



LAND OF THE SLEEPING CROCODILE

DON SILCOCK © 2013



1 Goby on a large seawhip at Bob's Rock; 2 Superb Bommie at One Tree, east of Dili; 3 Shrimp on a sea cucumber; 4 Tiger shrimp at Tasi Tolu; 5 Paddleflip Rhinopias at Tasi Tolu; 6 Scorpion fish at the Pertamina Jetty

...The juvenile saltwater crocodile was near death when the small boy found it stranded in a swamp far from the sea. Though greatly afraid, the boy decided to try saving the crocodile and eventually managed to get it back to the sea where it quickly recovered. The two became best friends and went on to travel the world together, the boy riding on the crocodile's back as it swam across the seas.

But as the crocodile grew older and the time came for it to die, it told the young man it would transform itself into a beautiful island where he and his children could live until the sun sinks into the sea.

The tale of the boy and his cold-blooded friend is told often in Timor to explain the island's crocodile-like shape and why the Timorese have a special affinity with the large reptile that is said to inhabit the creeks and pools along much of the country's south coast...

TIMOR'S LONG HISTORY OF COLONIAL RULE BEGAN IN THE EARLY 16TH CENTURY WHEN PORTUGUESE AND DUTCH SAILING SHIPS ARRIVED IN SEARCH OF THE SOURCE OF THE INCREDIBLY LUCRATIVE SPICE TRADE. DIVIDED INTO EASTERN AND WESTERN HALVES BY THE EUROPEANS, DUTCH WEST TIMOR EVENTUALLY BECAME PART OF THE NEW REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA IN 1949 WHEN THE DUTCH FORMALLY WITHDREW FROM THEIR 'EAST INDIES' COLONIES. EAST TIMOR REMAINED UNDER PORTUGUESE RULE UNTIL 1975 WHEN POLITICAL TURMOIL AND A MILITARY MOUNTED COUP D'ÉTAT IN LISBON RESULTED IN THE PORTUGUESE ABRUPTLY ABANDONING THE TERRITORY AFTER 455 YEARS OF COLONIAL RULE. DECLARING ITSELF INDEPENDENT ON 28 NOVEMBER 1975 AS THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF EAST TIMOR, THE COUNTRY WAS INVADIED AND ANNEXED JUST NINE DAYS LATER BY ITS LARGE WESTERN NEIGHBOUR INDONESIA.

Another 24 years of often brutal colonial rule was to follow. The end of the Suharto era in Indonesia ultimately led to self-determination and the newly independent Republic of Timor Leste finally joined the global community on 20 May 2002. Lead by the charismatic former guerilla leader Xanana Gusmao, and the urbane and articulate Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr Ramos Horta, the country more commonly known by its anglicised name of East Timor, remains one of the world's poorest nations but its large reserves of natural gas and oil promise a much brighter future.

Diving Timor Leste A quick look at the map and a basic understanding of the Indonesian Throughflow is enough to tell you that just as North Sulawesi, Raja Ampat and the northeast coast of Bali flourish from their exposure to those nutrient rich waters, so does the north coast of Timor hold considerable promise. To the north of Timor Leste are the remote islands of Alor and Wetar – the most easterly of the Lesser Sundas island chain which form the southern boundary of the huge Indonesian archipelago. Further north of Alor and Wetar are the deep basins of the Banda Sea, and as the rich waters of the Throughflow surge south towards the Lesser Sunda shelf, upwellings are created that suck up the rich phosphorus and nitrogen laden detritus of the sea.

The Ombai Strait between Alor, Wetar and Timor Leste is one of the three main passages for the Indonesian Throughflow through the Lesser Sundas, which means big currents and the chance of some great diving! Add to this mix the fact that recreational scuba diving simply did not exist in Timor Leste 10 years ago and the known dives sites are simply a fraction of what are still to be discovered.

Main Diving Locations These can be broken down into four areas; those in and around the capital Dili, the coastal locations up to two hours' drive east and west of Dili, the large island of Atauro north of Dili, and the smaller uninhabited Jaco at the far eastern tip of the country.

Dili There's three main regularly dived sites; all shore dives - Pertamina Jetty near the city centre, Tasi Tolu on the western outskirts, both muck/critter sites, and

nearby Dili Rock, a mix of critters and coral gardens.

Tasi Tolu has a somewhat legendary status as Timor Leste's version of Lembeh Strait, (it is just one site – and a very good one! – compared to Lembeh's multiple sites) and because it owes its existence as a dive site to the direct intervention of the

country's President. Tasi Tolu takes its name from three fresh water lakes just below the nearby foothills, which fill to capacity during the rainy season and then overflow, flooding the roads and villages in the area. The government commissioned a project to install a drainage channel to take this overflow into the sea – the design for which would have dumped the outflow right on to the Tasi Tolu site. The local diving community's campaign to relocate the channel finally got the attention of President Dr. Ramos Horta. He realised that destroying one of Dili's best critter dive sites would hinder dive tourism – a partial solution to Timor Leste's lack of employment opportunities – so he stopped the project.

I'd never have found Tasi Tolu without the dive guides from Dive Timor Lorosae. It's actually not that hard to find, but it looks

very ordinary, just a flat patch of marine growth, but within in it lurks a wide variety of extremely photogenic critters!

East of Dili: The numerous sites are all shore dives reached by short paths from the main road and involve getting kitted up under available shade and walking down the beach. All sites have sheltered entries, so getting in to the water is easy and exposure to the strong currents of Ombai Strait is gradual and manageable. My personal favourites were Secret Garden, Marble Rock and One Tree – Secret Garden has a small but superb sponge garden with resident colonies of purple anthias and silvery glass fish.

West of Dili: Bubble Beach and the picturesque town of Maubara are two main dive areas. Bubble Beach, though difficult to find underwater, is worth the effort. Like most dive sites around Timor Leste, currents and visibility can vary greatly. Sadly, a fence was erected in 2009 that effectively denied access to the

beach, although a number of more recent dives have been undertaken when the fence has collapsed or divers have walked from the road to the beach. Entry is via a sandy slope in front of an old walled Indonesian memorial. There's large picturesque bobbies and soft corals on a sandy bottom at about 30m (straight out) or 15 to 5 m (half left). In places the sand is warm and bubbles leak from the sea bed. Sharks, barracuda, lobster, nudibranchs, garden eels, blue spotted rays, triggers, puffers, morays, lizards, squirrels, parrots, angels and butterfly fish have all been seen here. The deep dive here on a coral outcrop is not to be missed!

There are two sites at Maubara, the Church and the Fort. The Church offers some superb diving around numerous bobbies on the coral slope. The shallower areas aren't particularly appealing, but at around 15m the slope is transformed and there's masses of marine life which is nourished by the strong currents sweeping the site. My favourite bobbie was about 200m northwest of the main entry point straight down from the car parking area near the church. The depth was around 19m and this spot teemed with life.

Ata'uro: This large island is 30km due north of Dili and the boat trip ex Dili takes around an hour. Ata'uro is right in the path of the Indonesian Throughflow as it rushes south into the Ombai Strait and schools of pelagics and pods of whales and dolphins are regularly sighted. Visibility is always excellent, and the abundance of fish life and coral is overwhelming. Dive sites include North Point, The Church, Franks Crack, Big Fish Rock, Dugong Bay, Manta Cove, and Bar Stool. Ata'uro is considered East Timor's most pristine diving area and there's a large variety of dives around the island suitable for every skill level as well as snorkelers. It's also possible to stay on the island.

Jaco Island: At the very eastern tip is the area of Los Palo and the National Park of Jaco Island. Boasting brilliant white sand beaches, turquoise seas and pristine reefs, the diving around the island is exceptional and unspoiled as the uninhabited island is rarely visited by commercial fishing boats. It's now possible to dive Jaco from a liveboard and *The Junk June Hong Chian Lee* is listing single or back-to-back

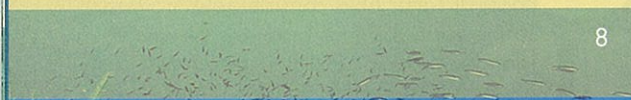
The Indonesian Throughflow:

A basic understanding of the Indonesian Throughflow and 'Sverdrups' is essential if you want to know why the scuba diving can be so good in certain parts of the vast Indonesian Archipelago and less-so in other areas. The Readers Digest explanation of Sverdrups: Northwest of the Indonesian archipelago lies the Pacific Ocean where the sea level is 150mm (6ins) above average, whilst to the south lies the Indian Ocean where the sea level is 150mm below average. This disparity is caused by the trade winds and associated oceanic currents that act in opposite directions in the northern and southern hemispheres, but the overall result is the largest movement of water

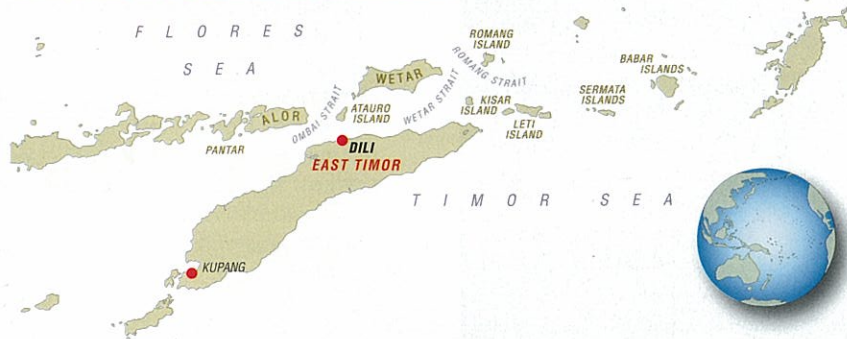
on the planet flows through the Indonesian archipelago from the Pacific Ocean to the northeast to the Indian Ocean in the southwest. So huge is this volume of water associated with the Throughflow, traditional measurements such as cubic metres and gallons are inadequate to describe it, so Norwegian scientist Harald Sverdrup invented the Sverdrup – one million cubic metres of water per second. To visualize a Sverdrup, think of a river 100m wide, 10m deep and flowing at 4 knots, then imagine 500 of those rivers all combined – that is one Sverdrup! It is estimated that the total amount of seawater that passes through the Indonesian Throughflow is 20-22 Sverdrups, or 10,000 of those rivers!



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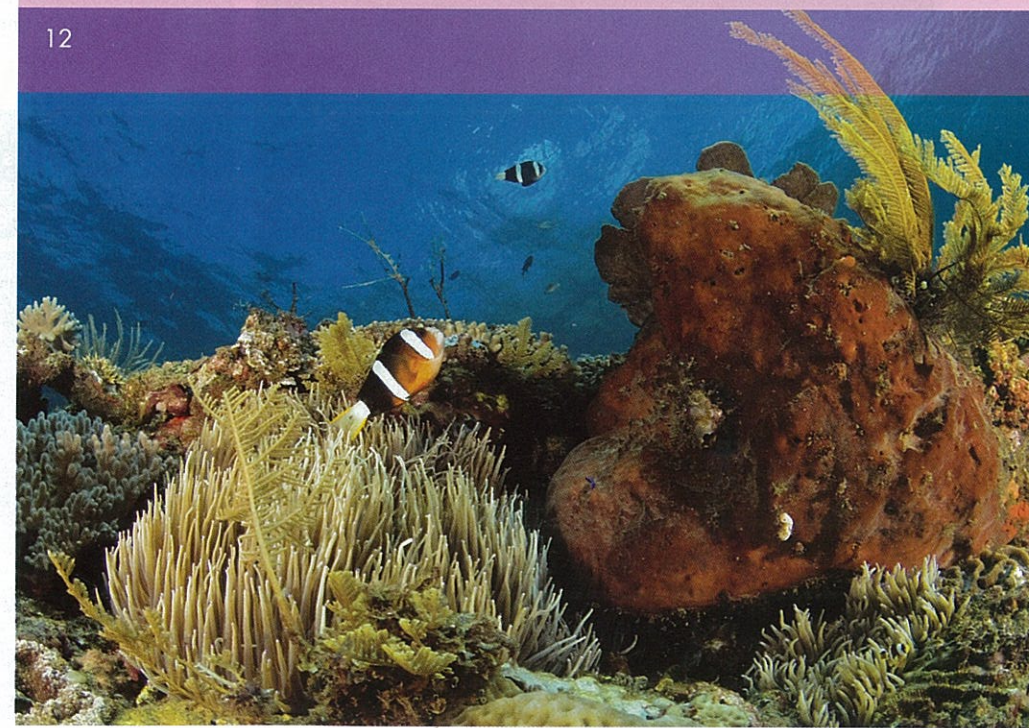
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- 7 Coral crab at Dili Rock
- 8 Rich corals and sponges at Secret Garden
- 9 Evening food market on Avenida da Portugal, Dili's main street
- 10 Kitting up in the shade for a shore dive
- 11 Superb bobbie at Maubara, to the west of Dili
- 12 Anemonefish at Marble Rock east of Dili



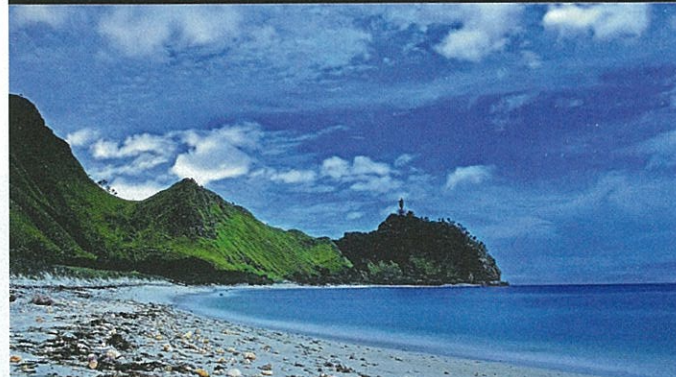
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13 Dili has a host of easy shore dives

7 day/6 night trips in Timor Leste from June to November 2013. The Junk will visit both fringing reefs and offshore islands along the north and east coast including Atu'oro and Jako, as well as explore new sites in the region as there's many offshore pinnacles still uncharted.

Timor Leste Summary Divers are constantly looking for new and exciting destinations and Timor Leste offers a unique and interesting mix above and below water. This is a developing country; Timor Leste's rough edges only add to its charm and the desire of its people to overcome the country's colonial past is admirable. The known diving locations definitely justify a trip, but the thought of what's still undiscovered is tantalizing.

When you plan your visit, do yourself a favour and allow extra time for some land-based exploring and enjoy the country as it is now – because it won't stay like that forever!

Don Silcock is based in Sydney and travels widely in Asia. His website www.indopacificimages.com carries information and image galleries on Timor Leste and other great locations in the Indo-Pacific region.

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Dive Operators There are currently two land-based operators, Dive Timor Lorosae and Free Flow Diving, both located right across from the beach on Avenida de Portugal, the main street of Dili.

I dived with Dive Timor Lorosae (DTL) which was started in 2002 by Darwin-based Australian Mark Mialszygrosz. This is a 5-Star PADI Instructor Development Centre offering a full range of PADI courses.

Mark first went to Timor Leste in 2000 to assist with the rebuilding of the country's infrastructure after independence. He's passionate about Timor Leste and its people and has some great tales about his early exploratory diving.

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