

New Caledonia: 2½ Weeks: August- September 2023

I (Russell Willis) was invited to go on a kayaking and bushwalking trip to New Caledonia in September 2013. What I saw on that trip made me believe that we **had** to offer a trip where we could share some of what we'd learned. A trip like this needs a French speaking guide. We have one. Sébastien Heritier led it for us in 2019. Covid got in the way for the next two years but we're proud to be able to offer it again.

The geological history of New Caledonia is the subject of some debate. Originally it was thought it was a piece of Gondwana that had broken off and remained above sea level. Next it was thought that it had wholly submerged, rising again about 35 million years ago.

Another idea is that it never completely submerged but was a series of islands. That makes sense to me given the incredible diversity of species, so many of which are endemic. The vegetation is one of the things that makes New Caledonia so special. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. A few examples.

- There are 19 species of Araucaria in the world. 13 of them are endemic to New Caledonia.
- While New Caledonia is very close to Australia, there are no native eucalypts,. There are, however, eight species of melaleuca.
- The open landscape is called maqui or 'mining maqui' as it's where all the mineral deposits are contains no native grasses – they don't like the nutrient poor soil. In their place, you have sedges which look similar to grasses but are botanically quite different.
- Amborella is the closest living descendent of the earliest flowering plants.
- Gymnostoma is a casuarina relative which looks like a conifer.
- There is a small tree (Pycnandra acuminata) which can be more than 20% nickel by dry weight.

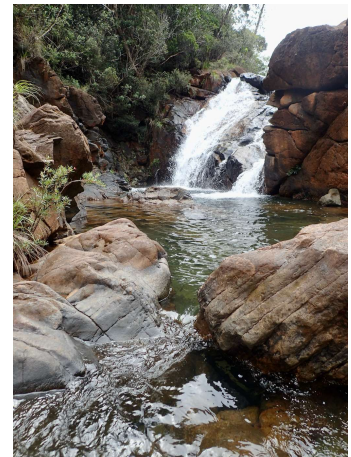


A small tree with flowers at the bottom of its trunk

Proposed Itinerary

Section 1: Nouvelle Calédonie Grande Randonnée 1 (NC GR1) (South)

- Day 1** Drive from Nouméa to Prony. Start of our walk on the NC GR1 (Nouvelle Calédonie Grande Randonnée 1). We will camp at Prony next to the bay.
- Day 2** Walk from Prony to Néocallitropsis cabin. This step offers beautiful views of the bay and we will enjoy our first swim at the Cascade du Carénage.
- Day 3** We walk to Netcha cabin situated near the Botanical Reserve of La Madeleine that we will visit. We can also have a swim in the Madeleine falls.
- Day 4** We will reach the park of La Rivière Bleue (The Blue River) taking advantage of the dizzying look outs and sleep in a nice cabin.
- Day 5** We will discover the Lake of Yaté and the unique New Caledonian rainforests. More than 80% of them are endemic.



Cascade du Carénage



Day 4 cabin



Crossing the Rivière Bleue Rest stop, Rivière Bleue Lac de Yaté

Day 6 We walk through vegetation that has changed little since the time of Gondwana when New Caledonia and Australia were linked. We finish the day by a swim in the “Rivière Blanche” (The White River)

Day 7 It is a day of floral exploration in a forest of kaoris (Agathis lanceolata) where we will try to see the famous Cagou birds (Rhynochetos jubatus). We will also try to find ancient petroglyphs near a natural swim pool.

Day 8 Our path leads us into a thick rainforest where we will look for giant kaori trees. We will also swim in a natural turquoise pool and in the "Grande Cascade".

Day 9 We continue our exploration of the New Caledonian rainforest, ancestor of the rainforest that covered Australia in the Gondwana. It's our last night in the Rivière Bleue Park

Day 10 Dizzying view of Noumea and descent to the Dumbea river where we can swim once again. Back to Nouméa for two nights.

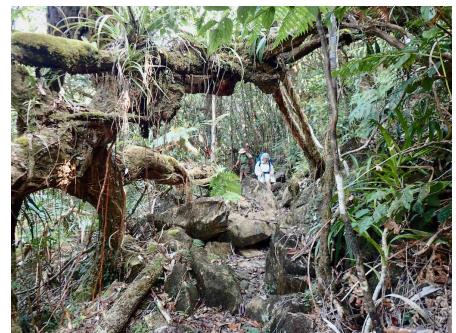
Day 11 Free time in Nouméa

Section 2: Nouvelle Calédonie Grande Randonnée 2 (NC GR2) (North)

North Caledonia is a favourite destination. It is home to exceptional biodiversity and endemism inherited from the Gondwana times: harmless terrestrial fauna, an impressive number of tree species and flowers unique in the world. The North is a paradise for the eyes and the spirit. This wild nature with dizzying heights, enjoying a pleasant climate all year round is ideal for bushwalking.

This on trail itinerary will allow us to immerse ourselves in the Kanak tribes where ancestral traditions are perpetuated. We will do "La Coutume" when arriving in the Kanak villages and we will try when possible to dine with the traditional owners.

Day 12 We take a bus to reach the departure of the NC GR2 in Napoepa in the north of the island where we will discover the Kanak culture



Walking in the rainforest



High view on the final day



Ferntree intermedia



Pitcher plant

Day 13 Our first day of walking on the GR2 where the tropical vegetation differs from the one we had discovered in the South. In the evening we will sleep on H el ene's property, who will serve us a traditional dinner and talk to us about her culture.

Day 14 This is the longest walk of our trip through a lush and always interesting forest that will lead us to the village of Saint Joseph. Along the way, we will find some natural pools for a swim!



H el ene's home



The three photos above show some of the scenery along the way. The one at right shows a Kakak village.

Day 15 This walk will take us on the ridge line of the New Caledonians hills through the primary forests and the savannah.

Day 16 The walk keeps going in a rugged and very compartmentalized relief. The path goes deep into the forest, weaving between tall trees. It penetrates long inviolate and enigmatic spaces.

Day 17 After crossing the Col de la Cistern and climb in a niaoulis (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*) savannah to walk the ridges which overhang the surrounding valleys, we will reach the welcoming tribe of Tiwae where Lydie will serve us a traditional Kanak dinner.

Day 18 In the morning, we can enjoy a swim in the ocean. Then we return to Noumea by bus following a picturesque road. Arriving in the afternoon.

Day 19 Diving day on the lagoon. It is the most extended lagoon in the world and it definitely worth a visit and a swim through the colourful corals and the tropical fishes



GR2 high view



GR2 camp

The photos at right show the lagoon and some petroglyphs and scenery on the GR2.



Notes.

We can run this trip anytime in August (peak tourist season in New Caledonia) or the second half of September. We'll make the final decision in consultation with the first to book.

Given its proximity to Australia, English is not as widely spoken as you might expect. By using our French speaking guide, Sébastien Heritier, we will be able to make arrangements that no non-French speaking person could do.

The dates have been chosen in consultation with some of the local tour operators we talked to and with those who booked first. August is out of the question as it is when most French people have their holidays. Prices are higher and most things are fully booked.

New Caledonia is French and it shows. The standard gas bottles you might use on a camping stove in Australia are unavailable or at least very difficult to find. We'll need to use a French camping gas stove.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. You need to be prepared to accept whatever the weather may throw at us. As with all our trips, you need to be more self-reliant than on most other tours.

If you can't be flexible enough to accept whatever changes we may have to make, this trip is not for you. If you can accept that, it should be a wonderful experience you'll remember for the rest of your life.

Cost. \$TBA. We have not yet fixed a price. It would cost more for a very small group than a large one.

Note. None of the discounts which apply to our Australian trips apply to any of our overseas trips.

If you can't do the full trip, it should be possible to leave part way along the journey. At this point, we can't offer a discount for that.

Our fee covers **only** the services of the Walkabouts guide, evening meals on walks where we can't purchase them, and all the pre-trip organisation. It does not include other meals, accommodation or transport. The Walkabouts guide will share these expenses with the rest of the group on an equal basis.

New Caledonia isn't cheap. We will have a better idea of exactly what things will cost closer to departure – we cannot possibly say what exchange rates will look like by then.

Conditions

- 1 Cancellation fees
- 2 All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and must have some form of travel insurance. Your passport must have at least six months before expiry and at least one blank page for stamps. Visas are not necessary for stays of less than 90 days for people from most countries.

Try as we might, Séb and I have almost certainly forgotten some useful piece of information. The more and the sooner you ask your questions, the more likely it is that we can give you the best possible trip.