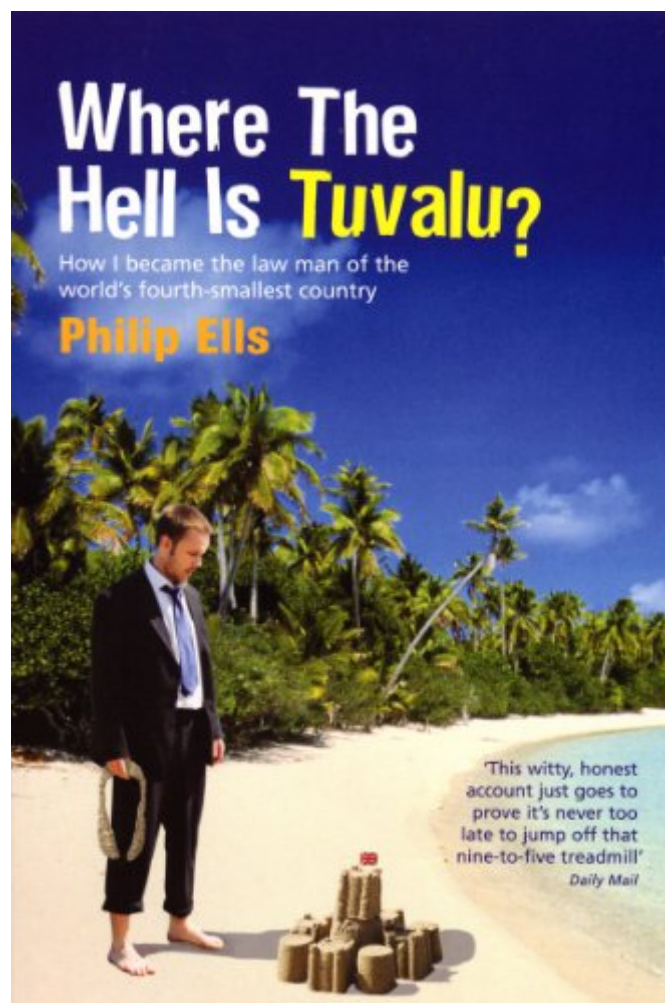




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# Where The Hell Is Tuvalu?: How I Became The Law Man Of The World's Fourth-smallest Country



## Synopsis

How does a young City lawyer end up as the People's Lawyer of the fourth-smallest country in the world, 18,000 kilometres from home? We've all thought about getting off the treadmill, turning life on its head and doing something worthwhile. Philip Ells dreamed of turquoise seas, sandy beaches and palm trees, and he found these in the tiny Pacific island state of Tuvalu. But neither his Voluntary Service Overseas briefing pack nor his legal training could prepare him for what happened there. He learned to deal with rapes, murders, incest, the unforgivable crime of pig theft and to look a shark in the eye. But he never dared ask the octogenarian Tuvaluan chief why he sat immobilised by a massive rock permanently resting on his groin. Well, you wouldn't, would you? This is the story of a UK lawyer colliding with a Pacific island culture. The fallout is moving, dramatic, bewildering and often hilarious.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

For a book that, according to Worldcat, cannot be found in a single library in the U.S., this isn't half bad. It's not another memoir from an expat on a Pacific

Island; I read it shortly after the much more popular *Sex Lives of Cannibals* and liked it a bit better. Troost is a better storyteller than Ells, but Ells has more interesting stories to tell. This is unsurprising, since Ells's job allows him to see firsthand how people and their society function as the People's Lawyer of Tuvalu, he is both public defender and civil law consultant for the entire country (which works because Tuvalu has only about 10,000 people, and also, family law apparently doesn't exist). The marketing for this book is way off, suggesting that it is an *Eat Pray Love*, inspiration for career change kind of memoir. Not only is that off-base given that the author was only in his 20s (this is more youthful adventure than midlife crisis), but I doubt many people would want this career change. Ells is isolated on a tiny island with poor housing, bad food, regular gastrointestinal distress and other illnesses (when it gets serious he has to be medevaced to Fiji because the local facilities are inadequate), bug and rodent infestations, and no modern conveniences. Oh, and he works hard, which makes sense when there's an extremely limited social circle and no dating pool to speak of. Sure, swimming in the lagoon is a perk, but this book is unlikely to inspire much travel to Tuvalu. I'll get the negatives out of the way first: Ells is not the world's greatest storyteller, and the book occasionally bogs down in boring descriptions of, for instance, expat social events. Especially in the first half of the book, there are numerous gross-out moments (and it isn't just the setting; there's a gratuitous turd story from Ells's life pre-Tuvalu). Also, the writing uses British slang to the point that I as an American who's spent several months in England couldn't always decipher his meaning. Finally, the author's habitually flippant tone and his callous behavior toward his seasick assistant make him seem like a jerk for much of the book. But I warmed back up to him when he showed genuine horror toward domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as an understanding of the societal pressures faced by victims. (He sees little of either type of crime in Tuvalu, where domestic violence is not taken seriously, but deals with a number of horrific crimes while on several weeks' loan to Kiribati.) And it is definitely an interesting look into a tiny and remote country. Much of the island's life appears to take place on and around the airport runway, and of course everyone knows everyone else as during a trial for pig stealing, Ells's assistant can't stop laughing during his client's testimony, but then the magistrate lives down the road from the parties and so is unlikely to be fooled anyway. People come to the author with everything from defamation by their neighbors to constitutional crises, giving us a more complete picture of island life than most

foreigners are likely to ever see. There is also some humor, though it's not quite laugh-out-loud funny. In sum . . . for the only book known to Goodreads to be set primarily in Tuvalu, this is an adequate read. In the end I rather liked reading it, so I'm rounding up to 3 stars, but my copy is headed for the donation bin.

I think everyone fantasizes about escaping the rat race - and escaping to a Pacific Island for 2 years....well, that sounds just about perfect. Of course Philip Ells puts us right. We experience Tuvalu through his eyes, the real place, not an imagined idyll. And we experience it also with his humour. I found his tales of life in these Pacific Islands to be funny, moving, informative, scary and crazy. I couldn't put this book down once I'd started it. And I still want to go there and see it all for myself!

One of the problems affecting the application of the law in isolated islands like Pitcairn and Tristan da Cunha (which I have alluded to in recent book reviews about these two islands) is that the populations are so small, thus finding total impartiality is impossible. In Pitcairn and Tristan, everybody knows or is related to one another. How can one find witnesses to testify for or against if they're your neighbours or second cousins? How can you even arrest these people in the first place? In Tuvalu (population 10,500), the solution to these problems is only partly solved by hiring a lawyer from outside. A volunteer public defender, known as the People's Lawyer, would serve a two-year term. Philip Ells was based in Funafuti, the capital of Tuvalu, yet also travelled to the other eight islands in the archipelago, meeting with local administrations and hearing cases there as well. Ells kept a diary and his two-year story occupies 278 pages written in small type. It must be a British thing (as I have a UK imprint) printing books in such a minuscule font. I have bemoaned these eye-squinters many times in past reviews. Thus 278 pages might be expanded to over four hundred pages by North American standards. Regardless of the number of pages, Ells has created a lengthy diary and if you enjoy travel stories, then *Where the Hell is Tuvalu? How I Became the Law Man of the World's Fourth Smallest Country* is a hilarious read, where this London lawyer is plopped down in the middle of a boiling hot, rat- and ant-infested scorching Pacific hideaway. Since there were few degrees of separation between everybody, it was hard for some people, especially Laita, Ells's own secretary and translator, to keep herself from laughing uproariously during defendants' testimony. Soon after settling into his office, Ells was surprised to find out: "Laita informed me, helpfully, that virtually all Tuvaluans pleaded guilty--partly because they were guilty and when everyone in the village knew what they had done it was shameful to pretend otherwise,

and partly because they knew nothing of a legal process that was entirely at odds with the customary manner of resolving matters."During his time in Tuvalu Ells dealt with two murders, a case of incest and land distribution claims. Violence against women was a problem yet only deemed so by foreigners, as even the matriarchs of the islands felt that domestic abuse was warranted. Ells never saw such a case in his two years there, however at the time of his assignment, there was a nascent women's rights movement. The culture shock of going from a modern metropolis to a backwoods cabin without modern plumbing facilities made me almost spit out my lunch in laughter:"Seated comfortably on the loo I heard a plop but it was something coming up out of the bowl rather than descending into it. Looking between my legs, I saw a furry head surface in the water having made an unimaginable journey. Although my life and circumstances had revolved around 360 degrees, there were some things I couldn't accept, The rat, as terrified as I was at the sight it had encountered, ducked a hasty retreat around the U-bend."For f\*\*\*'s sake!' was all I could bellow, in a state of total shock, stumbling out of the loo with trousers and boxer shorts down. I took some deep breaths, pulled my clothes on and repeated 'For f\*\*\*'s sake!' several more times for good measure until I had enough courage to return and finish what I'd almost started."For the rest of my time in Tuvalu I would circle around each toilet bowl like a bomb-disposal expert, declaring it safe for general use."Ants marched a regular path through his tiny office, yet bug spray worked to kill the masses. He couldn't find any such repellent to rid his workplace of the island's chickens, and what they left behind:"Clucking chickens, now almost fully mature, had grown in confidence and freely walked about my room with no sense of the need to make an appointment. They were too big for one kettle to boil. I shooed them away."My inquisitive visitors had a third eye for when I was concentrating. When I was unaware of their presence they would have a good look around, have a violent s\*\*\* and cluck out to notify me and my family of a successful incursion. I placed my black holdall across the door with a sign, THIS IS NOT A TOILET, in Tuvaluan and English, in case they were bilingual, together with a picture of a decapitated fowl. It made me feel better but got questioning stares from my neighbours, who knew me for running around like a headless chicken much of the time."Everyone on Tuvalu greeted Ells not by his first name, or Mr. Ells, but by his purpose for being there. Thus when he is greeted on the road or in the bar, Tuvaluans call out to him "People's Lawyer!". Even in the middle of a conversation, he is repeatedly referred to, in full and at every time, as "People's Lawyer". Unfortunately the shady reputation of lawyers is shared the world over, even in remote, sparsely populated Pacific islands. Some people inserted their own sly twist and referred to him rather as "People's Liar", doing so without any hint of irony. Ells filled Where the Hell is Tuvalu? with countless episodes of slow-paced island delays, where progress sneaks by

at a snail's pace. The main method of transportation in such a small capital city of Funafuti is by bicycle, yet his left plenty to be desired:"Everything just rusts here. You pedal backwards to stop,' the Electrician explained. My predecessor was a tall, gangly man and the seat was a good ten inches too high and, as expected, the adjustment mechanism had stuck. With visible springs sprouting through imitation leather, I soon found that sitting on the People's Lawyer's Bicycle was like receiving a rectal examination. The safest and slightly less uncomfortable solution was to stand on the pedals the whole time."One can't help but find the similar fixation between his bicycle riding and his attempt to drink milk from a coconut:"Eliakimo skilfully dissected the fruit [ = the coconut] by reaching behind him and producing a sinister machete the like of which I had last seen hacking through jungle swamp in Platoon. Two or three firm blows to create and then prise open the small hole in the top and a clear, sweet drink emerged by means of a noisy sucking by the drinker. Three large sucks and my face was stuck against the shell. I was French-kissing a small hairy hole."I will never think of coconut rice the same way again. Aside from some photo collections and a few Tuvaluan language books, *Where the Hell is Tuvalu?* is probably the longest and most detailed book about life on the islands in the late 1990's. I would recommend it as an essential read to future travellers to the islands.

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