

RACING IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

How an inkling of an idea came to fabulous fruition in October 2019

Words by Sally Blyth

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In 2018, Bulletin Editor Neil Miller and his wife Jeanette took a holiday in New Caledonia. Always on the lookout for copy for the 'Owners Bulletin, Neil had sought an introduction to the Director of Racing New Caledonia, from Sally Pepermans who leads NC Tourism in Auckland. Neil met Franck Guillermet and his assistant Mike Paofai who work from the Hippodrome Henry Milliard, one of four racecourses in the country. He wrote an enlightening article about racing in New Caledonia in the September 2018 Bulletin – here's the link: <http://www.racehorseowner.co.nz/News/default.aspx?p=1&>

Getting Things Off The Ground

From this, came his suggestion, at an Auckland Association Committee meeting: "Let's organise a racing trip to New Caledonia!" Horse racing in the tropics – what's not to like about that combo? With a love of travel and racing – and my tour leader hat on – I was immediately on board, and plans got under way to put a trip together.



Having selected the semi-nocturne night meeting on 19th October 2019, when the final Group One race of the season – the Government Cup – would be run, we built an itinerary based around that and spread the word through the Bulletin and other means. We managed to get a full quota – five couples, nine solo ladies, one male, and me as Tour Leader – and we were off. We flew out of Auckland on Aircalin, an excellent full-service airline, and arrived into Noumea on Friday evening.

Settling Into the Locale

The bus transfer to Anse Vata took about 50 minutes and soon enough we were settling into our very spacious apartment suites in Tower C of the Hilton Noumea La Promenade Residences. Each of our rooms had views out across the lagoon, excellent amenities and generous balconies. This will do very nicely, thank you!

It's an extremely well-located hotel, with pool, restaurant, business centre, fitness/wellness centre and friendly staff. There is no specific bar area but there is a broad semi-circle of shops and restaurants immediately below, and a pharmacy and various food stores a short walk away.

Several words of caution at this point – triple check visa requirements, the clocks go back (even if your phone doesn't update!), the liquor shops have limited hours of operation (buy duty free upon arrival), many shops and attractions are closed on a Monday, room service finishes at 9pm, and the 1-bed apartments have a porthole-style window in the shower. It's at chest height and opens directly onto the corridor/stair well/lift area. Do not open this window while showering, especially if you're a female! We wondered how many people have opened it mid-shower to see what lies behind, only to give an unsuspecting passing guest or cleaner an eyeful, and themselves an undignified fright! Several of us had a story to tell!

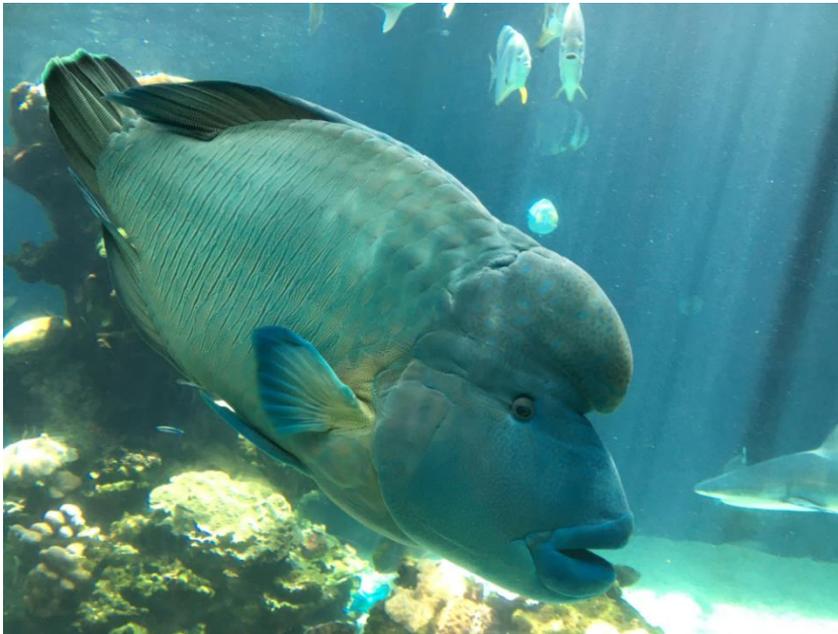


After an easy orientation stroll around the vicinity – fantastic boulangerie here, great café there, lingerie shop (without the bou!) here – we enjoyed Welcome Drinks in a warm tropical setting at the Ramada Hotel Sports Bar. This was an opportunity for people to get to know each other over the local Number One beer and some nice French wine. Conversation flowed easily as horses and racing tales were exchanged and a sense of anticipation escalated.

Afterwards, people headed off in groups to try out local dining options. The Thai meal was fresh and tasty but very slow in coming (we wondered if they'd gone diving for the prawns!), and pizza/pasta goers reported generous flavoursome food, but those who opted for the revolving restaurant at the top of the Ramada Hotel were disappointed; the views were fantastic, the food and service mediocre at best.

Culture and Sea Creatures

Saturday began with a drive up Ouen Toro Hill where we soaked up marvellous views in all directions. We continued on to the Tjibaou Cultural Center, a stunning building (designed by Renzo Piano who designed the Centre Pompidou in Paris) that blends seamlessly into its surrounding landscape. Constructed to celebrate the history and culture of the local Kanak people, being there is all about “feeling the spirit”. Art, history, culture, diversity and natural beauty combine with the soul of the local Kanak people and it's a very peaceful, beautiful and special place to spend time.



Next stop was the Aquarium des Lagons with exotic sea creatures, colourful coral, captivating turtles, menacing stonefish, fluorescent anemones, iridescent fish and the inimitable Napoleon – a large Humphead Wrasse that unabashedly showcased his plumped-up lips and an impressive coat in many tones of blue. With an exhibitionist swimming style, and an alarmingly watchful eye, this bloke knew he had us smitten!

A Memorable Night of Racing

A leisurely wander back along the attractive beach promenade, followed by free time for lunch and a rest, and then it was time to get the glad rags on and come together again for race night. Neil, Mike Gething and I met with Franck and Mike during the afternoon to finalise arrangements for the evening –

it was “all hands on deck” at the Hippodrome, with a large cast of volunteers setting everything up. Quite an operation, and one of the major jobs had been the hiring and placing of large individual lights and their generators around the track. Dunstan Feeds was the major sponsor for the night and the trophies were all lined up ready for presentation. It was all pretty impressive.



The Hippodrome is just a short walk from the Hilton and, in high spirits, we were welcomed at the gate and led up the red carpet. After formal photographs, we were escorted upstairs for the full VIP treatment: a free-flowing bar, oysters, foie gras and more. It was a balmy evening, with a warm breeze and, from our vantage point, we could easily watch the horses in the parade ring one way and then take a few steps in the other direction to find a seat in the grandstand and watch the action. There were approx. 1,000+ people on course, including many families. We chatted happily amongst ourselves and with other

racegoers, including David Smith from Dunstan Feeds; the vibe was casual yet classy and behaviour was impeccable.

Philippe was a marvellous host, helping us with betting and giving us a few tips and inside info – he had several horses racing on the night, some successful, others not! He’s usually the Stipe on course but tonight he was being a generous host for our group.

Several NZ horses ran, and the Government Cup was won by one of them – Lincoln Blue. Alyssa Schwerin and Nivesh Teeluck were riding, and I managed a quick chat with Alyssa who was loving the experience.

The commentary, in French of course, was noteworthy for its huge gaps – the caller would mention the horses, pause for a while as they galloped along in silence, and would then pick up his call again. It had an air of slo-mo about it, but when the horses came roaring down the home straight at full speed under the night lights there was plenty of cheering and enthusiasm and there was nothing slow about it. Race 3 was a trotting race which provided great entertainment, although there was no betting on this race.

For a bit of fun, I organised a sweepstake over two races: Elaine Vine (Wairoa) and Neil Miller were the lucky winners! In terms of betting success, Mike Gething cleaned up, backing four winners from the six-race card – well done Mike!

Putting a bet on was an interesting challenge, but many of the tote operators spoke reasonable English and showed great patience as they helped us work out what we were trying to do. We eventually got the hang of things and, by the end of the night, bets were being confidently placed in French. Alas, this did not necessarily equate to success!

After the final race and last drop of champagne, we trooped across the road to the Ramada Sports Bar to watch the All Blacks beat Ireland, which rounded off a hugely successful and enjoyable night of sport, camaraderie, learning, laughter and connection that we'll all remember forever.

Tropical Paradise

Sunday brought more perfect weather and we set off aboard the Mary D for Amedee Island – a tropical island paradise with white sand, the most turquoise of waters, shady trees and an attractive lighthouse. During the day, we were treated to a hearty lunch and plenty of entertainment.

We'd been warned about the seasnakes that slither along the sand and in the water, popping out of nowhere; they can be deadly, but are not interested in humans, are harmless if left alone and their mouths are too small to bite us. Still, they're a snake and they provided a few frights throughout the day, especially the one that came to lunch!



Many of us went on the glass-bottom boat expedition – sometimes these can be disappointing but not at Amedee. We were treated to a wonderful display of underwater life and were all in hysterics at the persistent pilotfish (aka suckerfish) that attached itself to the glass and came happily along for the ride.

The spritely ones amongst us romped up the 247 steps to the top of the 56m high lighthouse for wonderful views. Those in docile mode chatted and dozed under palm trees. Some explored the island, others went snorkelling. A highlight for many was swimming with turtles who came in close to shore. All in all, this was a wonderful day that was both relaxing and exhilarating and ticked many boxes. The water was as incredibly clear and as spectacularly turquoise as I've ever seen on a tropical island.

Free Time and Farewell

Monday was a free day – some went into Noumea, a city that was an experience rather than a pleasure, and in stark contrast to the resort area of Anse Vata where we were staying. Some went to nearby Escapade and Duck Islands to enjoy more beaching and snorkelling, others lay by the pool and took advantage of R&R. A few others whiled away the afternoon back at the Hippodrome where the first day of Le Semaine Cheval was taking place – the Regional Horse Championships. Adults and youngsters were

in action over the jumps and the charming scene kept those keen on another dose of horsey things amused for quite some time.

Neil, Jeanette and I took Franck and Mike out for lunch at Le Roof to thank them for putting on such a great time for us. This restaurant, with its many posts and traditional construction, juts out over the lagoon, and specialises in fresh seafood. Over delectable prawns and a Number One beer, amiable and hopefully enduring racing connections were enhanced. The vista of turquoise water and a rare sighting of a dugong frolicking below us added to the experience.



Our Farewell Dinner at the very fine Marmite et Tire Bouchon restaurant, was full of good cheer, food and wine, as we reflected on this unique and truly wonderful sojourn in a stunning part of the world. We had an early departure next morning and, after another excellent Aircalin flight, we landed back in Auckland feeling weary but, at the same time, energised and enlightened.

Flying Aircalin was a real pleasure – the flight between Auckland and Noumea is less than three hours, the staff are chic and friendly in their gorgeous uniforms which feature teal and Hibiscus Red, the food is very good, the planes new and modern, and the service polished. Highly recommended.

In Summary

Who knew that a suggestion, a couple of coffees and conversations with the right people, and a lot of hard work would result in such a superb and unique tour! It was a big job to pull it all together, with help from various sources, but we got there in the end.

This was my first visit to New Caledonia and I was utterly taken with the turquoise waters, the easy holiday vibe, the locals enjoying beautiful beaches and our very special treat of a night at the races.

It was a real pleasure to lead this trip. What a truly wonderful group of diverse and lovely people; from all walks of life and hailing from throughout the North Island (where were you southerners!?), everyone got on so well. There's no doubt that a deep-seated love of racing creates an immediate, common and lasting bond that enables genuine and authentic connection. Throw in ideal weather and a dose of tropicana, and you can't go wrong!

Our trip was great value, although shopping and eating out in New Caledonia is not cheap – but then again, it's not cheap in New Zealand either! New Caledonia is, for some reason, not on roaming and making a phone call is exorbitant; getting a local sim card is a good idea. The Hilton had a free internet quota included but it ran out quickly and was less than ideal (they're going to be addressing this). Because I needed to access email regularly, do some trouble-shooting, keep on top of logistics etc, I spent a chunk of time at the computer in the Business Centre and that worked well with reliable connection. Accessing the TAB website to keep up with NZ racing and results was intermittent, but it was more to do with the local internet than the TAB site.

Overall, this was a hugely successful, utterly unique and thoroughly enjoyable and special trip that has generated friendships and connections that would otherwise not exist and will hopefully last a lifetime.

Here's to our next racing trip ... come join us, wherever we may go!

Thanks to the following people for their input into making this trip possible:

- Neil Miller, for the idea, contacts and lots of insider knowledge;
- Mike Gething and Neil for assisting with the financials and good advice;
- Franck Guillermet (Director), Mike Paofai (Assistant) and Philippe Arnould (Stipendiary Steward and host extraordinaire) at Hippodrome Henry Milliard, for enabling a wonderful evening;
- Vanessa Salaun (President of the Organising Committee) and her team for offering an exceptional VIP experience;
- Sally Pepermans (Director NZ at New Caledonia Tourism) for contacts, guidance and goody bags;
- Jeremy Jezequel at New Caledonia Voyages, for immaculate assistance for all accommodation and land arrangements;
- Vanessa Tjemplon and Wendy at Aircalin, for assisting with our group flight bookings;
- Jordane Breyton, Manager at Marmite et Tire Bouchon restaurant, for a fabulous Farewell Dinner.

And, last but not least, thanks to all the wonderful people who came on this special trip – let's stay in touch and hope our horses run fast!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sally". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned on the left side of the page.