



AKAMA REPORT 31

Noumea

We are in New Caledonia, situated east of Australia and North of New Zealand, made famous to a generation of North Americans by the TV series *McHale's Navy* (staring Earnest Borgnine). The crew on the TV series frequently talked about going to New Cal for R&R leave. Indeed, there is a large US memorial in Noumea, to commemorate the US efforts to free the South Pacific from the Japanese invasion during WW-II.

After the harrowing passage from Vanuatu, tired and still suffering from the after effects of seasickness, we had to negotiate in the dark Havanah Channel, which has lots of reefs, turns and high currents. The process of entering unknown and dangerous waters in the dark can be a bit daunting. While AKAMA's position is shown on our electronic chart, the charts usually have unknown offset errors, which can be great, even a mile or so. Because it was pitch-black, we had only the lit navigational aids to guide us; the first was an approach range. These comprise two or more lights that line up vertically when you are on the right track. We aborted the first attempt to enter, as we heard surf breaking nearby. On the second attempt we managed to get lined up better. But, ranges don't tell us where we are along the track. So, we had to get a fix on something real to figure out the direction and distance of the offset. We were able to go close aboard an islet and get a fix on it. This allowed us to correct the electronic chart, which placed AKAMA on it exactly where she really was. After the first few turns worked out right on target we were able to increase speed a bit and motor along at a reasonable rate. Throughout this process we watched the depth sounder to see if it corresponded to the charted depth, which it did, allowing for the tide. We arrived safe and sound at Noumea at daybreak and we treated ourselves to another stay in a marina.

Our first contact with officialdom was the quarantine officer from hell. She went through AKAMA and took everything she could. This amounted to 25 kilos worth of fruit, meat and vegetables! She removed the crispier from the refrigerator and dumped the entire contents in the garbage bag. She even took our Orville Redenbacher popping corn...the nerve. We thought that this was normal, until some of the other yachties told us that they only lost a small amount. We were more upset when we discovered in the local stores some of the same brands of stuff she confiscated. The immigration officials came next and though they were a bit gruff they were quick and efficient. The customs officials never showed up, which is often normal for this port. This was good, as we had stocked up on duty-free wine and liquor in both Honiara and Port Vila. By rights they could have sealed this unless we paid duty.

New Caledonia was sighted in 1774 by Captain Cook; nevertheless, it was annexed by France in 1853. At one time it was jointly administered by the English and the French, but it is now an overseas territory of France. It comprises the island of New Caledonia and many smaller islands. The total area is about 19 thousand sq km, and the population is about 250 thousand. About 43 percent of the population is composed of Melanesians, and about 37 percent is European, mainly French. Although there is some integration, for the most part the Kanaks and the French lead separate lives. We were astounded when we attended the Independence Day celebrations and saw only Kanaks and tourists.

Since the celebration was to commemorate the leaving of the English, we expected to see mostly French in attendance.

The economy is based on a variety of activities including agriculture, fishing, forestry, tourism and mining (mostly nickel). New Caledonia's smelter is third in the world (after two in Canada) in nickel production and first in the world in ferrous-nickel production. It's no wonder that France grabbed the place. In 1986, New Caledonians voted to remain part of France, although not without violent outbreaks by Kanak separatists.

New Caledonia is divided into three provinces, each with an elected assembly; together the three assemblies comprise the 54-member Territorial Congress. An appointed high commissioner represents the French government, and New Caledonia elects two deputies and one senator to the French parliament. All this for fewer people than the Canadian city of Saskatoon Saskatchewan; and we think Canada has excessive government!

Noumea, is the capital and largest city (pop. about 70 thousand). It has a distinctively French flavour, although most people speak at least some English. We walked the entire downtown area several times during the first week; what a workout! It was good to get off the boat.

Shopping here is good - one can find nearly anything - but the prices are very high for most things. French wine, on the other hand, is reasonable; we bought a case. On the other hand, consumer treatment is not very good. In one big supermarket we saw items being sold marked as "Promotion" that were beyond their use-by date. We were amazed to find out that most of the staff of the supermarket goes home at 3 PM, even though the store is open until 5 PM. We also had a hard time getting used to the fact that most shops close for lunch from noon to about 1:30 or 2 PM, like the famous Spanish siesta.

This was not going to be a maintenance stop, but as it turns out it was. Our relatively new laptop computer died a while ago, and we were worried that the warranty would expire before we found an authorised service depot. We were lucky to find an Acer computer dealer, where we were able to determine that the battery, not the computer, was defective. That was good and bad news. At least the computer is now working, but the batteries are not warranty items and a replacement was US \$340. That's about twice the price of those we found for sale on the Internet, ouch! Also, a major shipment from West marine came to us in Noumea. We received among other things a new RADAR unit, a new VHF radio, and a fish finder. We have commented on West Marine before, both favourably and unfavourably. Well, after this experience, we must say that we are again favourably impressed; Cynthia with their international mail order desk provided outstanding service. We sent her many emails, which were always replied to promptly and completely. Our previous half-baked service from the technical department also improved markedly. Moreover, while we did not specifically ask for any price breaks, with such a large order we were given substantial "outfitting" discounts on most of the items. We did experience a few small glitches, which WM rectified quickly.

With all our repairs and improvements done, we cruised some of the waters around Noumea, a very interesting place. To begin with, the main island, which is about 250 miles long but only 25 miles wide, is surrounded by a huge barrier reef, making for nice swimming, fishing, snorkelling and smooth water for boating. They claim it is the largest lagoon in the world; we've heard this before but this time it may be so. Another interesting thing is that there are very few people...we've been used to getting canoed by natives every time we put the hook down. Here, nobody bothers you.

We spent a few nights north of Noumea at Baie Maa, a secluded spot with only a few other boats. We took advantage of the clear water to scrape the prop, as it had fouled badly in the polluted waters around Noumea. There are nice beaches here and a lovely little park where we played a game of boules with Mark & Dorothy of DIRTY DOTTY. Boules is a French game; think of it as lawn bowls with an attitude. The boules are chromed iron "cannonballs" about 3 inches in diameter and weigh about a pound and a half each. We had been looking for a set since we first played the game in Kota Kinabalu; they are plentiful in Noumea.

Next, we went out to the edge of the barrier reef, west of Noumea, to see the Amadee Lighthouse. This 56-metre cylindrical structure was built of iron in France, disassembled, shipped and then rebuilt in 1862 on the present site. It had a huge Fresnel lens, which is on display, but the lighthouse is now lit with a modern light. It has an internal cast iron staircase comprising 247 steps; we were tired by the time we got to the observation tower, nearly at the top!

As the anchorage at Amadee is rather open, we moved to Ile Uere, a protected bay south of Noumea. This spot is very popular with water skiers, and PWC owners. Both groups buzzed the anchored boats, especially those on the PWCs. Nevertheless, once they left for the day the bay became a quiet paradise, with a splendid view of Noumea at night.

We went back to Noumea after less than a week of cruising, for a tour of the nickel smelter. The tour was fantastic, as they let us go right through the facility. The draining of the molten slag from the kiln was the highlight. It pours out like lava and then turns to sand as it hits a seawater flow on the way to the holding pen. There were ten of us on the tour, all yachties. Unexpectedly, Maurice had to work hard, as Rene, the man giving us the tour spoke only French, and Maurice provided simultaneous interpretation.

Another interesting visit was to the Noumea Aquarium. Here we saw live nautilus, a mollusc that lives deep in the ocean. In order to survive in the aquarium, the water is refrigerated. This aquarium was the first in the world to display coral under ultraviolet light; the effect is spectacular. Our favourite fish was the napoleon hump-headed wrasse, a really big and colourful fish.