

SEA OF COLOURS

JANUARY 05, 2007

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia are tropical and scenic, but the most beautiful sights are found below the water. With the help of a simple snorkel and goggles the dynamic world of fish and coral come to life – it's a good thing you don't have to come up for air.

Roh Bay, at the northern tip of Maré, is a place seen by very few travellers. Although New Caledonia is just a few hours flying time from Sydney, this particular island may as well be the other side of the world. No one speaks English and the waters are too shallow for any but the most specialised of cruise ships.

As our tender navigates towards a small patch of beach protected by coral flats we spot turtles racing away beneath the surface. They move quickly but their elegant silhouette against the white sand below is unmistakable. The abundance of these majestic creatures is a good sign that the reef systems are healthy.

Once on the beach it's tempting to relax on the white sands. The indulgence of remote seclusion is a rare pleasure, but the crystal clear water is equally alluring. There are certain shades of blue that only exist on a sunny day with clear water above pure white sand. Coral blooms mottle the aqua tones, and with these in mind I put on my snorkelling gear.

As I swim away from the beach the first few sections of coral are populated with Damselfish that flutter about as I draw closer. The joy of sharing the water with even the most common of marine life is something to be treasured. Heading further out from the shore the water gets a little cooler and slightly deeper, and the coral gets more dense. Living coral is easy to spot for its bright colours. Patches of pink, red and blue catch my eye.

I move a little closer to a line of rocks that protect the cove from waves. It's mostly shallow as far as they eye can see but up ahead the coral drops away like an underwater ravine, with a sandy bottom just two or three metres beneath the coral bed. Breathing through the snorkel I never have to lift my gaze out of the water, so I can glide across the ravine as though I am one of the fish.

Lining the ridge are Blue Devils which behave about like sentinels watching their little spot of coral. Glancing along the length of the ridge-line the bright dots of electric-blue are suddenly obvious. That's the thing about snorkelling, the more you look the more you see.

When you float across a section of coral everything dashes out of your way, at least for a moment. But if you lay still, just drifting with the waves, then one by one the marine life below pops back out to continue their daily business.

On this journey I am guided by an expert from the cruise ship. Jamie Anderson has been an expedition leader with Coral Princess Cruises for over a decade, and his knowledge of life in the sea is second to none. Jamie waves me over and I follow him across the little cove to a little section where the coral flats give way to a narrow channel with a sandy bottom.

The under-water ravine is no more than three metres deep, but the steep drop-off and open space provides a play-ground for larger and

more varied species of fish. Trigger fish dart into crevices, Morish Idols poke at bits of coral in search of nutrients, and schools of Chromis shoot through and around some of the more elaborate coral pieces. It's really busy down there!

Patience is a virtue when snorkelling, and just observing the ebb and flow of life yields more and more exotic species. We watch a territorial Damselfish play games with a Moray Eel, a most unfriendly but well disguised fellow that would look right at home in a science fiction thriller.

And then we find Nemo. The orange and white clown-fish made famous by Hollywood is alive and well in New Caledonia, and he has friends. The older adults take on an increasingly darker shade of orange that is closer to brown, while distant cousins sport black and white stripes with yellow tips on their fins. Like a soft cloud that blankets them from harm they nestle into the tips of sea anemone, one of the few species that is impervious to the toxic sting.

Back on the surface we compare notes on the day's sights. As interlopers to the reef we treasure the brief immersion and start looking forward to the next opportunity for a snorkel. Jamie explains to me the unique variety of highlights to be seen across the Loyalty Islands; the natural pool on the Isle of Pines, the calm waters off the Ouvea Atoll and the immense coral flats surrounding the island of Lifou.

In the week to follow I would explore all these places and find Jamie true to his word. New Caledonia is blessed with ideal conditions for snorkelling and my confidence grew with each adventure. But I will always remember the sight of nearly a dozen butterfly fish darting along the ravine at Maré, like little yellow sports cars taking a joy ride on the freeway.

Maybe they were trying to catch-up with the turtles.

