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Clerks in Paradise

[Law school grads find happiness on exotic island locales](#)

Ross Todd
The American Lawyer
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For the hyperambitious, the only [federal court clerkships](#) worth striving for are in the chambers of elite judges like Richard Posner or [Alex Kozinski](#) or Brett Kavanaugh. Impressive in their own right, but also way stations on the road to the ultimate [clerkship on the U.S. Supreme Court](#).

Some choose a different path to clerkship paradise, however; one that leads through courts in the Northern Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and other tropical locales in the Pacific Ocean. These former United Nations trust territories have legal systems similar to those of the United States, and appeals from their courts traditionally lie with U.S. courts. Many of these territories invite American law graduates to spend a year or two working in their courts as clerks and counsel.

The pull of the Pacific can be powerful.

When Timothy Schimpf accepted a position as court counsel in Palau, [a nation of more than 300 islands that became independent in 1994](#), he turned down a permanent job as a trademark attorney with the federal government.

"It's absolutely worth it to take a chance and go do something outlandish," he says.

The \$40,000 salary he earned in Palau wouldn't go far in America, but life in the Pacific Islands had its perks. From Schimpf's government-provided beachfront housing, after-work swims and kayak sessions were easy. And the work wasn't bad either. Schimpf assisted with several land court cases that had a uniquely Palauan flavor. Only Palauans can own island land. There is little documentation, so oral tradition is admissible as evidence.

Although he became adept at dealing with Palauan law, Schimpf never quite got the hang of a local pastime: spearfishing. Locals use a speargun to come up with about 15 fish on any given dive, but Schimpf speared only two during his entire term.

Now that he's back in the states, he's headed to the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va., where he previously worked as a staff lawyer and where there is little call for speargun skills.

Transitioning from court in Palau to court in Richmond sounds doable, but what about adjusting from lagoon to big-firm life? That was the challenge for McDermott Will & Emery Chicago associate Michael Weaver, who spent last year as a law clerk at the High Court of American Samoa. The biggest source of culture shock? "Business casual in American Samoa is a little different," Weaver says. He wore sandals and a polo shirt to work every day except on Fridays. That's when judges and litigants donned traditional Samoan skirts, called [lavalavas](#), and Aloha shirts -- what mainlanders call Hawaiian shirts. Stylish, perhaps, but a little impractical



Image: Digital Vision

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when the winter wind comes whipping off Lake Michigan.

With applications coming due over the next few months, aspiring clerks will be fueled by tropical daydreams as they compose résumés, track down recommendations and draft writing samples.

For more information on Pacific Island opportunities, contact Hcourt@samoatelco.com in American Samoa, supreme.court@saipan.com for the Northern Mariana Islands or palaujudiciary@palaunet.com in Palau.



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