

# Destination East Timor

Among the many things East Timor doesn't have is a beaten path. Whether it's the relentless news coverage of its challenges or the hoops you have to jump through to get there, not a lot of people are visiting; maybe three or four a day.

And that's just a shame because it is actually one of the most welcoming places you can visit. People are genuinely touched by your interest, and your greatest risk of injury travelling around the beautiful countryside will be hand fatigue from waving back to people waving at you.

Yes it's got problems. It's the poorest nation in Asia and the political situation is still volatile just a few years after independence (as shown by the political violence in February 2008). Dili is dotted with refugee camps and not many people venture out after dark. But visitors are unlikely to feel threatened. In fact, what you'll be continually struck by is East Timor's potential. There's no greater embodiment of this than the people. Their grace and charm, given the horrors of just the past 100 years, is moving.

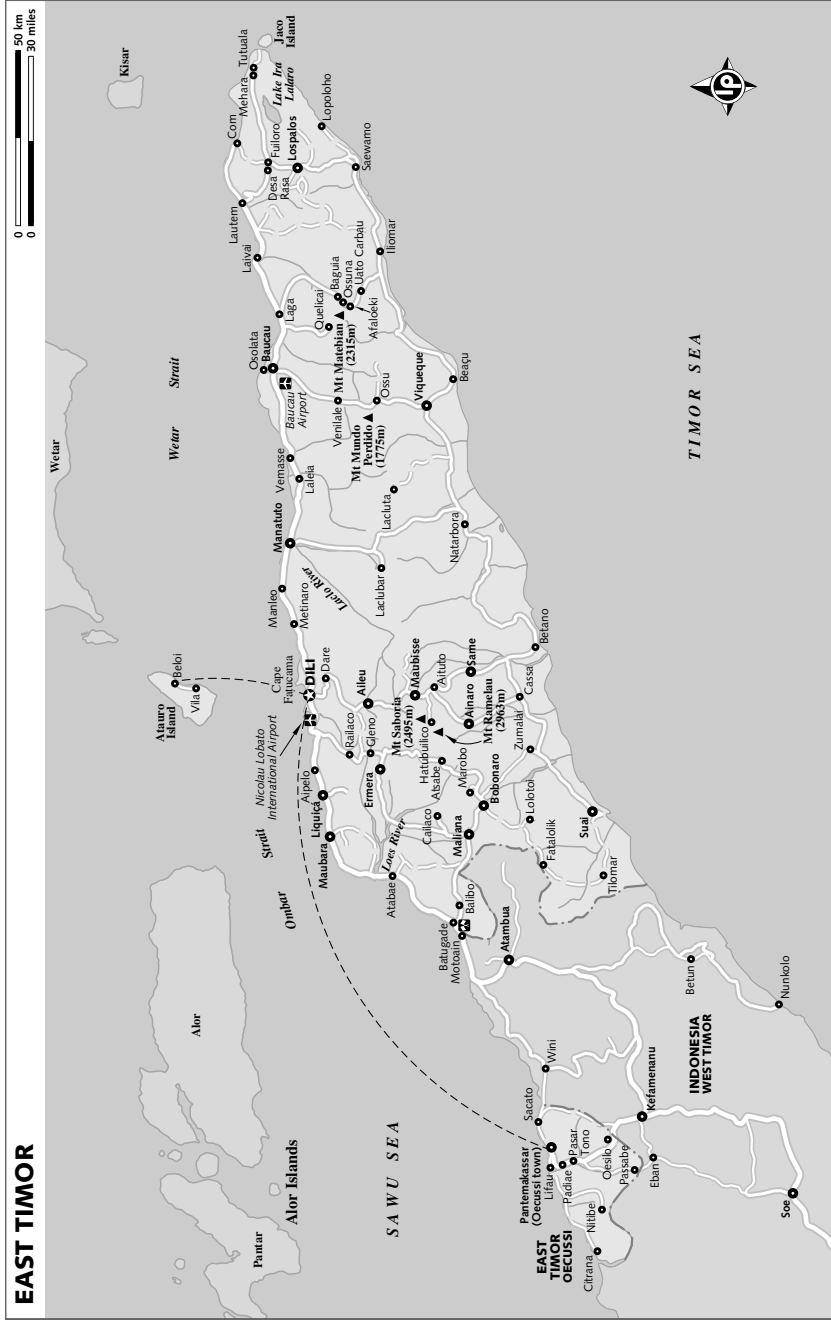
The land itself is beautiful. Although there are ecological concerns, as you travel around East Timor (or Timor-Leste, the official name and the one many prefer), you'll be struck by its jagged mountains, green valleys, thundering rivers, rich marshes and plantations of coffee, fruit and rice. At the sea, expect to swoon. There's kilometre after kilometre of silky white beaches where your mere arrival will increase the population by 100%.

East Timor rewards people prepared to make the best of it. Dili has some good places to stay, eat or enjoy a drink at sunset – all the better to make new friends (which few find difficult). Outside town, people who are self-sufficient will find trekking and walking opportunities, and can explore ancient villages and remote areas that only recently hid the leaders of the independence movement.

The roads are bad and getting around is a major part of the adventure but you will find your way and make your own discoveries. Offshore you'll find East Timor's greatest treasures in its myriad dive spots. Many of these are unnamed, but visitors will find that Dili has excellent dive companies ready to help lead the way. Swim a few metres from the beach and there are spectacular drop-offs. Some contend that the reefs are the most ecologically diverse on the planet. Surfers should note that the south coast also has breaks waiting to be named. And if you really want remote, just make for Oecussi, the minute enclave in West Timor.

With its unlimited potential, this tiny nation will fascinate those ready to meet the challenge. If you can hear your own beat, East Timor is where you can beat your own path.

**'...what you'll be continually struck by is East Timor's potential'**



# Getting Started

Hanging out with other travellers should not be on your list of things to do in East Timor. But meeting amazing and interesting locals and expats should. The nation has much to offer visitors who arrive with their eyes wide open. It's in the middle of the same messy process of forming a country that most nations have gone through at one time or another. But if you are mindful of what precautions are sensible, it's a fascinating place, mostly unexplored by outsiders.

Visitors should be prepared to be self-sufficient and understand that, outside Dili, they may not find reliable supplies of anything, including electricity and food. People are busy surviving and building a new nation; there's little that caters to the specific needs of tourists.

## WHEN TO GO

Go when the weather is best. During the May-to-November dry season there's little rainfall and you're assured of good weather. By the end of the dry season, it can be rather dry and dusty. The December-to-April wet season can be very wet indeed, making travel difficult, particularly if you get off the main routes where unsealed roads can become impassable and unbridged rivers uncrossable.

## ESSENTIAL PACKING

There's not much available in Dili beyond the essentials (water, food, beer, simple medicines and sunscreen), so if you think you will need it, bring it.

- Here are some items to consider:
- A hat – East Timor can get very hot.
  - Warm clothing – in the mountains it can get very cold, so come equipped if you plan to arrive at the summit of Mt Ramelau for sunrise.
  - Malarials, mosquito repellent and personal medications (see p96).
  - A towel and soap – remote hotels, if you can find them, might not be well equipped.
  - A light sleeping bag or sleeping sheet can be useful – for the same reason.
  - A torch (flashlight), as electricity can be unreliable.
  - Travel insurance (see p95) – a necessity for travelling East Timor.

## COSTS & MONEY

Compared to other Southeast Asian locations, East Timor has never been really cheap – not in the Portuguese era, not in the Indonesian era and certainly not now. Because locals have so little money, there's not much for sale aimed at the masses. Instead the goods you find and may need are mostly imported, so that adds to the cost. East Timor's relative cost is compounded by a simple lack of facilities and infrastructure – if there's only a very limited supply of accommodation available, the prices for rooms may be on the high side for what you get.

If you're willing to rough it and avoid places where the only choice is at the expensive end, travel on local buses and eat locally, you can probably get around for less than US\$25 a day. (Note: restaurants may be nonexistent in rural areas, so it's wise to carry food with you, as you can get very hungry before the next market day.) If you want your own vehicle and plan on staying in decent rooms – when available – then your costs will be closer to US\$100 to US\$150 per day.

## COMMUNICATION

Mobile (cell) phones have good coverage in most populated areas and are the principal means of communication. See p90 for details. Telephone landlines are uncommon and the costs of calling in or out of East Timor can be surprisingly high.

Dili has good internet access; Dili and Baucau are the only areas with internet access in East Timor.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

If East Timor's daily police reports were compared to most other cities of one million people, the former would come off quite well. Unfortunately, because the country remains under a microscope, any unrest gets headlines in ways that would be ignored elsewhere.

That said it is a good idea to stay security conscious in East Timor. Dili expats are an excellent source for news, and if you have a mobile phone you can sign up for SMS

message trees that advise of problems in real time. When tensions increase it is a good idea to be cautious and aware that thrown rocks can hurt you. One look at the condition of windshields around Dili will tell you that this is a real problem. If you hear people banging on poles and metal and see people running inside, it's a good sign that you should take shelter.

If you decide to travel outside Dili, you can seek advice on security and road conditions from the Security Information Coordination Centre (☎ 331 2210, ext 5454; Security Information Officer ☎ 723 0635) within the UN Integrated Mission in Timor Leste (Unmit). The UN police (Unpol) emergency numbers are ☎ 723 0365 and 112.

Generally East Timor is not a crime-ridden place so, outside of political problems, you'll generally not feel threatened.

### Driving

Away from Dili, road accidents are probably the biggest danger. The driving is generally not aggressive, speeds are usually quite low and the traffic is certainly not dense, but many vehicles are old and in poor condition. Plus, the roads are often winding, narrow, potholed and rarely equipped with guardrails, despite some impressively long drops in the hills and mountains and along the coast, where the sea often seems to be a long, long way below.

An equally big danger can be UN and NGO vehicles, which are much more likely to be driven aggressively and fast. International SUVs – including outsized and ludicrous Humvees – may leave little room for other vehicles.

### Theft

In Dili in particular there have been some assaults and thefts involving foreigners. Mobile phones are a favourite target, and cars are broken into. Visitors are advised to avoid dark streets at night and not to wander on the beach after dark. Electricity is unreliable, street lighting is generally very poor and there have been muggings and assaults. Women should take particular care. Outside Dili your greatest concern should be petty theft of your bags, or in your room or vehicle. Keep this in mind everywhere, even at what may seem to be a remote beach.

### HOW MUCH?

- Meal in a cheap restaurant US\$1 to US\$3
- Meal in a good restaurant US\$10 to US\$20
- Cup of coffee US\$1 to US\$2
- Bottle of mineral water US\$0.4
- Can of beer US\$2 to US\$3
- Satay street snack US\$1
- Half-day bus trip US\$2 to US\$3
- Taxi ride US\$1
- Souvenir T-shirt US\$10

### READING UP

Most books about East Timor focus on the nation's tangled recent history, such as *Shakedown: Australia's Grab for Timor Oil*, by Paul Cleary (p16).

*Timor-Leste Land of Discovery* is a very impressive coffee-table book filled with gorgeous images of the land and people. It's widely available in Dili.

*A Not-so-distant Horror: Mass Violence in East Timor*, by Joseph Nevins, covers the bloody recent history of East Timor and argues that the USA and Australia et al allowed the Indonesian government to slaughter thousands from 1975 to 1999.

*East Timor: A Rough Passage to Independence*, by James Dunn, is probably the most thorough account of the country's history – the chaotic two years leading up to the Indonesian invasion in 1975, the long period of Indonesian occupation and the violent upheavals of the 1999 referendum.

*The Redundancy of Courage*, by Timothy Mo, is a gripping novel in which a fictional country's struggle against occupation is a deliberately thinly veiled account of East Timor's independence fight. The novel was short listed for the Booker Prize in 1991.

*A Woman of Independence*, by Kirsty Sword Gusmão, is the autobiographical account of how this Australian teacher came to be East Timor's first lady in 2002.

*Tetum Ghosts and Kin: Fertility and Gender in East Timor*, by David Hicks, looks at the role life and death plays in the complex beliefs of the people living in Viqueque.

### ONLINE RESOURCES

There are some excellent expat blogs from East Timor, and most of the NGOs in the country have various sites with information. Note that some sites date quickly as their creators move on to other parts of the world.

**[www.easttimortourismassociationnews.blogspot.com](http://www.easttimortourismassociationnews.blogspot.com)** Has updated tourism news from the Tourism Association of East Timor.

**[www.etan.org](http://www.etan.org)** The East Timor Action Network is a US-based organisation, with a vast and compelling array of web links and loads of information and articles. This is an excellent place to start online.

**[www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)** Has guides to travel in East Timor; check out the Thorn Tree forum.

**[www.turismotimorleste.com](http://www.turismotimorleste.com)** The Official Department of Tourism site has some excellent information on the country written both by local and international experts.

**[www.unmit.org](http://www.unmit.org)** The site of the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste has news and official information.

**[www.xananarepublic.blogspot.com](http://www.xananarepublic.blogspot.com)** The Xanana Republic Gazette is a Dili-based blog that is very entertaining and informative. It also has links to the ever-changing line-up of local blogs, some of which really are excellent.

## The Authors



### RYAN VER BERKMOES

#### Coordinating Author

Years of travel across the Indonesian archipelago in no way prepared Ryan for East Timor. The mix of Asian and European cultures is like nowhere else and the beauty gave him a major pain in the jaw from all the dropping. More importantly, despite vast experience as an international journalist that taught him to never take headlines at face value, Ryan was amazed at how the reality of the country never matched the pervasive reports of doom. Within the myriad challenges of East Timor are a multitude of rewards for the traveller ready for adventure.



### ADAM SKOLNICK

#### Oecussi

Adam has been lost in the Amazon, scaled Kilimanjaro, toured baseball stadiums in Cuba, meditated with Hindu priests in Bali and Buddhist monks in Myanmar (Burma), and hiked through the rainforest with devout Muslim farmers in Sumatra. And Oecussi is one of the scruffiest and sweetest spots of them all. Check out his website and travel blog: [www.adamskolnick.com](http://www.adamskolnick.com).

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com).

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'