Portuguese Timor

One way to enter Portuguese Timor is by air from Darwin (Australia), a port of call for many international airlines. An airline, K.P.M., links Dili, in Portuguese Timor, with Singapore. Shipping lines link Dili with other Far Eastern ports—mainly Hong Kong and Singapore. It is also possible to enter Portuguese Timor from Indonesia, but the journey is often difficult and uncomfortable. Planes link Bali with Kupang, on the south-western tip of Indonesian Timor, but from here the traveller must find his own way to the border—by truck, or on foot—and from there at least another 18 miles on foot or on horseback (by Timor pony) to Dili.

On the north coast, about halfway between Dili and the eastern tip of the island, lies the town of Baucau, with an international airport. Here the planes from Darwin land, on runways that can accommodate any plane up to Boeing 707 size.

Timor lies about 276 miles from the nearest part of the Australian coast, and the flight from Darwin to Portuguese Timor takes about an hour and a half. Arriving at Baucau, I set my watch back an hour and a half, for Portuguese Timor’s time is behind Darwin’s. A local airline transports passengers from Baucau to Dili and other towns of Portuguese Timor. I travelled in a De Havilland Dove, which carries only a few passengers. We flew along the northern coastline, and arrived at Dili in about 20 minutes.

THE ISLAND OF TIMOR.

North west of Australia, and at the eastern end of the Sunda island chain, between the Savu Sea on the west and the Timor Sea on the east, Timor Island is about 300 miles long and from 10 to 65 miles wide, with a total land area of about 13,094 square miles.

The interior is mountainous—reaching heights of over 3,000 feet in the Indonesian territory, and in the Ramelau range, which extends from just within the Indonesian border to more than half way along Portuguese Timor. Part of this range, south of Dili, towers over 6,000 feet, and the highest peak, Mata Mai Lau, rises to almost 9,840 feet. In parts of the range, sheer granite cliffs, bare of vegetation except for a few stunted trees, rise hundreds of feet from gentle grassy slopes. In some areas 2,000 feet above sea level ancient coral forms lie embedded in limestone rock.

The Portuguese province: Portugal governs the eastern side of Timor, another small section of the north coast farther west called Oe-Cussi, the small island of Atauro off the north coast, and the tiny islet of Jaco at the north-eastern end of Timor. The main part of this territory, the eastern half of Timor Island, measures about 128 miles in length, and 47 miles across at its widest point. The land border, 75 miles long, crosses the island irregularly, in a series of curves. The coastline measures about 419 miles, with fine bays and beaches.

Region and climate: Most of the Portuguese territory is mountainous, with some perennial rivers and others that dry up in the dry season and become raging torrents in the wet. Those on the south side spread over vast flood plains, and the plains become fertile through the dry season. The longest permanent river is the Laco Norte, about 50 miles long. Though Portuguese Timor has no lakes, there are many waterfalls, and on the coastal areas lagoons.

The climate of Portuguese Timor is influenced by the Australian monsoons. Even in the hottest months, between December and April, temperatures rarely exceed 83 degrees Fahrenheit. The annual average temperature is about 69 degrees. Rainfall differs in the north and south of the island. Light rain is recorded in the northern areas—between 20 and 59 inches a year, falling mainly between December and March. Hardly any rain falls between June and October. Rainfall on the southern side is much heavier—about 118 inches a year. December and May are the wettest months, with a short dry season in September and October.

Vegetation and wildlife: Portuguese Timor, with a more monsoonal than equatorial climate, has very variable vegetation—in some areas dry grasslands and savanna forest, and in others, such as in gullies and along the banks of permanent rivers and streams, patches of dense rainforest. Pigs, probably brought to the island by early inhabitants, run wild in some parts of the forests, and deer were introduced by the first Portuguese settlers. Buffalo also run wild, and monkeys live in the trees. Reptiles include crocodiles, lizards, turtles and snakes. Birds are fairly plentiful—some are related to Australian species; others resemble birds of South-east Asia and Indonesian islands. The birds include parrots, honeyeaters, starlings, the Jabiru stork, herons, the Kool, kingfishers, pigeons, flycatchers, owls, cuckoos, jungle fowl, wood swallows, the Groshawk, and various water and sea birds.

HISTORY OF PORTUGUESE TIMOR.

The exact date of European discovery of Portuguese Timor is unknown—nor is there any certain date for first settlement. Discovery and settlement are believed, however, to have occurred in the first two decades of the 16th century.

Dominican friars arrived in Flores and Timor from the flourishing Portuguese port of Malacca in 1561, to convert the native peoples of these islands to Christianity. Before this not much notice had been taken of the Timorese—Timor attracted the Europeans only for prospects of trade. The friars built schools and churches, and took an active interest in the welfare of the Timorese people.

At the end of the 16th century the Dutch began to struggle for possession of the Indonesian Archipelago, and spasmodic fighting between the Portuguese and Dutch continued for more than half a century. Portuguese Timor was placed for a while under the jurisdiction of the Governor of the Portuguese colony of Goa, in India. It then came under control of the Governor of Macau—another Portuguese colony.
This caused friction for a number of years between the governors of the two colonies, until finally, in 1894, Timor was allowed to govern its own affairs, which did not end Timor’s problems, for the change in government was hampered by revolts by the Timorese native people. Peace was restored in 1913.

The boundaries of the Portuguese territory on the eastern half of the island were established by treaty with Holland in 1859, and legalized at the Hague convention in 1904. A little farther along the coast, the small Portuguese enclave called Oe-Cussi had been for many years under the control of two powerful Portuguese families—De Costa and Hornay, who at one stage almost succeeded in expelling the Dutch from their capital at Kupang. In 1769 the capital of Portuguese Timor was transferred from Lifau, in Oe-Cussi, to Dili—and the eastern side of the island began to develop. The boundaries of the Oe-Cussi enclave were agreed upon in 1661, between the Portuguese and the Dutch, but they were not legalized until 1914, with the Swiss Government acting as arbitrator between the two colonial powers.

**Government of Portuguese Timor today:** The head of the Government of Portuguese Timor is the Governor, who acts as President of a Legislative Council elected by the people. The 15 members of the Legislative Council, which include five Timorese chiefs, are not paid for their services. All people of Portuguese Timor are citizens of Portugal, and a Timorese representative stays more or less permanently in Portugal, visiting the island now and again.

**Present population and language:** The Portuguese section of Timor has a population of about 550,000 Timorese and 3,000 Portuguese. Though the Timorese have a number of local dialects, they speak one main language—with many words similar or the same as words of Polynesian languages and the Motu language of Papua. The Timorese call all Europeans “Malay”—because the first Portuguese settlers arrived from Malaya. Portuguese is spoken fluently all over Portuguese Timor, but English is also spoken or understood by people in the towns, and most of the Portuguese residents speak English fluently.

**Education:** Education is important to the Timorese, and the Government has established schools in every town and village of the colony. Missions also run schools in most areas. All teachers were formerly trained in Portugal, but lately a Teachers’ College has been started at Dili, from which about 40 students, both men and women, graduate each year.

The education system requires four years of primary schooling, seven years of secondary, and tertiary training in Portugal for selected students at the end of this time. The Government sends 17 promising students to Lisbon for further education each year. Education is free.

**Agriculture and exports:** Coffee, rice, vegetables, and small amounts of tea, rubber, sandalwood, and cinnamon are produced in Portuguese Timor. Cattle and poultry are raised, mainly for internal consumption, and small numbers of Timor ponies are sold to other countries, or raised for internal transport.

The Timor ponies, valued for their strength, hardiness and sure-footedness, are left unshod on Timor, where they are a main form of transport. The colony has at least 300,000 ponies.

The main export of Portuguese Timor is coffee—recognized as among the world’s best. Called Cinchona Coffee, it is processed by a special method to give the beans a distinctive flavour, different from any other in the world.

The search for oil in Portuguese Timor is meeting with success, and oil should soon be an important product.

**Trade and commerce:** Most of the items of trade come from the other Portuguese colonies—Angola, Mozambique, Macau—or from Portugal itself. Such goods are exported to Timor because of a difference in exchange rates and transport costs between the colonies. The Chinese in Timor, who import goods from the closer ports of Macau and Hong Kong, are not affected to the same degree as are other merchants in the colony. Many of the Chinese stores in Portuguese Timor are branches of main stores in Macau and Hong Kong. Trade with Australia is hindered by lack of shipping between Darwin or other Australian ports and Dili—though the Legislative Assembly in Portuguese Timor is eager to foster more trade with Australia.

**Land tenure in Portuguese Timor:** The Timorese own all land in the colony except some areas that have been sold by them. Some of this land is owned by chiefs; other land is owned communally by a whole village. The Governor of the Colony acts as a go-between when Timorese decide to sell.

**Dili, and a journey through the colony:**

Arriving at Dili, Bob Helliker (a geo-physicist I had met on the plane from Darwin) and I were taken to the Hotel Matimar—which advertises "private bathroom, fans and bells". The rooms here were clean and comfortable, and the charge of $9.00 a day included full board and laundry. Meals were excellent.

I spent the first day of my visit to Portuguese Timor exploring Dili. The Capital, with a population of about 1,000, is situated on the north coast of the island. The town itself has been built slightly back from the waterfront. The original town was destroyed by the Japanese during World War II, and the whole area has been rebuilt. Modern buildings now line the streets—such as the Administrative blocks, solidly constructed and entered from the street through a series of arches. Outside the Governor’s office stand two Timorese guards—not military personnel but village people, members of various chiefs’ families, who have compiled a roster system to stand guard outside the office.

Opposite the main buildings, across the street, people relax in a peaceful park, with flower gardens, trees, seats and paved walks. The main shopping area lies farther down the street, behind the hotels, barracks and wharves which line the harbourfront. Ships from Mozambique, Portugal, and other ports tie up at the Dili wharves, to unload their cargo and take on loads of Portuguese Timor exports.

Dili is a busy little centre, with dusty roads and noisy traffic careeriong along on the right-hand-side of the road with horns blaring. The people of Dili are friendly and courteous; people I encountered in the shops and along the footpaths greeted me with a slight nod and a cheerful “bon dia”, or “good morning”.

Just past the main shopping centre is a small store called Casa de Timor, where the Tourist Board sells Timorese handicrafts. For some years the Government has encouraged the Timorese people to continue their native crafts, and an export industry has now developed, of mats, baskets, woven cloth, carvings of buffalo horn and wood, and many other goods. The main overseas markets are the United States of America, Australia, and Portugal.

The Casa de Timor, an outlet for handicrafts, does not sell anything made with the help of machines. This not only ensures that the Timorese craftsmen lose none of their skill, but also that each article is in some way individual, and so more valuable. Articles do not conform to any set pattern, size or design, and their prices are determined by the amount of skill and time involved in making them.
Bob Heliker wanted to travel on the next day to the southern coast, and the villagers advised him to be on his way as early as possible in the morning, so that we could see the rivers ahead before they began to flood. Rain falling in the mountains in the late morning and through the afternoon swells the rivers until they cannot be crossed. We forded rising rivers, and had almost reached the coast when, on a sharp rise, we came to a sudden halt with a broken axle. There was another river to cross. The drivers had all the equipment they needed to mend the vehicle. Within two hours they had put in a new axle. To replace the oil in the differential they used funnels of palm leaves.

Another half-hour's travel brought us to Betano, on the shore of the Timor Sea. The 60-mile trip from Dili had taken us about six hours of actual travelling time. Bob finished his survey and inspection work quickly, and we set out to return to Dili. This time we had no hold-ups, and arrived back at the capital at about four o'clock the same afternoon.

Kam Airstrip and Tutuala: While we stayed at Dili overnight, the drivers took our four-wheel drive vehicle on to the town of Lautem, along the north coast. We joined them there the next morning, flying from Dili in one of the local airline's De Havilland Doves. Kam Airstrip, where we landed, a few miles beyond Lautem on the shore of the north coast, was used by the Japanese during their raids on Darwin in World War II. Near the end of the strip a symmetrical pattern of bomb craters is clearly visible—four marking the corners of an almost perfect square, and a fifth in the centre. Close to the airstrip can be seen the old revetments of the Japanese.

Our vehicle met us at the airstrip, and we set off for Tutuala village, almost at the eastern tip of the island. On the way we passed through many groves of coconut trees, and I noticed that each trunk had pieces of palm wood bound across it at intervals, making a series of rungs, so that a person could easily scale the tree to tap the bases of the top fronds for the sap to make palm wine. A short way past Lautem we took a road leaving the coast, and climbed to a plateau, where the road led across to the eastern tip of the island.

Tutuala is a pleasant village, with a large hotel overlooking the Bandar Sea and nine of the Moluccan islands. On Sundays Indonesians come to trade at Tutuala's market.

The Tutuala people believe in spirits connected with trees, plants, stones, and other natural things. They protect the things they believe sacred, often fencing them off and hanging palm fronds round them. These people speak a language called Lucoloba, very similar to some Melanesian languages. They make excellent pottery using coiled "ropes" of clay smoothed with a wooden spatula. All the pottery is hand made, and geometrical or leaf-shaped designs are added before the pot is baked. Usually red, pink, or black, the pots and jars are made in many shapes and sizes, some with handles or spouts.

The people of Tutuala and the village of Los Palos farther inland are known for their unique houses. The living section of the house is raised about six feet from the ground on four stout posts set deeply to provide good support. The roof, at its highest point, rises 30 feet or more from the ground. Built of grass thatch, the roof is decorated with long strings of shells—mainly cowry, with some cone shells and large nautilus shells at the end. These serve more than just for decoration—they are also supposed to ward off evil spirits. The more shells a house has, the better protected the dwellers.

Beneath the house, about a foot from the ground, is an open platform where women sit during the day, weaving or performing other household tasks, while the...
children, dogs, pigs and chickens run about near by. The animals usually sleep on
the platform at night.

From Tutuala to Baucau: On Saturday morning we left Tutuala and retraced our
route across the central plateau, through wide stretches of gently undulating grass-
land plains, on our way to Baucau. About a third of the way along we came to the
road leading to Los Palos and on to the southern coast. We called in at Los Palos,
a small village with a few scattered houses on the edge of a plain.

Travelling north, we eventually left the plateau and came again to the coastal
road, leading on the right to Lautem and Kom Airport, or left to Baucau and be-
yond Dili. Between here and Baucau we passed many groups of men and women
slowly making their way towards Baucau for the weekly market—held every Sunday.
Some led heavily-laden ponies; others balanced huge loads of produce on their
heads. By the sides of the road fat water buffalo grazed in rich pastures or wallowed
in streams and mudholes. Buffalo are used far less on Timor than they are through-
out Indonesia; their main work seems to be loosening the soil of the rice paddies.
For this the farmer merely drives a group of them over the field as fast as possible,
letting their sharp hooves dig into the ground. Ponies are used far more often for
transport—carrying riders or loads of produce, or pulling waggons or carts.

Sunday in Baucau: The second-largest town of Portugeuse Timor, Baucau lies a few
miles away from the international airport. Many of the people are Catholics, and
Mass at the little church is well attended early on Sunday mornings. When church
services finish, the congregations usually go to the local market, where trading
begins early and goes on all day. After lunch, cockfights are held. These are very
popular with the Timorese, and many people raise a fighting cock or two, lavishing
much care and attention on them. Cockfighting is controlled by the Government,
which takes a small percentage of all bets placed at the fight. Though artificial spurs
are strapped on the birds, as in the Philippines, poison cannot be used on them.
Many years ago it was common practice to poison the spurs so that the fight ended
more quickly—but this is now illegal.

Viqueque: From Baucau Bob Helliiker and I travelled to Viqueque, near the southern
coast of the island, the small but very attractive Administration Centre for this
area. Timor Oil has its base camp on the south coast not far from Viqueque, and
here I saw jars of crude oil that had been collected from seepage. The local people
have long been aware of the oil's many uses, and some have even managed to crack
the oil in a crude fashion, obtaining a kerosene for fires. Others use the natural gas
to light their fires.

Viqueque is an interesting and attractive area to visit. You can climb the Mundo
Perdido mountain, 5,860 feet high, and take advantage of an expansive view of the
island—from the summit both north and south coasts can be seen easily. About
seven miles from Viqueque, at Osora, are large limestone caves, with magnificent
stalagmites and stalactite formations. Also not far from Viqueque are sulphur
springs, and a volcano of bubbling mud.

The road to Viqueque from Baucau passes through vast mountain forests, rich
pasture lands where fat herds of ponies and buffalo graze, neat paddy fields, and
small villages. Deer and wild buffalo live in these areas—particularly in the moun-
tain forests, and provide good sport for hunters. Both kinds of animals can be shot
at any time of the year—the Government permits this, for they are not native to
the island and are often serious pests to the farmers.
Aerial view of a river in Portuguese Timor

The self-appointed guards of the Governor's office, Dili