

# South of Dili



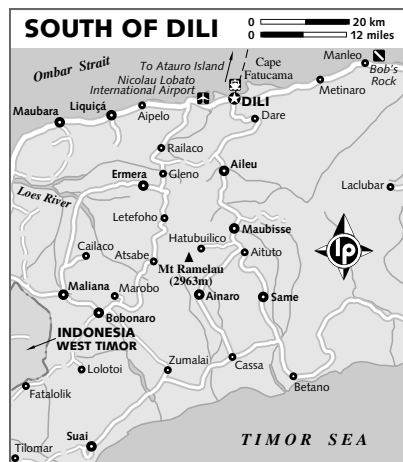
Heading south is the easiest way to get a quick change of scenery and weather from Dili. The hills have grand views back over the capital and islands beyond. As you climb, the temperature falls by the minute. Soon you'll be sweat-free and loving it.

The scenery is a lush mix of coffee plantations (this is the heart of East Timor's famed coffee industry), fruit trees and dense forest mixed with wide valleys. You are often literally up in the clouds all the way to the south coast, especially in the old colonial town of Maubisse. You can climb further above the clouds for yet more views at Mt Ramelau, the highest peak in the country.

The south coast is a mixture of beaches and salt marshes. It's thinly populated and as rugged as the roads themselves. In the southwest corner, Suai slumbers on, though constantly rumoured to be the base of East Timor's foray into the offshore oil fields.

## HIGHLIGHTS SOUTH OF DILI

You can easily reach Suai and the south coast from Dili in a day, including a few stops. But most people will want to pause longer in Maubisse (p73) and include a climb of nearby Mt Ramelau (p73). The road splits and goes through Ainaro and Same before rejoining near the coast. If you are planning to return pretty much the way you came, you can visit both. Otherwise pick one and create a circle that includes a return over the magnificent road north of Zumalai to Bobonaro (see p68). Roads along the south coast can be impassable, so check before you set out. Getting to Suai is not impossible, although heading east to Natabora often is.



## DILI TO AILEU

From the southern outskirts of Dili the road immediately begins to climb. You'll pass a rather large pink erection, which is the Chinese-funded and grandiose new presidential palace. Look for plant vendors all along the road, selling pots brimming with bougainvillea.

Between the 9km and 10km markers (distance from Dili), at **Dare** in the Fatunaba Hills, is an **Australian War Memorial**. It was built by the 2/2 Independent Company, the Australian guerrilla unit otherwise known as Sparrow Force (see p75), which held out against the Japanese in 1942–43. It's easy to miss because there's only a small plaque at the roadside and a small shelter. In 1968, surviving members of the Sparrow Force built a school here complete with that Australian essential: a swimming pool. It was damaged in 1999 and the pool was filled in as there was no money to maintain it, although Sparrow Force alumni money helped rebuild the school. Spurred by the Aloa Foundation (see p19), there's now a plan to build a new school and include a memorial and museum to WWII.

Great views abound from here over Dili and across the sea to Atauro Island. The play of light from storms, clouds and sunny areas is mesmerising. The road continues to climb through dense eucalyptus forest, which in the morning is shrouded in fog at higher altitudes. Some of the best viewpoints are 28km to 34km from Dili. A few small villages are spaced out along the road, and 14km before Aileu there's

a **traditional high-peaked house** perched above the road. An unmarked turn-off 7km before Aileu runs west to Ermera (see p68). This road is pretty rugged but it's popular with hardy mountain bikers who start up here and, hours of wild riding later, end up on the coast road west of Dili.

## AILEU

The road from Dili drops into a fertile highland valley and the town of Aileu, which is surrounded by rice paddies and garden plots. This reasonably large town, 47km south of Dili, is the capital of the regency of the same name. The **circular houses** with conical roofs are typical of the Mambai people found all the way from Dili to the south coast.

There are few points of interest in Aileu, apart from a very large **monument** to a massacre of local Portuguese citizens by the invading Japanese in 1942. Aileu was a centre for Fretilin activity, particularly in the first few years after the Indonesian takeover.

After Aileu the road climbs again and runs through the mountains 25km to Maubisse.

**Restaurante Zery** (dishes US\$2-6) has easily the best vittles you'll find south of Dili. This bright and cheery open-air place has clean tablecloths and napkins, amenities not to be taken lightly. The menu has a number of Portuguese classics, a legacy of the UN forces from the country who were stationed here around independence. *Caldo verde* (a rich soup) leads a menu that includes chicken and French fries (*frango no churrasco*) and *batata frita*, sweet and sour pork (*porco agridoce*) or a fine chow mein (*chaumin*). You can even wash your meal down with a glass of red wine (*vinho tinto*).

In the same block there are several bare-bones chicken-and-rice places that don't come close to competing.

### ROAD CONDITIONS

South of Dare, the roads become a very mixed bag. Stretches of well-sealed roads suddenly change to rough areas where sections have been washed down cliffs and what remains is mostly potholed. As always you're limited by the lowest common denominator, so although some parts are good, other parts require 4WD. And some parts may not be passable at all.

Dili–Maubisse buses all pass through Aileu; the fare is US\$1.50. South of Aileu the road enters a broad valley carpeted with rice paddies and accented with cacti.

## MAUBISSE

About 70km south of Dili, the small town of Maubisse sits at more than 1400m in rugged mountains and is surrounded by spectacular scenery. Apart from long walks, Maubisse has few attractions, but this old hill town makes a delightful break from the heat of the coast and is a peaceful, cool spot to relax. In July and August it can actually get quite chilly. The views are stunning from the Pousada Maubisse (see below), a fine old **Portuguese guesthouse**, and ruins of the **old fort walls** terrace the side of the hill.

Maubisse's large **market** is at its most active on Sunday, when villagers come from miles around to sell elaborate displays of carrots, garlic, bananas, beans and more. A few market traders sell *tais* (traditional woven articles), but most are from Babonaro (see p68), and the prices are high.

At the bottom of the hill where the *pousada* sits is a **memorial** to victims of the Japanese occupation in 1943. The road south past the market heads downhill a few kilometres to some traditional **Mambai villages**.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Pousada Maubisse** (☎ 724 9567; r US\$20-100) This old *pousada* (inn) was once the governor's residence; it has a great location with grand views. It's on the hill directly above the town and is impossible to miss. Take the road next to the market, from where it is 800m to the top; the name 'Pousada Maubisse' is arched across the road at the bottom. The eight rooms have private bathroom with hot water when the power's on and are clean, although plain. The cheaper rooms are in two blocks slightly below the main *pousada*, where the more expensive and slightly more luxurious rooms are located. There's a lounge, a restaurant and bar, while outside, apart from the fine views, there are simple gardens. The restaurant has a Portuguese-influenced menu heavy on steak (mains US\$9). This is a popular – even romantic – escape from Dili, although not recommended for affairs as you're likely to see someone you know. Rates are lowest midweek, climbing high for Saturday night.

**Maubisse Parish Church** (per person US\$15) About 1km north of the market area you'll see the town's grand church. A separate building with broad views of the terraced church grounds and valley beyond has five immaculately clean rooms, each with its own bathroom. The parishioners extend a warm welcome and don't be surprised if someone hands you a beer.

There are a couple of very plain places around the car park and bus stop area at the front of the market that offer meals for around US\$1. The Warung Naroma offers local coffee (*kopi*) that's a life-saver on days when the clouds close in and it gets downright cold.

## Getting There & Away

As everywhere in East Timor, buses from Dili to Maubisse (US\$2, about three hours) tend to depart early in the morning. Later buses may finish in Aileu, where you should be able to find a *mikrolet* (minibus) going through to Maubisse. Return buses finish around noon (perhaps later on Sunday and Friday market days), or you could take a *mikrolet* to Aileu and then another to Dili. Buses and *mikrolets* also go to Ainaro, Same and Suai.

## MT RAMELAU

We'd say that climbing this peak is the high point of many people's trips to East Timor, but you'd think we were joking. About 10km south of Maubisse by a kilometre marker stone, an unmarked road turns off west to the village of **Hatubuilico**, 18km from the main road along a fairly rough road. Hatubuilico is the base for climbing 2963m-high Mt Ramelau (Gunung Tatamailau), the highest peak in Timor.

The hike up Mt Ramelau is a steady, long haul to the top, rather than a steep climb, and takes 2½ to three hours if you start right in Hatubuilico village at 1950m. If you have a 4WD you can continue out of the village along a trail that in general is no worse – or better for that matter – than the road all the way into the village. After 2.5km you will reach a meadow at 2280m, from where it's only a two-hour walk to the top (1½ hours if you're in a hurry).

The trail is a wide walking path, with plenty of evidence of use by horses, and very easy to follow. At about 2700m there's a site where open-air religious services are held. The top

is marked by a 3m-high **statue of the Virgin Mary**. When not shrouded in clouds, the views are superb: south all the way to the coast and if the weather is clear, north out to Atauro Island off the coast from Dili.

The walk from the summit does not take much more than an hour to the meadow and two hours all the way down to the village. Bring a coat because it can get very windy and cold at the top at any time, and if you climb at night for the sunrise it can be freezing. The trails are also often wet and muddy.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Pousada Alecrim Namrau** (☎ 724 9567; Rua Gruta Ramelau Hun 1; r per person US\$10) In Hatubuilico, stay at this five-room inn, where meals can be arranged for US\$2. The uniquely decorated guesthouse (who knew you could do that with stuffed animals?) is run by the village chief, who can arrange a guide (US\$5) to get you up the mountain – and up at 3am in time to reach the peak for sunrise.

Shops sell only basic supplies so bring food with you. There's a very colourful **market** in the village twice a week; Timorese come from all around this mountain district, many of them arriving by pony.

### Getting There & Away

The easiest way to reach Hatubuilico is to charter a *mikrolet* in Maubisse and get it to wait for you, which costs around US\$20 to US\$30. Getting back can be a problem as there is no regular public transport. You might have to walk the 18km back to the main road. You can simplify things by arranging a visit with one of the tour companies in Dili.

### AITUTO

The road south from Maubisse has spectacular scenery and climbs through coffee plantations into more open country before reaching a fork 13km from Maubisse. To the east the road heads down to Same, while the road to the right goes southwest to Ainaro.

The small village of Aituto, with many **traditional thatched-roof houses**, is just north of the fork in the road from Maubisse. A fine whitewashed **church** perches above the road. Beside it is a beautifully constructed, **traditional circular building** on stilts, with a conical thatched roof. The building is elaborately carved and painted. During the Portuguese era in particular, the village was noted for its

many traditional houses with thatched roofs, topped by ritual posts that were decorated with buffalo and goat horns. There are great views of the mountains from here.

### AINARO

The trip to Ainaro, 40km south of Maubisse, is stunning, with fantastic views of the surrounding mountains and the wide valley descending towards the south coast. Ainaro is the capital of the regency of the same name, and is an orderly, well-laid-out town with a large, eye-catching **Portuguese church** and a few other **Portuguese buildings**. There is a **monument** to Don Aleixo Corte Real (1886–1943), a Portuguese patriot who led a revolt against the Japanese during WWII, but was captured and killed.

Continue 400m west past the church; on the right side of the road is **Hospedaria & Restaurante Gabmenis** (r per person from US\$10), which has simple rooms. The other choice for food is the very basic **Restaurante Vila Clara** (meals from US\$1). To find this establishment continue through town; it's on the right just past the centre, en route to Cassa and the south coast.

Direct buses run from Dili (US\$3) and south to Suai (similar fares); *mikrolets* run between Ainaro and Maubisse (around US\$1.50).

### SAME

Same is 43km from Maubisse along a scenic route. Given a choice between driving through Ainaro and here to the south, Same probably wins. The road clings to the curvaceous hillsides, passing through **coffee plantations**, which often squeeze up against both sides of the road and sometimes reduce it to a single lane. Bananas and oranges grow everywhere. A **naive shrine and cross** set in boulders overlooks the road at a scenic point about halfway between Maubisse and Same.

A few kilometres before Same a small **shrine** on the east side of the road commemorates six Timorese *'barbaramente assassinados pela Fretilin em 27 1 1976'*. It's a reminder that not all the brutality inflicted on East Timor was a result of the Indonesian invasion; there was some nasty Timorese blood-letting as the various factions struggled for control while the Portuguese rule came to its messy conclusion.

This was a centre for the revolts led by Boaventura, Same's *liurai* (native ruler),

during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the Portuguese era there used to be a *pousada* at Same, and the town also had a small airstrip servicing regular flights from Dili. In those days the road was very rough, and buses from Dili could take up to 10 hours to make the short trip across the central mountains.

Friends of Same ([www.friendsofsame.org](http://www.friendsofsame.org)), a group based in Melbourne, Australia, is a good example of what small initiatives can achieve. Working closely with the community the organisation has helped fund education and assisted many people locally.

*Mikrolets* run between Maubisse and Same at a cost of about US\$1.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel & Restaurant Same** (s/d US\$25/35; ☎ kitchen 8am–10pm) Just south of the town centre, this hotel will make you wish the owners would consider franchising. The 12 rooms are spotless and have big beds and private bathroom. There are fans and hole-free screens on the windows. The restaurant has a good menu of curries and standards, such as *mie goreng* (meals US\$3 to US\$4). A genuinely cold Tiger beer is US\$2.

**Talik Café** (meals US\$1.25–1.50) Close to the roundabout right in the town centre. It offers a choice of fried rice (*nasi goreng*), fried noodles (*mie goreng*) and similar dishes. Simple rooms may be available here.

### BETANO & SPARROW FORCE

Betano played a key role in the struggle of the Australian guerrilla unit known as Sparrow Force against the Japanese during WWII. For two months up to 18 April 1942 there had been no contact with the Australian forces operating behind the Japanese lines in East Timor. Radio contact was re-established on that night and, after attempts to supply soldiers by parachute drops were unsuccessful and abandoned, Australian navy vessels began to bring in supplies from Darwin. Between May and September supplies landed at Betano on 10 occasions, by HMAS *Kuru*, *Vigilant* and *Kalgoorlie*.

On 22 September the destroyer HMAS *Voyager* arrived off Betano with 15 tons of supplies, thousands of dollars worth of silver coins and 450 troops to reinforce Sparrow Force. Unfortunately the *Voyager* ran aground during the unloading manoeuvre and was eventually abandoned; wreckage from the ship can still be seen from the beach at Betano today. The crew were all rescued by other Australian navy vessels.

As more Japanese troops were moved into Timor the decision was made to withdraw Sparrow Force. The Dutch destroyer *Tjerk Hiddes* made three trips to Timor in mid-December and took off 950 Australian, Portuguese and Dutch personnel. Another 300 were evacuated by HMAS *Arunta* in January 1943, and the final stragglers were taken off in the submarine USS *Gudgeon* in February. Unfortunately there was harsh retribution for the locals left behind. Hundreds if not thousands were killed by the Japanese for collaborating with the Australians.

### BETANO

Betano is a coastal village with a long sweep of black-sand **beach**. This was where the Australian Sparrow Force guerrillas (see below) were evacuated at the end of their campaign during WWII. Fragments of the destroyer HMAS *Voyager*, which was lost here in 1942, can still be seen close to the beach, and there's good **snorkelling**. Where the road south from Same arrives at the coast there's a long sweep of black-sand beach and an Indonesian **memorial** to all the roads they built in the 1980s.

From Same in the central mountains the road south is in surprisingly good condition as it descends steadily for 24km to Betano. Regular *mikrolets* do the 40-minute trip from Same for about US\$1.

Thirteen kilometres south of Same and 11km before Betano, a road branches off west to Zumalai and Suai.

### EAST OF BETANO

Heading east from Betano, the road along the coast runs through coastal swamps. Flooded each wet season, this area is known as **Sungai Clere** and is rich with wildlife, including a plethora of birds such as cockatoos and indigenous pigeons. The latter enjoy the small blue fruits produced in profusion by the huge Canarium trees. With roots radiating in all directions, these impressive growths dominate the swamps. The entire 30,000-hectare region

has been designated as a protected zone. The oft-mentioned Timorese crocodile is said to live in these waters (see below).

Once past the wetlands, the road turns, then runs parallel to the coast to Natarbora and Viqueque (p56). There is not a lot to see and the road is in dire condition. Numerous unbridged rivers make this route impassable during the wet season. It takes a few hours from Betano to Natarbora, and at least another four hours from there to Viqueque. The road north from Natarbora to Manatuto is also a challenge.

## ZUMALAI

Zumalai is an important crossroad. The pretty road from Bobonaro (see p68) south-east over the hills ends here. From the east, the road from Cassa (where the routes from Dili via Ainaro and Same merge) should be a vital link but there are a few problems. Most notably the road simply vanishes at a wide river crossing just east of Zumalai. About half of a huge Indonesian-era bridge across the Ailua River has been washed away. Vehicles breeze across the surviving spans and then must literally ford the waters to reach the other side. Because of the river flow there are no tracks to follow, so vehicles gingerly wander through the waters looking for places shallow enough to preclude catastrophe. Keep your windows open should you need to bail out.

The town of Zumalai itself is small and nondescript. From here the road 30km west to Suai is smooth in parts and quite rough

### CROC HUNTING

Should you see any body of water in East Timor that's not the ocean you can count on a local to tell you that crocodiles live there. Neat! you think, crocs! Well there's one small problem: for all the talk about crocs, not many Timorese have seen them. Yes they exist, but if there were as many as people claim, the odds of you surviving a walk near water would be about the same as those for a chicken tossed into a croc cage at a fun park. So when somebody tells you about crocs in East Timor, just ask them: 'Have you ever seen one?' (Note that some are kept in fenced compounds in Dili.)

in others. A paving machine that appears to have self-destructed by the side of the road speaks volumes.

## SUAI

Capital of the Covalima regency, Suai is a sprawling collection of mostly **Tetun villages**. It's an interesting place with a pretty beach area. Should oil exploration begin in earnest in the Timor Sea there are plans to base some of it here.

During the Indonesian era this was a *transmigrasi* area; large sums were spent to create a town that could house Indonesian immigrants from other islands who would help begin to make the place less Timorese. Today broad and crumbling avenues – plus a number of silly statues – are the major artefacts of this scheme.

The last large town along the south coast before the Indonesian border, Suai is a rather confusing place since it's a port that's not strictly on the coast. Approaching from the east, the road forks about 4km before the town; the left fork runs to Suai Loro on the coast, while the right fork heads inland to the town of Suai itself. To reach **Debos**, the town centre of Suai, take the right-hand fork until you reach a roundabout with a cartoonish Indonesian statue, a police station and hotel about 3km along the road. Turn right here and then right again; Debos sits atop a hill 1.3km from the roundabout and about 5km inland from the sea.

In September 1999, during the violence following the independence referendum, more than 100 people, including three Catholic priests, were massacred by militia beside the wooden **Ava Maria church** in Debos where they had sought refuge. Just past the market there's a **memorial** to the three priests: Francisco Soares, Tarsisius Dewanto and Hilario Madeira. Nearby is the oddly militaristic-looking and unfinished **Suai Cathedral**; work has stalled on this grandiose extravagance. A great deal of damage was caused around the town centre in the upheavals, from which Suai is still struggling to recover.

## Suai Loro

Suai Loro (South Suai) is a poor, traditional village with a spectacular black-sand **beach** and expansive vistas. At low tide, rock pools can be explored and at high tide there's good swimming, but currents can be treacherous in

places. Nearby are the remains of a **Portuguese fort**. On the way to Suai Loro the road passes salty marshes where women crouch in tiny lean-tos, stoking fires under large tin trays of water from which salt is extracted. This area especially is known for its claims of huge crocodiles (see opposite).

## Around Suai

*Mikrolet*s run from the Debos market to villages in the district. An interesting trip can be made north to the mountains and **Tilomar**, which has an old residence of the Portuguese governor, and superb views over Suai and the coast. Further on is **Fatalulik**, which has a large, three-level traditional house with hand-carved posts and beams bound together in a stylish rope pattern. A fertility goddess is carved into one panel of the wall.

## Sleeping & Eating

Suai once had several hotels and a few good places to eat. Most were destroyed in 1999; you can see the remains of a few cottages down by the beach. Choices these days are slim.

**Eastern Dragon** (r US\$40-55; ☎) This place is big with the NGO and UN white-SUV crowd, who are anxious to find some air-con at the end of the road. However, it's in pretty rough condition and hard to recommend. Instead of a mint on our pillow we found a turd in our toilet. Many lights don't work and the poorly fitted windows might as well have a 'welcome' sign for mosquitoes. However, the

restaurant (mains US\$6) in a separate well-screened octagon does redeem things a bit. It has a full bar and decent Chinese food. The breakfasts are cooked to order and quite tasty. A small grocery is the only one of its kind on the south coast.

**Religious compound** (r US\$10) For spotless accommodation in pretty grounds, the Canossian nuns at this compound in Debos have simple rooms with four beds.

The nearby **market** has a couple of very basic *warungs* (foodstalls), with vendors selling a lot of beans and nuts. Political graffiti in English shows that the locals are not only aware of Australia's tough negotiating tactics for the oilfields offshore but that they don't approve.

## Getting There & Away

From Dili take a bus or *mikrolet* south to Maubisse and either Ainaro or Same to Zumalai. From there catch a *mikrolet* to Suai. The trip should cost about US\$5 and take all day.

## Getting Around

Fairly regular *mikrolet*s run to the various centres situated around Suai and then down to the beach. *Mikrolet*s to places like Tilomar and Fatalulik will take an hour or two and cost from US\$1. There's also a collection of motorcycle jockeys hanging around the market; negotiate a fare (US\$2 to US\$3) and hop on the back.

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