

Avocados in New Caledonia

It rose above the surface. A hand—I could clearly see fingers. Then it was gone. The calm disappeared with it. Just outside the shelter of the reef, our little white sailboat was hit by the full force of Pacific Ocean. The boat was thrown high then it crashed back down; wind, spray and a smile hit my face. I couldn't believe that I just saw a mermaid.

Of course, I couldn't believe it because that's not what I saw. Dugongs have long tricked travellers that way. Lost at sea, men desperate for women conflated this *sea-cow* with a lady—thanks guys. At *Aquarium des Lagons Nouvelle Calédonie* there is an entire display dedicated to this myth. It has a particularly amazing section which highlights that while human women have breasts, dugongs do not—again, thanks guys.

But, see, I did see it. In those waves. For a glorious moment I could have sworn it was a hand. That slight flicker of a flipper. The myth continues in this little Pacific pocket of France. Myths and magic; very much alive.

It's astonishing; fly five hours from Melbourne, and you can be in France. '04 Dom Perignon is stocked at the supermarket along with an entire aisle dedicated to cheese. Though, New Caledonia is not just France. It is a land of two official flags; the French and Kanak.

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Something about New Caledonia—its brightly coloured buildings, beaches, birds, reefs, flowers—feels mystical. Just eat the *Crème brûlée à la vanille de Lifou* at *L'Ed'Zen*. It is unlike any other. The burnt sugar cracks satisfyingly, as it does all over the world, but here, the vanilla is local; farmed on Lifou. It is distinct, fresh Pacific vanilla. Otherworldly.

I embarked from the city of brunch to come to the annual Avocado Festival. Embracing local culture while smashing avos? The perfect trip for an Australian. The festival is hosted by the Nece tribe, which welcomes different peoples from all over the archipelago. It is held alongside the public holiday, *Jeudi de l'Ascension*, which celebrates the day Christians believe Jesus ascended to heaven. Eating avocados and heaven? Perfect match.

Maré—the island that host's *Fete de l'avocat*—feels incredibly different to Noumea. Nengone can be heard just as much as French. Buildings are flittered throughout nature, and the roads are thinner with sand creeping up to their edges. The shore is white, and the sea has two distinct layers; pale sky blue and deep dark ocean. Before and after the reef.

We get to the festival early. The fish stalls are still being set up. There's opportunity for us to wander around. My need for caffeine overrides everything but after a single sip, I have to down the 'coffee'. The burnt taste lingers as I walk out over the clifftops.

There is a crumpled old colonial ruin that overlooks the bay. Inside this abandoned French building, someone is rearing pigs. The roof is long gone and coconuts just fall to the floor. At least the pigs don't smell. Only waves and sandalwood perfume this beach. It crumbles as the bay remains unchanged; local children still play in the shallows as the adults chat in the shade. It's timeless, the timbre of the laughter that kids have as they kick waves. Only today they're playing with their all too realistic toy guns. It's a pity that the smell of the bougna doesn't reach the beach—it's only as you walk up the hill a little more that yams, limes, and coconut can reach you.

The stage is ready for the music to begin. An avocado tree stands in its full glory, decorated with streamers and other varieties of avocado. It looks like it could be a traditional

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offering. But this isn't a traditional festival. It's under twenty-years old. Avocados are an introduced species to Maré. They love the limestone soil and now have a foothold in the local economy. And here we have it, these Melanesian people celebrate the harvest of a South American fruit on a European holiday.

But is this melding of cultures another flicker of a flipper? The myth of a united country? In 2020 there will be another referendum on whether they abandon the red, white and blue. This is an exciting time to visit New Caledonia. They are in the middle of analysing their histories and myths, and that energy can be felt everywhere. The divide is everywhere. Wealth, power, education, employment. Their choice on whether they break from France will affect everything.

This choice seems all consuming but go out on a little sailboat and everything drops away. The secret of New Caledonia is while the culture is so rich and diverse, the closest I came to ascending to heaven was descending off a reef in *La Baie des Tortues*. There, I waited, treading water until they came, the ancient shelled bodies, their flippers guiding them along. The turtles. Their calming presence, their beauty, their mystery. Remember, while divide is everywhere in New Caledonia, the surface of the waves is the most magical barrier.

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