

Far South



For nature lovers Le Grand Sud, the Far South of Grande Terre, with its red earth, scrub vegetation, rivers, lakes, plains, hills and bays, is a great place to go exploring. It has excellent walking and mountain-biking tracks, and is a kayaking, abseiling, boating, quad biking and 4WD adventure playground. The area can be explored by taking a convenient circular trip, either clockwise past Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue and on towards Yaté or anticlockwise past Plum and on towards Port Boisé and Goro.

You can take the longer route out of Noumea on the RP1 or the faster VDE (Voie de Dégagement Est) toll road (100CFP per vehicle). To get on the VDE follow Mont-Dore signs from the Rivière Salée exit on the Voie Express. The RP1 exit is next on the Voie Express.

Shortly before joining up at Boulari, the VDE and RP1 run parallel on either side of the Catholic mission at La Conception. The eye-catching domed church topped by the silver statue of the Virgin Mary, visible from both roads, was built in 1874.

About 3km southeast of Boulari is the Catholic church at St Louis with its red spire and mountain backdrop. Built in 1859, it's believed to be the oldest church in New Caledonia.

At the foot of Mont-Dore, the RP2 (route de la Corniche) follows the scenic coast around its western flank. The RP1 continues to the left and 2km further on forks to the right. Here, it curves around the eastern flank of Mont-Dore, links up with the RP2, and continues past Plum towards the remote Martian landscape around Prony and Port Boisé. The left fork follows the RP3 towards Yaté.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking the **GR1 Walking Track** (opposite) in a vast solitary landscape
- Kayaking by full moon through the drowned forest of Lac de Yaté in **Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue** (p255)
- Discovering the hidden village of **Prony** (p257) and its ruins
- Imagining yourself among dinosaurs in the miniature Jurassic landscape at **Chutes de la Madeleine** (p255)
- Giving kayaking, quad biking, abseiling and the Far South's other great **outdoor activities** (p253) a go
- Watching whales glide gently through the waters of **baie de Prony** (p253)



WARNING

Despite its tranquil setting, in the last few years St Louis, just north of the RP1, has often been the site of violent incidents. If you plan to visit, get an update on the situation.

Environment

The landscapes in the Far South are characterised by hills and plains sparsely covered in ultramafic scrub, shrubs and hard-leaved plants that grow on the nutrient-poor lateritic soil. These fragile species have adapted to the tough soil conditions over millions of years. Around 75% of the species are endemic since nonendemic species find it hard to adapt.

In the early colonial days the absence of forestry and mining regulations resulted in the destruction of large areas of vegetation. Today the vegetation is endangered most by fire and mining activities. There are some areas of dense tropical vegetation on the east coast of the Far South.

The region has several botanical and zoological reserves that hikers, picnickers, and bird and plant enthusiasts will enjoy, including Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue (p254) and the reserve at Chutes de la Madeleine (p255), which are good examples of current conservation efforts.

Fauna in the region includes native and introduced species of birds, insects and reptiles, as well as wild pigs and deer.

Information

A small **tourist information office** (☎ 43 33 44; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat & Sun) on the RP1 at Boulari (the Mont-Dore town council administrative centre) has information on activities and accommodation in the Far South. It has several walking-track brochures including one on the GR1 (see below).

Getting There & Around

It's worth hiring a car for a couple of days to explore the wide spaces of the Far South at your leisure (see p330). Buses to Yaté (600CFP, two hours) and Touaourou (700CFP, 2½ hours) leave from Noumea's Gare Routière at 11.30am Monday to Saturday. There are also buses to Mont-Dore and Plum (see p254). Many tour companies (see p253) operate in the Far South and can take you to most of the places described in this chapter.

MONT-DORE

pop 24,195

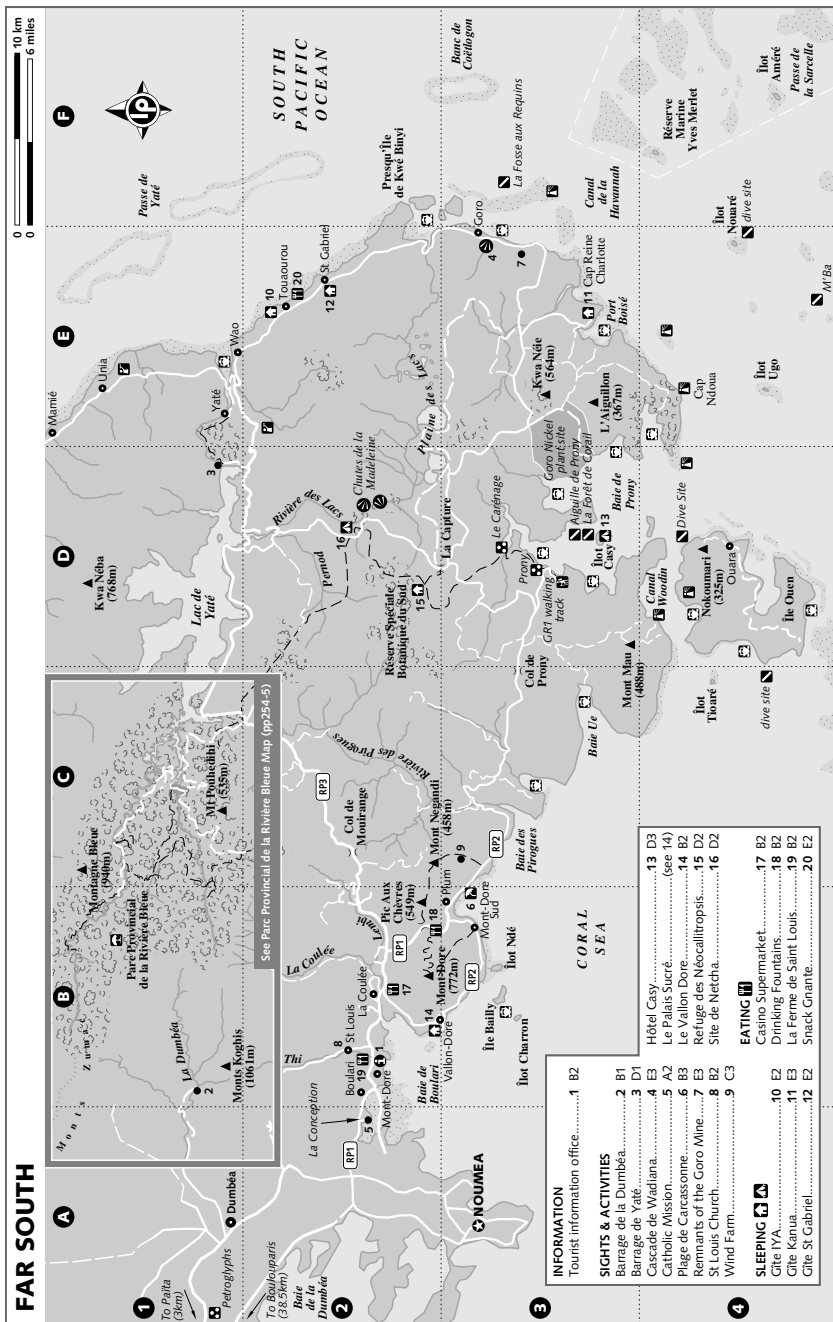
Mont-Dore is very spread out. The town centre, where there's a tourist information office, post office, cultural centre and shops, is at Boulari and neighbouring Robinson. The actual mountain (772m) is several kilometres further southeast.

Mont-Dore was originally called Mont d'Or (Mountain of Gold) when early settlers discovered gold. A brief, unprofitable period of gold mining followed by coal extraction, as well as bushfires, have left the mountain covered only in shrub vegetation.

GR1 WALKING TRACK

The highly recommended **GR1** (Grande Randonnée 1; www.trekking-gr-sud-nc.com) is a two- or three-day (44.4km) walk between Prony and Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue. It's an ideal way to experience the remoteness that is the main attraction of the Far South. The walk begins at the sea and traverses a diverse landscape of plains, forests, hills and streams. From the hills there are gorgeous views of the sea sprinkled with islands and headlands. It is the first phase of the Transprovinciale Sud project, which aims to establish a walking track from the south to the north of the Southern Province. The GR1 is divided into three legs and has well-indicated directions. For overnight trips there's a hut at the Refuge des Néocallitropsis at the end of the first leg (14km), or a camp site at Site de Netcha, the end of the second (10.8km). Day trippers can do one or two legs depending on their desired pace of walking. Either way, drop-offs or pick-ups need to be arranged. The main road is about 3km from the hut along a 4WD track and about 500m from the camp site.

By prior arrangement, the office at Site de Netcha (see p256) can arrange to drop you off at Prony (5400CFP), the Refuge de Néocallitropsis (2100CFP), or Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue (5700CFP). Rates are for a maximum of four adults.



TOURS IN THE FAR SOUTH

Below is a list of operators who run activities and tours in the Far South.

- Aventure Pulsion** (☎ 26 27 48; aventure@canl.nc; 4WD adult per day 12,000CFP; kayak or mountain bike per half-/full day 2500/4500CFP) Specialises in 4WD tours. The price, based on a minimum of two people, includes hotel pick-up and drop-off, and lunch at Port Boisé. It also hires out kayaks and mountain bikes at Site de Netcha.
- Caledonia Tour** (☎ 25 94 24; caledoniatours@lagoon.nc; adult/child 9500/6000CFP) This company runs minibus tours of the Far South. It specialises in bird-watching (it's a good option if you want to see *cagous* in Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue) and botanic tours. Rates are based on a minimum of two adults.
- Pacific Free Ride** (☎ 79 22 02; www.pfr.nc; canoe half-/full-day 5000/10,000CFP; quad bikes half-/full day 10,000/17,000CFP; abseiling 8000CFP) Offers canoe trips in baie de Prony and abseiling down the Cascade de Wadina at Goro or the Yaté waterfall. It also runs a fun quad-bike and canoe tour just south of Plum. You ride inland on quad bikes and return by river.
- Terra Incognita** (☎ 25 39 93, 78 94 46; terincognita@canl.nc; kayaks half-/full day/full moon 3350/5350/3950CFP; 4WD adult 9880CFP) Hires out kayaks in Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue on the basis of six confirmed bookings. It organises magical moonlit trips on the lake and Rivière Bleue during the full moon. Its 4WD tour rates are based on a minimum of three adults.
- Koghi Decouverte/Sud Loisir** (☎ 77 81 43, fax 27 51 52; koghidecouverte@hotmail.com; mountain bikes full day 1800CFP; mountain bikes & kayaks adult/child full day 5750/4600CFP) Hires out mountain bikes and kayaks in Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue. It also offers return transfers between Noumea and the park (2500CFP).
- Raid Ngatahi** (☎ 77 24 40; www.kujirado.com; per person 18,000CFP) Runs whale-watching excursions south of baie de Prony including lunch on Îlot Casy. It has a motorised boat.
- Pacific Blue** (☎ 77 80 52; ggarner-iruka@mail.com; adult/child 7500/5500CFP) Runs whale-watching trips in the south on a catamaran.
- Island Charter** (☎ 83 05 81; didierrobert@yahoo.fr; adult/child 7500/5500CFP) Runs whale-watching trips on a catamaran departing from Prony.

From the summit there are great views of Noumea and across the southern lagoon to the faint line of surf at the reef. A walking track at Mont-Dore Sud leads up the southern slope to the summit. Turn off the RP2 at the green Montée d'Eole signpost.

A disused mining path zigzags down the eastern slope to the Col de Plum on the RP1. Here, mountain-spring water gushes or trickles (depending on the season) from roadside drinking fountains where thirsty hikers can fill up their bottles. Particularly fit walkers can then climb the **Peak aux Chèvres** on the opposite side of the road and follow the summit to the whirring turbines in the Plum wind farm on Mont Negandi (458m) before descending to the beach south of Plum. About 2km back towards Plum, is the **Plage de Carcassonne**, a grassy park by the beach with showers and toilets.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Vallon Dore (☎ 43 32 08; fax 43 66 66; vallon_dore@yahoo.fr; 62 Promenade du Vallon Dore; d/4-person bungalow 6900/9900CFP; lunch Wed-Fri 1500CFP, dinner Fri & Sat 2500-2900CFP, buffet lunch Sun 4750CFP; ☹ closed Sun dinner, Mon lunch & Tue; 🚰) This hotel sits in a

calm, picturesque spot by the sea. Its attractive ochre and yellow bungalows above the beach have kitchenettes. Travellers wanting peace and quiet should avoid the hotel's popular monthly theme nights on Fridays or Saturdays.

Le Palais Sucré (☎ 43 37 60; 26 Promenade du Vallon Dore; pastries 80-225CFP; ☹ 5am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, 5am-noon Sun) Stop at this patisserie for crispy croissants, fruit tarts, *millefeuilles* and soft brioches. It's 400m from Le Vallon Dore hotel.

La Ferme de Saint Louis (☎ 43 54 82; Boulari; milk shake 230CFP; ☹ 8am-7pm) Next to Libre Service St Michelle, a grocery store, is this small farm shop, which isn't signposted. It sells pickles, jam, fresh eggs, and home-made cakes but is best known for its fresh fruit milk shakes. Its popularity is illustrated by the queue outside the shop at weekends when Noumeans returning home from the Far South make it a compulsory stop. The shop is a short distance from the Boulari tourist information office on the way to St Louis, just around the sharp bend. There are usually a couple of cows grazing in the small paddock next to the shop.

Casino supermarket (☎ 43 48 48; 🕒 7.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 7.30am-12.30pm Sun) There's a supermarket at the roundabout at La Coulée. Although there are small grocery stores in some of the settlements in the Far South, it's best to stock up before you go.

Getting There & Away

Carsud buses to Boulari (280CFP, 35 minutes), Mont-Dore Sud (400CFP, 55 minutes) and Plum (400CFP, 1¼ hours) leave roughly every 45 minutes from the corner of rue Paul Doumer and rue d'Austerlitz in Noumea.

PARC PROVINCIAL DE LA RIVIÈRE BLEUE

Heading east over the mountains toward Yaté on the RP3 you have panoramic views of the rolling red hills and the Plum wind turbines silhouetted against the sky to the southwest.

About half way to Yaté is **Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue** (☎ 43 61 24; adult/child 400/200CFP; 🕒 7am-5pm Tue-Sun) This wonderful nature reserve is home to many endemic plant, reptile and bird species, including the elusive *cagou*, New Caledonia's unofficial national

symbol (see opposite). The park's landscape is a mixture of the Far South's typical scrub vegetation and dense rainforest where the native palms and towering araucaria, *houp* and *kauri* trees grow.

The park lies along the western shores of the Lac de Yaté, an artificial lake. To the west and northwest, the park's boundary encloses the Rivière Blanche and Rivière Bleue, the lake's main tributaries.

With your own vehicle you can drive along the banks of Rivière Blanche to the end of the road 18km from the park entrance. At the mouth of Rivière Blanche is the old wooden Pérignon bridge, which leads across to the Rivière Bleue side of the park; it is too frail to carry vehicles. The Rivière Bleue side is, therefore, best explored by foot, bicycle or kayak. Inquire about a shuttle bus on the Rivière Bleue side that park management was planning to introduce when we visited.

Sights & Activities

You can pick up a free map of the park at the entrance gate. The Maison du Parc (visitors centre) near the entrance gate has

informative displays in French and English on the birds, plants, insects and reptiles of New Caledonia, as well as more specific information on the park's species.

Walks include leisurely half-hour ambles and hikes lasting several hours. Visit Le Palmetum, which features 14 different palm species dotted along a short circular path, or walk to *le houp géant*, the giant *houp* tree.

There are great picnic spots beside the park's streams and rivers or overlooking Lac de Yaté. This dam, completed in 1958, provides electricity for New Caledonia's national grid. Lac de Yaté's drowned forest (*forêt noyée*) is a special feature of the park especially when explored by kayak on a moonlit night. The lake or dam flows out into Yaté river, outside the park boundary, where you can abseil down the impressive 120m Yaté waterfall.

Activities should be arranged with a tour operator (p253) before arriving at the park.

Sleeping

You can inquire about camping in the park; the possibility was being discussed at the

time of writing. Otherwise, about 4km away, there's a camp site at **Les Bois du Sud** (☎ 87 02 43; park admission adult/child 1000/375CFP; camping per adult/child 200CFP/free). The hefty admission fee makes it not really worth staying but at the time of writing there was talk the fee would be reduced. The camp site is in a woodland setting by a small stream. There are shelters and tables as well as toilets but no showers. The tap water is not drinkable. The signposted turn-off is about 100m past the park turn-off, but on the opposite side of the road.

Getting There & Away

Phone before you go to make sure the park is open as it remains closed in certain circumstances such as bad weather. For information on transport options, see p251.

CHUTES DE LA MADELEINE

New Caledonians are proud of the **Chutes de la Madeleine** (☎ 46 92 47; adult/child 400/200CFP; 🕒 8am-5pm). It's about 11km from the turn-off from the RP3 at the eastern end of Lac de Yaté. Some even refer to the falls fondly as the local Niagara Falls. Although that's very far-fetched, the small waterfall with its surrounding miniature Jurassic-like landscape does have a legitimate claim to fame. The scenery was used as a backdrop for the 1999 BBC series *Walking with Dinosaurs*, which used computer-generated imagery to recreate life in the Mesozoic era. The area around the waterfall is a botanic reserve where paths wind through the vegetation and along the river bank.

Swimming is forbidden at the waterfall but permitted about a kilometre downstream at

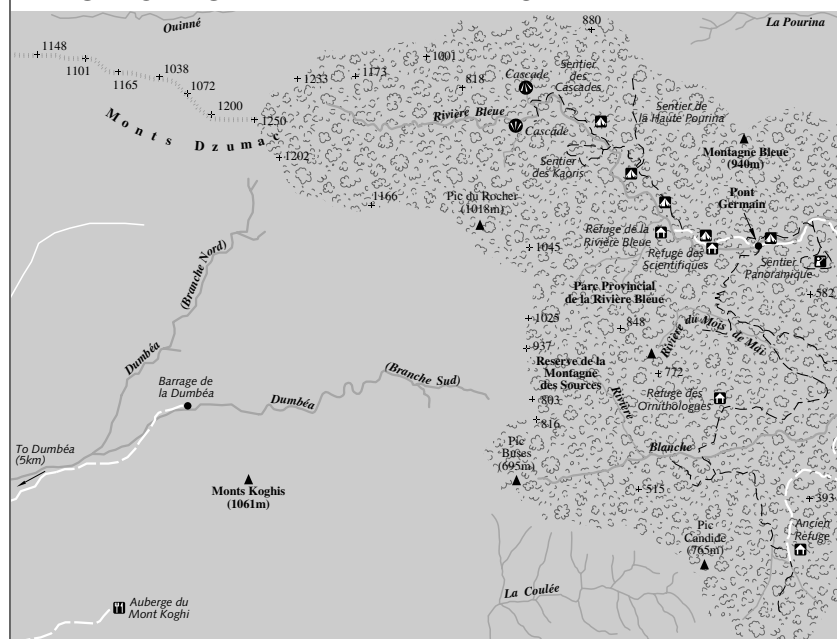
CAGOU

The flightless *cagou* (*Rhynocetos jubatus*) is a much-loved New Caledonian bird. Like the kiwi in New Zealand, the bird is an unofficial symbol for New Caledonia and the country's sports teams are referred to as *cagous* when competing overseas.

The *cagou* is about 50cm tall and has soft grey plumage and crest, red eyes and an orange beak. It has an unusual call that sounds like a dog yapping.

In the wild, the place you are most likely to see this bird is at Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue.

PARC PROVINCIAL DE LA RIVIÈRE BLEUE



Site de Netcha (☎ 46 92 47; park admission adult/child 1000/500CFP; camping 200/100CFP). This camp site, run by Aventure Pulsion, has a serene setting with shelters and tables overlooking the river. There are no showers but there are wooden diving platforms over the water. The tap water is not drinkable. The office sells a few basic supplies including bottled water. It also hires out kayaks and mountain bikes (see p253).

If you don't plan to camp and want to avoid the entry fee, you can swim where the road runs beside the river between Site de Netcha and Chutes de la Madeleine.

Six kilometres south of Chutes de la Madeleine the road crosses a small bridge at a place known as la Capture, about 500m before the intersection with the Prony to Port Boisé road. If you turn left immediately after the bridge you can follow a scenic route past **Plaine des Lacs**. This road, which was unsealed at the time of writing, leads past the Lac en Huit, a 'figure eight lake', and Grand Lac and eventually loops round to the main road near Port Boisé. Also at the time of writing, a few kilometres past Grand Lac, the road was closed for safety reasons related to mining activity between Thursday and Sunday.

The Chutes de la Madeleine are 70km, about 1½ hours by car, east of Noumea.

YATÉ

pop 1,850

A few kilometres past the Chutes de la Madeleine turn-off, the RP3 leaves the lakeshore and climbs steeply. Just before the summit there's a magnificent western view, down the length of the lake. Over the hill, the east coast comes into view and the road descends quickly to join it. To the left at the bottom of the escarpment the RP3 leads to Yaté village. To the right, another road crosses a small bridge and heads south towards Goro. It eventually loops around to join the RP2 south of Plum.

The village of Yaté, with its hydroelectric plant fed by Lac de Yaté, is squeezed between the side of a mountain and the Yaté river mouth. There's a shop and a petrol pump. **Le Rond Point** (☎ 46 41 56; ☎ 7am-noon & 2.30-6pm, closed Sun afternoon) at the end of the road.

Travellers not looking for supplies or petrol usually head south over the small bridge at the bottom of the escarpment to camp

sites and *gîtes* (small hotels) in the *tribus* (Kanak communities) of Wao, Touaourou and Goro.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Noumea stop at Yaté (see p251), Wao (600CFP, 2¼ hours) and Touaourou (700CFP, 2½ hours).

By car, Yaté is about 1½ hours from Noumea. Follow the RP3. Otherwise, tours can be easily arranged (see p253).

WAO, TOUAOUROU & GORO

All the way to Goro, the road runs along the coastline through luxuriant vegetation. The hills rise on one side and you can catch fleeting glimpses of the sea on the other. Wao is the first *tribu* you pass through and you might catch a game at its roadside soccer field. About 5km kilometres further on is Touaourou, on the sea front. Turn off the main road here to have a peek inside the church with its traditional wooden carvings around the altar.

Continuing towards the south you reach the *tribu* of Goro, not to be confused with the site of the large Goro Nickel processing plant that's currently under construction around 19km further south. About 1km past Goro the road passes beside the **Cascade de Wadiana**. The waterfall tumbles into a deep rock pool just before the river enters the sea. The pool is a popular swimming hole for both locals and visitors. Besides being rundown, the camp site opposite is not the quietest place to stay because of the many visitors (both tourists and locals) stopping at the waterfall.

Shortly after the waterfall you'll come across the remnants of an iron mining operation that was run by the Japanese and abandoned at the start of WWII. Giant rusting metal structures protruding into the sea are all that remain of the site where the ore was once loaded onto ships.

Sleeping & Eating

Gîte IVA (☎ 46 90 80; 3-person bungalow 5000CFP, camping per tent 1500CFP; meals 1800CFP; ☎ closed Sun dinner) Cocooned in a coconut grove, this *gîte* has a beach enclosed by coral cliffs. It has rustic but comfortable bungalows and a cosy atmosphere. When the sea is calm, snorkelling is stunning along the fringing reef that drops vertically into the depths.

The signposted turn-off to the *gîte* is about 3km south of Wao.

Gîte St Gabriel (☎ 46 42 77; www.gitesaintgabriel.com; bungalow d modern/traditional 7500/6500CFP, camping adult/child 700/350CFP; meals 1900CFP; canoe/bike hire half-day 500CFP) This *gîte* with its wide lawns sweeping down to the beach is 3km south of Touaourou. At low tide the water recedes a long way from the beach leaving behind delightful rock pools and stranded crabs scurrying for cover. The *gîte* is renowned for its seafood platters (4600CFP), which should be ordered 24 hours in advance. It has thatched traditional reed bungalows as well as modern concrete and mortar ones.

Snack Gnanite (☎ 46 40 40; dishes 850CFP; ☎ 6am-7pm) About 1km south of Touaourou on the main road there's a small restaurant. It's not fancy but the food's good. Dishes include prawns and rice, and octopus salad.

Buses from Noumea go to Touaourou via Yaté and Wao. See p251 for details.

PORT BOISÉ

The scrub landscape suddenly changes to thick forest just before you arrive at Port Boisé, which is 6.5km from the turn-off on the main road. The forest grows to the edge of the beach and enhances the isolation of this bay. When the tide's out it's too shallow to swim, but at high tide the edge of the fringing reef is good for snorkelling.

Gîte Kanua (☎ 46 90 00; fax 46 91 22; s/d bungalow with breakfast & dinner 7350/14,700CFP, camping per adult/child 800/500CFP) is the only infrastructure here. There are four thatched traditional-style bungalows and a small camp site with shelters and tables. The restaurant is renowned for seafood dishes with a local touch. Book accommodation and meals in advance.

The *gîte* organises excursions to offshore islets and 4WD tours. These activities cost 10,000CFP for two people. Other activities include kayaking, canoeing and windsurfing. It also organises *bougna* meals (3600CFP) for visitors at a local *tribu*.

There are enjoyable walking tracks along the coast and to a lookout behind the *gîte*.

Getting There & Away

By car take either the RP3 to Yaté or the RP1 to Plum and continue to Port Boisé. You can also cut across from the former road at the Chutes de la Madeleine. The latter route leads you up to a viewpoint by

some wind turbines at Col de Prony before dropping down to the southern plain. Port Boisé is around two hours from Noumea.

PRONY & ÎLOT CASY

The tranquil old penal centre Prony lies at the foot of a hill that dips down to the coast. It's nestled in dense vegetation. A stream runs through the hushed village of corrugated-iron cottages and overgrown stone ruins. Prony was first set up as a logging base in 1867 to supply timber to Noumea before becoming a convict camp. The convict camp was closed in 1911. Today, the cottages are mainly weekend homes for Noumeans.

About 500m south of the village is baie de la Somme which is part of the large baie de Prony. Baie de la Somme is the southern starting point for the GR1 walking track (see p251). Excursions to the picturesque Îlot Casy, in the middle of the larger bay, and whale-watching trips (from July to September) also leave from here (see p253). The clear waters that surround Îlot Casy are a marine reserve and are great for snorkelling. Unlike the red beach at Prony, this peaceful, forested island has soft, white beaches.

Casy Express (☎ 79 32 60; casyexpress@lagoon.nc; adult/child 2200/1200CFP) operates a water taxi service to Îlot Casy and tours to baie du Carénage in baie de Prony where there are hot springs and a waterfall.

Aiguille de Prony (Prony Needle) is a well-known diving site in the bay (see p221). Trips can be arranged from Noumea (see p224). La Forêt de Corail is another great dive site as the coral is phosphorescent.

By car it's about 1½ hours from Noumea to Prony. The shortest route is via Plum.

Sleeping

The only accommodation options are on Îlot Casy.

Drinkable spring water is available on the island. However, visitors should take all other provisions with them and carry out their rubbish when they leave.

Visitors can rent the rooms at **Hôtel Casy** (☎ 26 47 77; d 4000CFP) even though it's officially closed. Bring your own bedding and food. To make a reservation, call in the evening when the caretaker is indoors or leave him a message through **Casy Express** (☎ 79 32 60; casyexpress@lagoon.nc). Casy Express also arranges **camping** (per tent 500CFP).

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