

# West of Dili



Portuguese forts and beautiful coast are more than enough reason to head west from Dili. That the road along the water is also the sole land access to West Timor and Indonesia is but a bonus. It's a reasonably smooth ride and there are many places to pause along the way.

Inland, roads barely worthy of the name reach places such as Ermera and Maliana, which are regional hubs (a somewhat glorified term for what they are) but aren't especially interesting. However, little places such as the long-forgotten colonial retreat of Bobonaro and notorious Balibo are the journey's reward.

Travel away from the coast is not for the faint-hearted, but with adequate preparation – and 4WD – you'll see places and people seldom visited by outsiders. This is real travel, with the reward being the journey itself. Here, even the mundane takes on new meaning.

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## HIGHLIGHTS WEST OF DILI

The road west to the Indonesian border is in good shape and passes beaches, dive sites, interesting towns and pretty scenery. Inland, there are several towns, such as Balibo (p69) and Bobonaro (p68), that are interesting but most of the roads away from the coast are in pretty bleak condition. The route down to Zumalai (p68) and the south coast is as intriguing as it is challenging. You can make a circuit from Dili via Batugade, Bobonaro and down to the coast through Zumalai to Suai in one long day. Maliana (p68) is the only place with organised accommodation once past Maubara.

## NORTH COAST ROAD

This good road mostly hugs the coast all the way to the Indonesian border. It alternately clings to the curving sides of hills that plunge down to the water and then shoots straight across fertile flatlands. Every so often there's an intriguing little town with a historical remnant or two and roadside vendors selling fruity bounty from the hills beyond. Even though this is the only road in or out of the country, traffic is light. The major hazards are madcap UN drivers in white SUVs and foolhardy goats.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

There's a steady stream of buses running through all the towns along the coast from Dili's Tasitolu depot. Bus fares from Dili range from around US\$1 up to US\$5 all the way to the end of the road just beyond Batugade at the West Timor border.

Although the route through Ermera to the Indonesian West Timor border looks about the same distance, the coast road is in far better condition and is suitable for cars. As a result, all buses take the coast route; the inland route is strictly for 4WD exploration.

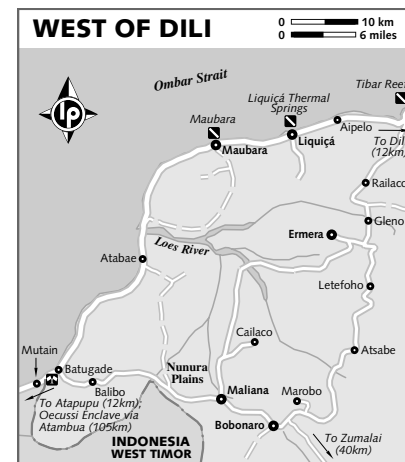
### AIPELO

The **Bekas Penjara Aipelo** is a 19th-century Portuguese jail that was once an impressive building. The central ruins have very thick walls with a host of roofless minor buildings clustered around them. It is right on the water; don't pass by without a stop.

### LIQUIÇÁ

This large, shaded town 35km west of Dili is strung along the tree-lined road for a few kilometres. It has some reasonable, mostly black-sand beaches and some fine Portuguese buildings, including the **governor's office** and the **hospital**. During WWII the Japanese imprisoned a large proportion of the Portuguese population of Timor in a concentration camp at Liquiçá.

On 6 April 1999, the Besa Merah Putih (Red and White Iron) militia were responsible for a massacre in Liquiçá. The massacre, which took place in the Catholic church, was one of the first signs that the forthcoming independence referendum had the potential to go disastrously wrong. Human Rights



Watch notes that at least 18 (and maybe more than 50) villagers, many of them children and the elderly, were killed when the militia mob broke into the church while Indonesian personnel stood by.

At the western end of the town, where the government buildings are located, the shocking pink Restaurant Happy Garden (the fried chicken is best) and Restaurante Rosa are about the only places you'll find to eat along the coast. Meals are only a dollar or two. The eastern edge of town has a lively **market**. The banana selection here is about the best you'll find, with everything from typical yellow numbers to huge copper-coloured jobbies.

Heading west, look for **Maubara Lake** near the 40km mark. Its placid waters are thought to hide evil spirits.

### MAUBARA

Sitting on the coast 49km west of Dili, Maubara has a 17th-century **Portuguese fort** that's impressive outside and slightly comical inside thanks to a raucous band of chickens that have taken over the shrubbery. Two cannons point out to sea from the corners of the ruins. The fort's substantial coastal wall faces resolutely towards the sea, a reminder of the long centuries of Portuguese rule. Across from the entrance and right on the water, stalls sell huge cushions that won't fit in any overhead bin, and local pottery.

The town also has an impressive **church** and some **scuba-diving** sites offshore, which are worth checking out. There's a small

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### DIVE SITES WEST OF DILI

Although some of East Timor's most popular dive sites are along the coast to the east of Dili, there are also a few sites to the west. All are close to the shore, and divers can simply wade in from the beach; boats are not necessary. New sites are being discovered, and the site names are often changeable. The sites that follow are listed with their distance from Dili.

#### Tibar Reef (12km)

Just off the road out of Dili to the west. The turn-off is just before the Indonesian-built archway over the road that marks the boundary between the Dili and Liquiçá regions. The reef heading off to the west from the shore has good coral and plenty of fish life.

#### Liquiçá Thermal Springs (35km)

Also known as Bubble Beach. The thermal springs issue into the sea from the sandy bottom in just 8m of water. The entry point is beside a cemetery for soldiers killed during the Indonesian era. Blue-spotted rays and reef fish cluster around the patch of coral reef northeast of the entry point.

#### Maubara (49km)

Entry is from directly in front of the Maubara fort (p65), and leads to a sandy slope and coral with plenty of colourful reef fish.

**market** most days but Sunday is the big day when people and vendors flock here from all over.

This was the centre of one of the most important old kingdoms in Portuguese Timor. It was here, in 1893, that a series of revolts took place, eventually leading to the bloody pacification of the island by the Portuguese. As in nearby Liquiçá, there was a great deal of intimidation by the Besa Merah Putih militia in the run-up to the independence referendum.

About 3km west of town look for a rusty sign along the road that reads 'Maubara Fatubessi'. Turn up the short but steep and tortuous road and you'll reach **Irmãs Carmelitas**, a religious retreat with sweeping views of the sea and islands beyond. The Carmelite nuns who run the place will happily rent you a simple room (US\$17 per person) set in the shady gardens whether a full confession is on your to-do list or not. All meals are included.

### LOES RIVER & ATABAE

Continuing west from Maubara, the road clings to the rocky coast, which provides often-spectacular views, particularly when it climbs high above the sea. Many of the hairiest bits are marked by road safety shrines and religious statues with expressions that don't look optimistic.

The road finally drops back to sea level just before the **Loes River**, 76km from Dili. The

long bridge that spans the river was finished in 1990 and allows year-round travel along the coast by this main route between Dili and the West Timor border. Just east of the river there is a large cluster of food stalls catering to the buses that pause here. On the west bank a Portuguese-style villa with some surprising architectural details hangs off a rock outcrop overlooking the river.

Beyond the river the road again climbs into the hills, offering fine views down to the clear, blue waters below. The reddish earth and sparse, dry-looking vegetation is very reminiscent of northern Australia, particularly along the stretches where eucalyptus trees are common.

After dropping to a plain covered with bright green rice fields, the road reaches the sprawling coastal village of **Atabae**, 85km from Dili. A UN troop base stood just east of the town in 2007, but otherwise there's nothing of note here except for a lot of fish vendors. After Atabae the road again sticks to the coast, passing some beautiful beaches before bending inland and climbing, then descending to the coast one more time just before Batugade.

### BATUGADE

Only 2.5km from the border with West Timor, Batugade is 112km from Dili. Its overgrown **Portuguese fort** dates from 1655 and has massive walls and a couple of old cannons. This

is not your cliché of the busy border town. There's a meagre market with a few stalls where you can get a non-cool drink and a snack or two.

The coastal road from Dili turns right at the fort and continues the last couple of kilometres to the border. From there it's only 12km to **Atapupu**, the first village in West Timor. See p92 for information on the border crossing. Buses direct from Dili to the border cost US\$5.

The alternative route out of Batugade is to turn left at the fort in the centre. This road climbs steadily to Balibo, then drops to cross the Loes River and its floodplain into Maliana. From there routes continue to the south coast or loop back through Ermera to Dili.

## INLAND ROAD

The inland route runs from Dili to Ermera, then to Maliana and Balibo through the mountains, before finally reaching the coast at Batugade, just before the West Timor border. Today the sealed coast road is in much better shape, although from Dili the inland road is OK as far as Ermera. Between Ermera and Maliana, either directly or via Atsabe, the road is rutted, rough and suitable only for 4WDs.

This country is pretty desolate; you won't encounter many people. You'll be alone with your own thoughts and the striking, at times arid, landscape. The beautiful road to Zumalai and the south coast, which begins near Bobonaro, traverses lush hills and ancient villages. Maliana is an interesting market town. Balibo was the scene of an atrocity that still resonates, while Bobonaro is an undiscovered colonial gem.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Catch a bus heading inland to Ermera from the Tasitolu terminal in Dili (p49). There is no regular public transport beyond Ermera. If you plan to do this or the road to Zumalai in a rented vehicle, you'd better get a 4WD. Maliana is the only place you'll reliably find petrol.

### ERMERA

The area around Ermera, 62km southwest of Dili, was once the main coffee plantation of Portuguese Timor. It is still a major coffee-

fee-producing area but things have changed. Coffee brought wealth to the town, and good examples of Portuguese architecture can be seen, including a beautiful **church**. The old part of town is interesting to wander around, although Ermera's best days are in the past (see boxed text, pp68-9). It has been a regular location of political upheavals since 2002.

During the independence struggle, Nino Konis (or Conis) Sanatana, who succeeded Xanana Gusmão after his capture, was based for a time in Ermera. Unfortunately Sanatana died in an accident in early 1998, just over a year before the independence referendum. Today an elementary school in nearby Gleno is named after him, and it's possible to visit his **house**, which has concealed meeting rooms and escape tunnels.

Ermera is easily reached by bus from Dili for about US\$2; it makes a good day trip by bus or by car to see the rich plantings of coffee in the hills and enjoy a temperature drop from the sweaty coast. Take the coast road out of Dili, then turn inland soon after the airport and climb into the hills through a lush, green valley. The road continues to Railaco, where Australian forces operated during WWII, and Gleno before reaching Ermera.

There's a very rough road running over the hills from Ermera to Atsabe and on to Bobonaro, 82km away, or an equally problematic route direct from Ermera to Maliana.

### ATSABE

The market town of Atsabe is in the hills on the route from Ermera to Bobonaro. The high **Bandeira waterfall**, the best-known waterfall in the country, is just outside town on the road from Letefoho. This region also produces *tais* (traditional woven articles).

### MAROBO

The rough road from Atsabe eventually reaches a T-junction, where you continue straight for Zumalai or turn right (west) for the road to Bobonaro and Maliana. Some 3km before this junction, you'll pass through the tiny village of Marobo, which was once a Portuguese resort and mountain retreat. Although the hotel has gone, there are two large pools fed by the **hot springs**. The walls are collapsing and a few water buffalo are enjoying the benefits of the waters; it's an alluring setting amidst thick vegetation. However,

**FINDING ERMERA** *Tony Wheeler*

I've no idea how I found my way to Ermera in 1974. My diary notes that after leaving Maubisse for Hatubuilico we followed a road that was more like a path and 'must be too narrow for a jeep in many places'. This time, while travelling north from Maubisse towards Dili, I reach what I think must be the Ermera turn-off just north of Aileu. There's no sign, but a large contingent sits waiting at the junction, and when I ask '*Ini jalan ke Ermera?*' (Is this the road to Ermera?) the response is undeniably affirmative. But when I follow up with '*Berapa km ke Ermera?*' the reply from the guy who seems to know most about it is '*tudjuh km*'. Seven kilometres? That seems scarcely likely – I was expecting something between 30km and 50km, although Timor's tightly winding roads can make anything into a long distance trial. '*Tudjuh pulu?*' (70?) I ask. That seems too far, but no, he's adamant that's all it is.

The road quickly becomes rocky, potholed and very slow going. After a kilometre or so I stop to ask another bystander. He confirms it's the right road, but extends the distance to '*sepuluh*' kilometres (10km), which is still far too close. Another kilometre brings up another bystander who's also certain I'm on the right road but has no idea how far it is. The road surface deteriorates even further, and the next bystander isn't even sure if it's the right road.

A few kilometres further I meet a truck coming the other way, and the driver not only confirms that this unreservedly, categorically, absolutely is the road to Ermera, he also pronounces a much more likely distance: 24km. A kilometre or two further down the road a miracle takes place. The cracked, potholed, broken bitumen that alternates with stretches of rocky, battered, cratered, unsurfaced road suddenly turns into the smoothest, newest bitumen I've seen anywhere in East Timor, and continues most of the way to Ermera.

getting here requires some effort. The road/path to the springs is in worse shape than the bad road you turn off. It's best to be prepared to ask directions and hike 1km from the road.

**ROAD TO ZUMALAI**

What may be East Timor's prettiest road climbs into the clouds from its start near Bobonaro before plunging through mist-shrouded and terraced valleys to Zumalai on the south-coast plain (see p76). It's a very rough 40km but well worth the three or more hours the journey requires. Waterfalls punctuate some bends, and flowers of every kind grow wild. Across the at-times barren and grassy hills, you'll see timeless conical thatched huts housing families who survive raising animals and growing food such as maize and pumpkins. At each one the sound of your vehicle will bring forth a flood of children, waving wildly and shrieking with excitement (this is not a busy road...). Should you stop, you'll have about 40 new friends in minutes.

**BOBONARO**

It's easy to pass Bobonaro as the town is 1km off the main road, some 3km from the junction of the Zumalai and Ermera roads. As you struggle over potholes and boulders you may

wonder if Bobonaro is worth the effort. It is. This was a summer retreat in colonial times, with Portuguese swells enjoying the cool breezes and sweeping views from the wide verandas. A large number of old buildings survive from this era and, although they're in pretty grim shape, it's possible to imagine what Bobonaro once looked like and how it could look again.

Back on the main road, it's a 26km descent west along a winding road to Maliana. The final 6km is a steep, hairpin, roller-coaster ride.

**MALIANA**

Maliana is on the edge of the vast **Nunura Plains**, a fertile floodplain and rice-growing district. It's the capital of the Bobonaro district and home to the Kemak people, whose rectangular stilt houses dot the countryside. It's not an attractive place; its proximity to Indonesia means it has a lot of scars. Electricity poles stripped of wires march into the distance and there's a large UN presence.

The **market** will explain why you need to stock up before leaving Dili; there's often not much on offer although it is known for cheap eggs and noodles. The independence struggle and resettlement resulted in a loss of tradition in much of East Timor, but this region still produces some fine *tais*, mostly with black backgrounds.

Barely 5km before Ermera I arrive at a roadblock, just as it starts to rain. The Japanese soldiers organising the stoppage explain that just ahead a brand new bridge is being officially opened by the UN. The ceremonies will be over in half an hour; please be patient. Along with a squabble of *mikrolet*s (minibuses), motorcycles and trucks, we wait until a long entourage of UN vehicles departs and we can try out the new feat of Japanese engineering. The only problem is that another kilometre towards Ermera another smaller bridge has collapsed, and its temporary replacement looks long overdue for some Japanese engineer's attention.

After all this Ermera is a distinct letdown. My 1974 diary pronounced it a 'pleasant little town' with a neat and tidy Chinese hotel, a restaurant serving surprisingly good food and Taiwanese flicks showing in the market that evening, including one that combined the storylines of *To Sir with Love*, *Love Story* and *Sound of Music* in one feature. Twenty-eight years later Ermera is a grey and dismal little dump with a muddy main street, half of which looks as if it's about to slide down the hillside. There are no restaurants and no hotels, and I can't find a building that looks anything like the neat and tidy establishment we stayed in back when East Timor was Portuguese Timor.

When I get back to the collapsed bridge a tiny *mikrolet* has just broken through the planks. I lend a hand to lift and shove the vehicle off the bridge and then run back to my vehicle before the truck behind me crosses first and destroys it completely. An armful of two-by-fours and a chainsaw could do a good temporary job on this bridge; it wouldn't take a team of Japanese engineers or a UN opening committee.

From Maliana the westbound road runs across the Nunura Plains to the **Loes River**, crossing the river on a long bridge completed in the early '90s. Look west about 500m and you'll see a large Indonesian military base just over the border. The road then climbs back up into the mountains to Balibo, 26km from Maliana. Another bridge, also constructed during the Indonesian era, crosses the river further downstream near the coast. There are dodgy parts of this road that can make car travel problematic.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Maliana has about the only organised places to stay between the north and south coasts of western East Timor.

**Motel Aljafil** (rUS\$15) This motel is on the road that exits town heading to Balibo. Starting from the roundabout near the market in the town centre, travel for about 700m until you pass a church – it's a little further along on the left. The five rooms are about as simple as you can get: just a bed, a table and a candle for when the power goes off. Washing facilities are Indonesian *mandi* style – you scoop water out of a tank or drum to flush the toilet or wash yourself. Nearby there's a small café with decent fresh food.

**Restaurante Maliana** (meals US\$2-3; ☎ 7am-8pm) Try this place, opposite the market in town.

It offers *nasi Padang* food and dishes like *nasi goreng* (fried rice) or *nasi campur* (rice with a variety of interesting odds and ends). The shiny floor in the dining area contrasts with the dirt floor in the kitchen.

About 60m down a small road behind the restaurant you'll find a tidy **house** (r per person US\$10) with five rooms for rent. It's a nice little spot and the family who owns it is charming. To find it, just wander in its direction and they'll find you.

**Getting There & Away**

Buses from Dili cost US\$5 and run along the coast to Batugade before turning inland through Balibo. Before independence there used to be a back-road route across the border to Atambua in West Timor via Weluli but it's long closed.

**BALIBO**

Balibo has a slightly chilly mountain atmosphere. A substantial **Portuguese fort** sprawls along the hillside overlooking the market area. Balibo was the infamous setting for the murder of five journalists by Indonesian soldiers in 1975 (see p70).

The 'Australian Flag House', financed by the state of Victoria in Australia, has reopened as a **community centre** on the village's main square. In fact, this was not the place

### THE BALIBO FIVE

On 16 October 1975 the small village of Balibo, close to the East Timor–West Timor border, was the site of a massacre that has soured Australian–Indonesian relations ever since and caused considerable embarrassment to the Australian government.

In October 1975 the Portuguese had retreated to Atauro, the Timorese independence party Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) had made their grab for power and the stronger Fretilin force had defeated the UDT and controlled most of the country. Another month would pass before Fretilin formally declared East Timor's independence but already the Indonesian government had expressed deep dissatisfaction with the prospect of an unstable, left-leaning government controlling the eastern half of the island. Following rumours of possible Indonesian incursions into East Timor, five TV journalists working for Australian TV Channels 7 and 9 – Australians Greg Shackleton and Tony Stewart, British citizens Malcolm Rennie and Brian Peters, and New Zealander Gary Cunningham – made their way to Balibo.

On 16 October an Indonesian force crossed the border and soon after dawn attacked the village of Balibo. Officially the five journalists were killed in crossfire between the Indonesians and the Fretilin defenders. In fact, they were simply hauled out of their hiding place and executed.

After years of calls for an investigation into the killings, New South Wales launched an inquest in 2007. NSW police went to the Sydney hotel room of Indonesian Governor Sutyoso and asked that he testify at the inquest. Sutyoso refused.

The findings of the inquest were delivered in November 2007. The coroner concluded that the men were deliberately shot or stabbed and that the killings could constitute a war crime. Indonesian General Yunus Yosfiah (now retired) led the attack on Balibo, and has been identified by Timorese witnesses as one who fired on the journalists.

The Australian government was accused of being partly responsible for the journalists' deaths. Alan Renouf, former head of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, James Dunn, the last Australian consul in East Timor, and other former officials from the Whitlam government told the court that they received warnings the Indonesians were going to attack the town of Balibo on the day the journalists were killed. They also testified that it was the private policy of the Australian government to support Indonesia to take East Timor by force. Three Portuguese journalists who were in Balibo with the Australian party left for Dili the day before the massacre, having failed to persuade the others of their dangerous situation.

If the Australian government made any attempt to warn the journalists of the danger they faced, it was ineffective. Dunn argues that the government then put large amounts of effort into attempts to cover up the part it played in the men's deaths. The coroner found that there was no evidence that the Australian authorities were forewarned that the journalists were about to be killed.

Since the inquest, there's been renewed interest in the fate of Roger East, an Australian journalist who stayed in East Timor after the 1975 invasion to investigate the fate of the Balibo Five. Witnesses say he was led down to the Dili waterfront with hundreds of others and shot by the Indonesian army.

There have been several books about the massacre, including *Death in Balibo, Lies in Canberra*, by Desmond Ball and Hamish McDonald, and *Cover-Up: The Inside Story of the Balibo Five*, by Jill Joliffe. A film called *Balibo*, starring Anthony LaPaglia and based on Joliffe's book, went into production in mid-2008.

where the journalists were killed; they had stayed their final few nights in this house, but had retreated to a house beyond the square as the Indonesians advanced. Displays cover the incident and there's a photo of one of the five, Gene Shackleton, painting an Australian flag on the side of the building in the vain hope it would dissuade the Indonesians from attacking. You can see the ghostly outline of

the flag protected by glass on the side of the building today.

The square still has its now typically shabby **Indonesian Integrasi Monument**, showing a Timorese peasant exuberantly breaking free of the ropes of Portuguese bondage.

From Balibo the road drops steadily down from the hills to reach the coast at Batugade, 14km downhill. It's mostly in good shape.

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