

Timor Leste

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+ WHEN WE THINK OF TROPICAL DIVING IT'S USUALLY PAPUA NEW GUINEA, THE SOLOMON ISLANDS AND THE PHILIPPINES THAT FIRST SPRING TO MIND. BUT THERE'S ANOTHER DESTINATION THAT'S BECOME A SERIOUS CONTENDER.

East Timor is one of the newest countries in the world after gaining independence in May 2002.

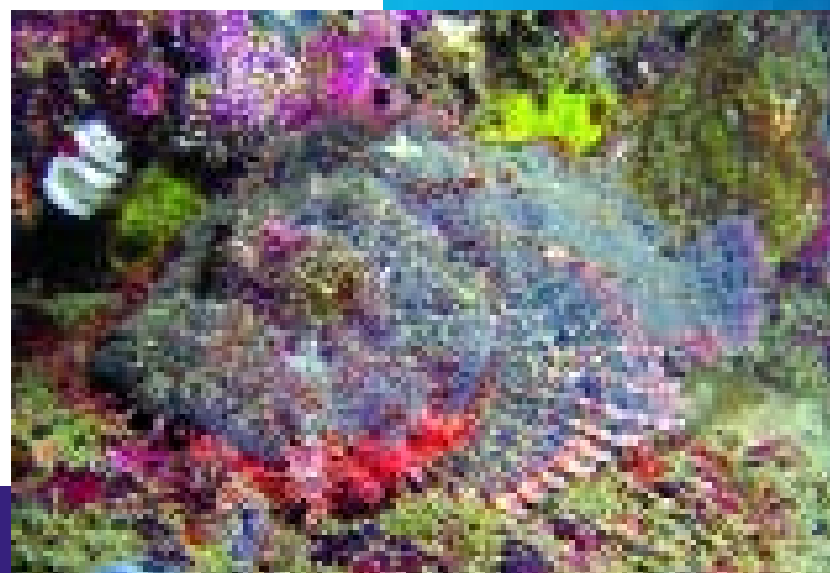
The East Timorese are very proud of their independence and the country is still learning to live with its new identity. The Timorese people are incredibly friendly and very happy to assist tourists with their needs. The local language is Tetun however Portuguese, Indonesian and English are also spoken. It helps to learn a small amount of Tetun before arriving so that you can exchange pleasantries with the locals; it brings a smile to their face to see you trying to speak their language!

East Timor offers everything that a scuba diver can possibly want to see. Muck diving, coral reefs, wrecks, big fish action and mind-blowing deep coral walls. The diving is conducted through FreeFlow Diving, which is owned and managed by British couple Wayne Lovell and Ann Turner, who have been living in East Timor for the past 5 years. The business opened in 2001 making it the longest established dive centre in East Timor. Wayne knows East Timor's divesites

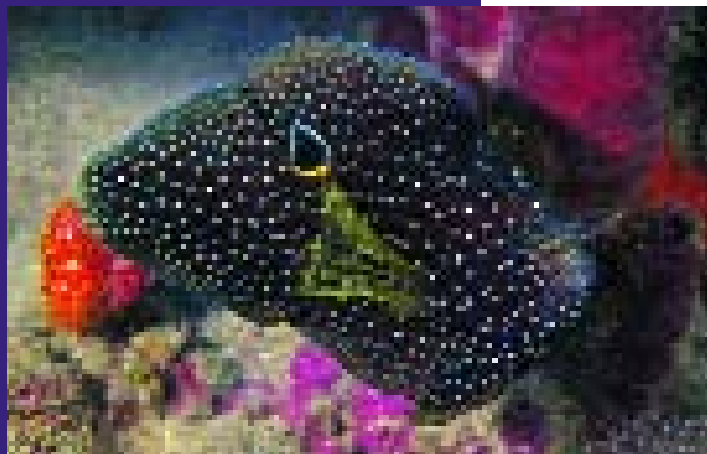
better than anyone else; his explorations have led to the establishment of many of the sites. He's also an excellent critter finder as he has the knack of finding the rare and unusual.

All the diving is done out of Dili and a typical day usually commences with a leisurely drive through stunning coastal scenery to numerous different divesites where the car parks right at the ocean's edge. The longest drive to a divesite is just over an hour, however the amazing views make the time pass quickly. Entry and exit is very straightforward as the fringing coral reefs start at the shoreline. The surface interval can be spent resting under the trees, enjoying lunch before hopping back in for a second dive at a new location. On the way back from the dive, a quick stop at the Mamar restaurant in Metinaro Village for a fantastic local meal is an excellent way to finish off a day's diving.

FreeFlow Diving provide full hire gear for a reasonable price and do not impose a maximum dive time; you can dive as long as your air and computer safely allows or until your camera battery runs out! Hiring of



Main image - On the deep wall dropoffs of Atauro Island, large barrel sponges coral are common; Left - Tiger anemones *Nemanthus* sp; The tasseled scorpionfish *Scorpaenopsis oxycephala* camouflages well with its surroundings; Coral reefs in East Timor are rich and plentiful



From top left - The comet *Callopleksiops altivelis* is a shy and elusive fish; There's at least 7 different species of anemonefish on East Timor reefs; Nudibranchs are plentiful and *Chromodoris leopardus* is one of the most spectacular. Below - *Island Lady* at Atauro Island; The tiger egg cowry *Primovula tigris* can be found on gorgonians; Many dive sites are along the coast east and west of Dili. Dive briefs are at the water's edge and it's a short stroll into the divesite; Lionfish *Pterois volitans* are very common on the reefs.

dive equipment should be seriously considered as Air North is very strict about their 20kg total baggage allowance. The only carry-on they allow is a small briefcase size bag – if you're a photographer don't even bother trying to take your bulky camera bags as carry-on – they simply don't fit in the tiny overhead compartments!

As well as excellent shore divesites east and west of Dili, there are incredible boat dives with Island Charters on the purpose-built 40 foot dive boat *Island Lady*. Owner/skipper Jim Cato has over 20 years of sea experience and regularly runs dive trips with FreeFlow across to

Atauro Island. This boat easily accommodates 10 divers, has a fresh water shower, toilet, dry area, all safety equipment and is powered by 2x200hp turbo charged Volvo engines which allows a cruising speed of 25 knots. It also has an excellent dive deck that makes getting in and out of the water very easy.

Atauro Island is a one hour boat trip away and it has some of the best wall diving in the Indo-Pacific region. On the way over you're almost guaranteed to see dolphins and it's not unusual to see pilot and fin whales. We did a single dive at Manta Ray Cove where we dropped down to 50 metres on the vertical wall and slowly made our way back up through some of the most prolific coral growth imaginable. It is easily one of the best wall dives I've ever done - even better than some of the walls at Uepi in the Solomon Islands and the dropoffs in the Red Sea. Other Atauro Island divesites include Big Fish, the S Bend, Bar Stool and Shark Point, but many more sites will be found as exploration continues!

Overnight stays on Atauro at eco-tourism guest lodges provide the opportunity to experience the local culture as well as

offering the possibility of a night dive. The eco lodge is run by Barry Hinton and is named Nema's@Atauro in memory of his wife. The resort is within the village of Beloi and guests can stay for \$25 per night, which includes a local dinner and breakfast. A perfect diving option would be to spend 4 or 5 days shore diving with a day's diving at Atauro Island.

Some of the shore dive sites have interesting names such as Dirt Track, Lone Tree, Secret Garden, Hammerhead Point, Kingfisher Cove and Dollar Beach. A few of the more memorable Dili dive sites we visited were:

Bob's Rock: Named for a rock on the roadside with the word 'Bob' written on it. This site is a macro photographer's heaven and the spot to find rare and elusive species. There's a large gorgonian fan at 20 metres that's home to the pygmy seahorse *Hippocampus bargibanti*; to the west is a large patch of garden eels. Other interesting critter finds here include the rare white mushroom coral pipefish, ornate and robust ghost pipefish, mantis shrimp, leaf scorpionfish and numerous species of nudibranchs and commensal shrimps. This is also where we found seven different species of anemonefish – pretty good for a single divesite!

K41: This site is exactly 41 kilometres east of Dili! As you enter the water a reef wall starts on your right hand side that you follow out until it starts to slope away into the depths. There's an excellent bommie at the end of the wall covered in crinoids and gorgonians with schools of sweetlips and fusiliers swarming the reef top. Alternatively, off to the left (west) it's an entirely different dive, a much siltier habitat containing large seawhips and colourful coral bushes. This is an excellent spot for egg cowries on the gorgonians and large *Nembrotha nudibranchs* feeding on ascidians.

Wayne's World: This has exceptional coral cover with abundant hard corals and lots of colourful soft corals and sponges. The reef slopes down to around 30 metres and down on the sand line is a good place to find resting whitetip reef sharks plus large schools of batfish and tropical snapper. There's also a nice reef swimthrough at 20 metres and the shallows deliver all sorts of unusual macro critters, including large numbers of anemonefish. Some visiting divers named this site after Wayne took them on an exploratory dive here.

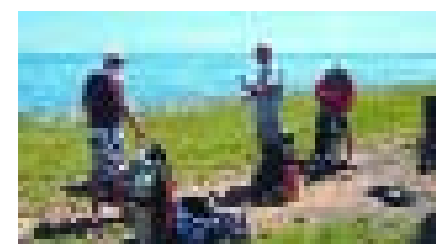
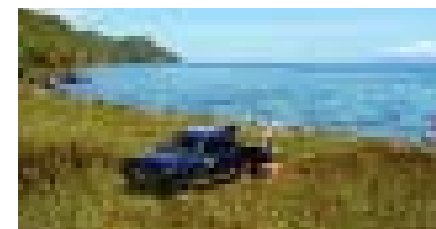
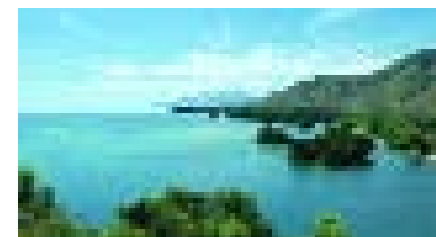
Dili is the base for diving, and is the only 'real' city in East Timor. There's many hotels, but comfort and prices can vary from US\$10 to US\$100+. We spent a week at 'Hotel Dili' and highly recommend this. It is on Dili's beachfront and has an excellent restaurant and large beer garden, perfect for unwinding after a good day's diving. There are upmarket exclusive five star suites to cheaper basic rooms. The deluxe room, at approximately US\$70 is excellent value as it is large, clean and comfortable. All rooms have broadband Internet access (at the cheap rate of \$6 per day) and the many Australian power points can be used for charging camera and strobe batteries.

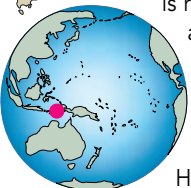
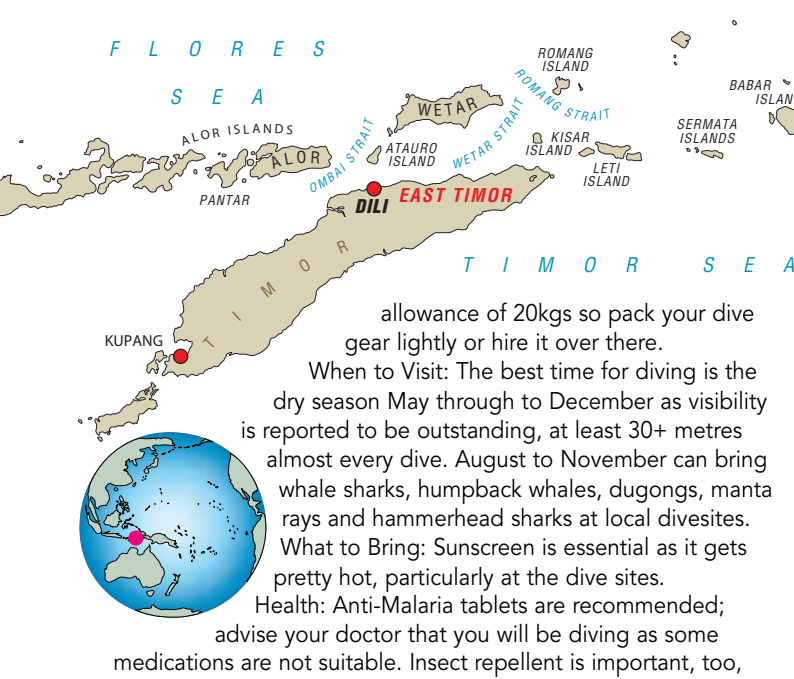
Other hotels to consider are the Hotel Esplanada and Casa Minha (top range), Venture Hotel and Rocella Hotel (mid range). The new Thai Pavilion Hotel under construction in April 2006 is shaping up nicely. There are many places to eat and a large variety of restaurants in Dili if one taps into local knowledge. The Monkey Bar is great place to relax and chill out and the restaurant offers excellent surf and turf meals. Other good places include the Victoria Beach café for fresh Timor fish, the Dili Club for pizza and trivia night, Hotel Dili for western cuisine and the Caz Bar at Areia Branca is a great place to kick back with a beer and enjoy local prawns and a spectacular sunset.

The local pig racing might be on; this is an experience to behold! You can place bets on your favourite porky and cheer the pigs around the track with all the other fun-loving ex-pats!

USEFUL TIPS

Bookings: Our trip was organised with Allways Dive Expeditions based out of Melbourne, they have some great package deals available. Tel 1800 338239 or allwaysdive@allwaystravelservice.com
Getting there: The East Timorese capital Dili is connected by daily flights by Air North from Darwin. It is also possible to fly to East Timor via Bali.
Baggage allowance; Air North is very strict on a maximum





allowance of 20kgs so pack your dive gear lightly or hire it over there.
 When to Visit: The best time for diving is the dry season May through to December as visibility is reported to be outstanding, at least 30+ metres almost every dive. August to November can bring whale sharks, humpback whales, dugongs, manta rays and hammerhead sharks at local divesites.
 What to Bring: Sunscreen is essential as it gets pretty hot, particularly at the dive sites.
 Health: Anti-Malaria tablets are recommended; advise your doctor that you will be diving as some medications are not suitable. Insect repellent is important, too,

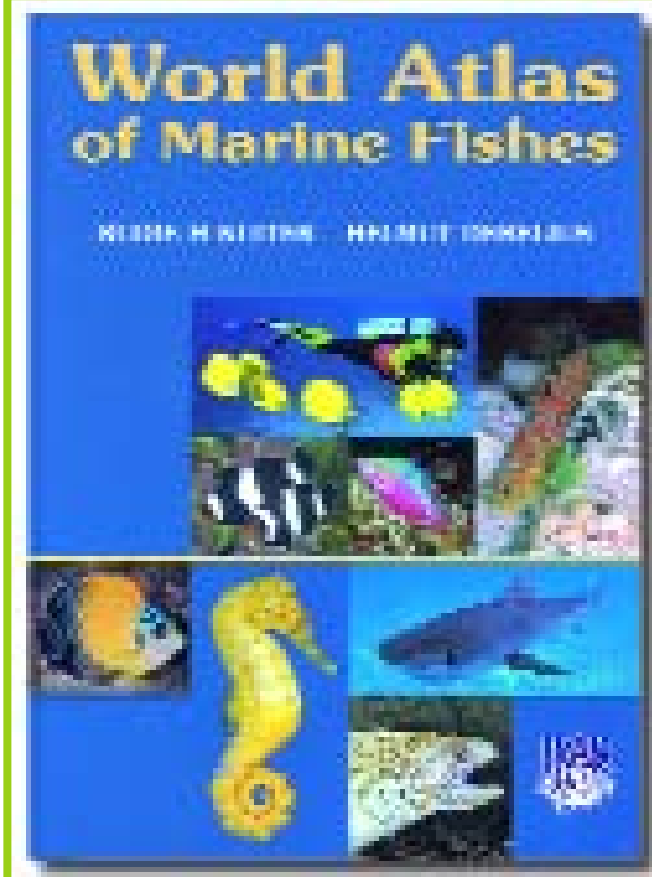
The spectacular *Nembrotha purpureolineata nudibranch*



out there°

especially during the wet season. Ladies; one piece swimmers are preferred as locals don't appreciate skimpy swimwear.
 Language: Local language is Tetun. Portuguese, Indonesian and English are also spoken.
 Currency: US Dollars. Bring some small US notes as getting change at local markets can be difficult. There are two ATM's, one at ANZ bank and the other at Leader Supermarket. Tipping is not common practice and is at your discretion.
 Visa Requirements: Entry Visa is \$30 US which is paid on arrival and the airport departure tax is \$10 US.
 More Information:
 Allways Dive Expeditions: www.allwaysdive.com.au
 FreeFlow Diving – www.freeflowdiving.com
 Dili – East Timor - www.discoverdili.com
 East Timor Tourism - www.turismotimorleste.com
 The Underwater Photo gallery – www.daveharasti.com

East Timor is also known as 'Timor Leste' in Portuguese. The country has had a troubled past with the most extensive violence occurring in 1999 when Militia and Indonesian soldiers were responsible for the killing of many civilians and the destruction of most infrastructures. To restore order the United Nations sent in a peacekeeping force (InterFET) and within weeks the instability in East Timor was under control. The UN has worked hard during the past six years to restore infrastructure and assist with the rebuilding of the capital Dili, which had been extensively damaged during 1999. Following some recent trouble in May 2006, the UN with the assistance of the Australian Government, is again trying to help this new country 'rebuild' itself.



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