

Mountain, reef and farm: Adventure travel in Timor-Leste

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Abstract

One of the privileges of being a long-term expatriate in Timor-Leste is the opportunity to introduce family and friends from overseas to ‘the beloved land’. Over the last 13 years we have hosted many visitors, from pre-schoolers to parents in their 80s. Our specialties are building links between visitors and locals (both Timorese and expatriate), and giving our guests the opportunity to appreciate Timor’s beautiful natural environment, often through adventurous activities.

People contact is usually a highlight of our guests’ visits. Particularly memorable are visits to Timorese friends in rural areas. On such visits we spend a lot of time acting as interpreters, not only for language, but also for culture. This includes practical advice as well as prompts as to what the guests and hosts can talk about. Without this, visitors would go home without ever learning from the wide local knowledge of our hosts, or becoming aware of the rich variety of stories that they can tell.

Nature appreciation usually starts on the first day, with a sunset dinner at the beach or a swim over the coral reef at Tasi Tolu. Some guests have gone for adventurous activities, including an unsupported ten day hike from north to south coast, a fully supported three day hike with porters and cooks, a four day coastal boat trip, river adventures, bicycle and motorbike journeys, downhill riding, and cross-the-bay swimming.

Almost all the people who have joined our adventures over the last ten years returned home enthused by the beauty of Timor, the interesting people they meet, the hospitality of local friends, the wonderful range of stories they heard, and the worthy physical and mental challenges they faced, all made possible because of good security.

Most visitors, however, would be unable to organise such trips themselves. The technical challenges include getting information, arranging affordable transport, accessing food and accommodation in remote places, finding guides, communicating with local people without knowing a local language or local culture, getting backup in the event of emergencies, and the steady encroachment of crocodiles into favourite coastal areas.

In short, regardless of whether visitors come for adventure or not, most of Timor is still an adventure destination, in the initial exploratory phase of the tourism life cycle. It is a place where arrangements are flexible and the unexpected is likely to happen. The main exception is Atauro, which is becoming a developed tourist destination where guests can have as much adventure as they want, but can still be confident that they will be housed, fed, and returned to the mainland at the time agreed upon (unless of course the seas are too high to travel).

Introduction

One of the privileges of being long-term expatriates in Timor-Leste is the opportunity of introducing overseas visitors to “the beloved land”. In this paper we present case studies based on our experience of hosting many visitors, from pre-schoolers to parents in their 80s. Our specialties are building links between visitors and locals (both Timorese and expatriate), and giving our guests the opportunity to appreciate Timor’s beautiful natural environment, often through adventurous activities.

According to a 2014 survey by The Asia Foundation (2014:6), 56% of visitors to Timor-Leste say they are coming for work, meetings or business activities, 16% to visit family and friends, and 17% for holiday. In our case, of the 100 or so people we have hosted in our home over the last fifteen years, 40% came primarily as our family or friends. They usually want to see something of how we live, to meet our friends, to get to know Timor, and in some cases to share adventures in Timor’s mountains and seas. A further 54% come as volunteers or other supporters of Timor. These normally want good contact with those they work with, as well as to understand Timor better, and to have a break out of Dili. Only 6% came as tourists. In our case these were all international cyclists using Timor as a staging post between Australia and Asia, and staying with us under a program called “Warm Showers”. There were additionally numerous other foreigners who did not stay with us, but whom we took on trips out of Dili.

Family, friends, volunteers and other supporters of Timor are obviously not high-end tourists. If they don’t stay with family or friends, then they tend to stay in medium or low priced accommodation, and they don’t usually go on organised tours. They are however a category of visitor that suits the current stage of tourism development in Timor, as this paper will show. They contribute to the economy by eating in restaurants, paying hosts and guides in rural areas, and sometimes hiring cars. They may also tack on a visit to Atauro island or go for a dive. In the process they also get us out spending money in rural areas. As many people have joked, locals only tend to get out and about to see the sites when they have visitors to show around.

In this paper we present a series of case studies of the various types of activities which our guests have enjoyed, illustrating the possibilities as well as the challenges involved. We start with community and home visits. This is followed by outdoor activities of various types, including hiking, cycling and motorcycle adventures, as well as boating and swimming activities and day trips in nature. We end with a brief note on visiting historic sites. We do not discuss tourism within Dili city, in part because this is not normally a highlight for our visitors, but also because most visitors can manage city-based activities without help.

Community and home visits

One of the highlights for many of our visitors is a visit to the home of Timorese friends, particularly in rural communities. Such visits put us in the role of interpreters, not only for language, but also for culture.

For instance, when agriculturally-minded friends with two pre-school children came to visit from Australia in 2005, we wanted to give them the opportunity of staying overnight in a rural community. Given the winding nature of mountain roads, the stay had to be close enough to Dili that they would not get carsick on the way. A Peace Corps volunteer introduced us to her host family in Remexio, who agreed to take all of us overnight. It was a great adventure for the children, who loved watching bread dough being mixed in a wheelbarrow by the local baker, seeing dogs lying by the kitchen fire, and all of us sleeping in one room. When they left Timor we asked the little son what he liked best. He replied, “Everyone smiled at me!” For the parents too, this home stay was a special experience. As the wife said years later, “Most tour guides have no idea what we want! They think we want to see monuments, but the best thing in travelling is to meet people.”

Most visitors need practical advice on how to behave, particularly if they are coming to build relationships with local groups whom they are supporting. This ranges from “If someone offers coffee, accept it”, to how to bathe with a dipper, what to wear, and how to “pay” people who host you when the hosting is not a commercial arrangement.

International visitors are interested in a great diversity of topics, from agriculture to law, from education to opportunities for handicapped children, from business to the system of government, from religion to language. There are in addition many topics about which local people can give interesting explanations and stories, but which foreign visitors do not know to ask about because they lack the background knowledge to do so. This includes talking about animistic beliefs and practices, origin stories, taboos, and the complex family inter-relationships and obligations that are common throughout Timor. For all these things visitors need an intermediary, not just someone who can interpret words, but someone who can prompt them on what to ask, or who can explain the background to what is being said.

This has implications for the training and recruitment of tour guides in Timor. They ideally should have a good general knowledge and be able to explain a wide range of topics in an international language. They also need a good understanding of the culture and background of their visitors so that they can fulfil the role of intermediary. In our experience, most Timorese have no idea that foreigners can be so ignorant of their customs and of their environment, and so are unable to explain things in a way that is clear to them. For example, after riding through agricultural country for five days on one Tour de Timor, a fellow rider exclaimed, “Where are all the farms?” Very few Timorese would have thought to point out the farms that we passed (and nor indeed had we), since they would not have realised that someone with a broad acre farming background would not recognise subsistence-level multicropping fields.

There is one sector of the tourism industry in Timor which could learn a lot from our rural hosts. In our experience, virtually all Timorese are generous in their hospitality when we visit them in their homes. However there are very few hotel and restaurant staff who put energy and thought into serving us in their workplaces. Those who do show a “can-do” service attitude tend to have us coming back for more.

Adventures

One thing that puzzles most Timorese is our desire to hike up mountains, cycle rural roads, and swim over coral reefs. For most, the mountains are associated with the back-breaking work of farming by hand, as well as with sacred places upon which it could be dangerous to stumble. With the exception of fishermen, most Timorese cannot swim. Hence very few, even in the tourist industry, have seen the beauty of the coral reefs with their own eyes.

Although such adventures pull us in, it is difficult to explain the attraction to Timorese, or even ourselves. Physical exertion in nature is of course a big change from our sedentary office-based occupations, the beauty of the environment is like medicine for one’s soul, there is an exhilaration in meeting physical challenges, a joy in meeting people from very different walks of life, and for some a raised awareness of the presence of God.

Whatever the case, Timor offers numerous opportunities for adventure. What constitutes adventure does, of course, depend on who one is. Most of our adventures have been with fit adults. Some, however, have been with little children. For instance, one daughter of friends thought it a thrill to celebrate her fifth birthday by pedalling her little bicycle all the way around Tasi Tolu (before it got built out), followed by cooking pancakes on the beach with the family.

Hiking

Trekking

Opportunities for hiking abound in Timor. Our longest hike was a ten-day trek in 2009 with five other family members. This went from Dili on the north coast to Betano on the south coast, over the mountains of Ramelau and Kabulaki.

Preparing the route was a challenge, as at the time there were no published descriptions of hiking routes. There are now several, including for hikes around Hatobuilico (<http://hatobuilico.com/>), a “Trekking East Timor” site with hikes in Matebian mountain, Oecusse and Atauro as well as some cycling routes (<http://trekkingeasttimor.org/>), and ten short hikes in “Best Hiking trails in East Timor”

(<http://www.wikiloc.com/trails/hiking/east-timor>). There is also at least one tour company that has led treks from Dili to Betano.

The best paper maps we found were a full series of maps in the scales 1:25,000, 1:50,000, 1:100,000 and 1:250,000 (Army Topographic Support Establishment, 1999) put out by the Australian military based on Indonesian maps. Google Earth too proved very useful, showing not only terrain and settlements, but also some of the many walking tracks that crisscross Timor. In the end we decided approximately where we wanted to stop each night, without always knowing the exact route to take. In preparation we read stories about the Australian Sparrow Force which travelled this approximate route during World War II (Callinan, 1953; White, 2002), only in later years getting access to the account by Cleary (2010). In recognition of Sparrow Force we nicknamed our own group the “Penguin Force”. One old man in a remote hilltop village of Fatubosa laughed and laughed at the absurdity of us waddling along like ducks with heavy packs when we could have used horses. Had he known what a penguin was he would have approved of this name.

We spent one of the nine nights in a guesthouse in Hatobuilico, where the cooked food and warm showers were welcome, though the high uneven steps were a challenge after five days of hiking. The following night was spent with friends in Mauxiga, and the one thereafter in a hut on Kabulaki, but the rest of the nights we slept in tents. Usually we set these up near a house, school, local government office, or even in a market. Once we set up in what we thought was a remote paddock, though it turned out our tents were straddling a walking “highway” between Letefoho and Hatobuilico, with group after group passing by. Camping near the top of Mount Ramelau was, not surprisingly, a cold but stunning highlight of the trip.

On day two and three we had arranged in advance through intermediaries for local families to feed us. However we had failed to leave money with them to show that we were serious, and at the time there was no telephone signal there to enable us to let them know we really were on the way, so we ended up being fed boiled cassava or taro and chilli, with coffee, for three meals in a row. We had left a food dump at the second night’s stop, mainly because Catharina was carrying nothing after a fall in training the week before. Apart from that, we carried all our food. In all those days the only sizeable kiosk at which we could stock up a bit was in Hatobuilico. There was one other tiny kiosk as we approached the base of Ramelau from which we managed to procure a single can of drink.

When we followed dirt roads, we walked without guides. But whenever we left the road to follow walking tracks, we would find a local person who was willing to come along in return for payment. One was a school student going home that way anyway, most were men we met at our overnight stop. They kept us on the right track, prevented us stumbling into sacred sites, and ensured people would not be too shocked at seeing white faces. At that time there were rumours going around of a shape-changing woman appearing in various places, and we didn’t want to be mistaken for her!

While hiking on Kabulaki mountain in pouring rain, one of the men who was carrying an enormous pack fell heavily. Thankfully we had an excellent guide, the uncle of our friend in Mauxiga, who had been a messenger for the Falintil guerrillas and knew the country well. He found us a grass hut nearby, lit a fire, and found us potable water. Amazingly, we had telephone reception and so could ring for a car to start the six hour drive to the nearest road, as well as hear the wonderful news of the birth of the injured man’s first grandchild. When the hut owner returned he must have been astonished to find foreigners in residence, but he took it well. Next day these two men led us down five hours to the nearest road, the injured man pushing on without stopping and without complaint with the help only of two walking sticks, as there was no room for anyone to walk beside him to support him. From this rough isolated road, colleagues collected him and his wife in a car. On return to Australia the next day it turned out his tibia had been fractured.

This illustrates a major challenge of adventure activities in Timor: how to get people out in an emergency. Since that time the options have improved somewhat, with the availability of an international clinic in Dili with English-speaking doctors, though without full facilities. They are apparently able to arrange international evacuations if required.

Supported hiking

A completely different experience was taking a group of eleven Australians on a fully supported three-day hike over Mount Ramelau in 2015. This group, ranging in age from 17 to 70, had raised money to support some programs in Timor, and wanted to visit the programs as well as go for a “trek”. They did not, however, want to carry their gear or do the cooking. Their leader had previously led fully supported hikes in Nepal, where there are plenty of companies offering such services, so did not realise the challenge he was setting us in organising their visit. Since they were from a Protestant church in Australia, we approached a Protestant church in Hatobuilico for help. This took us two visits to Hatobuilico to organise, but proved interesting and workable.

Before starting the trek, we took the group to visit a card-making enterprise in Railaco and a farm in Ermera. That night we all stayed with hospitable friends in Letefoho, who have often hosted us and our friends on our various adventures. Next day an English-speaking Timorese friend and Catharina led the hikers up the north slope of Ramelau, while Rob accompanied sixteen cooks and carriers up from Hatobuilico. We all spent the night freezing in the roaring wind, in the most sheltered spot the locals could find. The cooking was a success, but finding a means to enable the two groups to interact was not easy. In the end we prompted and interpreted some “interviews” with several individuals, so that each group could hear a bit about the other, after which the groups took turns singing songs in their own languages. It wasn’t a lot of cultural exchange, but was at least something.

By day three, as we approached Ble Hitu, some hikers had run out of puff. Thankfully we had a “plan B”, by which Rob took them to visit friends in Mauxiga, allowing them to see a rural family, home and farm. Meanwhile the rest of the party enjoyed the spectacular descent down to Dare, while being thankful we didn’t have to walk up it. All this was possible thanks to good cars and drivers, and a local guide.

Guided hiking

In 2015 we also had our first experience of a locally guided overnight hike. This was up Mount Taroman, in Covalima district, with one other expatriate. Catharina had served in Taroman for the UN-run referendum on independence in 1999, and was keen to meet her old team. We stayed the night with the former village head, and were relieved to find that since our last visit the PNDS program had set up a public toilet nearby, which was clean.

Our host then took us up the mountain. He turned out to be a very knowledgeable guide, plying us with stories as we walked. These covered the history of his clan, victories and defeats in past wars, hiding places during times of unrest, and what various plants were used for. He also insisted on bringing along two young men as porters if required. It wasn’t long before we two women gratefully handed over our packs. Without our guide’s help, we would almost certainly have missed the rock thrones of the ancient kings, the stream where we had lunch, and the cave at which we camped under spectacular rock formations. We also might have missed the track to the cloud forest which had attracted us to go there in the first place, having read about it in Trainor (2015).

Our guide too was very satisfied with the trip, and keen to have more guests. Any such guests would need to be able to do the eight hour (almost 200km) trip from Dili, some of it over very rough roads, and to speak Tetun or Indonesian or else take an interpreter along.

Cycling

Timor-Leste offers some wonderful cycling, so long as you like mountains, handle the heat, and can manage rough roads.

An amazing way to cycle the country in a fully supported way is to join the Tour de Timor (<http://www.tourdetimorlorosae.com/>). We joined the first three tours, from 2009 to 2011, holding up the rear in each case. Thankfully the other foreigners at the back did not understand the calls of “*Avoo la bele!*” (“Grandma can’t make it!”) that followed us as we slogged up the hills. The trips were hard, with climbs of up to 2000 metres in a day, but there was satisfaction in meeting the challenge. Accommodation was usually

camping, and all meals were provided. You just had to bring enough of your own food to see you through until you arrived at the destination, which in our case was often late in the day.

When José Ramos-Horta, the then president of Timor-Leste, first initiated the Tour de Timor, one of his major goals was to show the world that Timor was a peaceful place. In this it deserved to succeed. Indeed it is safe enough that Catharina has in recent years ridden many miles from Dili on her own, on many occasions, and in every direction, being hassled only once.

Another example of how safe we feel in rural areas is from a three-day ride, dubbed the “Tour de Leisure”, which we did through Maliana district with friends in 2012. For this ride we took along a visitor who had just the day before arrived from Australia. On the first afternoon he struggled with the heat, and we left him lying on a mat in the shade at a kiosk in remote Purugua hamlet in Cailaco subdistrict, surrounded by local people with whom he could not communicate. When Rob arrived some hours later to pick him up in the support car, the visitor had perked up, and people were attempting to communicate with him using the *Word-finder* Tetun-English dictionary written by one of the authors (Williams-van Klinken, 2015).

Although we perceive rural Timor as a safe place to be, there have over the years been notable exceptions in which there were certain places we would not take visitors. Perhaps this is why the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is still (as of 15/6/2016 at least) advising visitors to “exercise a high degree of caution in Timor-Leste because of the uncertain security situation. The situation could deteriorate without warning” (http://smartraveller.gov.au/countries/timor_leste). We hope that this encourages people to be sensible and to seek local information rather than discouraging them from visiting this beautiful country at all. As Currie (2013) has pointed out, if tourism is to go ahead, then Timor-Leste needs to be “rebranded” from its former image as a poor strife-torn nation to one which is attractive to outsiders.

Many of our visitors enjoy doing long downhill rides, with riders and bicycles being transported up the hills in vehicles. The road back from Maubisse is excellent for this, particularly the last downhill from above Aileu, which goes for 30 km with a descent of 1300 m.

Motorcycling

A less strenuous activity, but still adventurous on account of the state of many roads, is to ride motorcycles around Timor. Since motorcycling is a major form of transport for Timorese, it is possible to get reasonable information from friends about road conditions. The exception is of course when you leave the road. In 2013 Rob decided to attempt the track from Laclubar to Turiscaí. Tetun has a single word which covers both “road” and “track”, so he was not sure which category we would consider it to be in. He asked around, and was warned that the track got narrow. “It’s one metre wide”, someone explained. What he hadn’t realised is that it would be one metre wide for five kilometres!

At one point, one of the riders slid off the track on his bike, breaking two bones in his leg but thankfully being saved from going over a cliff by a fallen tree. By this time rural telephone reception was good, and Rob was able to call in a friend from Dili to drive the four hours to pick up the injured man in Turiscaí. Getting him there was another matter. Two of the young men in the party rode on to the end of the track, where they met a farmer who was able to transport the injured man out on his horse. Rob and the young men went back and forth riding out the remaining motorbikes, some of the riders now being too nervous to do anything other than hike out. This incident again shows the importance of good backup and local language skills in the event of emergencies.

For those who want a motorcycle tour without organising it themselves, Dave and Shirley Carlos (<http://www.timoradventures.com.au/>) run tours of Timor-Leste both on motorcycles and in four-wheel drive vehicles. In both cases they have worked hard to seek to link visitors with the communities to which they go.

Boating

Although Timor-Leste is a half island, we have limited experience at organising boat trips. In fact, apart from boats servicing Atauro island and Oecusse, dive companies taking people to dive sites, and an advertised tour of Dili harbour, we are not aware of anyone else organising such trips either.

In our only overnight boat trip, we borrowed an expatriate friend's local-style motor boat to go for a four-day trip to the east. Thankfully the seas were calm, as we had little experience and limited safety equipment. Seeing the rugged coastline from the sea was beautiful, and we enjoyed camping in what to us seemed to be remote beaches away from the road. In this we were mistaken, as we so often are in rural areas. At the base of Subaun Boot mountain, one of the party was seeking some privacy behind a rock only to find that this rock was on the edge of a well-used walking track.

For a much more sedate trip, we have twice organised afternoon boat tours from Dili to Cristo Rei and back. These too were lovely. However finding a boat proved difficult. For one of the trips, with all the language staff from Dili Institute of Technology, a local staff member ended up going out many times to locate a boat and negotiate the price. Were it easier and not too expensive, we'd be inclined to take many more groups out for this trip.

Swimming: reefs and crocodiles

One of the great joys of living in Dili is the easy access to coral reefs. The closest is Tasi Tolu, just a few kilometres west of the international airport. It has been a place for many beautiful starts to the weekend and relaxing finishes to a hot day, as well as a venue for serious swimming training. It is popular with all our visitors, some of whom find themselves swimming there within two hours of landing in Timor, others finding it a wonderful break after a hard day of volunteering. For those with diving qualifications, there are some excellent dive sites, many of which are accessible directly from the beach. There are also several dive companies hiring out equipment and offering training, guided dives and boat trips to Atauro and to off-shore sites.

For what feels like a "trek", we have taken several groups of good swimmers for a 2 km swim across Tibar Bay, following the reef that runs along most of the mouth of the bay. This, followed by a luxurious morning tea at the Tibar Resort, makes for an excellent way to mark a public holiday.

As others have pointed out (e.g. Cater 2006), many of us who want adventure don't really want serious risk. The increasing numbers of crocodile sightings in recent times, including many reports of crowds feeding crocodiles visiting Dili in late 2015, have led us to swim more cautiously, when at all, and we have put the Tibar Bay swim off our annual program. Kaeslin (2015, p. 43) writes that "Today it is not totally safe to swim, snorkel or dive in several places of Timor-Leste that are being developed for ecotourism (e.g., Jaco Island, Com). The chances of encountering a crocodile may be small but when attacked in the water the chances of escape are minimal." Based on data from various sources, he states (p. 39) that there were at most two attacks per year from 1996 to 2007, but that in the three years from 2012 to 2014 this had risen to 12-15 attacks per year. The Crocodile Task Force (2016) presents much higher figures, claiming at least 123 attacks by crocodiles between 2007 and 2014, including 59 fatalities. Most attacks were in outlying villages of Viqueque and Lautem districts, including the tourist destinations of Com and Tutuala. Crocodile presence can be expected to increase. During the Indonesian time, the military kept numbers down by shooting them. Since 1999, there has been no such culling, as crocodiles are considered as ancestors by most Timorese, and so cannot be killed unless it is a crocodile that has turned "wild", indicated by the fact that it has attacked a human being. In any case, they are protected by law (UNTAET Regulation No. 2000/19 and Diploma Ministerial No. 04/115/GM/IV/2005).

While crocodiles discourage us from swimming and have serious impacts on the daily lives of people who live nearby, they do give rise to a wealth of fascinating stories. For instance, when Catharina stopped at a kiosk in Tibar in early 2016, the owner explained that her family get their fresh water supply from a spring out in the bay. At times there has been a crocodile in the way, and they have had to ask it to move aside so they could pass by. Like all Timorese, she assured me that crocodiles won't bite "good" people. Instead, they take people who have been cursed by others, usually for stealing their possessions. She seemed unsure how to respond to my reply that in Australia crocodiles aren't known to make such distinctions.

According to the 2014 Asia Foundation report (2014:8), 31% of visitors to Timor-Leste intend to go snorkelling during their stay, and 36% did indeed go to the beach as a leisure activity. If crocodiles continue to encroach on populated and tourist areas, this could have serious repercussions for tourism.

Shorter trips in nature

Timor offers many opportunities for shorter hikes, day trips and driving trips. To date the best overview of places to visit throughout Timor is still the Lonely Planet guide (Cocks, 2011).

One of the most popular hikes, even with children, is of course from Hatobuilico up to the top of Mount Ramelau. Mount Matebian is more challenging, and we have only done it once so far. That trip was memorable for staying overnight at a farmhouse part-way up the mountain, eating roasted freshly-dug potatoes for breakfast, and being guided up the mountain by an eight-year old boy and his uncle. Mind you, the lad looked like he could have easily managed everything on his own – the foreigners, the route, and the horse which carried our water.

There are many beautiful and interesting places to visit, although they tend to be widely scattered. For instance, the far east is well-known for Jaco Island and its fringing reef. However a hike through Konis Santana National Park also rewards you with the astonishing sight of a fast-flowing river which just disappears into the ground. Laga has a lake in which salt crystallises every year at the end of the dry season, such that the local owners can just gather the salt blocks up, after appropriate ceremonies. And Watulari has the beautiful lake of Irabere with fascinating associated stories.

In visiting any of these places it is still appropriate to “expect the unexpected”. Near Venilale there is a *ponte natureza* (“natural bridge”) in which a river runs under a natural arch for some twenty metres. Our last visit to this arch reminded us of the difficulty of doing even such trips without local knowledge, a good car and driver, and emergency backup. We parked our car at the home of a local teacher, and several of his children accompanied us to the arch as guides. On our return we were shocked to find we had no car keys. A thorough search of the track brought nothing, and left us assuming that the keys had fallen out into the river. The reality of our isolation sunk in, with no public transport, and no motorbikes or trucks that would dare to take us up the difficult roads after recent rain. We were faced with the option of a three hour uphill walk to Venilale, where we were lodging, or of accepting the teacher’s kind offer to stay the night. As it turned out an expatriate friend staying an hour or two away came to pick us up in a four-wheel drive car, and another colleague drove from Dili next day with spare keys.

For hikes more local to Dili, a favourite option is of course Dare, especially now that there is the Dare Memorial Museum, with a coffee shop and information about World War II.

Even closer is a hike up the Comoro River. Climbing up a waterfall on the western branch in 2006, we learned the importance of taking local guides. We had climbed up what seemed a remote waterfall, only to find a woman dressed in a *sarong* farming at the top. As we followed the creek, a man joined us, telling fascinating stories while also ensuring that we didn’t take a dip in a sacred pool there. Catharina did not dare to climb back down the waterfall, so we decided to walk around and descend further along the bluff. Our self-appointed guide offered to lead us there, but we declined, as the path looked obvious. In Timor there are many stories of the land “turning over”, hiding the tracks, when it doesn’t know you. It felt like that on that occasion! Hours later we made it to the car, Rob barefoot as two of our sandals had broken, and two kilograms lighter as a result of dehydration.

Getting good guides is not always so easy though. Ironically it seems most difficult in places where people are getting used to tourists, as some have very unrealistic expectations of how much they will be paid. Most of our excellent guides have been either friends or family of friends.

Some of our visitors allege that we do hiking or riding as an excuse to do a “kiosk crawl”. Indeed we often stop at kiosks, partly to get refreshments, partly to spend some money locally, and partly to have the opportunity to meet people and hear stories. Kiosks are one of the undervalued tourist resources of Timor.

Historic sites and cultural activities

According to The Asia Foundation survey (2014:8, 11), 69% of visitors to Timor-Leste intended to visit historic sites and to experience cultural activities during their stay. In the exit survey, when departing visitors were asked what the primary purpose had been for their most recent leisure trip within Timor, 10% mentioned visiting historical sites, and a further 10% named cultural activities. When asked to identify the three main attractions that they would encourage others to visit, 23% mentioned historical sites, and 25% mentioned cultural activities.

Despite their reported popularity, there are not many historic sites to which we can take visitors, let alone send them on their own without anyone to explain them. Apart from just looking at Portuguese-era architecture, there are the Resistance Museum and the old Balide prison in Dili, the Ai Pelu prison in Liquiça district, the Dare Memorial Museum, and the Balibo house and fort, all of which have visitor information on display, and some of which have guides available. So far as we are aware, other sites, such as the Maubara fort, are short on information for visitors. Many, such as Nino Konis Santana's hiding place in Mertuto village in Ermera district, are difficult to access on account of the distance from Dili and the difficult roads, although in this particular case a replica can be seen in the Resistance Museum in Dili. This limited access to historical sites, and limited information about them, was also identified as a significant hindrance (along with infrastructure and information) in The Asia Foundation report (2014:14). For those who are particularly interested in the Australian involvement in World War II in Timor, Eco Discovery (http://ecodiscovery-easttimor.com/sparrow_tours.html) has run some tours with knowledgeable guides.

There are a number of significant archaeological sites in Timor which it would be interesting to visit. On these, too, there is limited information directed towards tourists. There is however some general information on the internet, for instance articles on Lene Hara cave (<http://donsmaps.com/lenehara.html>) and Jerimalai cave (<http://donsmaps.com/timorcave.html>) in Lautem district, showing evidence of human occupation 42,000 years ago.

As for cultural activities, we are not aware of any regular events to which outsiders can just turn up. Many of our visitors have found it interesting to attend weddings and wakes with us, made possible by Timorese generosity in welcoming the guests of their guests. Some community-based tourism groups are attempting to include cultural activities in their programs. For instance a group in Luro, in Lautem district, runs home stays which include learning to weave *katupa* (rice packets) from young coconut leaves, and watching children do cultural dances. However, such tourism is usually occasional and small-scale. According to Tolkach and King (2015), community-based tourism has to date rarely been successful in Timor.

An adventure destination

Almost all the people who have joined our adventures over the last fifteen years returned home enthused by the beauty of Timor, the interesting people they meet, the hospitality of local friends, the wonderful range of stories they heard, and the worthy physical and mental challenges they faced, all made possible because of good security.

Most visitors, however, would be unable to organise such trips themselves. As noted above, the technical challenges include getting information, arranging affordable transport (hire cars being expensive, and buses rarely going just where you want to go), accessing food and accommodation in remote places, finding guides, communicating with local people without knowing a local language or local culture, getting backup in the event of emergencies, and the steady encroachment of crocodiles into favourite coastal areas.

In short, regardless of whether visitors come for adventure or not, most of Timor is still an adventure destination, in the initial "exploration" phase of the tourism life cycle (Butler, 1980). In most of Timor, tourist numbers are low, there are no secondary tourist attractions to supplement the primary attractions, and tourism has little economic or social impact on local residents. It is a place where arrangements are flexible and the unexpected is likely to happen.

Beyond adventure tourism: a holiday destination

The main exception is the island of Atauro, which is becoming a developed tourist destination where guests can have as much or as little adventure as they want, and can still be confident that they will be housed, fed, and returned to the mainland at the time agreed upon – so long as the seas are not too high. There are several places to stay, each with their own style, a range of places to snorkel, dive and hike, an absence of crocodile habitats, published prices for tours, a dive operator, pleasant places to relax, good food, and a range of options for travelling between Atauro and Dili. There is even information available on an Atauro website (<http://ataurotourism.org/>). When we want to just have a holiday, we now can do that right at home in Timor Lorosae.

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