

Islands of Rhythm

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VACATIONS & TRAVEL

The islands and atolls that form the eastern fringe of New Caledonia are filled with song and verse, a human soundtrack that echoes the lives of Melanesian tribes for the past few thousand years. Music is deeply woven into the lives of the islanders, floating on the air like a sea-breeze, as colourful as the coral reefs and welcoming of travellers from distant shores.

The native islanders of New Caledonia are called Kanaks, and to appreciate their experience of music we have to imagine their world. If not for the sounds of waves on the beach, birds in the trees or coconuts falling from palm-tops there would be very little sound at all. Kanak people live in a world of quiet, stirred occasionally by the elements.

Music is a gift to the islanders, a unique experience for the performers and audience alike. The simple beating of hollow sticks, chanting of words and pounding of feet on the ground fill the air with harmony and rhythm. Their world of silence suddenly shudders with energy and life, the total effect much greater than the sum of the parts.

The deepest voices belong to the elders. They are the Big Man or Big Woman of the community, whose ability to evoke trembling tones from thin air has earned them immense respect within the village. Like a ship's Captain they guide the music with the most subtle of gestures, charting a course for the rhythmic journey.

For centuries the sounds of Melanesian rhythms have been used to greet new arrivals from distant shores, a display of peaceful power that creates harmony between the disparate Kanaks tribes. Today's visitors are just as likely to be passengers on a cruise ship and the welcome is no less warm.

Coral Princess is one company that has enabled small groups of passengers to embark on expedition cruises that explore the cultural sights and sounds of the Melanesian islands. The Oceanic Discoverer is the newest addition to their fleet which offers luxury accommodation and expert crews. Small ship cruises are an exciting option in the Pacific, where the shallow waters and concealed reefs present challenges for larger vessels.

One of the highlights of Coral Princess expeditions is their unique tender design, which loads passengers easily and comfortably on deck before being lowered into the water to head for a beach landing. As the tender gets closer to the shore the voices and drumming of villagers can be heard above the waves. Stepping off the tender's gangway your feet get washed by the tide and with just a few steps you are on the beach to be welcomed by the Kanaks.

Our visit to the Isle of Pines was typical of the charms on offer in New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands. Before heading across the island to snorkel in the natural pools we were greeted at Kuto Beach by a stunning display of theatre and music. The big men sang under the shade of a palm tree while the younger boys and girls revealed the story through dance.

Performances can be tales of myths and legends, from a time long ago, or they can symbolically recount the importance of tribal beliefs concerning matters of bravery, duty and love. Even the simple act of catching a fish is worthy of a story, but the art is in the telling. The background drumming and melodic chants mimic the motion of waves while the dance itself demonstrates the synchronicity of an outrigger canoe, the strength of a fisherman and the playful struggle of the fish.

For a young Kanak boy who has finally earned the right to dance this experience is one he will always treasure. He will have seen the story told before, and will have shared his voice with his younger peers in preparation for the real thing. Representing the village in public is another matter of course. This is a right of passage, to be accepted into the community of men. His voice is no longer alone but given to the village and heard by all.

On the beach at Kuto the Big Man called out a solitary and powerful note to finish the performance, along with a carefully directed smile to welcome the new boy.

Some of the more remote villages are not accustomed to frequent visits from cruise ships. They have seen the big boats passing by for years, but the same shallow reef that protects their shore also prevents vessels from coming in closer for a visit. Here again we experienced the unique advantages of the Coral Princess expeditions, their ships small enough to get inside the outer reef and their tender flexible enough to land passengers on any beach.

Along the shores of Ouassé, a village on the main island of New Caledonia, we were treated to one of the most impressive celebrations from one of the smallest communities. The Big Women carried the load, releasing their songs with fervour and passion, their smiles as wide as the ocean. Tropical flowers brought colour to every inch of the village and, once adorned with hats and necklaces, we were soon covered in flowers as well.

When the singing was over a tour of the gardens and mangroves revealed the abundance of flora enjoyed by the people of Ouassé. The mineral-rich mountains that rise up behind the village are an earthy red, leaching colour and nutrients to the narrow strip land along the coast. From a viewpoint high above the beach we can see our cruise ship waiting patiently between the reef breaks, nothing but deep blue sea behind it and tropical palms in front.

The better known destinations such as Lifou offer some of the most spectacular scenery of all the islands, semi-enclosed coves where coral-gardens pepper the jade coloured water with a rainbow of fish. Life below the water is always changing, but so is the music on the shore. Mixed in with the bright sarongs and traditional drums the sound of a guitar can also be found. The young men of Lifou have made it their own, with an island feel that is distinctive and gentle.

Kanak people are naturally gifted singers, and they can burst into voice for almost any reason; sailing home after a fishing trip, walking through the forest to visit a tribe or preparing food for the evening meal. The words of a song can provide excellent company and give a metre to the passing of time.

Any shared experience of joy can quickly lead to singing, for this is the nature of the Kanaks. On the atoll of Oueva our expedition leader offered to take the women on a pleasure cruise in the tender, and as they boarded the boat every one of them sang and laughed. The eldest women took seats at the front and the younger girls followed. We waved goodbye from the beach, listening as their rhythmic chanting faded into the distance and the only remaining sounds came from the waves on the shore and the wind in the palm trees.

