

# Île des Pins



With its towering araucaria pines, soft-as-silk beaches and dazzling blue waters, Île des Pins is simply magic. There are caves, forests and old penal-colony ruins to be explored, a hill to climb if you're feeling energetic, or beaches to lie on if you're not.

Its idyllic tropical-island scenery makes it an ideal place for a romantic getaway. Baies de Kuto and Kanumera at the southwestern end of the island and baie d'Oro on the eastern coast have heavenly beaches and calm, turquoise lagoons. And naturally, on this island paradise, seafood is available in abundance. However, the local speciality is *escargot* (snails), a culinary surprise for most visitors.

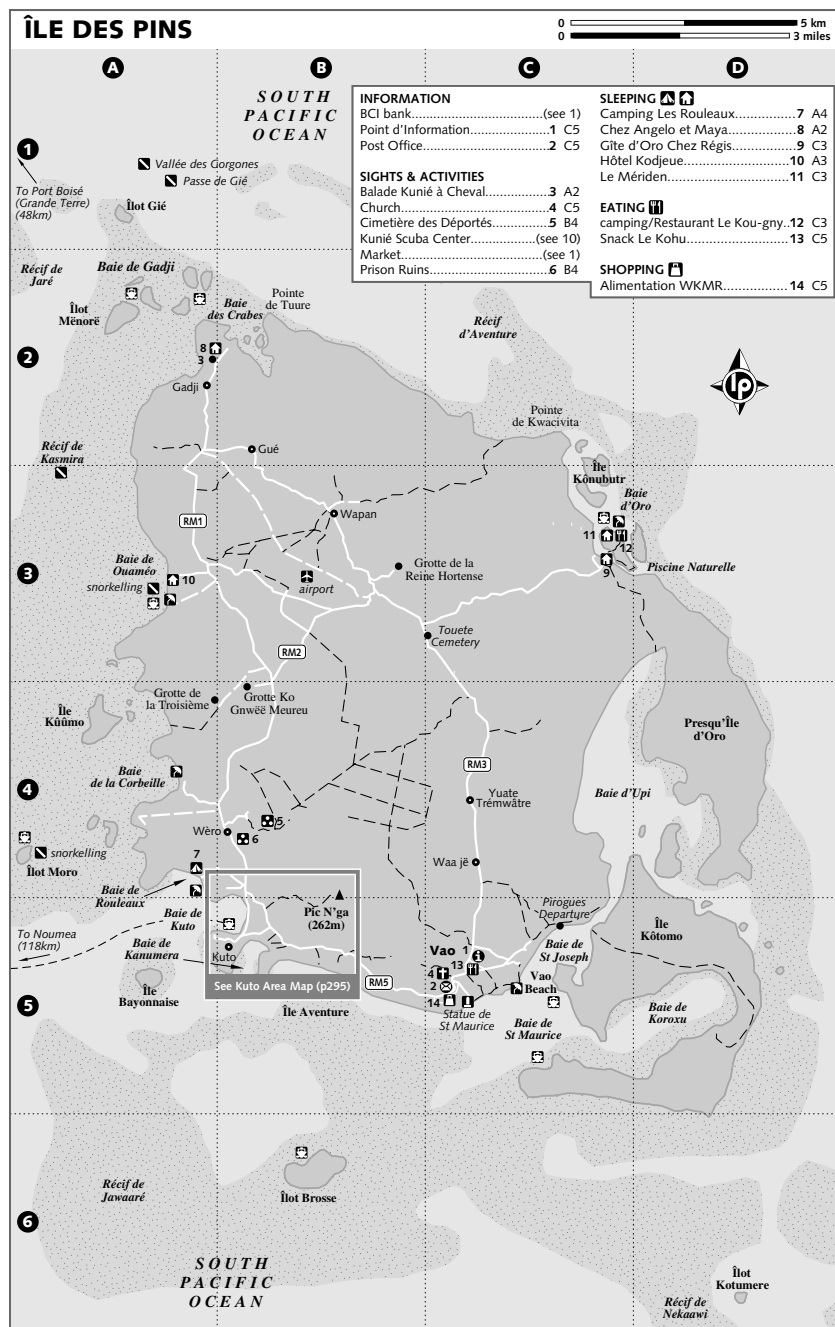
A trip on a pirogue (outrigger sailing canoe) is a must on Île des Pins. Your stay on the island isn't quite complete if you haven't skimmed lightly over the aquamarine bays on one of these sturdy ancient sea craft. Divers and snorkellers can also discover the island's fascinating underwater world.

The nicest thing about New Caledonia's top tourist destination is that despite its popularity, Îles des Pins remains tranquil and simple.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Skimming lightly across tranquil baie d'Upi in a **pirogue** (p294)
- Diving into a beautiful underwater world beneath the azure lagoon at **baie de Ouaméo** and **baie de Gadji** (p296)
- Snorkelling at the idyllic **la piscine naturelle** (p294) near baie d'Oro
- Relaxing on the silky sand beaches at **Kanumera** and **Kuto** (p295)
- Climbing **Pic N'ga** (p295) for a panoramic view over the island and its mesmerizing turquoise bays
- Venturing into the dark recesses of **Grotte de la Reine Hortense** (p297)
- Visiting the haunting **prison ruins** (p296) of the convict penitentiary





## History

Known as Kunié in the local language, the island was christened Isle of Pines by James Cook. But the island was inhabited long before the English explorer arrived, first by Lapita people around 2000 BC followed by Melaneseans.

In 1774 Cook became the first European to sight Île des Pins. However, the island's reefs made it difficult to approach and he eventually landed on a small islet, which he named Botany Island. The tall pines, *Araucaria cookii*, of Île des Pins are named after the British navigator.

In the early 1800s Europeans in search of sandalwood arrived on the island. They were followed by Protestant missionaries from the London Missionary Society in 1841 and, several years later, by Catholic missionaries who had greater success in converting the local population.

France designated the island as a penal centre back in 1872. Kanaks on the west side of the island were moved to the east side to make room for around 3000 Communards and, later, convicts who were incarcerated there. After the 1878 Kanak uprising (see p194), 750 Kanaks from the mainland were exiled to the island. The penitentiary on Île des Pins was eventually closed in 1911 and the land that had been taken from the local Kanaks was then returned to them.

## Information

In addition to the information centres located in Vao (see p294) there is an **information desk** (☎ 46 14 00; idp@cci.nc) at the airport that is open for flight arrivals and departures. The **gendarmerie** (Map p295) is on the peninsula at Kuto.

**Destination Île des Pins** (☎ 24 92 80; info@dp.canl.nc; 12 bis rue Général Mangin; ☎ 8am-12.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-12.30pm Sat) in Noumea (see p232) can book accommodation, car rental and activities.

## LOCAL CUSTOMS

There are two main things to remember on Île des Pins: topless bathing is forbidden as is climbing the taboo rock, **Le Rocher**, in baie de Kanumera. This is the large vegetation-covered rock with wooden stairs up the side that is separated from the beach at high tide.

## Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

There is diving in the lagoon at baie de Ouaméo and Gadji, while an underwater cave dive is possible at Grotte de la Troisième.

The best places to snorkel are at the two ends of baie de Kanumera. You will see coral and fish, and, if you are lucky, much more.

### SURFING

The only place you are likely to find surf on Île des Pins is the aptly named baie des Rouleaux (Roller bay). The best months for surfing and kite surfing are July and August. You will need to bring your own equipment as there is none available for hire. To get there see Camping Les Rouleaux, p298.

### Eating

The culinary speciality on the island is *escargot* (snails), which are collected from the island's forests. They're often served as an entree. As on the Loyalty Islands, lobster and other fresh seafood are specialties and you can also sample *bougna* (traditional Kanak meal). As in most places outside Noumea the majority of restaurants are attached to hotels and *gîtes* (bungalows) and guests need to book meals in advance.

### Getting There & Away

Getting to the island involves a 20-minute flight or a 2¼-hour boat trip from Noumea. The *Betico* (see p328), which docks at Kuto, sails three times week and **Air Calédonie** (☎ airport 44 88 46, Kuto 44 88 50; vente@air-caledonie.nc; www.air-caledonie.nc; ✈ 7.30-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 7.30-11.30am Sat) operates at least two flights per day (one way/return 8150/16,350CFP, 20 minutes).

### BON APPÉTIT

One Île des Pins claim to fame is *escargot* (an edible snail). These large land molluscs are collected in their hundreds off the floor of the tropical forest. The snails are soaked in water for two days to cleanse them, after which they're cooked, in true French style, in parsley butter and garlic. Usually about 6cm long, these snails are not to be confused with giant African snails, which are all over New Caledonia but are not eaten and are considered a pest in neighbouring countries.

## Getting Around

Most hotels and *gîtes* (p297) can arrange airport and wharf transfers. Several of them hire scooters and cars.

Hôtel Kou-Bugny and Gîte Nataiwatch in Kuto hire **scooters** (per half-/full day 3120/4680CFP). Hôtel Kou-Bugny, Gîte Nataiwatch and Hôtel Kodjeu hire **cars** (per day weekday/weekend 6650/8320CFP). Rates are cheaper if you're a guest at the hotel or *gîte*. Rates include airport and wharf drop-offs and pick-ups as well as petrol. Relais Le Kuberka in Kuto hires cars to guests only. **NC-First** (☎ 46 10 90, fax 46 10 91; car rental per day from 7280CFP) is a car-hire company in Kuto.

**Kunie Loca Fun** (Map p295; ☎ 43 54 80; per half-/full day 5000/7000CFP) hires scooter cars (miniature two-person vehicles). You must be over 16 to drive them but a driver's licence is not necessary.

Cycling is another great way to explore Île des Pins since there aren't too many steep climbs and distances between places are relatively short. Gîte Nataiwatch rents **bikes** (per half-/full day 1000/1500CFP). Another transport option is with **Taxi Île des Pins** (☎ 79 19 26). Arrange for this service well in advance.

Most accommodation places can arrange island tours (per person around 1700CFP).

## VAO

Vao, at the southern end of Île des Pins, is the island's main centre. However, this doesn't mean that it's big. There's a *mairie* (town hall), bank, clinic, shop and not much more. Nevertheless, there are several interesting

sights and activities in Vao and neighbouring baie de St Joseph and baie de St Maurice.

## Information

The **Point d'Information** (tourist information centre; ☎ 46 10 27; <http://ile-des-pins.com>; ☎ 8-11.30am & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am Sat) is opposite the red-roofed market. There's a **Banque Calédonienne d'Investissement** (BCI bank; ☎ 46 10 45; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3.30pm Mon & Fri, 8am-noon Tue & Wed, 1-3.30pm Thu) with an ATM inside the same building. There is also a post office.

## Sights

### CATHOLIC CHURCH

Vao is dominated by its large Catholic church with its red steeple. It has beautiful carvings around the altar and wooden panelling in the ceiling. Colonial-era mission buildings surround it. Behind the church a path leads up the hill to a small chapel where there are views over the village to the sea.

### SCULPTORS

The sculptors on Île des Pins are renowned for their woodcarving talent. Several roundabouts in Noumea are decorated with totem poles wearing beguiling expressions and leaning at odd angles. The beautiful carvings at the airport and in the grounds of Hôtel Le Méridien in baie d'Oro are the work of sculptors from Vao. You can visit their workshops in the village. William Paouro is based opposite Snack Le Kohu and Samuel Vendegou lives 200m from the church at the intersection of the main road north.

## PIROGUE EXCURSION

Île des Pins' legendary wooden pirogues with their triangular sails are, not surprisingly, one of the island's most popular excursions. Most excursions follow a one-way itinerary. The pirogues leave from the northern end of baie de St Joseph (past the football field) and sail serenely up the clear waters of baie d'Upi. Passengers are dropped off at the far end of the bay where a path leads through an old forest. The path ends at a narrow waterway leading from the open sea to baie d'Oro. If you follow the waterway west you'll end up at Hôtel Le Méridien. Wade across and follow a path east to *la piscine naturelle*, a clear blue pool cut off from the sea by a high reef. This is a wonderful snorkelling site where you can see tropical fish, large patterned molluscs in white shells, and moray eels. From *la piscine naturelle* another waterway leads north to a sandy beach at baie d'Oro.

Most hotels and *gîtes* can organise pirogue excursions (around 3800CFP) with transfers included (to baie de St Joseph and from baie d'Oro). To do an excursion independently (per person 1500CFP) you can simply turn up at baie de St Joseph before 8am. But if you are doing the one-way trip you will have to arrange a pick-up from baie d'Oro. Pack a picnic or order lunch at Camping/Restaurant Le Kou-gny (p298), Gîte d'Oro Chez Régis (p298) or Hôtel Le Méridien (p298).

## BAIE DE ST MAURICE

Only 600m from the church is baie de St Maurice. Above the beach, a fence of carved totem poles encloses a statue of Jesus, a harmonious representation of traditional spirituality and Christian faith. This monument commemorates the arrival of the first missionaries on Île des Pins and is also a war memorial. The carvings set against the lagoon backdrop make it a compulsory photo stop, so get your cameras ready.

To get there from Kuto turn right just before the church and head straight down to the sea.

## BAIE DE ST JOSEPH

Baie de St Joseph, about 1.5km east of the church, is the departure point for pirogue excursions (see opposite). Under the trees along the beach you may see sailors building their pirogues.

To get there follow the road straight down from the church or, if you're entering Vao from the north, turn left before the football field just before Snack Le Kohu.

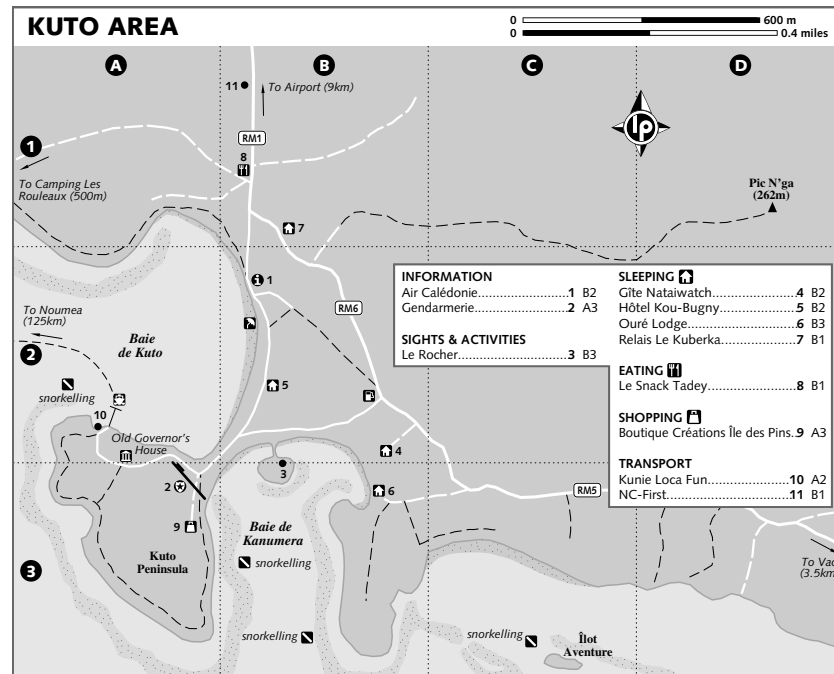
## KUTO

Kuto, 6km west of Vao, has a couple of gorgeous beaches and interesting prison ruins. If you arrive at Île des Pins by ferry, the exquisite turquoise waters of baie de Kuto and baie de Kanumera are the first breathtaking sight you'll have of the island. A narrow strip of land separates the two bays. The sand on the beaches is so fine that if you lie down on it, chances are that is where you will stay for the remainder of your sojourn. The road between Kuto and Kanumera tunnels through a thick forest where the air is cool and silent.

## Sights & Activities

### PIC N'GA

Near Kuto, a path leads to Pic N'ga (262m), the island's highest point. It takes about 45 minutes to reach the summit. It is a steady climb up an exposed rocky track but the views are worth the effort. Even if you only make it halfway, you will still have fantastic views of the bays. From the top you can see over the entire island ringed by its bright blue lagoon. There is also a shady thicket



of trees where you can catch your breath before heading back down.

The signposted path starts 200m south of Relais Le Kuberka on the main road.

### CIMETIÈRE DES DÉPORTÉS

After the Paris uprising in 1871, 3000 Communards were deported to Île des Pins. Over 240 of them died on the island. Most of them were buried at the **Cimetière des Déportés** (Map p292), 2km north of baie de Kuto. There is a monument listing the names of all the deportees who died including some who drowned when the boat they were trying to escape in sank. The simple graves are surrounded by rectangles of small stones. Only two of the graves are marked. The cemetery is 700m from the turn-off.

### PRISON RUINS

A thick stone wall surrounds the **prison ruins** (Map p292), which date back to Île des Pins' convict days. After the Communards first exiled there were given amnesty in 1879, convicts arrived on the island. You can wander through the arched entrance into the eerie silence where the internal buildings with their overgrown walls and windows covered by rusted iron bars are slowly disintegrating. The ruins are beside the main road about 1km north of baie de Kuto.

### AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Ouré Lodge** (☎ 43 13 15; ourelodge@lagoon.nc; garden/lagoon view/beach d bungalows 26,950/32,950/38,950; 🍴 🚶) This lodge sits on Kanumera's gorgeous beach overlooking the turquoise lagoon. It is a modern place with comfortably furnished, attractive wooden bungalows set amongst coconut trees. It is surrounded by serene grounds dotted with tropical flowering plants. Wide sliding doors open on to covered decks. The bungalows have minibars and Internet connection.

In front of the lodge a swimming pool is set harmoniously in a landscaped garden. The thatched restaurant is spacious and looks out over the pool to the bay beyond. It serves an *escargot* entree and lobster main for 5000CFP. This end of the bay is sheltered and there is good snorkelling. Airport and wharf return transfers cost 1800CFP and 700CFP, respectively.

From the main road beside the ruins, a track leads 200m to a restored water reservoir, which dates from the prison era and is still in use today.

### Shopping

**Boutique Créations Île des Pins** (☎ 46 12 68; 🕒 9-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm) This boutique near the wharf sells wonderful souvenirs of Île des Pins including coffee-table books (in English), postcards, and hand-painted tops and *pareos* (sarongs). A DVD (3950CFP) featuring underwater and island scenes on Île des Pins is also available. Several of the books on the island were written by the boutique's owner Hilary Roots. She and her partner speak English and German as well as French. In summer the boutique closes later.

### GROTTE DE LA TROISIÈME

This large sunken cave is in a forest about 8km north of Kuto. With the forest vegetation towering above, it has an eerie feeling especially if you are alone. If you climb down a little way into the wide opening you can then peek into the dark recesses of the cave; better still, scramble down into the darkness. Be careful as it is rough underfoot. The cave floor is filled with water. Kunié Scuba Center (see p225 organises dives in the underground caves for experienced divers.

There's a signposted turn-off on the main road shortly after the first turning to the airport coming from Kuto. Follow the dirt road for 800m. The road continues through the forest but a wide turning area indicates where you should stop. There's a path here leading to the cave 50m away.

### BAIE DE OUAMÉO & GADJI

Baie de Ouaméo has a long stretch of beach facing the open sea. It is about 1km from the main road. The road there passes through a patch of forest with ancient banyan trees. The main reason to visit is to stay at Hôtel Kodjeu or to go diving.

Further north is Gadji at baie des Crabes. It is an isolated but pretty spot, about 2km from the main road, with just a couple of houses. Baie des Crabes is very picturesque with rocky islets dotted around a turquoise bay. The beach, however, is muddy and not suitable for swimming.

Diving is conducted by Kunié Scuba Center (see p225), which also runs excursions to picturesque islets in baie de Gadji.

**Balade Kunié à Cheval** (☎ 49 93 07; per hour/half-day 2500/6000CFP) organises horse treks along the beach, through the forest or up to the plateau. To get here, turn down a dirt road at the 'ranch' signpost on the road to Gadji.

### GROTTE DE LA REINE HORTENSE

In the middle of the island, **Grotte de la Reine Hortense** (admission 200CFP) is an immense cave in a limestone cliff. From the car park, a path leads through a lush tropical forest past wild banana and papaya trees, giant ferns and towering tropical hardwoods to the huge cave entrance at the base of the cliff. Be careful, as inside the cave the ground is slippery.

This immense cavern was where Queen Hortense, wife of a local chief, is said to have taken refuge for several months during intertribal conflict in 1855. Stalactites hang from the roof and in places stalagmites push up to meet them. Just inside the entrance is an altar to the Virgin Mary. At the very back of the cave is a flat rock ledge where the queen is said to have slept. Light floods the back of the cavern through an opening in the roof from where the roots of a banyan tree descend into the cave.

There is an honesty box by a hut in the car park if the caretaker is not there to collect the entrance fee. You can borrow some torches, found next to the honesty box, but it is best to bring your own in case the batteries are flat. The cave is about 500m from the main road down a sealed road. The turn-off is 300m north of the airport road junction.

### BAIE D'ORO

Baie d'Oro is yet another tranquil bay enclosed by a reef to the east. To the north and west there are islets and coastline covered in Île des Pins' distinctive araucaria pines. The distant rumble of surf enhances the bay's sense of isolation. The main attraction at baie d'Oro is *la piscine naturelle* (see p294).

Baie d'Oro is 5km from the main road. The turn-off is 9km north of Vao opposite a small cemetery.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Most hotels and *gîtes* serve *escargot* as well as lobster and other seafood. Costs of meals range widely from around 1800CFP to

### SANDALWOOD

Sandalwood has been sought by traders in the Pacific for nearly two centuries. In the early 1840s traders almost depleted Île des Pins' sources within two years of arriving on the island. They then plundered the Loyalty Islands and later the east coast of Grande Terre. The main market for sandalwood at that time was China. These days it's still in demand, especially in France, where its essential oil is used in perfumes. The tree, *Santalum album*, is slow-growing and has a slim, lithe torso draped by small, shiny leaves. The roots and the yellowish heartwood, which grows up to about 1m high, contain the prized oil.

more than 3200CFP for a plate of *escargots* and from 3800CFP to around 5000CFP for lobster. They can also make sandwiches if you want a picnic lunch.

### Vao

**Snack Le Kohu** (☎ 46 10 23; dishes from 900CFP; 🕒 7.30am-5pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 7.30am-3pm Sat & Sun) This blue-roofed snack bar sits beside the main road heading north from Vao. It has tables under thatched shelters with sculpted posts and is a pleasant place to stop for lunch. The snack bar serves a range of meals including chicken or steak and chips, sandwiches (from 300CFP) and a dish of the day (1250CFP).

The **market** (🕒 6-11am), selling local produce, is held on Wednesdays and Saturdays. It's opposite the tourist information office. For groceries, stop at **Alimentation WKMR** (☎ 46 11 29; 🕒 7-11am & 4-7pm Mon-Sat), on the main road at the western end of Vao.

### Kuto

**Gîte Nataiwatch** (☎ 46 11 13; www.nataiwatch.com; 3-person camp site 1800CFP, 3-/4-person bungalow 7500/8000CFP; dishes 1500CFP) Set in a forest only a short stroll from the Kanumera beach is this simple and relaxed place. You can camp anywhere under the trees. The smaller concrete bungalows have a bathroom, the larger wooden ones have a kitchen but no bathroom. Airport/wharf return transfers cost 1500/500CFP.

**Relais Le Kuberka** (☎ 46 11 18; 1-/2-person camp site 1040/1560CFP, s/d 6200/6700CFP, 4-person bungalow

8200CFP; dishes 2000CFP; 🍷) This is a quiet place with a swimming pool, about 350m back from the beach. Rooms and bungalows, with fridges and bathrooms, open onto a small garden. Its restaurant is renowned for its cuisine, especially its seafood dishes. Airport/wharf return transfers cost 1300/400CFP.

**Hôtel Kou-Bugny** (📞 46 18 00; [www.kou-bugny.com](http://www.kou-bugny.com); standard/deluxe bungalows 16,500/19,500CFP; 🍷) This hotel, across the road from beautiful Kuto beach, has traditionally inspired bungalows. They are arranged in a garden under a thick canopy of trees. The bungalows have minibars. There's an excellent seafood restaurant. Airport and wharf return transfers cost 1700CFP and 400CFP, respectively.

**Camping Les Rouleaux** (Map p292; 📞 46 11 16; camping per person 1000CFP) Unlike the island's other beaches the one at this secluded camp site has waves, attracting surfers in July and August. It has thatched shelters with tables. The beach is private and access to it costs 100CFP for picnickers. If you'd like to sample *bougna* it will cost 3500CFP. It's great value as there's enough food for four or five people. Heading north from Kuto, the turn-off is just before Le Snack Tadey. Immediately after you turn take the right fork.

**Le Snack Tadey** (📞 46 10 68; sandwiches 400CFP, dishes 1100CFP; 🕒 8am-5pm) This little snack bar is just north of Kuto beach. Opening hours are unreliable but if it's closed go round the back and if there is someone there they'll open up. The attached shop (open from 7.30am to noon and 2pm to 5pm Monday to Saturday; mornings only on Sundays) has a limited range of stock.

### Baie de Ouaméo & Gadji

**Chez Angelo et Maya** (📞 88 19 74; camp site 1000CFP, case 1500CFP; meals 900CFP) This remote homestay, at the end of the road in Gadji, has a *case* (traditional Kanak house) where visitors stay. It is set apart from the family home. Guests sleep traditional-style on mats on the floor. If you're looking for an opportunity to swap stories with a local family and sample Kanak cuisine, you'll love it. By prior arrangement, the owners can arrange transport to meet you.

**Hôtel Kodjeue** (📞 46 11 42; [resa@kodjeue.nc](mailto:resa@kodjeue.nc); 3-/4-/5-person bungalow 21,000/26,000/16,000CFP; dishes 1800CFP) This hotel sits in open grounds which, combined with the view of the sea stretching to the horizon, give it an exposed feeling.

The bay is calm, though, and the sunsets are gorgeous. There is a kitchenette in the five-person bungalows. The hotel also has a small shop (open from 7.30am to noon and 4pm to 6.30pm). An *escargot* or lobster meal will cost 3850CFP and 5800CFP, respectively. Airport and wharf return transfers cost 600CFP per person.

### Baie d'Oro

**Gîte d'Oro Chez Régis** (📞 43 45 55; [www.gitedoro-iledespins.com](http://www.gitedoro-iledespins.com); camping per tent 1500CFP, d bungalow 8150CFP; dishes 1800CFP) People flock to this *gîte* from all over the island to sample its speciality: *bougna* (from 2550CFP). Arrive around 10.30am to see the *bougna* being put in the earth oven or around noon to see it being taken out. Don't forget your camera. It also serves *escargot* (2200CFP) and lobster (3800CFP). The restaurant is in an open thatched *faré* (shelter) beside the waterway. The appealing wooden thatched bungalows are decorated in traditional style. They are simple but comfortable and have private bathrooms. It's only a 10-minute walk to *la piscine naturelle* or baie d'Oro. Airport and wharf return transfers cost 1200CFP and 1600CFP per person, respectively.

**Hôtel Le Méridien** (📞 46 15 15; [meridienidp.com](http://meridienidp.com); bungalow d delux/deluxe/premium/55,000/65,000/75,000CFP; lunch/dinner 4500/5000CFP; 🍷) Situated in an idyllic spot, this hotel is pure tropical luxury. It has views of baie d'Oro and of tall pointed araucarias silhouetted against the sky on the surrounding islets. The grounds are landscaped into a forest setting. An optical illusion would have you believe the swimming pool flows into the calm lagoon, as if you could float from one to the other. Breakfast for two and return transfers to the airport are included in the room price. There is a supplementary 1000CFP tax on the rates.

**Camping/Restaurant Le Kou-gny** (📞 46 10 65, 83 59 21; camping per tent 1200CFP; set menu 2200CFP) Renowned for its lobster meals (3900CFP), this place is popular with day-trippers to baie d'Oro. It has a beautiful location on a secluded beach beside the tranquil bay. Its rustic simplicity is what makes it special. Tables are set out under the trees on the sand. To get here, cross the bridge to Hôtel Le Méridien and follow the path to the right that leads through the forest. It's a five-minute walk. Le Kou-gny does not arrange transport for guests.

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