



Jaco Island beach. PHOTO: JOAO GALAMBA

TOURISM

On the eve of the ball

From natural hot springs and historical sites to culture, crafts and Timorese cuisine, Timor-Leste is brimming with tourism draws

IT SEEMS hardly possible: talcum beaches, cloud-brushed mountains, quaint towns, dazzling purple sunsets, and hardly a soul to be seen. Not to mention heritage architecture, 3,500-year-old cave paintings, stomping dance celebrations, kaleidoscopic textiles woven from hundreds of years of tradition.

What about turtles, whales and dolphins, scuba diving to knock your fins off, organic chillies to set lips on fire, and among the most stunning hill-hugging coastal drives in the world. How many times can you say “wow”? Say that again backwards: wow.

Timor-Leste is brimming with tourism draws. “We have natural hot springs, historical sites, culture and crafts, so many international restaurants now in Dili, and our own Timorese cuisine,” extols Tourism Minister Francisco Kalbuadi Lay. “Have you tried our *katupah*?”

Timorese rice steamed in fragrant coconut leaf packets, subtly flavoured with coconut milk and spices. It goes perfectly with shakoti, a hearty Timorese-Portuguese lamb green curry.

Few capital cities in the world offer such views: emerald hills which turn golden in the dry season and back to green with the rain. The waters of the Ombai Straits and Wetar Straits flashing fifty shades of blue beneath passing clouds. The sky bursting into deep magentas and oranges as the sun dips below the liquid horizon. These may well have been the images in the mind of Xanana Gusmão — in the past a political prisoner but now the Prime Minister of Timor-Leste — as he sat in his jail cell in Jakarta and penned the lines of his poem, *Mar Meu: My Sea of Timor*.



East Timorese 'uma lulik' sacred houses.



Pelicans at Tasi Tolu. PHOTO: UNMIT



Left: Coastal road Dili to Manatuto. Above: Cristo Rei beach. PHOTOS: DANIEL J. GROSHONG/HUMMINGBIRD.ORG, JOAO GALAMBA

Timor-Leste is a new state but an ancient people. Almost every Timorese is a polyglot, speaking the country's national languages Portuguese and Tetun, the country's lingua franca, plus Malay and their own tribal tongues. There are some 30 distinct tribal languages in Timor, some of which are now at risk of disappearing. English usage is becoming increasingly common, particularly among professionals, businesspeople and the youth. The faces of Timor tell the story of the diversity of the country with a population of mixed Austronesian, Melanesian, Papuan, European and Chinese descent. This can sometimes lead to surprising physical features such as natural blond afros matched with green eyes.

With such rich offerings, Timor-Leste is getting ready for its grand reveal. “We are preparing our human resources in every respect. From service and hospitality to culinary and performing arts. We are sending our bright young people for training all

over the world — Australia, Hong Kong, Brazil, Europe. We even have twenty students studying at the renowned Cuban National Ballet School!” effuses Mr Lay. “In three to five years, when this ‘professionalisation’ programme is done, we will embark on our marketing campaign.”

It is astonishing that all this is within easy reach: just 3 hours 45 minutes’ direct flight from Singapore, less than 2 hours from Bali, and just over an hour from Darwin. Strategically situated at the cusp of Asia and the Pacific Islands, and set to benefit from the Trilateral Economic Zone being formed between Timor-Leste, Northern Territory Australia and eastern Indonesia, trade is expected to multiply in the coming years. Dili is positioning itself to become a transit point for business travellers, with airports slated to be upgraded and a new shipping port coming on line in a few years. Malls, accommodations and parks are springing up across the capital, and food, culture and sporting events populate the annual calendar. There is even an annual street carnival. In downtown Dili, an

announced 26-storey modern complex will offer premium retail and office space, plus smart apartments and a hotel to be managed by Alila Hotels and Resorts.

Yet, a 20-minute drive outside of Dili brings you to Tasi Tolu lake and a profusion of bird life. Venture further into the districts and the scene is pastoral. Wood fire smoke mingles with the cool morning mist, and the locals are welcoming and warm. Every angle, a photographer's paradise.

Timor-Leste will be Asia's next tourism hotspot — it is inevitable. But why wait to experience it when you can have it all to yourself on the eve of the ball.

GETTING THERE

- Air Timor flies three times a week between the capital city Dili and Singapore. For reservations, e-mail rsvnaa@air-timor.com, call 6542-2051/2 or visit www.air-timor.com.
- Visa is available upon arrival for US\$30.

TRAVELLER'S TIPS

- US dollar is the official currency.
- To understand the history of Timor-Leste, don't miss a visit to Resistência Timorese Arquivo e Museu located at Avenida Cidade de Lisboa in the capital city of Dili. Visit <http://amrtimor.org> for more details.



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Rice field in Baucau district.