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Dili diaries

Singaporeans who have moved to Timor-Leste share their success stories

Keeping it real

Singaporean Collin Yap, 44, is chairman and managing director of National Insurance Timor-Leste (NITL), the country's first general insurance company, and chairman of NITL Foundation, a non-profit private charitable foundation which develops children through education and healthcare programmes.

He was once a corporate high flyer. At 36, he made it as regional senior vice president at a New York Stock Exchange-listed financial institution, but he craved new challenges. "I'm a sucker for pain," he grins. So at 38, he decided to get out of his comfort zone and moved to Timor-Leste.

How was it in the beginning?

The first two years were tough, especially coming from compliant and transparent Singapore. I landed in Dili in 2008, four months after the attempted assassination of the country's President and Prime Minister. The situation was messy and tense. No one went out after dark.

What were the hardest times and how did you overcome them?

The hardest times were the first three years when it took 19 months to get our operating licence. I had no income, had to support my wife and three children, and we were living on savings. Also,

those first three years I was spending long stretches of time away from my family residing in Taiwan as I had to micromanage the business 24/7. But I am very blessed to have a capable and supportive wife to hold the fort at home. This allowed me to focus on work. There had been many setbacks but I kept alive in my heart the belief that there is a divine reason for everything – good things fall apart so that greater things can come together.

How have things changed?

Things have certainly changed. City infrastructure has improved tremendously. We have better roads, new public and commercial buildings. Dili now is a hive of business activity, there is no visible poverty in the streets and government agencies and functions have been institutionalised. Timor-Leste was a complicated place to do business in, but we stuck by our core values of integrity, excellence and respect and refused to compromise. It's taken longer to achieve our objectives, but now we are known and respected for our core values.

Of what have you been most proud?

My proudest moment was when our first scholarship recipient Isaias Nivio Pereira returned to Timor-Leste with full honours after four years at one of the top engineering universities in Indonesia. I had

made a tangible difference! It proved that with education, opportunity and support, Timorese youth can contribute to the development of their nation. Today, Isaias works for me as a qualified civil engineer at our property development company, Timor Capital Partners Asia.

What are your goals and challenges now?

My goal is to continue to grow a robust, efficient and reliable insurance and risk management service provider on sound financial standing. In the process, I hope to impart knowledge and skill to the Timorese so they can take up more leadership positions. And I want to do my part to help the under-privileged and marginalised.

How has Timor-Leste changed you?

I am an unvarnished straight-talking person with no patience for mediocrity, inadequacies, non-performance and high-level bull****. That said, my experiences in Timor have made me more resilient, and more patient.

My favourite things

I love spending my free time with Catholics doing missionary work, and travelling to the districts to see how people live there, and to see what I can do within my means to help. It serves as a reality check for me.



Mr Yap (second from right) on the grounds of a Dominican orphanage in Hera, Timor-Leste, supported by NITL Foundation. The orphanage cares for orphaned children of FALINTIL freedom fighters. Sister Marylou Mariano OP (far left) and H.E. David Scarf AM (second from left), Ambassador of the Sovereign Order of Malta to Timor-Leste.

I wanted to build something of my own where I can really make a tangible difference to the people and community I live and work with. Timor-Leste was a new nation with no insurance company. Insurance is an integral part of any economy. This is one of my areas of expertise and an opportunity to make a difference.

– Mr Collin Yap, Singaporean in Timor-Leste



Diana Choo at centre.

Never give up

Singaporean Diana Choo, 44, arrived in Timor-Leste alone 14 years ago to start a small restaurant, Diana Café.

In 2000, the capital Dili was smashed to smithereens in the destruction which followed the independence ballot. The place was crawling with United Nations peacekeepers, foreign advisers, aid workers, opportunists and mercenaries.

"In those days, everywhere you went, there were foreigners, and the handful of small eateries that existed were flooded with foreigners. At the time I lived in the neighbourhood of Taibessi, in a rented house with a local family. The people I lived with treated me like their own family. I felt safe and warm with them."

Fourteen years later, the city now boasts international restaurants from Thai to Lebanese, along with Burger King and Gloria Jean's Coffee.

Ms Choo is today human resources and finance manager at GAP-MHS, Timor-Leste's first aviation company, formed under the auspices of the country's Ministry of Petroleum & Mineral Resources to service the oil and gas rigs. She also plays a voluntary role in liaising between the Singaporean community

in Timor-Leste and with the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Why did you go to Timor-Leste?

I came to Timor-Leste because one of my aunt's friends asked me to help explore the business potential in the country.

How was it in the beginning?

When I first landed in Dili, I saw burnt-down buildings everywhere, not many shops and restaurants around. I said to myself: 'Oh God, what am I doing here?'

What were the hardest times and how did you overcome them?

My hardest time was around 2006 when everything I did was not going well. I didn't have any money and Timor-Leste was going through its roughest patch since independence. Plus, my dad was very sick in Singapore and I was so worried and upset.

Life felt very hard then but I told myself to persevere, that there were lots of opportunities ahead. Timor-Leste was beginning to develop. I kept telling myself to stay strong, that I'm going to make it.

How have things changed?

Timor-Leste has started to change a lot: more investors coming to Timor,

more buildings going up and shops and houses everywhere. Hotels and guesthouses are sprouting up even in the districts, so when we travel out of the capital we no longer have to worry about where to stay or eat.

What are your goals and challenges now?

My challenge now is to pass on my skills to the local staff working with me. I believe and know they can do it – to be professionals like any other foreigner – and one day they can run the show.

How have you grown or developed?

I have learnt to be more independent, and have proven to myself and to others that with determination, one can succeed.

My favourite things

The joy of living in Timor is nature. In my free time, I drive to the districts and enjoy the natural scenery. I love going to Gleno in the hills of Ermera district to visit HOPE orphanage, where I've been helping out since 2004. Being with the children in those peaceful surroundings is a pleasure. I have watched the kids grow into young adults, some have even started their own families. This has been a great joy and satisfaction to me.

Back to the future

The Japes are overseas Chinese with a family history dating back to 1910 in Portuguese Timor.

Maubara, a coastal town in Liqueia district some 40 km west of Dili, was where Mr Alan Jape, 60, and Mr Tony Jape, 55, were born. Both brothers and their sister Pamela, 43, lived and studied in Singapore from the 1970's to 1980's before moving to Australia.

Alan served national service as a combat engineer at Gilman Camp. Tony attended St. Gabriel's primary and secondary school and retains his Singapore permanent residency. Pamela attended Dunman High.

In 1999, after Timor-Leste voted for independence from Indonesia, the Japes returned from Australia to Timor-Leste to participate in the rebuilding of the nation.

They formed Dili Development Company as part of the Jape Group, with interests in real estate, retail and hospitality.

The Japes built Dili's first modern mixed-use complex, Timor Plaza, complete with shopping mall, hotel and serviced apartments and a 3D cinema.

Mr Alan Jape, managing director of the Jape Group:



Artist's impression of Dili central masterplan.

Our family has been in the real estate business for 30 years. We were involved in the rebuilding of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy flattened the city in 1974. Homemaker Village, the second largest commercial complex in Northern Territory, Australia, was established by our company. It was the vision and passion of our father, Jape Kong Su, to help rebuild Timor-Leste.

Mr Tony Jape, executive director of Dili Development Company:

Before we developed Timor Plaza, many people ridiculed the idea of a modern shopping centre in Dili – they just

couldn't picture it. But we had a different view. We had confidence in the country's future and potential, and we are pleased to now see the success of our hard work.

There has been a sharp rise in business confidence, particularly after the departure of the United Nations in 2012. The government has been spending on infrastructure development. Living standards have improved, and private sector investments and the middle class are growing. Land and banking regulations remain to be passed, but we believe there is political will and this will be done.

Our city-centre development, Dili Central, is fast expanding into an integrated business hub and will include a new residential compound, hotel, apartments, commercial buildings and a medical centre. We also have on the drawing board a beach resort thirty minutes outside of Dili being planned as a satellite town with international conference facilities.

Ms Pamela Jape, operations director of the Jape Group:

Over the last 12 years, Timor-Leste has advanced from securing political stability to now economic development.

Among our biggest challenges is to train the local workforce to operate to international standards. Upgrading the quality and capabilities of our human resources is crucial to servicing our projects in the pipeline. We have been excited to see the growth of our staff and the progress in their careers.

Our favourite things

The warmth of the Timorese people, the beauty of the landscape, the challenges and opportunities of working in a strategically located developing country in Asia.



From left: Mr Jape Kong Su, Ms Pamela Jape, Mr Alan Jape and Mr Tony Jape.





Above: International Ski Federation (FIS) Ski Competition at Val Thorens Resort in the French Alps.
PHOTO: YOHAN GOUTT GONCALVES

Right: Opening ceremony at the Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi, Russia.
PHOTO: YOUTUBE



The Olympian

There is no snow or winter in the country he represents, but that has not deterred Yohan Goutt Gonçalves, 19, from competing for Timor-Leste as the country's first and only Olympic skier

BORN of a French father and Timorese mother, Yohan Goutt Gonçalves grew up in France. His mother, Maria Carolina Gonçalves, had fled Timor at the age of 12 when Indonesia annexed the former Portuguese colony in 1975. She finished school in Australia before meeting Goutt Gonçalves' father, Pierre Goutt, during a year of travels, and settled in France.

"Growing up, my mother taught me a lot about her country and people, so I have always felt close to Timor-Leste – it is part of me," Goutt Gonçalves shares. "So when it was time, I could have chosen to represent France but I really wanted to achieve something for Timor-Leste. I wanted the world to know about our young country."

Goutt Gonçalves had been skiing even before he could walk. "My father was an avid skier. When I was a baby, he would put me in his backpack and take me out on the slopes." He put on his first pair of skis when he was two years old, and entered his first competition at 14. Since then, he has trained and raced mostly in

Europe, as well as in Turkey, Australia and Iran. He skied under the banner of Timor-Leste during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, but getting to the Olympics was in itself an epic endeavour.

Timor-Leste, not surprisingly, did not have a skiing authority. With the help of his parents, Goutt Gonçalves set up the Federation of Skiing of Timor-Leste and sought formal approval from the International Ski Federation. At the time, he was ranked 3,606th in the world, but benefited from the "wild card" which gave athletes from smaller nations a chance to compete. Then, there was the matter of funding. He needed to raise US\$75,000 (S\$93,810) to meet the cost of his training and essential expenses. His skis and uniform were second-hand until a few sponsors finally came on board.

In the months leading up to the Sochi Games, he trained intensively in Austria and managed to qualify for a place in the slalom event – with just six months' preparation instead of the normal two years. At the Winter

Olympics opening ceremony in February this year, the lights were bright, and the music and cheering fervent. "I held our flag and I told myself: Now, let's show Timor-Leste to the world," he says.

Goutt Gonçalves came in 77th in the first slalom run, and 43rd in the second run, but in the eyes of the Timorese he was already the champion. "When I flew to Dili afterwards, people were embracing me and thanking me for what I had done for the country. I was very surprised and touched. I had visited Timor-Leste many times before but this time, I felt the love and warmth of the people so strongly. I also got to know other Timorese athletes, and they are like brothers and sisters to me," he says.

The teenager is now juggling his undergraduate studies in business administration at a university in Paris with preparations for the World Skiing Championships in the United States next year. His dream is to open sports centres for the youth in Timor-Leste. "We need to shake off the bad memories of the past, and build a new future," he says.

The fly girls

Stellar Timorese have overcome the odds to make their dreams come true

THEY say you should walk before you run, but Cristina Amaral, 23, and Emilianita Atolan, 24, have turned the proverb on its head. These two young women from rural Oecusse (o-weh-KU-see), Timor-Leste, did not know how to drive a car, nor even to ride motorcycles, but they are flying airplanes.

In 2010 when Amaral and Atolan were just 19 and 20 respectively, they responded to a countrywide summons issued by the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources calling for applicants for a pilot training programme.

Timor-Leste possesses offshore oil and gas assets. The country needed to train skilled helicopter pilots to fly to the rigs on the Timor Sea.

The Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Mr Alfredo Pires, had decided that out of six new trainees, two should be selected from Oecusse, the country's western enclave, and two should be women. It was his idea of affirmation action.

After a series of rigorous tests including mathematics, physics and chemistry exams, Amaral and Atolan obtained among the highest scores in the country. Not only did the Minister get his Oecusseans, but they happened to also be women, and they qualified on merit.

Flight training is conducted in English but Amaral and Atolan, for whom English is a third and fourth language, did not speak a word of it. They attended English language courses with a private tutor at the Ministry of Petroleum for six months before departing to Australia for further English studies, and subsequently started helicopter flight school in Australia.

For a whole year they studied hard, but language continued to be a steep hurdle and they eventually dropped out. That might have been the end of the runway for the farm girls from Oecusse, except Mr Pires refused to give up on them. He decided to send the women to Indonesia, where their knowledge of the Indonesian language would bolster their learning. There, the story takes another twist.



Ms Emilianita Atolan (left) and Ms Cristina Amaral are the first female trainee pilots from Timor-Leste.

The Aero Flyer Institute in Jakarta, one of the top 10 flight schools in Indonesia, does not offer helicopter training. So, Amaral and Atolan switched to learning to fly fixed-wing aircraft – generally considered to be much more difficult than flying helicopters.

"When I first entered pilot training, it seemed strange," Atolan admits. "My classmates were all men. But after a year of training together, we all feel like family now."

When you jump into the cockpit, the plane doesn't care if you're a woman or man.

— Ms Cristina Amaral

"It's true that it's unusual to see a woman pilot but actually, when you jump into the cockpit, the plane doesn't care if you're a woman or man," points out Amaral. "The important thing is to be well prepared and knowledgeable and brave!"

"And stay calm," adds Atolan, "so if your wing or engine fails, you will know what to do."

Amaral completed her first solo flight in November 2013. The

man who believed the girls from Oecusse could do it, Mr Pires, was there to witness it. Atolan has clocked more than 100 flight training hours and is now less than 50 hours from her Commercial Pilot License (CPL).

After receiving their CPL, both Amaral and Atolan will go on to train and qualify for their Instrument Rating, certifying them to fly by the plane's instruments only, without relying on out-of-window sight.

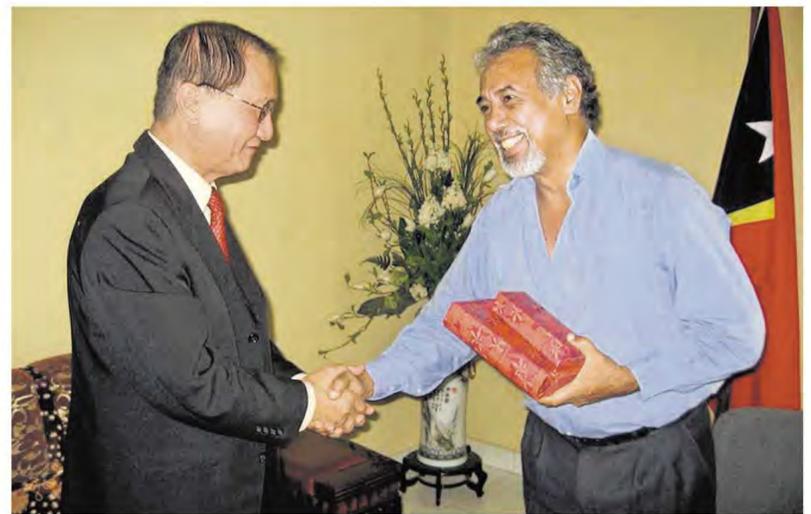
"I know my parents are proud of me. Even though they are far away, they give me their prayers and support," says Amaral. "And I am proud of myself! From zero aviation hours, I now have a hundred hours! I think I should be proud of myself."

"My father is a farmer and my mother is a housewife. To them, this is an unbelievable achievement," reflects Atolan. "And to be honest, I am proud of myself for having accomplished this thing I never even thought or imagined."

The women have not forgotten how it all began. "What my family and Minister Pires have given me... it is so very precious," expresses Atolan.

"I am truly grateful to the Minister and the Ministry staff and my beloved country for supporting me," Amaral echoes.

But the women's parting thoughts are about their country: "And now, my beloved brothers and sisters of Timor-Leste, we must be confident, be brave – believe in ourselves to do and to achieve. And our dreams will come true," Atolan declares.



Ambassador Lee with Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão.

A special friendship

After 10 years as Singapore Ambassador to Timor-Leste, veteran diplomat Lee Chiong Giam is set to retire

RELATIONSHIPS between nations are built by people. Mr Lee Chiong Giam, 73, first joined Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 1969, and rose rapidly to Deputy Secretary. During his long and distinguished career in public service, he served in numerous important roles including as Chief Executive Director of the People's Association from 1982 to 1999. Currently, he is a Senior Advisor at the MFA and concurrently Singapore Ambassador (non-resident) to Timor-Leste. Ambassador Lee will be retiring at the end of this year.

"Ambassador Lee is not only an Ambassador of Singapore, but also a great friend and advocate of Timor-Leste," says Timor-Leste Secretary of State for Asean Affairs, Mr Roberto Soares. "He exemplifies the noble spirit of Singapore. His tireless efforts have greatly enriched the understanding and cooperation between our two countries, and have deeply cemented the relationship between Timor-Leste and Singapore."

The Chargé d'Affaires of the Timor-Leste Embassy in Singapore, Mr Domingos Savio, echoes the sentiment. "We have benefited tremendously from Ambassador Lee's wisdom and Singapore's support over the past 10 years. Ambassador Lee will always be a special and honoured friend to us," he says.

"I am greatly honoured to serve as Singapore's Ambassador to Timor-Leste, a great nation," reflects Mr Lee. "Very few leaders and their people in this world have endured and overcome so

much suffering to build a nation from scratch. Timor-Leste has abundant natural resources such as oil and gas, minerals, fertile soil and a sea teeming with fish. But more importantly, Timor-Leste is blessed with honest, able and diligent leaders like President Taur Matan Ruak, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, former President José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Belo. I am confident that Timor-Leste will enjoy a bright future."



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