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It's easy to see why this area is protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site

Guardians



A New Case Of Addiction

Seasoned traveler Gabi Steindl strikes liquid euphoria outside the world's largest lagoon – though many of you would find your own heavenly fix inside it of course. If you've not considered splashing out on a trip-of-a-lifetime to New Caledonia, you just might when you reach the end of this feature

Words: Gabi Steindl / Photos: Ludovic Guiné, Eyefty Pacifique, Patrice Morin, Gill Chabaud, Maxence Blanc, Gabi Steindl



Turtles go on their own huge journeys, too. Photo: Gill Chabaud



New Cal hack Photo: Gill Chabaud

We had been up since 4am, having driven 70 kilometres by car and another six by boat when we made the call to cut our losses and navigate the zodiac back to shore. Heaving it back onto the trailer we then headed a further 30 kilometres up the coast to another boat ramp. 'Checking the surf' took on a new meaning for me on this trip, but after another five-and-a-half nautical miles we found glassy and near perfect conditions awaiting us at the reef pass. All the best things in life have their price...

If, like me, you're addicted to waves, you better also like boats if you want to visit New Caledonia as this little country is composed of a myriad islands in the South Pacific, 1,500 kilometres east of Australia. Surrounded by a coral barrier reef that stretches over

1,600 kilometres, New Caledonia boasts the world's largest lagoon at an area of 24,000 square kilometres. Since 2008 the lagoon has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and recognised as one of the three most extensive reef systems in the world. At some points the reef is just a few kilometres from land, at others it's over 65. Needless to say the lagoon is a kitesurfer's dream. However, for wave action around New Caledonia, the reef passes are the destination, rearing big, breaking waves due to the combination of deep water in the channel that meets the shallow reef.

Staying at the Le Meridien in Noumea, the capital city, for my first two nights, courtesy of New Caledonia tourism as a two-night welcome, I was in total heaven. Any place that serves sashimi for breakfast is my kind of place! Very full, I stumbled

back to my room after my first breakfast and sent a message to Ludo, one of the local wave kites who I had been in touch with before the trip. Shortly after my phone rang.

"Bonjour Gabi. Ca va? Would you like to come for a drive in the boat on the lagoon, and perhaps a kite on the reef, or are you too tired after your travels?"

"Yew! I'd love to – merci beaucoup!"

Minutes later Ludo's car appeared outside the hotel lobby with his boat in tow behind. The 5.3 metre rigid-inflatable with a four stroke 70 bhp engine is evidently a popular ocean wave wagon of choice among the locals. I spent way more time on boats than on land during this trip; in New Cal it's not about the car you're driving, it's all about which boat – an absolutely indispensable must-have essential.

"Tenia delivered at the next 'alert'. When we arrived at the break there were two boats anchored with a couple of windsurfers who had already broken all their gear. Blue skies and straight lines were hitting the reef superbly. I will never forget kiting waves so clean and perfect with a massive smile on my face."

Layers of joy
Photo: Patrice Morin



Find your tribe

Tricky boat launch – fundamental to sessions round here



Ten nautical miles (18.5 kilometres) and a good 35 minute boat-ride later, we arrived at 'Dumbéa Left', AKA: 'Mini-Chopes', one of the best waves in Nouméa's vicinity. The ride out there was fast and rough and I had to cling on tightly to the rail right behind Ludo with both hands. Trying to anticipate each bump on the water's surface I focussed on absorbing the often heavy impacts with my knees. There was absolutely no way of sitting down, but when you're hungry for a kite-session and the reef is many miles out to sea, it's only natural that you want to go as fast as the conditions allow...

We were the only boat at the pass. I could make out the beautiful silhouette of Grand Terre's mountains in the distance, but essentially we were out in the middle of the South Pacific. Anchoring in the channel right beside the break and watching the first sets roll in, I understood why the locals

affectionately call the wave Dumbéa Left – a mini-version of its' big brother in Tahiti. It was unlike any wave I had ever kited before. Trying to predict the sets approaching from out the back was really hard at first because the hollow, fast waves suddenly seem to rear up literally out of the blue, dredging off the shallow reef. Figuring out how the wave worked was one thing, the other challenge was the boat-launch. I had never launched a kite from such a small vessel before and I can't deny that it was a rather nerve-wracking exercise doing it for the very first time. With hardly enough space to roll out the kite, the canopy was hanging over the engine, wing tips floating over the sides of the boat in the water. The bar and lines were already attached on land, but then just pumping up the kite in this tiny and unstable space was quite a challenge. Flipping the kite over, I placed it onto the water's surface and sat

down on one of the rubber pontoons of the zodiac. Letting the kite drift away, I ensured the front lines were tight to avoid it taking off too soon or rolling over. My heart beat heavily and I breathed a massive sigh of relief when the kite finally flew safely up in the air. Still sitting on the side of the boat, I grabbed my board, stuck it on my feet and off I went. I'm pleased to say that over the weeks I became an expert in my boat launch, otherwise I'd have missed stacks of incredible sessions.

Turtles can be spotted very frequently, and I had a few close calls, narrowly avoiding crashing into them. A little more overwhelming are the humungous cargo and cruise ships that head out through the channel near Nouméa and pass by the breaks really quite closely. On several occasions I waved to the captain, crew and passengers of the giant sea vessels while kiting, which was a bit surreal.

NEW CAL STYLE SURF CAMPING

Imagine an island so small that you can walk around it in five minutes. Surrounded by crystal clear turquoise waters, the big, green, shady trees are perfect to set your tent up beneath. Ludo introduced me to such a place and we were the only people on this tiny piece of paradise, located in the lagoon and just a few nautical miles (thus, much closer than the 'main land') from my favourite

surf break. Surfing this amazing long left-hander in bikinis, with turtles popping up everywhere, returning to the island for a bite to eat and a rest, then doing it all over again before sinking into sweet dreams after feeding on freshly caught fish barbecued over the camp-fire under a star lit night sky; I never wanted to leave.

Given that New Caledonia is surrounded by an incredibly rich variety of marine life, there are of course sharks in the water. Although I met Ludo's friend Lolo, a shark attack survivor, the low attack statistics prove that, compared to many other places, attacks are rare here. Lolo, once one of the most dedicated wave kites on the island, was bitten in his right calf while water starting his foil board. There's no doubt he was lucky, managing to body drag for nearly five minutes back to the beach where people came to his aid. Several operations and many stitches later, Lolo is just as enthusiastic about foiling as he was before the attack.

Not wishing to dwell on what may lie beneath, photographer Gill Chabaud and I headed to Tenia the next day – a perfect, long, peeling left-hander that can hold the largest swells when they hit the coast of New Caledonia. When the waves are pumping, it's 'the' place to be.

Averaging over 220 windy days per year, it's easy to understand why kiting and windsurfing are so

popular here, but I planned my own trip during the 'off' season, between May and September, when the winter swells roll in. Southern Ocean low pressures feed straight onto the coral reefs off New Caledonia and produce waves of a much larger scale than summer time.

I simply couldn't wait to see Tenia's wave and set-up. Crammed into a tiny zodiac with two frothing windsurfers, photographer, all our equipment and sailing gear, this was already an experience in itself. 'The mission': a 70 kilometre drive by car and then a good 25-minute boat-ride. There are no webcams, swell buoys or any 'live' data to be found online. The anticipation and adrenaline heading out with the boat was a real rush. Over the weeks in New Cal the local forecast turned out to be the most unreliable I had ever come across, changing quite drastically over the course of 24 hours. We had a running joke that the local meteorologists were obviously deciding the weather by the paper, rock and scissors technique...

And they hadn't got it right that day either; with a welcome of sheet glass and overcast skies instead of the forecasted 18 knots southeasterly. Thank god I had managed to squeeze my surfboard onboard as I surfed for nearly four hours that day.

On standby for the next 'swell alert with wind' for Tenia, I decided to head up the west coast



This incredible lagoon
Photo: EyeFly Pacifique

and check out Bourail, another of the country's surfing-hot spots. Bourail is also home to Poe Beach, one of the top flat-water kiting grounds. A massive shallow lagoon filled with the most beautifully coloured waters, you can camp right on the water's edge. I stayed at the Nekweta Surf Camp at Roche Percee (translated as "The Pierced Rock"), it's the only surf spot in New Cal that's actually on the main coastline, however it only breaks when massive swells hit, perhaps a few times per year. I was in great hands. Manu Hernu, a fifth generation local, surfer and fisherman, built the surf camp - an authentic little guesthouse - from scratch by hand nine years ago. He knows all the right spots to paddle, snorkel and fish and his lovely wife Stephanie cooks the most amazing meals for their guests. Many species of turtles come to the beaches of Bourail and Roche Percee to hatch their eggs in spawning season (from mid-November to the end of February). A turtle lays 100-120 eggs at once, which stay in the sand for 75 days. The life cycle of these turtles is quite remarkable. Hatchlings travel as far as the coast of Chile and Peru before returning to the area where they hatched when they're about 29 years-of-age and start to breed for the first time themselves. There's something

very naturally balanced about these creatures, and something that many humans would do well to tap into I think. Their sense of belonging and the role they have to play must be very strong.

GET TRIBAL

New Caledonian 'island-life' is unlike anywhere else in the world that I've experienced. A civilized, rather western style island on which, despite invasion, colonisation and decimation of tribal populations through slavery and introduced diseases, a great deal of the indigenous culture has been preserved. French style meets Rasta-man vibrations here, and this special mix creates an interesting potpourri of Euro (mainly French) and Melanesian locals with their different customs and lingual tastes (33 native languages are still spoken here).

The Kanaks are the native people of New Caledonia. They comprise just under half of the 250,000 total population. The east coast is where to experience Kanak culture best. I spent nearly a whole week there exploring and camping. Authentic and undeveloped, the coastline features a series of small villages with many traditional tribes and lush, green mountains that drop straight into the Pacific. More humid than the rest of the island,

Welcoming locals



Going feral is pretty great here



The 100,000 annual tourists don't often follow you to these parts



A bit like the Scottish highlands with sunshine



Back to brilliant basics



"The 'Day of Days' popped up on the weather charts with a high period groundswell and perfect winds and waves over four metres. The anticipation and excitement on the drive was huge and the day mapped out as absolutely epic. Even Patrice Morin, a seasoned New Caledonian photographer-legend, came out in a helicopter to capture the action from the air. Still rocking, and absolutely exhausted, the stoke and adrenaline of that session kept me lying awake in bed unable to sleep for many hours that night."



S-Express!
Gabi had the pleasure of shooting with Gill Chabaud, a local and extremely talented photographer, who she offers a huge "Merci" to! Gill made incredible things possible and whenever the waves were pumping he'd drop everything to either swim with his water-housing at one of the passes, or capture the action with one of his big lenses from the boat
Photo: Gill Chabaud

it's a tropical setting that boasts majestic waterfalls, luxuriant valleys, large rivers and many estuaries. Kanak is most commonly known for its cliffs of lindérlique - black limestone formations. One of the most dramatic landmarks along the northeast coast is the mouth of the Ouaième River; the last river in the country without a bridge that you cross via an authentic ferry.

Kanak society is organised around clans or tribes, which are both social and spatial. I decided to spend my last full moon with one of them to truly immerse myself into their ancient culture. I chose the 'Tribu Tiendanite', the tribe of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, a remarkable man noted in New Caledonian history as a politician and leader of the Kanak independence movement, who was assassinated in 1989.

When you visit or stay with a tribe it is a customary gesture to bring a present. You may give a piece of manou (piece of coloured material), often together with a 500 CFP (French Pacific Francs)

or 1000 CFP note. More than the object itself, it's the gesture that counts. From that moment you are their guest and they will protect you. It was a privilege for me to hand over my present to the second chief of the tribe, Felix Tjibaou, the cousin of Jean-Marie. Cooking fish over the fire with the kids and falling into sweet dreams to the sounds of the river in the dense rainforest outside my little hut was another unforgettable memory of my journey through New Cal paradise.

New Caledonia is absolutely dazzling. The perfect waves, the boating-life, the crystal clear waters, surfing with turtles in perfect glass, the sheer beauty of nature, 50 metre high pines growing at the edge of the most luminous waters I have ever seen, the French and Melanesian cuisine, the tribal vibes and the making of so many new friendships are only a few of the memories that I took away from this trip that will remain in my heart for the rest of my life.

Nautical life lessons



NEW CALEDONIA USEFUL FACTS & INFORMATION

Contrary to many countries in the South Pacific, tourism is still in its infancy in New Caledonia with roughly just 100,000 tourists per year, so you will often find yourself all alone on hikes in National Parks. As the world's fourth largest supplier of nickel, the mining industry is the major sector of the local economy and constitutes much of the wealth on the island (in fact New Cal has one of the highest average incomes per capita in the Pacific).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

New Caledonia's Tontouta International Airport is 52 kilometres northwest of the capital, Noumea. Air-France flies code-share with Aircalin, New Caledonia's national airline from Paris. Alternatively, connect with Aircalin in Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne and flights are also available from various Pacific nations, such as New Zealand and in southeast Asia. No visa requirements for stays of up to three months for EEC, US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korean passport holders.

GETTING AROUND, MONEY & COSTS

New Caledonia is generally not easy on the budget, however it doesn't have to be super expensive. Take your own tent and do a drive-and-camp holiday. There are a number of car rental companies and countless beautiful camp-spots all around the island. Instead of going to restaurants, grab some fresh sushi and delicious French baguette sandwiches from the supermarket or nearly any petrol station. Bouts d'Brousse are a taxi-boat company specialising in trips to Tenia, find them on Facebook.

ACCOMMODATION

Cheaper than hotels, 'Gîtes' guesthouses or self-catering holiday homes (houses, bungalows, chalets etc.) can be rented, and don't miss out on a tribal home-stay too! Gabi recommends these two: Grande Terre - Nekweta Surf Camp: www.nekweta.com Isle des Pins - Gite Nataiwatch: www.nataiwatch.com

WEATHER

New Caledonia has a semi-tropical climate. Between October and March Les Alizés trade winds blow like clockwork at 15 - 25 knots. In summer sea temperatures average a toasty 27°C, so all you need are boardies and a rashie. Even in winter, from April to September, the water is still around 22°C, so take a spring suit at that time.

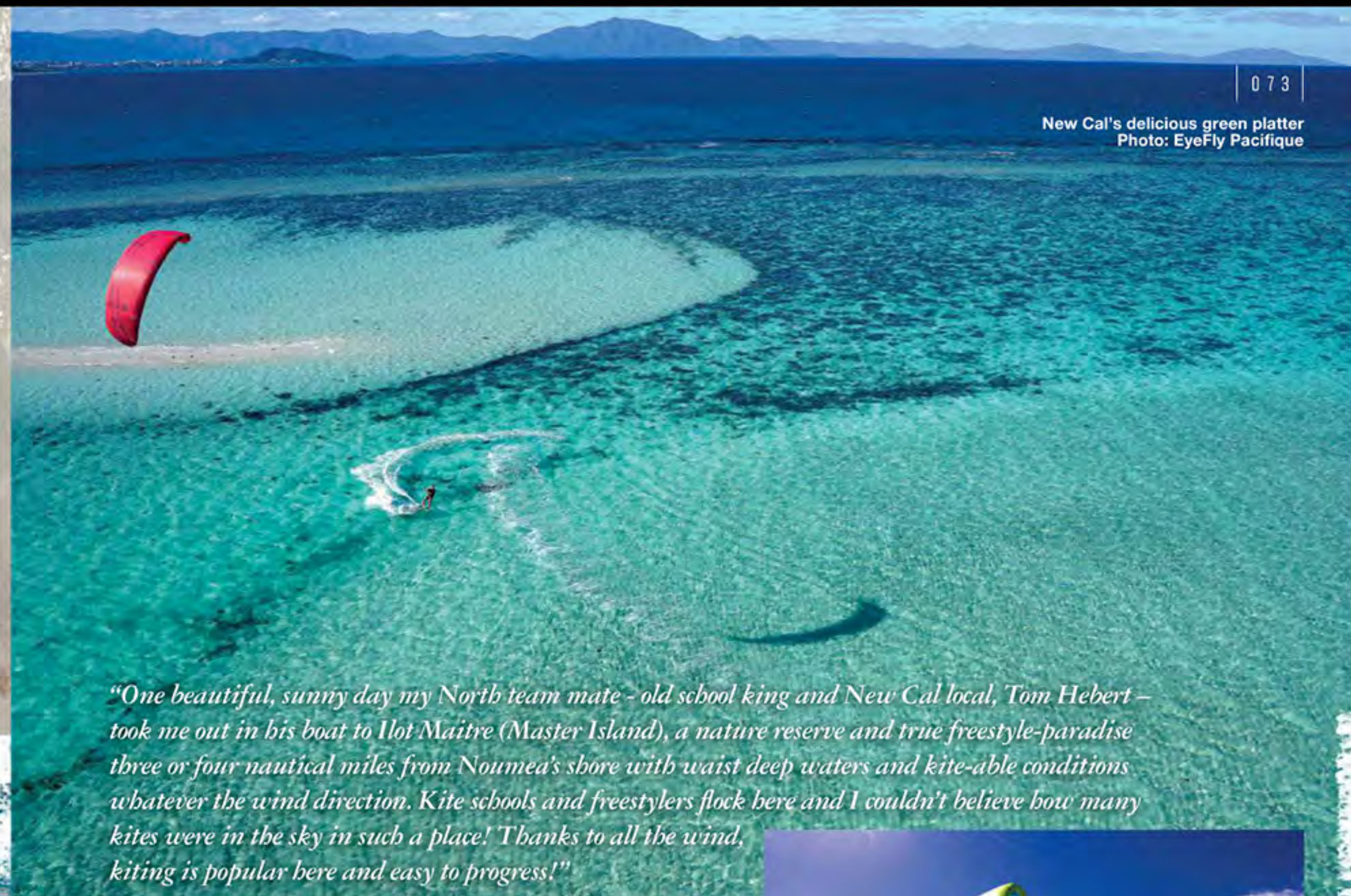
BON CHANCE!

Ideally, do a crash course in French before visiting! I was fluent back in my uni days, so could thankfully remember a great deal! You may come across localism at some of the surfing spots. Once you're in New Caledonia you will know which ones those are. Just avoid them as there are many others, but always be respectful towards the locals at all spots.

Rolling with the thunder
Photo: Patrice Morin



New Cal's delicious green platter
Photo: EyeFly Pacifique



"One beautiful, sunny day my North team mate - old school king and New Cal local, Tom Hebert - took me out in his boat to Ilot Maître (Master Island), a nature reserve and true freestyle-paradise three or four nautical miles from Noumea's shore with waist deep waters and kite-able conditions whatever the wind direction. Kite schools and freestylers flock here and I couldn't believe how many kites were in the sky in such a place! Thanks to all the wind, kiting is popular here and easy to progress!"



Ilot Maître, popular with the kite crews
Photo: Gill Chabaud

TOM HEBERT'S NEW CAL STYLE

We asked long-time pro rider, Tom Hebert for his local tips too. He recommends www.casadelsole.nc for two or more people staying as they offer good prices and are right next to the main kite spot in Noumea. If your budget stretches a little further, then www.lemeridiennoumea.com/fr and www.complexechateauroyal.nc are two more hotel options, right on the kite spot, too. Taxi boats will take you to the popular kite spot on Master Island as well as many other islands. Tom reckons you can kite pretty much anywhere, but that there's also so much more to do and the gear prices are cheaper than NZ or Australia.

Gabi flew with Aircalin, New Caledonia's national airline from Melbourne with 85 kilos of gear! She is sponsored by North Kiteboarding, Ion and Fanatic. Find more useful country and travel facts at the NC tourism bureau website: www.visitnewcaledonia.com KW