. Some centres start the instruction in waist-high water in a hotel swimming pool or on the beach.

There is no formal procedure, but you shouldn't dive if you have a medical condition – such as acute ear, nose and throat problems; epilepsy or heart disease (such as infarction); if you have a cold or sinusitis; or if you are pregnant.

If you enjoy your introductory dive, you might want to follow a four- to five-day course to get first-level certification. This will allow you to dive anywhere in the world – it's like a driving licence.

DIVING & FLYING

Most divers to the Vanuatu and New Caledonia get there by plane. While it's fine to dive soon *after* flying, it's important to remember that your last dive should be completed at least 12 hours (some experts advise 24 hours) before your flight to minimise the risk of residual nitrogen in the blood, which can cause decompression injury. Careful attention to flight times is necessary in this region because so much of the inter-island transportation is by air.

Point, where thousands of tonnes of military paraphernalia were discarded by the US Navy when it left the country. Divers swim among the tangle of cranes, bulldozers, trucks and other construction hardware in less than 30m and finish their dive exploring a small shipwreck in the shallows. See p88 for more on Million Dollar Point.

And what about the diving in Efate? It can't really compete with Santo, but we found Hat Island, about 5km off the north side of Efate, as well as Paul's Rock, also off the north side of Efate, pretty appealing. The seascape is top notch, and you'll see a smorgasbord of reef fish. For experienced divers, the Corsair – a WWII fighter plane – rests in 30m of water near Pele Island. In the same area, local operators also recommend Gorgonia Forest, which is done as a drift dive. See p61 for more on diving in Efate.

Penetration of wrecks is a skilled speciality and should not be attempted without proper training.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

If you're a certified diver, don't forget to bring your C-card and logbook with you. Dive centres welcome divers regardless of their training background, provided they can produce a certificate from an internationally recognised agency.