



THE ROAD EAST TO TIMOR LESTE

On his trip to Timore Leste **Robert White-Harvey** sought a balance between living the vacation good life or getting down and dirty in a country that is pristine and teeming with natural beauty.

SINCE I RETURNED home from my visit to Timor Leste (East Timor), many have asked: “Why Timor?” With so many tropical venues to go to in Asia, why does Timor Leste earn a recommendation?

Bali is more developed and comfortable. Timor Leste is somewhat rougher as a tourist venue, but it is more pristine and unspoiled. It

is a rare opportunity to see a beautiful tropical environment before development transforms it into a shiny, new resort colony.

Timor Leste is a poor country, yet it has made great strides in a very short time. The roads are terrible, but the diving is fantastic. On the one hand, it is still more expensive than a holiday in Vietnam. But on the other hand, it is much less crowded than a holiday in Vietnam.

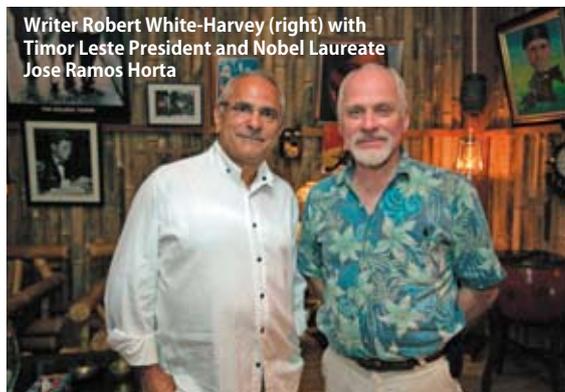
environment. It is a fresh start.

How much development is the right amount? To those accustomed to extensive tourism amenities and creature comforts, Timor Leste may be considered under-developed. However, to adventure tourists who seek the best diving sites, the rarest birds and more rugged peaks, Timor Leste is simply unspoiled.

In my travels, I choose to live in both worlds. I often work hard — and I even get dirty — just to see that rare bird or to get a better photo. Then I like to relax in comfort for a while. It is possible to do both in Timor Leste, and more tourism facilities are in the works.

If you are adventurous and want to go somewhere different and see things that you will never see anywhere else, then take the plunge. You will have better stories to tell as a result.

Before you go be sure to check out the air/hotel/tour packages available from Air Timor and various hotels. The savings can be



Writer Robert White-Harvey (right) with Timor Leste President and Nobel Laureate Jose Ramos Horta

THE GREAT DEBATE: UNDEVELOPED V. UNSPOILED

Some complain that tourism is still in its infancy in Timor Leste, while others celebrate this fact. To the more adventurous, it is good news that tourism is less robust. There is a unique and exciting opportunity to develop a new tourism infrastructure that doesn't overwhelm the

substantial over doing separate bookings. Some deals will include island tours, guides and even camping equipment. Additional accommodations are available. The choices range from rustic huts to business-class hotels.

Always keep insect repellent and bottled water handy.

DILI AND ATAURO ISLAND

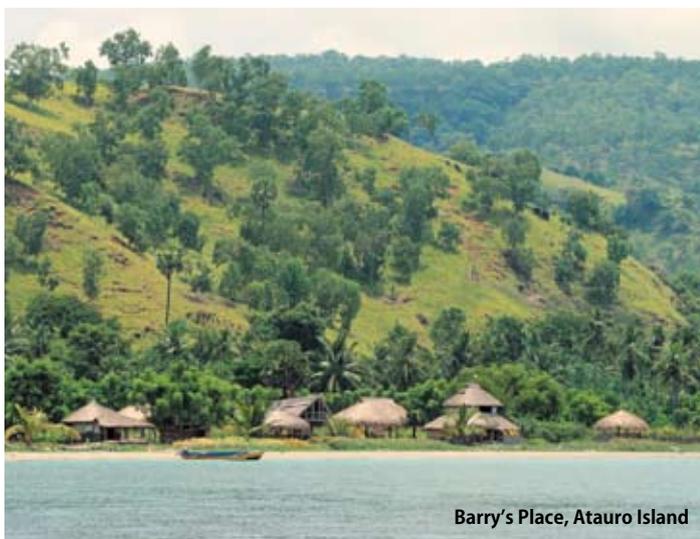
Timor Leste's location at the northern end of the Coral Triangle makes the island a world-class diving destination. The waters can be crystal-clear — especially in the dry season between June and October. November is a good time to see larger humpback whales. Some of the best scuba sites include: Dili Rock and Atauro Island — as well as K57 and Com farther east.

Dive Timor Lorosae is worth a look early in your travel planning. They offer diving, snorkelling, training/certification, whale-watching, and other fun on the water. In addition, they have accommodations and a waterfront bar. A day or two of diving/snorkelling can also be combined with a visit to Atauro Island.

While many activities in the eastern part of the country require a long journey in an SUV, Atauro Island can easily be reached from Dili by ferry, dive boat or water taxi. Either way, it is a pleasant contrast from banging around all day on rough roads. Depending on the vessel, the crossing takes two to three hours.

BARRY HINTON'S LODGE

After visiting Barry Hinton's Lodge on Atauro Island, my problem was that I didn't want to leave. I suddenly lost all desire to work, and I felt a strong urge to contemplate my life while



Barry's Place, Atauro Island

The view from Cristo Rei statue



sitting amongst the flowers near the beach — with a beer, perhaps.

Barry has done a marvellous job with his rustic, but comfortable, beachfront villas. His original designs, and his extensive use of local materials, make Barry's Place a true pioneer of environmentally-friendly development. Power for a few essentials comes from solar panels. I noticed that I had a WiFi signal, but I turned my smartphone off anyway. It didn't seem right in such an idyllic place.

Barry's Place is sometimes referred to as 'EcoLodge', and *Lonely Planet* refers to it as 'Nema's Lodge'. Another lodge nearby, 'Tua Koin', is also referred to as 'EcoLodge'. To avoid Eco-confusion, I refer to the two lodges as: Barry's Place and Tua Koin. Either way, Atauro Island is worth a visit.

THE ROAD EAST

It is a bit more work to travel by land, but a visit to the eastern part of the island is well worth the effort. If you haven't arranged tours through the airlines there are other companies that offer tours. Should you choose to rent a vehicle, you will need an SUV to handle the rough mountain roads. Remember, they drive on the left, and be prepared to stop suddenly and often. Around any bend you may encounter a rock slide, or a water buffalo in the road.

About four hours from Dili is colourful

Baucau — the country's second-largest city. The hilly Old Town has many colonial-era buildings still awaiting restoration. At first Baucau may seem messy and chaotic, but the town has a lot of character. It quickly grows on you. Try the three kilometre hike down the cliffs to the beach if you want to see waterfalls and huge banyan trees.

Farther east, in the district of Los Paulos, is the Com Beach Resort — an oasis of comfort in the rugged east. First-class fishing, diving and snorkelling are available at Com, and several other popular sites are a short distance away. Convenient day trips can be arranged to Tutuala and Jaco Island, to the markets of Los Paulos, and to Nino Konis Santana National Park.

RARE AND ENDANGERED

The Nino Konis Santana National Park — named for a leader of the Falintil resistance — is of enormous importance to rare and endangered species of birds. Before visiting the park, contact BirdLife International at www.birdlife.org. Bring binoculars and the long lens. This could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see rare and vulnerable species such as Black Cuckoo doves, Timor Green Pigeons, or the Yellow-crested Cockatoo — one of the world's rarest birds.

As you have made it to the east, be sure to enjoy the pristine beauty of the beaches at Tutuala and nearby Jaco Island. In addition to the crystal-clear waters and gleaming white sand beaches, Jaco Island is also a bird sanctuary.

If you love to hike arrange an excursion to Mount Ramalaou. At 2,964m, Ramalaou is the highest peak in Timor Leste. Many excursions start at the village of Hato Bulico about a day's drive south of Dili. From there it is a 3-4 hour hike to the top. Other trails may require local assistance or a guide who speaks Tetum.

None of trails are for shorts-and-sandals hikers. This isn't the Appalachian Trail — this is the tropics. For your own protection, bring long pants and good hiking shoes. Light-coloured clothing will attract fewer insects than dark clothes.

THE BIG EVENTS

There are three annual sporting events that are starting to draw international attention. The Dili City of Peace Marathon attracted 1,500 runners last year. This year's race is run on June 18th.

Unlike most bicycle races, the Tour de Timor is an extreme mountain bike racing challenge. The riders cover 600 very rough kilometres in six days. Last year it attracted more than 200 international competitors and 100 local riders. This year's race will take place on September 11-16.

For serious anglers, the Com Fishing Festival offers some of the world's best fishing — along with \$30,000 in cash prizes. The intense competition includes such big-game species as Marlin, Tuna and Sailfish.

THE INTANGIBLE EXCITEMENT

In addition to the crystal clear water, gleaming white sand beaches and exotic rare birds, there are intangible qualities about Timor Leste that tend to sneak up on you.

One intangible is the sheer quirkiness of the place. After a while the bumpy roads become part of the story. You end up telling more stories to the folks back home about the rough mountain roads than you will about how a pink

drink tasted at a resort.

The pigs, goats, and chickens that camp in the roads are good for funny pictures. (Club Med doesn't supply amusing livestock). And then there was that monkey in Tutuala that kept throwing his half-eaten food at me. He hit me twice, then ran away. You won't experience that in Singapore.

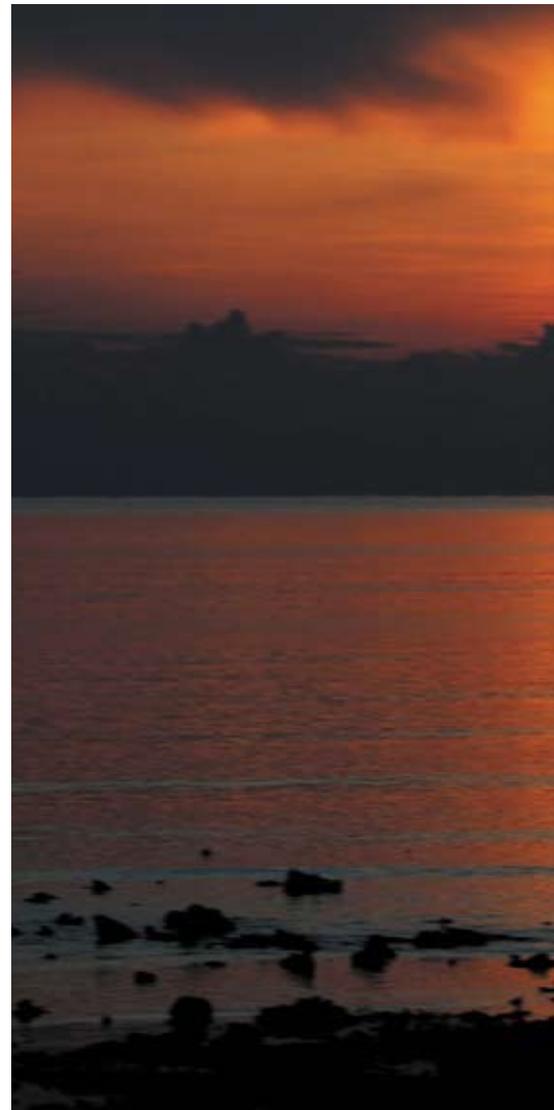
Another intangible that sneaks up on you is the excited optimism of nation-building. This whole country is experimenting, learning and adapting as they tackle problems from pot-holes to power grids.

It reminded me of the mood in Prague, in the 1990s after the Russians left. The challenges are many, but there are business opportunities galore. In both places I was just a tourist, yet I wanted to roll up my sleeves and build something.

MEMORIES SPEAK VOLUME

I will have no problem remembering Timor Leste. Meeting the President — Dr Jose Ramos-Horta — was obviously the highlight of the trip, but there were other memorable moments as well.

That crazy rooster near the Hotel California that crowed all night — instead of at sunrise — was one such memory. And that enormous water buffalo sleeping in the road near Baucau, or the Tutuala monkey who chose me as the person to fling his food at... Ah, yes. These memories speak volumes about a place. **A**



Water buffalo at work in rice paddy



Stilt House: Totem House (uma lulik)





Heron flying over Tutuala beach at sunrise

INFORMATION

Flights

Air Timor
www.airtimor.com

In addition to Air Timor flights from Singapore, Air North flies to Dili from Darwin, Australia, and Merpati Airlines flies from Denpasar (Bali) Indonesia.

Visa

Visas are available on landing for \$30 (USD). An additional \$10 tax is due on departure.

Hotels

www.timorleste.hotels.com
www.islandexplorer.com.sg

Tours

www.ecodiscovery-easttimor.com,
Timor Megatours at www.discoverdili.com.

Dive Timor Lorosae

www.divetimor.com

BirdLife International

www.birdlife.org

Dili City of Peace Marathon

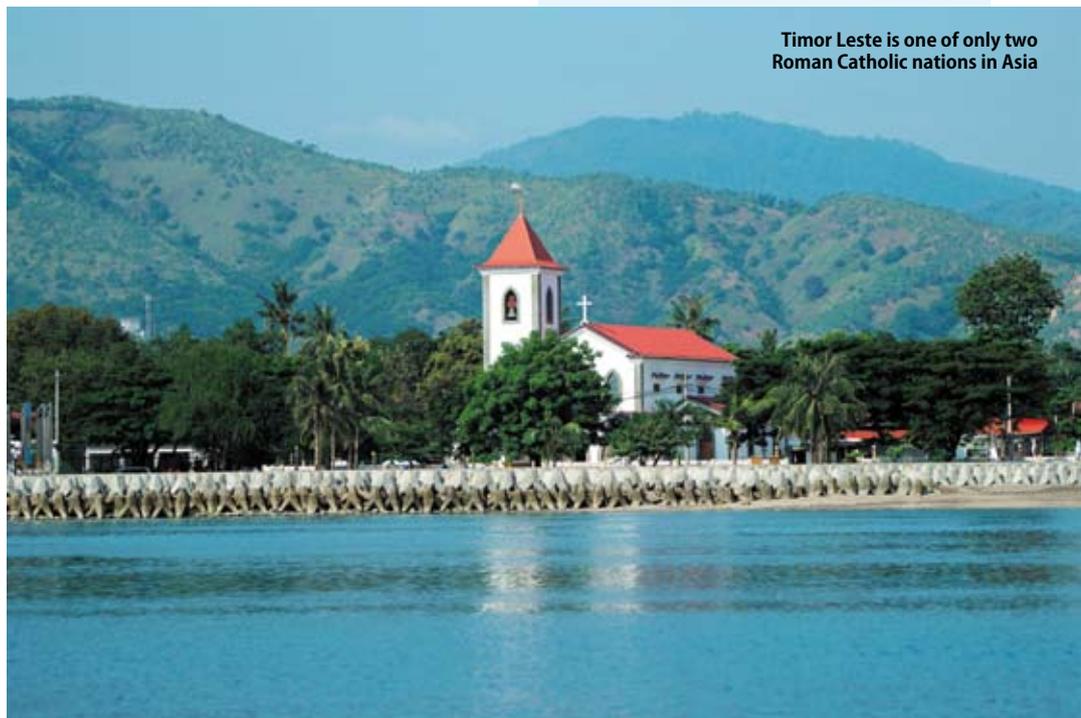
www.dilimarathon.com.

Tour de Timor

www.tourdetimor.com.

Com Fishing Festival

www.comfishingfestival.com.



Timor Leste is one of only two Roman Catholic nations in Asia