

Island song: a week in Tuvalu

by Tom Bamforth

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Photo: Tom Bamforth

An excerpt from Tom Bamforth's new book The rising tide: among the islands and atolls of the Pacific Ocean.

I opened the throttle and tore down the tarmac, pushing the rusty motor scooter as fast as it could go. The warm night air, thick with salt, flowed around me as the scooter cranked out its top speed and I headed for the edge of the island, to the sea. The atoll narrowed and the houses thinned. Within a few minutes of what seemed like flight, I had arrived at the isthmus of the Funafuti lagoon; a metre-wide strip of land separating the moonlit mercury of the lagoon from the crashing waves of the great Pacific Ocean. Tuvalu was one of the smallest countries on earth, and the trip from end to end of its largest atoll took just twenty minutes on a clapped-out motor scooter. But that short journey into the vast night of sky and ocean, sand and stars – a unity of the elements – made Tuvalu much greater than the sum of its minute islands. During the day, there was the risk of ‘island fever’ – a sense of being trapped forever on this tiny coral atoll. But at night, as every one went to bed, the country seemed to expand with space and freedom and I urged my scooter faster into the encroaching dusk, past the parliament buildings and the shanties at the edge of town, and on into the roar of the ocean and the sonorous grunting of the local pigs.

‘You’re never helpful, Randal’, erupted an annoyed parent to the cabin at large. From the back of the plane the phrase ‘we didn’t have to come here, you know’ floated up from the growing din of annoyance and disquiet as holidaymakers on family tours started to squabble under the stress of the journey. Young lovers, clad in singlets and shorts in anticipation of a holiday in the Pacific sun, were by now freezing in the plane’s arctic air-conditioning. Babies cried with the turbulence and air pressure, while exasperated parents lost their cool after several hours constraining the airborne boredom of their teenage children. This was a desperation

that intensified as the mildewed cold of the cabin gave way to airless morning heat on the tarmac as we transited through the tourist destination of Fiji.

And then the plane grew quiet as we flew on, three hours north toward Tuvalu. The squabbling families were left behind to their resorts and tinned cries of 'Bula' – an idealised Pacific experience of neatly planted rows of frangipani, golf courses and artificial white sand beaches that were hermetically sealed from military coups, urban sprawl and the toughness of village life. In the resorts, Fiji worked as it didn't in reality. Beaming, handsome Fijians set the Pacific tone while, behind the reception counters and in back offices, Indo-Fijian clerks and accountants laboured industriously, turning profits and making sure their guests wanted for neither sun nor smiles nor beer. Bar the tourists clad in singlets and thongs, Fiji in 1960 must have looked like this – an immaculate pre-independence European playground of instantly met needs and exotically pliant locals.

As we flew further from Fiji, there was nothing now beyond the hum of the engines and the distant white tips of the breaking waves below – the white-on-blue mirror of the clouds that thinly strafed the sky above. A pale outline of a lagoon surrounded by coral atolls appeared – a vast bleached semicircle, like the jawbone of an ancient sea-monster – and hinted at more habitable atolls to come.

The resemblance of some of the atolls to ancient sea monsters clearly struck early Tuvaluans, who considered the eel and the flounder to be the creators of the land. Having been friends, the creatures fell out and started to fight over who could carry a heavy stone in a test of strength. Hit in the stomach and badly injured, the eel magically cursed the flounder, whose crushed body became thin and flat and formed the land of Tuvalu. The eel then became round as a coconut as it feasted on the flounder's body, explaining the presence of coconut trees on Tuvalu. Having consumed the flounder, the eel went back to collect the stone they had been carrying together and noticed its three colours: blue, black and white. He threw it in the air, and the blue piece got stuck and did not come back to land. Angrily, he threw the stone again, and this time the black piece became stuck as well. Having thus created day and night, the eel uttered some magic words, and the white part of the stone fell, creating light. A small part of the blue stone still remained, so the eel broke this into eight parts and created the main atolls of Tuvalu.

If Tuvalu's atolls inspired myth and folklore, it has also been significant to Western science. It was on the main atoll, Funafuti, that Charles Darwin's theory about the origins of coral atolls was demonstrated. To answer the question why coral atolls appear in the middle of the ocean while coral itself occurred only in shallow water, Darwin proposed that it grew on the slowly subsiding craters of ancient volcanoes. The growth of the coral kept pace with the subsidence, eventually forming a

habitable landmass that outlined the volcano's rim. Geological expeditions organised by the Royal Society in London in the 1930s drilled into the Funafuti atoll and found at great depths traces of fossilised shallow-water organisms, proving Darwin correct.

I was visiting Tuvalu to manage an international development program and there had been some problems with the project: delays, a lack of reports, budgets that had begun to go slightly awry. Alarm bells had started ringing when I could not get through on the phone from Melbourne. For some reason, the Tuvalu connection was rerouted to the Midwest of the United States, and my afternoon calls to the Tuvalu office of my organisation were diverted to hardware store owners in Ohio and evangelical churches in Wyoming in the middle of their night. When I eventually did get through to my colleagues in Funafuti, their concerns were entirely different from mine. Instead talking about the aid program, there was much discussion of the arrival of an outer-island choir for its centenary celebrations. Days, even weeks, had been declared choral holidays. It had become clear that the only way of discovering what was happening on this archipelago of coral atolls, home to a sovereign nation of eleven thousand people and at a deep remove from the aid agency's Australian headquarters, was to get on a plane and see for myself.

The plane circled above Tuvalu's capital, Funafuti, and eventually glided down, the atoll becoming less bone-like, and more like a living, breathing human settlement as we approached. I stumbled out of the air-conditioned insularity of the cabin, blinded by the sudden light and heat of the runway. The weekly arrival of the plane was a major event on Funafuti, most of whose land was taken over by the airstrip, built by the Americans during World War Two. The short supply of land meant that it had also become the main playground for children during the day. At night, young lovers and those seeking to escape from their extended families camped there to catch the sea breeze and listen to the roar of the ocean. A fire truck had been dispatched shortly before our landing to clear away the last of the children and excited relatives had gathered nearby, carrying shell necklaces and floral headdress as gifts of welcome. Market stalls were conducting a gentle trade. Some locals had taken the opportunity for a lunchtime doze under the shade of a breadfruit tree – an afternoon somnolence that daily overcame the island and stretched on into the early evening.

In Funafuti (whose international airport code was 'FUN'), everything seemed in miniature. The Development Bank of Tuvalu was a one-room building a few metres from the airport, and the parliament house was a small open-sided meeting hall that was used by children to watch the arrival of the weekly flight from Fiji. The towering government administrative office, built by Taiwan in exchange for diplomatic recognition, was the only structure on the atoll more than two storeys high, while the Tuvalu campus of the grandly named University of the South Pacific was a small

classroom and an outdoor meeting table. Between the landing strip, the main road and the government buildings was a maze of paths and side-roads leading to built-up settlements where extended families, sometimes up to thirty people, packed into small, tin-roofed houses.

While the airstrip was the hub of social life, however, its construction had come at a cost. During World War Two, at each narrow tip of the croissant-shaped island, coral had been cut out of the atoll and used to surface the runway, leaving deep trenches on either side. As the population of Funafuti gradually increased with migration from the outer islands, communities sprang up on the only land available to them – the trenches. The communities grew, building stilt houses in the trenches and these slowly filled with rubbish and waste. Every time there were heavy rains or strong winds, damage was caused to the unstable houses. During drought, the opposite problem occurred. The absence of water and the rubbish strewn around the area posed sanitation and hygiene risks. For all its charm, even this miniature nation was beginning to struggle with the pressures of urbanisation.

If the settlements were not enough, the Tuvaluans' relation to the sea was one of palm-tingling precariousness. Each year, during the king tides, a third of Funafuti was submerged, as water bubbled up through the porous coral. More alarmingly still, while Tuvalu was generally said to be outside the cyclone belt, cyclones are not completely unknown. Bebe, which struck in 1972, caused the total inundation of Funafuti and destroyed all the island's buildings. Old pictures at Tuvalu's meteorological office, when I visited, showed scientific staff bravely carrying on their work, knee deep in water.

'We'll collect you at nine this evening', said one of my Tuvaluan colleagues, who was eager to be left alone to make preparations for the evening's entertainment. The reason for my strange phone calls about singing weeks earlier had suddenly been revealed. I had unwittingly arrived during the centenary celebrations of Tuvalu's island choirs and this was now at its height. There was, unusually for Funafuti, an excited anxiety in the air. The choirs, founded by missionaries in 1914, were coming together like a great gathering of the tribes. The finest singers and community elders had made sea voyages from the remotest of the atolls, taking days to reach the capital, where each island had its own local community whose centre was an open-sided meeting hall, or *maneapa*.

That evening, dressed in floral shirts and crowns of frangipani, we made our way to the *maneapa*. I followed gingerly, aware that this was a serious business and no mere tourist attraction. I was there on sufferance as a cordially invited guest but felt

that I could not have walked in on my own. We processed slowly on ancient motor scooters – a floral chugging that was both stately and faintly comical, as enormous Tuvaluans festooned in flowers, balanced delicately on their tiny mechanised transports, knees turned out for balance.

The *maneapa* was surrounded by concentric circles of community members organised, it seemed, hierarchically, watching the performances inside from the cool of the night. Inside, groups of men and women, organised by island, gave competing performances that rose in tempo, volume and drumming as they sought to outperform each other. Supporting the *maneapa*'s enormous roof were eight columns, one for every island of Tuvalu. The leader of each community sat with his back against one of the columns and they formed an inner circle of wizened elders deep in contemplation who lent gravitas to the proceedings.

Troupe after troupe stood to perform. The young girls started first – bedecked in flowers and pandanus fronds they danced from a sitting position. Theirs was a slow dance, classically Polynesian, with a gentle swaying of shoulders and choreographed arm movements – the calm of the lagoon – before the older women stood to the increased beat of the drums, building on the swaying arms below with fuller undulations. As the drumming resonated, deep Pacific male voices sang, and the tempo grew, before the men too were on their feet, moving with still greater freedom as the drumming and singing entered a crescendo. Around the edge, the crowds cheered and laughed with ever-greater volume and hilarity, as jokes were introduced into the routine: a sudden frenetic paddling of imaginary canoes, a mock amorous proposal and rebuff. Before long all were up in a general mêlée of noise, flowers and whirling pandanus. Round and round this ritual went, growing louder and more intoxicating with each repetition as the dancers sought to outdo each other. Unhappy with just one crescendo, some performers repeated the best and loudest bits. In the confusion, old women armed with bottles of lemon-scented spray-on cologne pumped thick wafts into the energetic dancers as they worked themselves into a fragrant island ecstasy.

Behind the *maneapa*, feasts were prepared by women for the performers and spectators. Multiple roast pigs turned slowly on spits, fresh tuna sashimi was cut into mouth-watering slices and doused with seawater. There were buckets of lightly salted flying fish, sweet pandanus desserts and great mounds of taro and breadfruit. This was proper feasting – food prepared for the entire contingent — hundreds of people every night. And each night was a new celebration that lasted till dawn as more boats arrived from the islands, and as the official choral ceremonies took place. The feasts then continued as the representatives from the outer each island were farewelled back to their boats for the long journey home. For three weeks, the singing, dancing and feasting continued till dawn, stopping all other activities

beyond preparing food, training voices and picking fresh flowers for that evening's crowns.

As the food was consumed, each of the hitherto silent elders stood to speak, offering advice, humour, religious instruction and formal greetings from their island to the world. But a concern for the old ways had now crept into the proceedings. At length, the elders shared their knowledge about the world in which they had grown up and which was rapidly transforming around them. They gave details about how to set fish traps in the traditional way, the multiple uses of the pandanus tree, the art of making canoes. These ancient skills of Pacific life and survival were solemnly and formally recited. There was also a quiz – a stoic attempt to engage the younger Tuvaluans in elements of their culture that the elders deemed important.

'Which island in Tuvalu first converted to Christianity?'

'Funafuti!'

'Who was the Roman general who denied that Christ was the son of God?'

'Chuck Norris!' called out an irreverent youth from the back of the *maneapa*.

'How do you know who you are?'

The answer to the last question was convoluted and involved references to faith, biblical study and island life. But in a way it was also crucial to the proceedings: the frantic vigour of the performances was the reinforcement of collective identity in the face of the country's unknown future.

Leaving the *maneapa* at midnight, I set off for a late-night ride on my motor-scooter, exploring the nocturnal world of Funafuti. This time I was not a guest seated in the charmed inner ring of the *maneapa* but a distant spectator, lurking on the outskirts as other *maneapas*, in different parts of the island, went through the same rituals. These were smaller and more intense. I had been at one of the great *maneapa* – a place that occasionally doubled as the country's parliament. It was made of concrete – a sign of wealth – and had elaborately woven pandanus mats on the walls spelling out the names of all the islands of Tuvalu in perfect missionary copperplate. The other *maneapas* were small and more modest wooden buildings with corrugated-iron roofs. But the noise was just as great, the concentric circles were smaller and tighter, and the performances took on a greater level of intensity. No one here called out 'Chuck Norris' irreverently to strange questions from local elders. The music continued, hundreds of bodies swaying, singing, drumming in a driven unison that was at once celebration and preservation. The solution to rising sea levels, migration, urbanisation and the decline of outer island life, it seemed, was to drum louder. Here, the edge was harder, more visceral, the dancing defiant. The effect was of a musical centrifuge whose forces ever magnified and tended in on themselves – the focus was the disappearing point at the centre.

For all the intensity of the outer island choirs, this was not the chosen entertainment of Funafuti's young. As the singing and drumming in the *maneapas* continued into the night, young people crept away, taking off their floral crowns and pandanus skirts. They put on shorts and tight-fitting t-shirts and set out for the 'chicken shed' for some 'twisting' – the local term for modern dancing that seemed to conjure the presence of long-departed American GIs. The 'chicken shed' was a large wire construction on the other side of the runway, well away from the houses, where Funafuti's massed youth sweated out the night with beer, and with hip-hop blasting from the club's massive speakers, before they crashed out on the tarmac.

Eventually, I headed back to my hotel, where the house band was in action and as I fell asleep, a Tuvaluan-Fijian reggae ensemble crooned, 'I'll give you fish and chips if you swing your hips'.

The next morning, I left the hotel early and joined some friends from the night before, and we crammed into a small motorboat for the islet of Funafala, in the Funafuti lagoon. For the Tuvaluans, this was an opportunity to 'get away from it all' and escape the megalopolis of Funafuti for the island life they had known as children, before roads, shops, flights and a money economy had changed their society forever. For forty-five minutes we skimmed across the waves of the relatively calm lagoon. With each passing minute, the water turned an ever more brilliant shade of turquoise, the beaches gleamed, and the coconut and pandanus trees swelled with burgeoning fruit. We landed, and the children with us instantly disappeared pursuing startled crabs along the beach. One of the adults produced a sharp knife and an enormous whole tuna – it was time for a Pacific hangover cure. For the next hour we sat in the shallows carving exquisite buttery slivers, lightly doused in saltwater, before ripping pandanus fruit from the trees and gnawing on the sweet, fibrous husks.

'You know, I'm thinking about migrating to New Zealand', said Atiu, a colleague, between bites. Most of his family had already left Tuvalu, and his children were at school in Auckland.

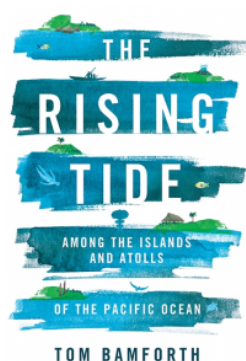
I suggested we could swap – Melbourne for Funafuti.

He laughed. 'It's not the paradise we remember', he said. 'It is difficult to get a good education, and there are few opportunities for our children.' Of his extended family, only he and his wife, who worked in the bank, had jobs with wages and the social expectations were endless. At any one time there were around thirty people staying at his house, all of whom had to be provided for. And then there was illness, which was increasingly common across the Pacific, where changes in diet and lifestyle had led to epidemic proportions of diabetes and heart disease. Fully one-third of

young Tuvaluans were diagnosed with what was locally called 'gout' – a catch-all description for what were, most likely, the early signs of diabetes. Those who could afford it went to New Zealand where proper treatment was available for diseases that were a death sentence in Tuvalu.

'But then I think', Atiu continued, 'if island life was good enough for me, why should it not be good for my children?' We reflected on the differences between the sunlit freedom of the islet and long school days in cold, suburban Auckland. 'Maybe I could ultimately migrate to Mackay in central Queensland', he said. 'From the pictures it looks most like Tuvalu.'

As we left the islet, speeding back toward the urban centre of Funafuti, to return to jobs and a flight home, I saw a message scrawled by one of the children in the sand. The words 'Funafala is very good' appeared just beyond the line of the rising tide.



[The rising tide: among the islands and atolls of the Pacific Ocean](#) is published by Hardie Grant.

You can hear the former Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Enele Sopoaga MP, at the [ACFID National Conference](#) next week.

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