

TOURING

the 90km lunch

Bruce Ashley explores what's on the riding menu in the South Pacific islands

It would take a fabulous island getaway and a great dish to voluntarily ride 90km under a tropical sun for lunch unless, of course, it's the remote New Caledonian island of Lifou and crabe de cocotier is on the menu.

It's the combination of chance encounters and timing that can yield the most fruitful experiences, as I discovered on my visit to New Caledonia, where sharing a bunk room at the well-run Auberge de Jeunesse (Youth Hostel) in Noumea led to a stay on the isle of Lifou and a day-long gorge of white sandy beaches, crystal-clear waters, cycle sweat and eventually a succulent crab lunch.

A week earlier I was working on last minute frantic bike-boxing and weight reduction to join the check-in queue at Brisbane airport, but by the time I had made the two-and-a-half hour flight to NC, unpacked the bike and settled into a refreshing ale on the hostel balcony, I was as relaxed as if I'd had a month's meditation. On my previous trip, my bike and I ferried south to the spectacular Isle of Pines on a bonefish quest. The bonefish (*Albula* sp.) is saltwater fly-fishing's mullet-meets-silver Exocet, and world-class size bonefish inhabit many of the white sandy tidal flats of New Caledonia and the South Pacific. This time round, it was the same quest but a different location.

I flew to Lifou, a small island in les Îles Loyauté (Loyalty Islands) and spent the first night in a *case* (traditional grass hut) close to the edge of the island's precipitous northern limestone cliffs with a stunning ocean vista. Snorkelling next morning in gin-clear tepid waters among the marine life equalled a Great Barrier Reef experience and was not only free, but shark-free, which pleased me greatly.

The next day I took an easy 30km pedal dawdle along sealed, narrow and shaded rural roads, passing small villages, coconut plantations, vanilla farms

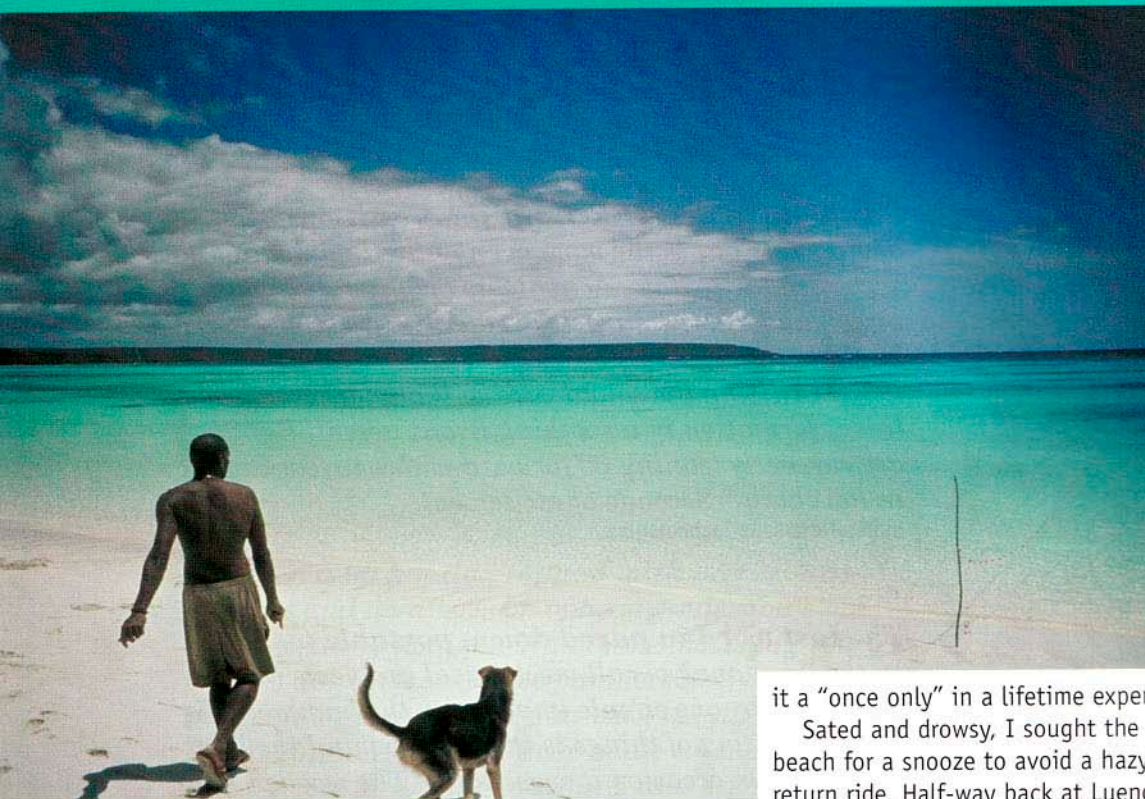
(orchids essentially) and countless discarded beer cans. Ian Kiernan could wow them. From the saddle I also saw neat stone walls and huge banyan trees marking the chief's land, and locals working their taro and yam patches and reaping blady grass for hut thatch.

Mid-way at the wharf at Easso, two machete-wielding Kanaks approached me. Just in case you get there (highly recommended) don't be too alarmed if you're riding along and see a machete, rifle, or other sharp and or scary



implement being toted by local chappies – they're just useful tools and part of islander life. It's the easiest way of dealing with undergrowth, and dispatching the bald, rounded heads off coconuts – as my new-found friends Ernest and Vincent kindly performed for me (well, I did let them try out the Iron Horse). Have you ever had green coconut pulp and milk? Sweet, sweet, succulent and refreshing... aaarrghh.

At Lifou's main town of Wé, I caught up with the hospitable Phillipe and Miriam, local doctors who I had met at the youth hostel, who took me in for three days. I jumped at the offer of scuba diving with them the following day, and joined them that evening at their friend's *grillade* (barbecue). There Philippe implored me not to miss the coconut crab lunch served at a distant seaside restaurant. This sounded too enticing a prospect to pass up for my last day on the island and I relished



the challenge of a ninety-thousand-metre dash there and back for lunch.

A booking was made and an early start saw me heading south to Xodre (pronounced hodjer) and Beau de Monde. The open palm-fringed road led past rockpools sporting huge blue parrot fish, communal shade houses, coconut plantations, brilliant white sandy beaches and sculptured rock formations. Children and elderly folk alike waved excitedly and smiled as I passed – this wouldn't have happened if I had been in a car. Kebabs from a school fundraising roadside grillade boosted my flagging energy levels, but the intense midday sun and humidity on a shadeless section of flat road slowed my cadence and had me glancing at the tyres as if they were the culprits.

I arrived at Beau de Monde at 1pm and I was seated at the premier location, under the shade of a pandanus overlooking the pale blue waters and fringing reef. Two cool ales didn't touch the sides! It was a fairly simple fare of coconut crab and green papaya salad, but the plate was huge and the meal sensational. I had a full crab to myself, but an adjacent table of three were struggling with a similar order – now was that the cycling or am I a glutton? (Both, probably.) Coconut crabs are land dwelling and they feast on coconuts by opening them with immense claws. You'll have to experience the taste. I had a "very droll Bernard" retort when explaining to a fellow Aussie that the taste was not unlike coconut and not unlike crab. Will they last if we keep on eating them? I was told that there are plenty to be trapped at night in the nearby forests and plantations, but just to be sure, you may have to make

it a "once only" in a lifetime experience.

Sated and drowsy, I sought the refuge of the nearby beach for a snooze to avoid a hazy and full-stomached return ride. Half-way back at Luengoni I arrived on time for my tour of the Grotte Les joyaux cave system, which included a refreshing torchlight swim in the crystal clear waters of the pitch black cave. I pedalled into Wé right on tropical sunset, and spot-on 90km since sunrise.

Photos: Bruce Ashley

Tour guide

New Caledonia is a French Territory, about 1200km north east of Brisbane in the South Pacific. Lifou is about 120km north east of Noumea. The indigenous Kanak speak Drehu, while most islanders and the "metros" speak French. Few islanders speak English.

Air Calan or Qantas fly to Tontouta International airport daily ex Sydney and Brisbane (from \$600 return). Air Caledonie has daily flights from Noumea to Lifou. Dismantle bike for internal flights plus AUD\$50 surcharge (which may be reduced in the near future).

Accommodation: a range of hotels, homestay at a local Tribu and camping or gite available.

Cycling: definitely right side of the road! The ride to Beau de Monde is a flat 45km on sealed roads. Very little traffic, and mostly low speed. A hybrid or MTB fitted with cross-country slicks would be ideal, and aim for max 14kg of gear.

Best time: May to October.

Bookings and information: for flights see www.aircalan.com.au or www.qantas.com.au and for general travel information see www.iles-loyaute.com or www.newcaledoniaturism-south.com.au