

THE ROYAL VISIT TO TUVALU - SEPTEMBER 2012 – THE INSIDE STORY

by Capt. John Hensford, with photos by Tony Prceovich

A unique and historic event occurred in Tuvalu in September. Prince William and Kate, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, visited Tuvalu as part of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Other readers may wonder what relevance the Queen has to Tuvalu. It is that she is the 'Head of State'.

Tuvalu is an entirely independent nation but at the time it became independent from Britain it chose to retain the Queen as head of state. When she is referred to here it is as "Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Tuvalu and other Realms". All the islands of lesser importance, such as Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand, are just 'other realms'.



The visit by Prince William and Kate was the first royal visit since the Queen herself came in 1982. Preparations began months in advance. The visit could only be brief so the programme had to be tightly controlled to pack in as many events as possible while still allowing the young couple some time to rest.

One important matter to be decided was the type of conveyance for the Royal Couple. In 1982 a custom-built canoe was used to paddle the Queen and Prince Philip from the Royal Yacht Britannia to shore. The canoe was then lifted onto strong shoulders and carried ashore with the Royal Couple still seated. This time there was to be no ship but a jet plane. 'Paddling' a canoe onto the airport runway may become possible in future years when the sea level rises but not at present. So it was decided to 'update' tradition and use a miniature house, carried by bearers. The design eventually chosen was a highly modified version of a traditional Tuvaluan house with roof of woven pandanus leaves.

Preparations become more intense as the great day approaches. The Government declares Friday 7th September a public holiday but not for resting. The entire community is requested and expected to tidy up all the private and public places. There is a rehearsal of the welcoming ceremony. This is repeated on the following Friday, four days before the event.

On the day before the Visit we are watching the sky for rain, and it comes in heavy showers, sweeping across the island of Funafuti from ocean side to lagoon side. This time last year the country was in the middle of severe drought that necessitated bringing in emergency desalination plants. We keep our fingers crossed for dry weather tomorrow.

When dawn breaks at 0530 hours on Tuesday 18 September the weather looks favourable but there are some distant clouds. Final preparations have been continuing during the night. There are decorations everywhere, even in places the Royal Couple will not see. As is customary, all the decorations are with local, traditional materials from the island's many trees, bushes and flowers.



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By 0900 hours it is bright and sunny and the distant clouds have evaporated. Tension is mounting, especially for the Governor General and the Prime Minister who have important ceremonial duties to perform. The Secretary for Foreign Affairs breathes a sigh of relief that all the preparations he and his staff have co-ordinated have finally been made in time.



Tuesdays and Thursdays are 'plane days' in Funafuti, when our regular turbo-prop plane from Fiji arrives. On this day it comes early so it can leave and be well outside Tuvaluan airspace before the Royal jet enters. Even though two planes are tiny specks in the immensity of a million square kilometres of Tuvaluan territory it's better the specks are well separated.

At one hour before arrival time everything is looking fine. Suddenly, RAIN! Not the gentle rain of cooler climates but heavy, pounding tropical rain. At 30 minutes it's still raining. The royal jet might have to circle around to wait until visibility improves for landing. The runway has no lights to assist and it's only 1560 metres long, with ocean at the end, the side of the island plunging down to a thousand metres and unimaginable depths beyond.

My colleague Eti Esela and I are wearing long trousers, long-sleeved shirts, ties and black leather shoes that have been taken out of our cupboards for the first time in many months. Over that we have brightly-coloured, traditional Tuvaluan formal decorations around our waists and our necks. These have been arranged for us by our colleagues Sina and Dinah. Although the design is traditional our pandanus leaf 'skirts' have an interesting variation with the three fishes copied from our Ahrenkiel flag. The fishes have had a 'makeover' and have changed shape from sleek Atlantic fish to tropical Pacific reef fish.

With five minutes to go, the rain fades away and finally stops. The royal jet comes into view over the southern end of the atoll. It lines up on final approach, angled considerably to its right because the wind is blowing hard. A second before touchdown the pilot deftly turns the plane onto the alignment of the runway and tilts the wings. It's a very big jet, probably the biggest that has ever landed at Funafuti. The wingspan is about the same as the runway width. It lands delicately on the southern end of the runway, roars past the assembled throng at the airport building and stops in less length than our regular plane uses.



The door opens; there is a long pause and suddenly out comes Prince William with Kate close behind. She is wearing a beige coloured dress, above knee, her hair in a little bun – very different to the pictures we have seen of her in other countries on this tour. It's good that she is being different for Tuvalu. William is wearing a suit and an open-necked shirt.

They step into the miniature Tuvaluan house, which strong young men lift onto their shoulders. There is an escort of young ladies dancing and singing, while on either side school children are

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waving flags. The conveyance stops in front of two flags – one the Tuvaluan national flag, the other the standard of the Duke of Cambridge. Everyone sings 'God Save the Queen' and the Tuvaluan national anthem. The Church President offers up a prayer to the Almighty.

The Royal Couple are greeted by the Governor General and his wife, and by the Prime Minister and his wife, and then the Couple moves along a line of community leaders and their wives, shaking hands with them all. They also meet the Ambassador of the Republic of China, the only ambassador to Tuvalu who resides on the island.

The official party moves into the Vaiaku Maneaba and views a brief 'fatele' (local dancing and singing accompanied by drummers) presented by the Funafuti community. It has been choreographed well. At the end, as the drumming reaches its inevitable crescendo, all the dancers in unison make three hops forward ending close to the Royal Couple and raise their right arms in a military salute. It's a traditional dance with a clever modern touch that suits the occasion.



The party then goes off to visit the children at Nauti Primary School. It's clear from the photos that everyone thoroughly enjoyed that visit, especially the Royal Couple. They walk across the road to visit the local campus of The University of the South Pacific where they have some brief discussions with students. The next item on the programme is a viewing of a very special palm tree.

To get there they have to pass the APNL office and we, the staff, are lined up along the road outside, with all our neighbours, waiting for the royal vehicle to appear. They are delayed. They are enjoying the visits to Nauti and USP so much. I get a bit tired of standing waiting so I go indoors to make a cup of tea. My timing is not good and I have to run outside again. I don't have time to put my teapot down so I wave it at the Royal Couple. They probably think I'm inviting them for a cup of tea. They don't stop but I do get a nice smile and wave. Perhaps next time!



Two hundred metres down the street the vehicle stops and the Royal Couple step down. They are at the Queen's Palm Tree. It was planted by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth thirty years ago. I have passed that tree thousands of times in the years I have lived in Tuvalu but never knew until now that it was planted by the Queen. It's about twenty metres tall, as mature coconut trees are. The Couple drink juice from nuts freshly picked from the tree.

Then they walk to a viewing stand on the edge of the lagoon to watch canoe racing, after which they present medals to the winning teams. All the teams deserve a medal because it's quite rough on the lagoon today. The Tuvalu Police Patrol Vessel is anchored nearby. Today it's serving as the

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race starting vessel instead of its usual rôle defending Tuvalu's exclusive economic zone against illegal commercial fishing.



Next stop is a 'Tuvaluan village'. The Couple don't have time to visit any real village so this one has been created on the lawn in front of the airport. Each of Tuvalu's eight island communities has built a traditional miniature house, each different. Island representatives display local handicrafts. William is shown how to crack open a coconut with a machete. He wants to try for himself, and succeeds without cracking his fingers. They are shown some baby turtles and William delicately picks one up.

Next event is a game of 'Ano', a local game played by two teams with variable number of players (the more the better), which involves throwing a hard, heavy ball to and fro. William is invited to join in and does so. Wisely, Kate watches. Then they move into the grounds of the Governor General's residence and there plant two palm trees. Maybe they will drink juice from them in a future year, or perhaps their children or grandchildren will do so.



In the evening there is a feast and it is followed by more 'fatele'. This traditional dancing and singing varies from island to island, and from event to event. For this special occasion there are dance groups from every island. It is exciting, powerful entertainment that Tuvaluans love to show off to outsiders, but if there are no outsiders they do it anyway, just for fun. Funafuti is the right place for fun. Our airport code is FUN. Everyone is hoping that Kate will join in the dancing. Guests are always encouraged to do so but it is rather unlikely that a royal person will accept.



The Prime Minister's wife Seinati, herself an enthusiastic dancer, whispers to Kate that she is going to join the dancing and that Kate is welcome to come too. Fantastically, Kate accepts. She is really enjoying herself. A lady comes up behind her and wraps a traditional Tuvaluan skirt around Kate's slender waist and ties it. She loves it and continues dancing. William looks on with an expression that might at first have expressed concern but soon changes to approval as he sees how much Kate is enjoying dancing. Then the unimaginable happens – Prince William joins in the dancing! He is with the male dancers, Kate is with the lady dancers, but eventually they are dancing side by side and obviously loving it, and each other.

The function is being held at the Vaiaku Maneaba, which is an open-sided building where many important functions are held,

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including Parliament. The populace are able to stand right outside and see what's going on. This evening they are ten deep on all four sides. All too soon the function ends. Prince William said that he had particularly wanted to visit Tuvalu because his grandmother the Queen had told him it was 'the most iconic place she had ever visited'. Well, he has had his wish and everyone agrees this is an event for the history books.

The next morning as I am standing at the airport watching the Royal departure I am wondering what they were thinking as their jet came in to land. They were probably thinking 'where is this island'? That question goes through most people's minds the first time they come. One can feel the plane reducing altitude, down, down, down, but no land visible either side. The plane banks right and islands come distantly into view to the left. Flaps are being adjusted, landing gear is whining down, there are all the usual noises of an approach to landing but still not much indication of land. The plane is now so low it's easy to see individual wave crests.

Then a series of tiny islets flashes past – none big enough to land on. Through the crystal clear water one can see the underwater connection between the islets; it's the rim of what was a volcano, aeons ago. Now the plane is low enough to see individual coconuts on the palm trees but below the plane there is still only sea. Suddenly, palm trees pop up on both sides and almost instantly there's the bump as the plane touches down on the runway. It's an exciting landing that I never tire of. Then there's the shock of heat as the plane door opens and the tropical air rushes in, and one realizes 'I have arrived at the World's most remote capital city'.

Now it is departure time and the Royal Couple are being entertained again by singing and dancing. On a table are presents of local handicrafts. Kate has her hair down today, as she did at the fatele last night. She looks more familiar this way; it's as we see her on TV. I'm not close enough to see exactly what the pattern is on her dress but it is a floral design, very different to the pattern of the Tuvaluan ladies' dresses but very much in keeping with them. Last night she wore a long flowing dress. William is wearing much the same as yesterday, a suit and open-necked white shirt. That in itself is a fashion statement. They both look happy and relaxed.

The Prime Minister makes a speech, appropriate and brief. The President of the Tuvalu Church offers a prayer of thanks to the Almighty and asks His protection for the Royal Couple. Then it's time to go. William and Kate are tall and easy to see. They move outside and board their special 'house'. The bearers raise it to their shoulders. The Police Honour Guard makes a Royal Salute with great precision. The Royal Couple move forward, led by a big choir of young ladies singing merrily. The official party melds in behind the Royal vehicle and follows it to the plane, an avenue of schoolchildren clapping on either side.



The populace moves onto the grassy area alongside the runway. This must be one of the few international airports in the World where that would be permitted, and in truth it is not usual here either, but it is possible because the runway is not fenced and is only a 'runway' for a few minutes

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per week. The rest of the time it is a walking and running track, a place for volleyball and soccer, at night a place to study the stars and a cool place to sleep.

The Couple reaches the plane and the bearers lower the 'house'. It has fulfilled its task. The bearers



will be able to tell their grandchildren 'I carried the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge way back in 2012! There are some final farewells from the official party and Kate walks up the aircraft stairs, pausing to make a shy and happy wave to everyone, which is responded by a thousand waves. William follows and does the same, but doesn't get quite as many return waves as Kate. She is on the way to becoming a super star. He, of course, already is one.

The door closes and we are all ushered back beyond the airport perimeter road, but that is still close to the runway. So now it's time for the Couple to go. There is always excitement at the airport when a plane lands and takes off – even if it's just the turbo-prop from Fiji twice a week. This is the first Royal visit by plane so it's extra special. It's lovely that people can be so close to planes, but it is necessarily so because the island is only four hundred metres wide at this point and that's its widest.

The plane starts to move forward. A dog decides to show interest in another dog; they run onto the grass. A thousand throats hiss at them – a reaction they have never experienced before. Wisely, nobody gives chase, which would have frightened them towards the aircraft. A policeman waves at the dogs; remarkably they obey and leave the area. In Tuvalu even the dogs are law-abiding. The plane passes us, nice and slowly. We all wave frantically and everyone on the plane does likewise. We can't see which is Kate and which is William, but they're surely at one of the windows.

The wind is light and its direction a little unusual, more or less straight across the runway. The plane can take off either way. The pilot chooses to taxi to the northern end. A dog nonchalantly crosses the runway behind the plane. The dog-chaser vehicle speeds after it. The dog gets the message and disappears towards the beach.

The plane turns, immediately winds up its jets to full power, and comes thundering down the runway. It is airborne before it gets to where we are all standing; it needed only half the runway length. The jet engines are huge, as though taken from a larger plane. A blast of hot jet air and dust sweeps over us and we are all forced to turn away momentarily. Then the plane is soaring up into the sky, banking right, setting course for Brisbane where the Couple will transfer to a scheduled flight.

I find myself talking to one of Royal staff members who has remained behind to travel on tomorrow's regular plane. She says William and Kate told her last night their visit to Tuvalu has been the absolute highlight of their Tour. CONGRATULATIONS TUVALU. We are so thrilled that we were able to be a part of this historic event. Thrilled and privileged. John and Tony.



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