

# Legends of the lagoon

Loyalty islanders are welcoming the first day trippers - **Craig Tansley** - discovers a community happy to share their south Pacific idyll.

**‘Y**ou need to make allowances for some lodge managers who run tourism businesses as well as doing their fishing and agricultural work – this may cause irregularity in service...’ – Mare visitors’ guidebook.

These are problems a holidaymaker will never worry about in the over-water bungalows of Bora Bora or in the fancy five-star hotels of Nusa Dua. But then the handful of Western tourists who know enough about Mare to come and visit have never been enough to keep the local Kanak population out of their pawpaw patches. When I show up at the island’s tiny, makeshift concrete airport one bright starry evening in May, I’m the only Westerner.

Gilbert – who drives me to the simple resort I’ll be staying at – tells me there are no street lights on Mare (there are in fact two, Gilbert). There’s barely a single restaurant or cafe, either, or a clothing store, and most food must be bought at the island’s once-a-week market that starts when the supply ship arrives from Noumea on Saturdays at dawn. In the darkness we pass small villages of basic huts and concrete homes. The speed limit is 50km/h but there are no cars on these roads after dark, and the island’s cows, Mare’s main traffic problem, are sleeping and therefore less likely to wander onto the roads.

Mare is one of three Loyalty Islands in New Caledonia, the best known of which – Lifou – lies just a few kilometres to our north.

Despite the fact that it sits inside the world’s largest lagoon and is just half an hour’s flight from Noumea (which itself is less than three hours’ flying time from Sydney), Mare is virtually unknown to Australian tourists. And yet it offers everything anyone could ever expect of a South Seas escape.

Protected by the world’s second-largest barrier reef, Mare is a raised

coral atoll, home to some of the south Pacific’s prettiest beaches, fringed by stunning lagoons and backed by sharp, pitted limestone cliffs. Its landscape is unusually striking – across the entire island, fossilised coral rock is honeycombed with grottoes and pools of iridescent freshwater much cooler than the temperature of the lagoon.

It’s part of one of the world’s best diving regions – tropical fish, sea turtles, manta rays and rare dugong roam these warm waters.

Locals live in sleepy villages scattered throughout the island; they’re mostly subsistence farmers and fishermen living like they belong in another century entirely.

But few people come to visit; and so Mare’s young leave for a taste of the bright lights – places with three street lights and more – in Noumea and further afield to New Zealand and Australia.

The chiefs on the island – there are eight districts governed by tribal elders – fret for the future of Mare: like so many southern Pacific islands, its population is dwindling; in 2009 the population dropped to 7000 and this year the figure slid to 5000.



How many, they ask, will still be here in two years’ time? A decade? Depopulation is a big problem across the entire Pacific, and it’s one that has one of Mare’s paramount chiefs, Nidoish Naisseline, deeply troubled.

Resplendent in a Hawaiian shirt and with a shock of white-grey hair slicked down with coconut oil giving him the air of film-star royalty, Naisseline takes me walking on his private beach one afternoon.

“Something must be done to make the young people stay,” he says. “Or this place will be gone forever. They are bored, there is nothing here for them. What good is all this without people?”

The Loyalty Islands are the isles of legends. Superstition dictates much of daily life – Naisseline tells me he knew something would come from the sea to save them; he says he saw it in a dream.

That something, it seems, is hardly a mythical beast or an enchantress from the ocean, but rather a gigantic cruise liner carrying 1900 holidaying Australians and dumping them at Mare’s main port, Tardine, and onto Mare’s pristine, empty beaches and into her freshwater swimming holes.

Tomorrow, the ship is due in port. I’ve been here two days and the last thing I wish to do is share my private paradise with anyone, let alone a shipload of Australians.

To prepare myself, I travel to Tardine. It must surely boast one of the Pacific’s prettiest settings: old coral, concrete and limestone buildings are built beside a sweeping bay that serves Mare as a harbour; sunburnt pigs are housed by the foreshore in pens made from coral and are kept quiet on a steady diet of coconuts, sweetening their meat. Backyards of playful children swing from avocado trees laden with oversize fruit, darting between hibiscus and



frangipanis and clothes lines tied between coconut and casuarina trees. A new mooring has been built for the cruise ships and as the sun sets in a sea of burnt orange, I jump from it into the warm, mirrored waters among schools of bright-blue parrot fish.

Local teenagers swim around me, showing off their seasoned gill-like lungs. As they dry off on the dock, I ask them (one teenager can speak English and translates) if they’ll leave Mare. “I want to go to New Zealand,” one says. “I will work in Noumea,” another says. “There is

## Young children gather at every vantage point for a look.

nothing for us here.” Another asks me questions about Australia: “I will go there,” he declares.

We often forget, in our quest to discover that ultimate reward of the traveller – a paradise no one knows about and which we wish to keep for ourselves forever – that a price is sometimes paid for such solitude. Study the islands of the south Pacific and you’ll see an overwhelming trend towards depopulation; the utopia we seek is often the entrapment locals wish to flee.

Is it perhaps selfish, then, to want to keep places such as Mare secret so that our once-in-a-lifetime visits are free from other visitors? Or should we hope these communities come to enjoy some of the easy prosperity of our modern lives?

Next morning I arrive early at Tardine as the Pacific Jewel docks.

Its size dwarfs the bay and kids stare with mouths open. There’s excitement in the humid air and children gather at every vantage point for a look at these Western visitors – many children have never left the island and have had little involvement with Westerners.

A local tourism representative I’d met yesterday looks proud as punch: “They made an effort, I am happy,” she says.

Mare’s extroverts have found nirvana: a rotund performer commandeers the town’s only microphone and welcomes every passenger; bashful old women sell fresh coconut cakes and fruits, giggling like little girls as compliments are dished out. CFP francs change hands, more than passes through Tardine in a typical month.

The village’s school stops temporarily as the headmistress brings curious children outside. Locals set up fish barbecues in their backyards, others charge a tiny fee to swim in their private limestone pools.

Every school bus on the island is dispatched to transport passengers to secret lagoons, wide sandy beaches and natural attractions such as the Bone Hole – one of the world’s largest sunken holes.

It’s a logistical masterpiece in a community better known for vegetable farming. Simple food stalls are set up on Mare’s best beaches, and other entrepreneurs sell cheap cold beer. At one stall I buy two beers and leave my change as a tip. Looking uncomfortable, the stall owner walks all the way back to me. “Too much,” he says, returning the equivalent of 50¢.

The island swallows 1200 or so people who disembark,



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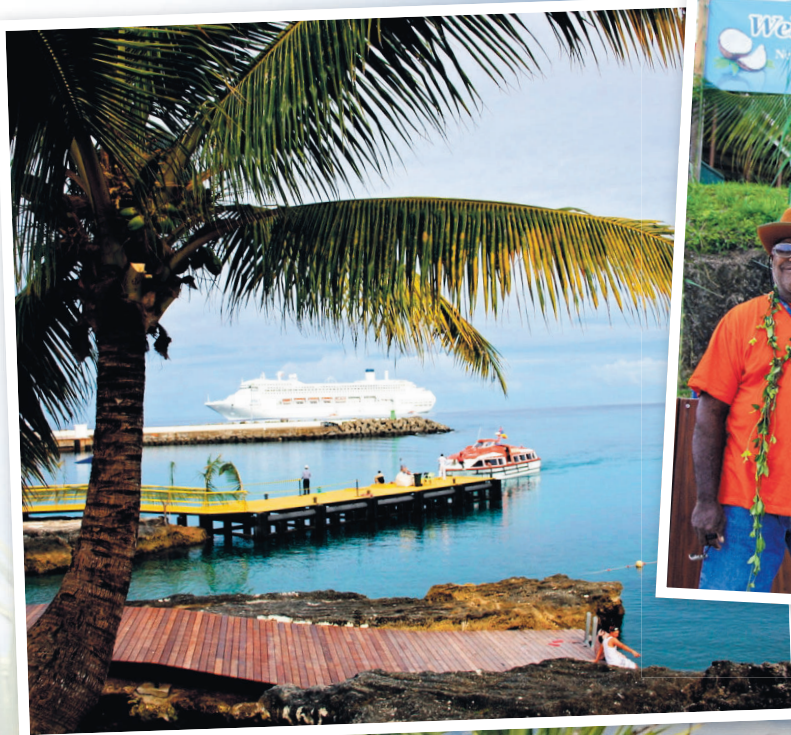
disappearing down its sunken holes and into its limestone grottoes. It seems to me to be a unique chance for passengers to experience how simple life once was, long before the T-shirt vendors arrive. It allows a fleeting glimpse inside an unspoilt world, the likes of which most passengers probably only thought existed in the pages of childhood books. While I fear what tourism can do to unsuspecting islands, at least Mare gets to wave goodbye to visitors within the day and will only be visited 14 times in a year.

Seven hours later, the Pacific Jewel leaves and everything is exactly as it was. I return to the warm waters of Tardine's harbour. Around me, exhausted locals swim, washing the sweat off from a busy but profitable day.

That night a feast is prepared to celebrate a successful visit. Under an impossibly starry night sky, fresh fish, lobster, crab, pork, beef and chicken are dished out in ridiculous proportions.

A paramount chief tells me tourism has actually brought a unification of tribes and clans who traditionally fought. He says the suspicion initially felt by many has gone, mostly because they hope young people may see a future in Mare. But as the locals drag me up to dance and food is served thick and fast beside a beach where I see turtles moving in the moonlight, I'd rather keep this part entirely to myself.

The writer travelled courtesy of P&O Cruises.



Pacific magic ... clockwise from far bottom left, the locals live in villages across the island; freshwater lakes are aplenty; a cruise ship arrives at Mare; the islanders prepare to welcome their visitors; spectacular beaches abound. Photos: Alamy; Craig Tansley



## Trip notes

**Cruising there** Pacific Jewel and Pacific Pearl will visit Mare on 14 different cruises from Sydney this year and 14 visits next year. Pacific Jewel will call at Mare during an eight-night cruise departing Sydney on February 10. Prices start at \$759 a person, quad share. Pacific Pearl will visit Mare as part of its nine-night cruise departing Sydney on March 8. Prices start at \$809 a person, quad share. pocruises.com.au, 13 24 94.

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