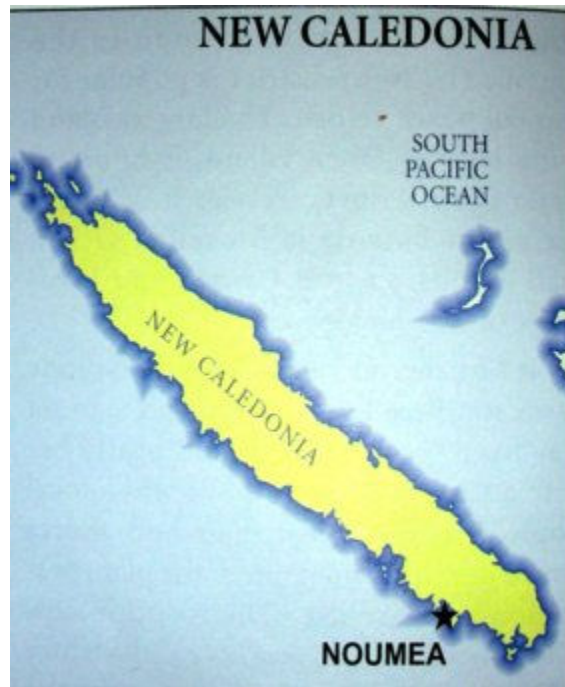


## **Day 50, (Saturday, 11/08/08) Noumea, New Caledonia**

We had first been to Noumea in February of 2007 on the Amsterdam as part of the Grand World Voyage (GWV).

( [www.2007gwv.thestansfields.com](http://www.2007gwv.thestansfields.com) ) We may have heard of New Caledonia before booking the GWV back in January 2006 but we had to look hard at a globe first to find New Caledonia and then locate Noumea. It turned out to be one of the most beautiful ports of that cruise and we were looking forward to this return visit. The island of New Caledonia is 200 miles long and roughly 30 miles wide. It is located about 1200 miles northeast of Sydney, Australia. The city of Noumea is near the southern end of the island. Here is a map showing the location of Noumea on the island.



The day started with temperatures in the 80s, clear sky, and calm sea as we made our approach to the harbor of Noumea, New Caledonia. The island is surrounded by a coral reef with a few breaks that allow ships to pass in and out of harbors. We were still many miles out to sea today on the approach to the harbor when we photographed these waves breaking over a shallow spot in the reef. Scenes like this make us appreciate even more the early explorers who navigated through hazards like this in uncharted waters with only the wind to drive their ships.



Another view we got of the city from a distance was dominated by smoke from the nickel ore processing plant on the outskirts of Noumea. New Caledonia is a huge source of nickel for the world, just behind Russia and Canada in the mining of nickel ore. The nickel mining and processing industry is a major part of the local economy and the pollution that comes with that bargain is accepted by the people. Part of the pollution comes from the coal fired electric power plant used by the nickel foundry. The electricity for the rest of Noumea is hydroelectric with generators located at a lake nearby.



The harbor at Noumea is very large and even after passing through the reef it took the Amsterdam almost an hour to reach the pier and tie up. We took advantage of the time by getting breakfast. By good fortune we ran into Sue and Mike in the Lido and joined them for breakfast on the Lido open pool deck to savor the marvelous weather and scenery around us.



There is a nice cruise ship terminal in Noumea and as we arrived dancers in native costume greeted us outside the terminal building.

It doesn't take long for the ship to clear customs in Noumea so soon after docking we were off the ship. We didn't have any firm plans for the day and thought we would just browse around on our own. In the terminal building we were approached by a man named

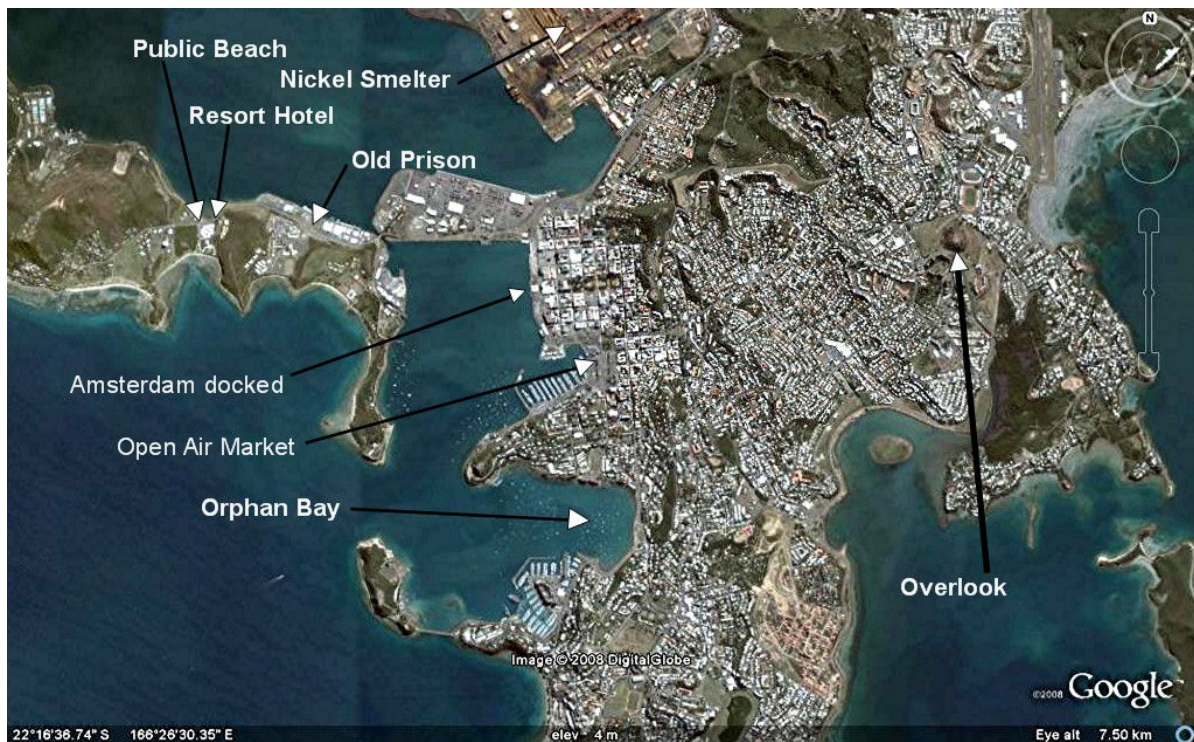
Ian who was offering a 3 hour tour of the Noumea area in his van for \$35 US each. He was an Englishman who had been transplanted into this area so language was no problem and we took him up on his offer. He needed to recruit 4 other customers so we browsed around the passenger terminal while we waited. The second floor area of the terminal is a broad open space where

local craft vendors come and set up their displays whenever a cruise ship is tied up at the pier. They were just getting their stuff in place and didn't have many customers while we were there. Here is a view of the upper level of the Cruise Ship Terminal with the windows of the Amsterdam visible through the open wall area.



While we were waiting one of the passengers getting off the ship tripped and fell very hard right at the entrance of the terminal. He was helped up and promptly attended to. Apparently he had hit his head and there was blood on the floor. We have witnessed or heard of falls by several passengers. We hope that this gentleman was not badly injured.

It was about 9am and Ian had found a party of four other people from the Amsterdam to join us on the tour. After introductions to Jack & Lois, Jim & Judy we all climbed into Ian's van and headed out. Ian had outlined the sites that we would visit on his tour and most of them are shown on this map from the Google website. On the map the arrow from "Amsterdam docked" is pointing to a white square that is the roof of the terminal building.



These impromptu tours are a crap shoot and sometimes can be real losers. As it turned out, our fellow tour companions were fun, the weather was beautiful, and Ian showed us a Noumea that looked even more beautiful than it did on our first visit.

On the way to our first stop Ian gave us a quick introduction to New Caledonia and Noumea history and social issues. The official language of New Caledonia is French but there are many Melanesians languages and English is taught in the high schools. New Caledonia is a territory of France which was colonized for the purpose of having a place to send prisoners in the late 1800s, much like the British did in Australia. It would be good to have an opinion from a serious history expert on this issue. It seems more likely that the main purpose of the prisoners was to hold the claim to these far flung properties that the colonial powers had just acquired. Anyway, New Caledonia's first European residents were primarily French prisoners. The harbor at Noumea served as a major naval base for US ships in World War II during the build-up to stop the advance of the Japanese toward Australia. The US resources at Noumea were critical in the Battles of The Coral Sea, Guadalcanal and beyond. The native population is a brown skinned ethnic group called Melanesian which is separate from Polynesian. The Melanesian population used to be discriminated against and they were put in an official category called "Indigenous Status". In the 1980s there was much unrest and a near uprising by the Melanesians protesting their treatment. After a tumultuous time the laws were changed to give Melanesians advantages in jobs and education, much like the Equal Opportunity laws in the US removed some barriers for minorities. New Caledonia, as a French territory, has an economy that is subsidized in the form of pay for many working and retired French civil servants and public works projects. However, the nickel mining and processing industry is by far the biggest part of the economy. They have about 1% unemployment and enjoy a relatively high standard of living compared with most South Sea Islands. In order to more firmly tie New Caledonia to France, where the Euro is used, the exchange rate of the South Pacific francs (XPF) for Euros was fixed permanently at 119.33 XPF per Euro. Therefore, the islanders have no uncertainty regarding the value of their currency relative to the Euro. The traffic on the roads is right hand, just like in the US and France. The price of gasoline is about 140 XPF per liter. The US dollar buys about 100 XPF so a liter of gas costs \$1.40 US or about \$5.60 US per gallon.

Our first stop was an open air vegetable and fish market only a few blocks from the Cruise Terminal. This was Saturday so there was a large crowd of people there and loads of vendors for not only food but all sorts of clothes and trinkets. On weekends they have a band playing lively native music and that was the first



thing we saw and heard.

Ian showed us around for a few minutes, pointing out the highlights of the place. In this photo on the left Ian (dark blue shirt) is identifying some of the vegetables and fruits for Jim and Judy.

After describing the market to us Ian turned us loose on our own for about 30 minutes.

We headed for the fish market which he had recommended as a point of interest. The ocean here has abundant fish and there is an aqua-farming industry so there was a lot to see.

This friendly (but serious looking) young lady saw us trying to photograph fish behind the glass and quickly volunteered to hold up one of her large lobsters.



We were about ready to leave the market when Jack and Lois spied an ATM machine. Jack extracted some French Pacific francs (XPF) from the ATM so he could buy a pearl necklace that Lois had picked out at one of the vendor's stalls.

We left the market and Ian drove us out of town to the infamous penal colony maintained by the French in the late 1800s. Ian described the penal colony system. Many convicts died while they were held in cages for months during the trip from France. Those who survived the trip from France were then exposed to the malaria ridden swamps of the Noumea area. Many more died while working to fill the swamps and build some shelter with stone and mortar. All prisoners started at the lowest level of hard work, lousy food, and poor living conditions. With good behavior a prisoner could work his way up to the top level in about 5 years. The prisoner could then take off the chains and be treated sort of like a trustee in a modern prison with freedom to work outside the compound under close supervision. All that now remains of the prison are some of the stone buildings where effort has been made to keep them from deteriorating. These buildings are representative of the few prison buildings we saw.



From the prison grounds Ian drove a short distance to a beautiful beach area. As we approached the beach we saw there was a public area on the left where primarily Melanesian families and couples were enjoying their Saturday in the sand and gentle surf as shown in the photo on the right and the one below.



On the right hand side of the beach was a very interesting resort that Ian said was well known for luxury accommodations.



Some of the rooms were suspended on pilings over the water and all the buildings had exotic roofs thatched in traditional South Pacific style. Barbara is showing off the rooms over the water in this picture on the right.

The main hotel was hidden behind the



tropical growth on the hillside. In the picture on the left, we are standing near some hotel beach buildings and Ian (second from left) is giving Judy, Jim and Jack a little more info about the area before we leave. We all loved the beach which was not crowded and looked perfect for swimming or just lounging around.

As we were getting back into the van a Melanesian man on the beach approached Ian and asked him something in French. Ian gave him a short answer. The man looked a little

angry and a heated short discussion took place. Ian started the car and we left the beach. We asked Ian what had taken place. Ian said that the man needed a light for his cigarette and he thought Ian would have a cigarette lighter in his van. It turned out that Ian was driving a fairly new Peugeot and it did not come with a cigarette lighter. The man on the beach did not believe the van had no cigarette lighter and probably suspected some discrimination against Melanesians on Ian's part. We all also expressed our amazement that a French car came without a cigarette lighter and chided Ian about the incident. Ian passed it off good naturedly but this little vignette led to his telling us that there currently was a painful shortage of cigarettes in Noumea. The cause of the shortage was a strike by the French civil service workers in the Tax Department. They wouldn't process the cigarettes through the tax stamp certification so that they could be sold. Ian is a smoker and was suffering from nicotine withdrawal. All of his passengers were non-smokers and Jack was a doctor so Ian got absolutely no sympathy from us, just unsolicited suggestions that he give up smoking.

The next place we went was the top of a hill on the outskirts of Noumea which served us as a nice lookout spot to see the layout of the area. From this vantage point the nickel ore processing plant was plainly visible. We could see the smoke rising and the plant was covered with red iron oxide dust given off in the processing of the ore.

Turning to our left we got a more appealing sight of Noumea. The picture below shows the city park in the center of Noumea and the Amsterdam tied up at the passenger terminal in the harbor.



From the lookout spot we proceeded through the outskirts of Noumea directly south down to the shoreline

of the harbor. We turned right at the shore and proceeded around the bay called Anse Vata. We drove past where the US Navy hospital was located during WWII. The small one story buildings have been preserved as much as possible in their original condition. The buildings are not impressive but the site was vitally important to the wounded servicemen in WWII. We got this photo on the right.



Ian drove on past the luxurious resorts at Baie Des Citrons or "Lemon Bay" and finally around Orphan Bay. At Orphan Bay there is a huge anchor in the center of a Round-About. Our guide said that the anchor is part of many memorials to the US military effort in WWII and is from the Battleship USS Missouri (BB-63). The "Mighty Mo" was part of the US Navy Pacific Fleet armada during WWII and is now a floating memorial in Pearl Harbor. Regarding the name of Orphan Bay or "Baie de L'Orphelinat" we heard that the name was derived from the fact that orphan girls were brought from France in the late 1800s and housed somewhere around this bay. It was intended that they would marry guards or prisoners from the penal colony and help populate the island with Europeans.

After passing Orphan Bay it was a short drive to the cruise ship terminal where Ian dropped us off and we said goodbye. He had been a great guide and we were very pleased with the tour.

We went on board the Amsterdam for lunch and then headed out for just a stroll around Noumea to get more of a flavor of the downtown area. When we hit the streets it was 1pm and the tradition for many shops is to close down from 12 noon to about 2:30pm. Consequently, many of the shops were closed. That wasn't a big deal for us since we didn't have much of a shopping list.



Barbara had brought her library card from Oak Ridge in support of the game called "Where in the world is your library card?" We thought this was a good time to get a picture of her library card in Noumea, New Caledonia.

Earlier in the day our tour guide had pointed out the library as one of the best examples of colonial architecture in Noumea. We started in the general direction of the library. Along the way we ran in to MaryLou and talked her in to joining us. With MaryLou you know this isn't going to be just your ordinary "walk in the park". We were successful in finding the library and got the treasured picture of Barbara's library card in front of the Noumea "bibliothèque" as shown in this photo on the right.



For reasons that were not explained the library grounds contained the mock-up of an old sailing ship grounded at the entrance to one of the buildings. The picture on the left shows the fine vessel with MaryLou and Barbara getting ready to raise the anchor.

The spirit of her seafaring ancestors suddenly gripped MaryLou and she grabbed the ship's wheel in a vane attempt to steer the vessel out of these shallow waters.



Failing to get arrested here we turned and walked quickly away.

MaryLou had visited a nearby church earlier in the day and was impressed with the statue of Joan of Arc outside the church. We decided to visit the statue before making the hike back to the ship.

We found the stature and indeed it was beautiful with a flowering tree growing nearby.

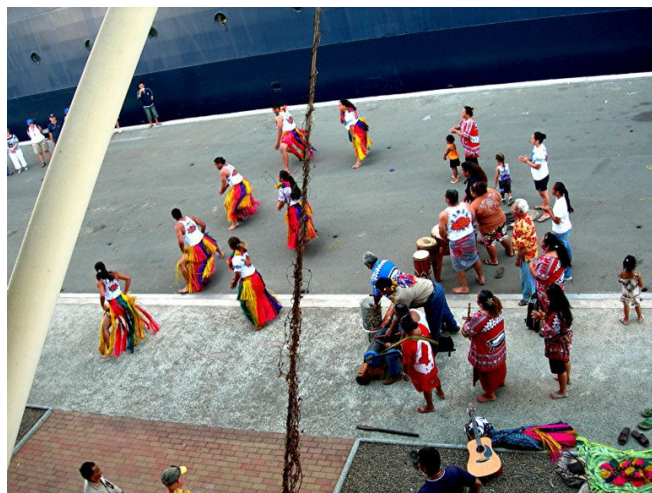


Overcome by the urge to get closer, MaryLou suddenly clambered up onto the statue base and clung to her heroine. With the promise of a cold Coke Lite we got her down without injury and quietly made our exit.



We then wound our way with MaryLou leading the charge through the streets and parks of Noumea back to the Amsterdam. It always feels good to successfully get back to the ship when it is scheduled to depart soon.

There was a native band in colorful costumes performing a farewell dance as we boarded the ship.



The Amsterdam got underway about 5pm bound for our next port of Suva, in the Fiji Islands.