

FESTIVALS & SPECIAL EVENTS

Fun all year long

Timor-Leste's calendar is filled with festivals and special moments

EVERYONE loves a great party, and the Timorese seem to be making up for lost time. Emerging from a fraught past and bursting with youthful energy, Timor-Leste is blazing its forward direction with events and celebrations that confirm its unique identity.

Blessed with mountains, plains and sea, the country possesses immense potential of becoming the next hot location for international outdoor sporting events from yachting, marathons to cross-country races.

A predominantly Catholic country, the Timorese celebrate many of the Christian holidays such as Easter and Christmas. And as a people keen to perpetuate and share their traditions, culture fairs take place throughout the year featuring food, dances and crafts from every district of the country.

Carnival de Timor kicks off the year's festivals calendar with boisterous celebrations including street parties and a parade through the centre of the capital, Dili. Participants in exuberant costumes both whimsical and traditional vie for "Best Dressed" awards. Dancing to live bands continues into the night.



Carnival revellers in capital, Dili. PHOTO: DANIEL J. GROSHONG

On **May 20 Independence Day**, the nation pulls out all the stops to celebrate with grand official ceremonies, cultural events and sporting competitions. The day is known as "Restoration of Independence" in Timor-Leste in remembrance of the country's independence originally declared on 28 November, 1975.

The **Batugade Races** is Timor-Leste's version of Royal Ascot. Timor has a long tradition of horsemanship. Hardy "Timor Ponies" have for centuries transported goods and people across the country's mountainous terrain. These races, though, are thoroughly contemporary affairs, complete with ladies in fascinators and fashion contestants struttin' their stuff.



Batugade horse race. PHOTO: TIMOR PLAZA HOTEL AND APARTMENTS

Timor-Leste's premier sporting event, the **Tour de Timor** (www.tourdetimorlorosae.com) is "the toughest mountain bike race on earth." Launched in 2009 by Nobel laureate and then-President José Ramos Horta, the race attracts hundreds of international competitors to ride across some of the most gruelling routes and spectacular landscape in the world. This year's Tour takes place from September 13 to 17 and will involve five days of cycling totalling 356km.

The **Dili Marathon**, marked for October 25 this year, offers a different way of taking in the sights. The route weaves through the seaside capital, with enthusiastic crowds cheering runners on. Participants can choose to do the full 42km or the half marathon. For the less hard core there is the 7km fun run with easy access to a cold beer on the beach afterwards.



Independence Day celebrations. PHOTO: DANIEL J. GROSHONG / HUMMINGFISH.ORG



The toughest mountain bike race on earth, Tour de Timor. PHOTO: UNMIT



President Taur Matan Ruak (centre) with the fashion contest winners. PHOTO: TIMOR PLAZA HOTEL AND APARTMENTS

Timor-Leste quick guide

CLIMB the 500 steps to reach the iconic hilltop statue of Cristo Rei (Christ the King) situated at the tip of the Fatucama Peninsula 7km from central Dili, and be rewarded with gorgeous views of the coast. Cool off with a dip in the sea and a picnic by the beach.

WATCH the sun rise from the summit of Mt. Ramelau, Timor-Leste's highest peak. At nearly 3,000m, the clouds will be swirling beneath you. It may take two to three hours to make the 800m ascent, so overnight in Maubisse or Hatubuilico and start your trek early.

STAY at the pink Pousada de Baucau, a quaint colonial era edifice in Timor-Leste's second largest city, and enjoy the Portuguese and Timorese offerings in the hotel's restaurant. Pick up beautiful locally hand-crafted items from the convent shop next door. Stop by the impressive Mercado Municipal, built as the town's covered market during Portuguese times and recently renovated and repurposed into a convention centre.

SWIM the crystal waters of Jaco Island with its blindingly white sand. Don't miss the amazing and bizarre 3,500-year-old rock art at the Ile Kere Kere caves directly across the island on the mainland. Hire a local guide to lead you to the site.

DIVE the rich waters of Atauro and meet the friendly schooling barracudas. Chances are high you will encounter the whales and dolphins that regularly ply the 30km strait between Dili and Atauro. Reconnect with nature at one of the ecolodges on the island.

VISIT the bright and modern Timorese Resistance Archive & Museum in the capital and its excellent permanent exhibition on the history of the country's independence struggle. The museum shop stocks elegant gifts and souvenirs, and a curated selection of handwoven Timorese tais textiles.

DRINK a cool cocktail or three on the beachside deck of DiZa, Dili's chicest hangout, and watch the sun sink into the sea as locals forage for shellfish and baby octopus at evening low tide.

EAT fresh seafood cooked just the way you like: wrapped in banana leaf and spices, grilled over coals, or steamed Cantonese style with a dash of soy sauce. Choose from a host of restaurants dotted along the coast offering sea breezes and international cuisines. Try Portuguese dishes like *bacalhau* (salted cod) and *feijoada* (chorizo sausage and beans), or Timorese specialities such as *carne assada* (buffalo meat). A bit of budu – tangy salsa made from chilli, tomato, mint, lime and Spanish onions – add instant zing.

BUY organic products: Timorese coffee, honey and pure sea salt. A women's cooperative produces Ai-Funan – meaning "flower" – a line of soaps handmade with 100 per cent all-natural ingredients. Don't leave without a stash of colourful bags and accessories made from basketry and tais. Pick up a copy of "Mar Meu", a book of poems and paintings by Xanana Gusmão to read on your flight home.



Cristo Rei.



Nino Konis Santana National Park, Jaco Island.



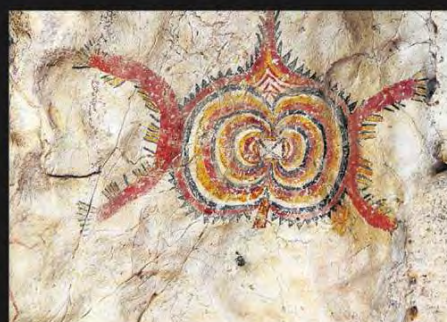
Top left: Dawn at the peak of Mt. Ramelau. Above: Catch of the day, cooked the way you like.



Accessories made with traditional handwoven "tais" textiles.



Pousada de Baucau hotel.



Cave painting, Ile Kere Kere Caves.