

# Australia-Tuvalu deal brings a visa-free Pacific closer

by Stephen Howes

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The Falepili Union signed by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Tuvalu Prime Minister Kausea Natano on 10 November 2023

Photo Credit: [Facebook/AlboMP](#)

The announcement that Australia will provide 280 permanent residency visas to Tuvalu each year as part of a [new treaty between the two countries](#) is the latest in a series of [pathbreaking Pacific migration initiatives](#) unveiled by Australia's Labor government. In this blog I explore how the new Tuvalu visa will fit into the evolving Pacific migration regime, and how it lines up with the calls made this year by [Samoan Prime Minister Fiam?](#) and [Fijian Deputy Prime Minister Prasad](#) for visa-free access across the Pacific.

To provide the context, let's start with the Australia-New Zealand (ANZ) special relationship. As a result of it, any citizen of one of these two countries can move to the other country, obtain a visa on arrival, and stay and work there as long as they want. By virtue of their possession of New Zealand passports, Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue citizens have the same access to New Zealand and Australia.

This ANZ+ arrangement sets the gold standard for Pacific visa-free access. The five countries it involves make up more than a quarter of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) membership (19 countries) making this by far the most significant form of PIF integration in existence.

One level down are the ANZ Pacific lottery permanent resident visas: New Zealand's long-established [Pacific Access Category Resident Visa](#) and [Samoan Quota Resident Visa](#) and Australia's (currently being created) [Pacific Engagement Visa](#) (PEV). These Pacific lottery visas extend the ANZ+ arrangement to the rest of the Pacific but in a watered-down form. The ANZ+ arrangement is uncapped, and there are no work, language or health pre-travel requirements. The Pacific lottery visas are capped, and have work, language and health requirements. Nevertheless, they are (or will be) very important in providing Pacific island citizens with preferential access to permanent residence in New Zealand and Australia.

And now we have the Tuvalu visa. From what has been said so far, it will be for

permanent residency, and will be allocated by lottery, but it will not have a work requirement.

Moreover, while the Tuvalu visa is capped, it is a very high cap. The New Zealand Pacific lottery visas are typically equal to about half a percent or less of the population of the countries to which they are made available, and Australia's Pacific lottery will likely be similar. By contrast, 280 Tuvalu visas equates to 2.5% of the total population of Tuvalu (11,200).

Add to that the 75 visas Tuvalu gets under the New Zealand lottery visa, and the 75 it might get under the Australian equivalent, the PEV. (The New Zealand quota has actually been temporarily increased to 150 post-COVID, but was 75 pre-COVID.) That is 430 visas or 3.8% of the population, which would represent an extraordinarily high level of out-migration in a single year, let alone in repeated years, in fact one of the highest in the world.

Research by myself and colleagues in collaboration with the World Bank in the 2017 *Labour Mobility Pacific Possible Report* concluded that only "2,200 Tuvaluans will have the desire and financial means necessary to migrate". Further research by my colleagues Richard Curtain and Matthew Dornan in 2019 came to a similar conclusion. These are only educated guesses, but if they are right, everyone who wants to migrate from Tuvalu will be able to within only five years.

An alternative scenario is that everyone in Tuvalu will want to live in Australia or New Zealand for at least four years in order to get an ANZ passport (five for New Zealand). Once there is a larger Tuvaluan community in Australia, they will provide air fares for new entrants, and the new entrants will simply make do if they can't get a job. Under this scenario, everyone will want one of the new visas. And, even allowing for some population growth, everyone will have migrated within 30 years.

However it pans out, one thing we can be sure of is that the new Tuvalu visa will be very popular. In 2019, before the COVID interruption, for every NZ Pacific Access Category visa available to Tuvalu, there were 16 applicants, just over 10% of the population.

In summary, the Tuvalu visa is not as liberal as the ANZ+ arrangement. In the latter, migrants can simply come and go, and in unlimited numbers. In the former, you'll have to do a four or five year stint to get the right to simply "come and go", and numbers will be limited, but at a very high level. At the same time, the Tuvalu visa is much closer to visa-free access than the ANZ Pacific lottery visas: no work requirement and much higher numbers.

Analysts will disagree over whether dropping the work requirement makes sense

(given concerns about integration), but there is no doubt that the Tuvalu visa marks a new milestone in the journey towards Pacific visa-free access.

How important that milestone is depends on how much of a precedent the Tuvalu agreement is. Tuvalu is a country that uses the Australian dollar as its legal tender and that recognises Taiwan rather than mainland China. Asking it not to enter into a security agreement with China is to ask for not very much. Nauru is the same category as Tuvalu (uses the Australian dollar and recognises Taiwan), but the two other countries in the Pacific that recognise Taiwan already have a security agreement with the United States. It will be much harder to get countries that are already receiving aid from China, such as Kiribati, to agree only to receive “critical infrastructure” aid from the superpower if Australia gives consent (as the new treaty requires of Tuvalu).

Nauru and Tuvalu are also similar in being tiny, both having populations of not much above 10,000. More visas will have to be offered to the other, larger Pacific island countries to make them similarly attractive offers.

So, beyond Nauru, I'm not sure how widely the Tuvalu deal can be replicated. Nevertheless, it surely will not go unnoticed in the Pacific that **Tuvalu asked Australia** for a deal, and got one. A third variant of preferential visa access, intermediate to the ANZ+ arrangement and the Pacific lotteries, is now on the table for other countries to request.

*For more, I recommend the 2019 Devpol report by Richard Curtain and Matthew Dornan, [A pressure release valve? Migration and climate change in Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu](#).*

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/australia-tuvalu-deal-brings-a-visa-free-pacific-closer-20231114/>