

We are sitting on the plane and see below us the nine island group, which together forms the state of Tuvalu. The word Tuvalu means in fact 'the eight standing next to each other'. We were a little confused especially as there is actually a nine island group, but the steward explained that the ninth was only settled in 1949 and people didn't want to change the name. As we look out of the plane window, it strikes you that there are no mountains here and on the contrary, the group of islands is totally flat, narrow and stretched. The highest points of Tuvalu lie around 3 metres above sea level and the biggest distance from one end to the other is 400 metres wide. That is also the logical reason why almost everybody lives so close to the coast. As we landed at the airport, we were a little anxious that we would never be able to remember the names of all the islands in the group, but at least the island of Funafuti has etched itself in our memory, as we are landing here and the island of Funafuti is the main town of Tuvalu. People tell us that there are flights from the airport two or three times a week directly from the Fiji Islands. As we got off the plane, we immediately noticed the tropical climate. It was around 30 degrees and our clothing stuck tightly to us. No more bad weather we thought, and after all the rainy weather at home we finally enjoy the sunshine. Our guide was already waiting for us. We considered briefly which language to greet him in, but he welcomed us in English and asked if we would like to go to the beach. We said yes and went by taxi along the only tarmacked road. Funafuti works rather more like a large village than a capital and during the journey the guide told us that there were around 12,000 inhabitants in Tuvalu. That is quite a lot of people for such a small area. Speaking English here will not be a problem as, next to Tuvalish, it is the official language, because the islands group was a British colony until 1978. Every island community has its own dialect, its own feasts, its own trades and all the seats in parliament are split into representatives of the island community. In Funafuti, inhabitants of all the group of islands come together, mostly coming because of work, service provisions, for example in the field of health. A few cars and motorbikes came past us. Because the road in total is only 8 kilometres long, we got out again and also saw boats that were used as means of transport. On the beach a fisherman told us that every year about 200 to 300 tourists come here. The advantage of coming is to be able to dive. Six of the island groups are atolls and ring-shaped coral reefs and are famous for seeing many different fish. On our tour of the island, we discovered that the majority of people here are religious and live on fishing or from farming. People eat what they can fish or harvest. For some time Tuvalu has also imported foodstuffs, above all rice, which have since become the basic means of nutrition for the island inhabitants. In the meantime, people have become dependent on imports because traditional cultivation no longer suffices to provide for the fast growing population. Our guide lifted a coconut off the floor and said that coconuts and the insides of coconut were what Tuvalu exported. The plant that we see in front of us does not appear to be well known, and therefore we inquire and find out that the plant is a pulaka. A type of gummi plant, whose entire contents we can eat and in Tuvalu is an important means of nutrition. After these first impressions, we remember why we are here and ask our guide to bring us to our venue. As we arrive we already see people who are eager to get to know us.