EVERY HOME IS A GRAVE

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Climate change is a deepening issue here; in the Pacific Islands it's an everyday reality.

In Funafuti, Tuvalu, in front of most homes there are long, cement boxes, some neatly tiled, some painted bright reds and greens and blues and pinks, some festooned with garlands of plastic hibiscus, some accompanied by carved crosses. Graves. All are big enough to house a human, and they house the remains of past family members, kept close to their future generations.

"It ties you to the land," one man told us when we witnessed the same tradition on Bora Bora, and makes it very hard to sell. Or leave.

What if the land is the first to leave? To be on an atoll in Tuvalu is to be on an island disappearing, as climate change takes hold.

We sailed out of New Zealand in July 2015, with stops in Tonga and Fiji, but the ultimate goal was to put ourselves and our 41-foot sloop safely on the other side of the equator for what was forecast to be a nasty El Nino-influenced cyclone season. Tuvalu was the first atoll where we felt we might be just out of reach of the season's first storms.

However, not far from where our yacht was anchored there was plenty of evidence that even average weather routinely does its worst here. There used to be a beach along the western edge of Funafuti's lagoon, just steps from the capital and government buildings that serve the country's nine islands. Though patches of golden sand remain here and there, now the foreshore is mostly sharp grey rock, shattered coral, and seaweed, entirely submerged by a high tide that licks at the edge of the main road.

To serve a tightly-packed population of 10,000, there is one long, paved road running down the centre of the thin ribbon of island, parallel to both shores, lagoon to the west, Pacific Ocean to the east. In many places, it's possible to see both bodies of water at once and to see evidence of the water encroaching.

Cheap Chinese motorbikes are the primary mode of travel on Funafuti. From the back of our rental ($10 for 24 hours, no we don't need your name or ID) I felt that I was looking up at the breaking waves, that the water was actually above me.

Funafuti wants its beach back, and a dredging project is under way, sucking up tonnes of sand from the floor of the lagoon and spitting it onto the sharp rocks and fallen palms. Australia-based Hall Contracting is completing the $7 million project, funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It includes construction of a seawall to hold the sand in place – hopefully.

"It will be a nice place to come drink a cold beer and watch the kids play," a police officer told me as we stood on the narrow concrete pier watching a bucket loader redistribute piles of dredged sand.

"Do you think it will stay?" I asked.

"Maybe a year or two," he shrugged.

Heavy winds and waves from the northwest were forecast for a day or two, just in time to coincide with the full moon's king tide. "Water will be in the streets," he assured me.

He was right. We rode our motorbike through it.

One day, I chanced to meet the chief of the island, Andrew Ionatana, son of former Prime Minister Ionatana Ionatana, who died suddenly in 2000 while giving a speech just a few steps from where I was sitting despondently by the shore, bags of wilting groceries at my feet. My dinghy was left high and dry and stuck underneath the pier by the extremely low tide.

"You want some help?" he offered. With his young daughter in charge of the dinghy's painter, we waded through the seaweed with the shifty, slippery, newly-dredged sand sucking our flip-flops off our feet. Together we frog-walked the dinghy off the rocks and into the milky blue water. It was then he introduced himself. I asked if he was down by the waterfront to check on the progress of the dredging, but it was just to let his daughter fossick for shells in the upturned sand. Then I asked about climate change.

"Yes, we are really worried," he said. "We don't know the future of Tuvalu in 50 years." His eyes got wet and glassy. And what would those 50 years look and feel like? An increasing population crowding ever closer on a diminishing atoll, the ribbon of land slowly fraying away at both ends, open ocean kissing the lagoon across the causeway at all high tides, not just today's king tide.

Yet, everywhere there were signs of a people deeply connected and committed to their land as long as it continued to exist. Many new homes were under construction. The dredging to create the beach was part of a contract to fill in the myriad "borrow pits", a legacy of WWII when the US Marine Corps mined coral to construct a runway down the centre of the island, leaving behind 10 vast trenches that were eventually filled with trash and junked cars, broken appliances and brackish, polluted water that shifted with the tides, indicating just how porous and fragile the island is. Filling the pits shored up the land and increased the standard of sanitation – many pits now resembled random, white-sand beaches marooned incongruously inland, with volleyball nets stretched across them. Trash is now collected by a tractor towing a trailer and delivered to a new dump at the north of the atoll.

Myriad climate-change-adaptation and food-security projects were operating. I talked at length with a 19-year-old student attending the University of the South Pacific who said she was definitely coming home to Funafuti when she was done with school in Fiji.

Playing cards with friends sitting in the shade of Grandmother's grave, sleeping on open platforms under palm-leaf roofs, racing down the airport runway with the motorbike's throttle pinned to its fragile limit, tapping a new palm shoot for bootleg coconut "toddy", searching for shells at the beach – all of that sinks with Funafuti. They're not just victims of the first-world activities that have accelerated climate change, they're victims of the optimism that keeps us all going, attending school, building additions on our homes, gathering fresh flowers for the grave in the front yard.

We can't stop nature, Andrew commented, as the bucket loader roared closer to where we stood and began rearranging a pile of dredged sand. But they were trying. That's human nature. ■