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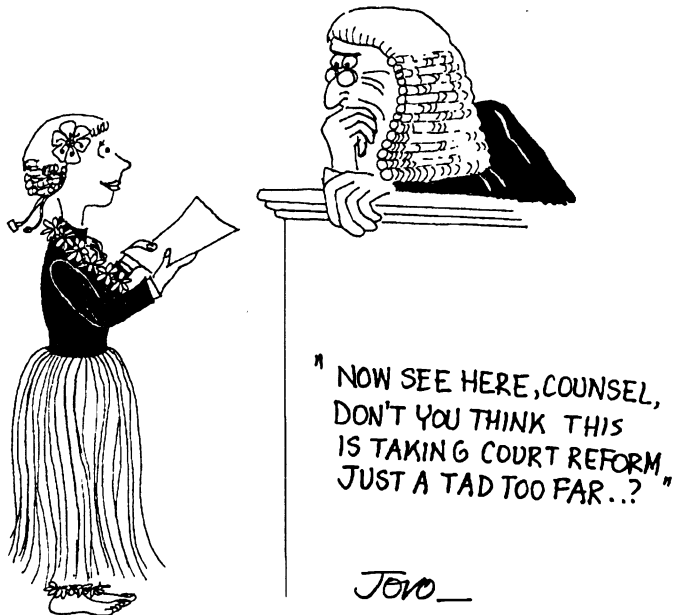
Katharine Philp reflects on her year in Tuvalu as an Australian Volunteer Abroad

I am swinging from a rope ladder transferring from the Tuvaluan patrol boat Te Mataili on to the naiad (a rubber ducky type number). I've already bruised my shins and my dress is not behaving itself, I am relieved that I took the precaution of also putting on a pair of shorts before attempting this manoeuvre. We are bobbing in the middle of the Pacific Ocean just off a very small island that we are visiting to conduct a local government review. Although I had boarded the patrol boat via this method, that was back on the capital island (a coral atoll) while the boat was moored on the tranquil lagoon and my dignity remained in tact. This time, the patrol boat and naiad are moving with the swell but, just to make it interesting, in opposite directions. I make the transfer without any major mishap and the leader of the delegation (an ex governor-general and my adoptive Tuvaluan grandfather) and I are the first to set off to land.

The island (called Niulakita) that we are visiting is probably one of the remotest islands in the world and doesn't get many visits from Tuvaluans let alone piangi (foreign) females. In fact, it's a safe bet that none of these people have even imagined a female becoming a lawyer, let alone seen one in the flesh. These people have a very traditional lifestyle and the society is highly patriarchal; I am wondering what sort of impression I will make. It is also surrounded by a reef and the crossing is notoriously dangerous. In fact people have been known to drown attempting to cross it. Consequently I find myself in the rather surreal (ridiculous?) situation where I am wearing a lifejacket and clutching a briefcase as we surf over the reef waves to our destination. A few tense minutes and we make it!! So far, so good.

There is a reception committee waiting for us. This consists of the "old men, including the pastor. As we land on the

beach, my grandfather gets out of the naiad first; it's men first over here. I follow, heaving a sigh of relief in anticipation of being on terra firma again. Too soon. Just as I have one foot on the sand and am about to lift the other out of the boat, I lose my balance and after turning, ever so gracefully on my heel, I promptly find myself sitting rather unceremoniously in the shallows. Oh hum, so much for first impressions.



Thank goodness Tuvaluan people have a great sense of fun and the incident was laughed off as I scrambled to my feet, the introductions were made and I was made to feel more than welcome.

The tour lasted for three weeks, involved visiting five of the outer islands and also saw me:

- dancing with the locals, grass skirt and all;
- enjoying me first taste of coconut crab, which by the way is absolutely delicious;
- sleeping in the local guest houses, located just a few metres from the shores of the lagoons;
- getting drenched as a wave broke over the boat on the way back out to the PB and the engine stalled just as we got to the reef;
- sitting cross-legged in the local

maneupas (meeting houses) for two days at a time, while discussions were held in Tuvaluan;

- being woken at 2am by a local man at the window of my room in the guest house, wanting me to answer a question. Needless to say, the answer boiled down to a particularly caustic "no"; and
- last but not least, being used as an example by the leader of the delegation to encourage the youth of the islands, both boys and girls, to study hard and get educated.

One thing is for certain; this is a far cry from the life I envisioned for myself as my eyes glazed over during soporific afternoon lectures at university. I had no idea that a law degree would eventually lead me into such an adventure.

My time is drawing to a close and I have spent the last couple of weeks reflecting on my twelve months here. In spite of a handful of frustrations it would have been one of the most worthwhile twelve month periods of my 10 years post admission. I have a funny feeling that I

have got a great deal more out of this year than the Tuvaluans but I gather that is par for the course with many volunteers and I for one am grateful for the opportunity to have done this.

For those of you toying with the idea of taking some time off to spend with AVA (Australian Volunteers Abroad) I can thoroughly recommend it. Regardless if the dramatic increase in salary (I have been in receipt of the princely sum of \$186.46 per fortnight) there are compensations that more than make up for that.

I doubt I will be gazing over the beautiful azure lagoon waters of a coral atoll from my office window, let alone be wearing flowers on my hair to work when I get back to Australia! But that's another story.