



# Timor-Leste's Tasi Tolu



Thorny seahorse; Seaside view of Tasi Tolu in Timor-Leste; Tiny tiger shrimp just under 2cm (right)

Text and photos by Don Silcock

**There can't be many dive sites that owe their existence to the direct intervention of the country's president, but Tasi Tolu, on the outskirts of Timor Leste's capital Dili, can claim that unique patronage.**

Tasi Tolu gets its name from the three fresh water lakes just inland from the beach and below the nearby foothills. During the rainy season, the lakes tend to fill to capacity and then overflow, flooding

the nearby road and villages. To prevent that from happening, the government commissioned a project to provide a drainage channel for the overflow to run off into the sea. This design, which took the most logical path, would have dumped the outflow right onto the Tasi Tolu site.

In my experience, there are typically three basic ingredients for a critter site to flourish—a sheltered area (critters don't like surf); close proximity to deeper waters with nutrient rich currents; and a source of organic run-off such as a large stream. The organic run-off is a kind of Goldilocks-and-the-three-bears deal, because it needs to be just right—not too hot and





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Entwined nudibranchs; Commensal shrimp, *Periclemenes magnificus*; Cleaner shrimp hiding in coral; Banded boxer shrimp

not too cold, because too hot means siltation which the critters don't like very much, and too cold means not enough organic nutrients. Tasi Tolu is obviously just right, because it's a great site with lots of critters to see, but the drainage channel would have raised the temperature to the boiling point during the wet season and effectively decimated the site.

The local diving community waged a

campaign to get the drainage channel relocated and ultimately got the issue on the radar screen of Dr Ramos Horta, the urbane and erudite Nobel Peace Prize winning president of Timor Leste.

Horta saw tourism as part of the potential solution to one of Timor Leste's most pressing problems—lack of employment opportunities—and accepted that destroying one of the

best critter dive sites in Dili was not a great idea. He was eventually able to stop the project.

**Shore dive**

Tasi Tolu is a shore dive and a pretty straightforward affair. Kit up on the beach from the back of your transport, close to the now defunct and partially constructed drainage channel, then walk





## Tasi Tolu

dive guides from Dive Timor Lorosae who I dived with in Timor Leste. Not that the site is particularly hard to find, rather that it looks nothing like a photogenic one.

One of the highlights of Tasi Tolu were the resident pair of Rhinopias. The yellow one posed nicely for me, as seen below (right). There was an assortment of other critters in and amongst the marine growth, ranging from seahorses to spiny tiger and tozeuma shrimps. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Leaf fish (or Paperfish); View over village, bay and steep hills at Tasi Tolu; Gaping weedy scorpionfish; Tiny squat lobster measures just 2cm; Porcelain crab in sea anemone



straight down the sloping sand at about 15m where you will find a flat patch of marine growth and in amongst it, you will find a wide variety of photogenic critters.

I did several dives at Tasi Tolu and eventually got to know it like the back of my hand, but I

down the beach and enter the water just by the group of small boulders. Heading

have to say that I would have missed the site completely if I had not been shown it by the



# fact file



## Timor Leste

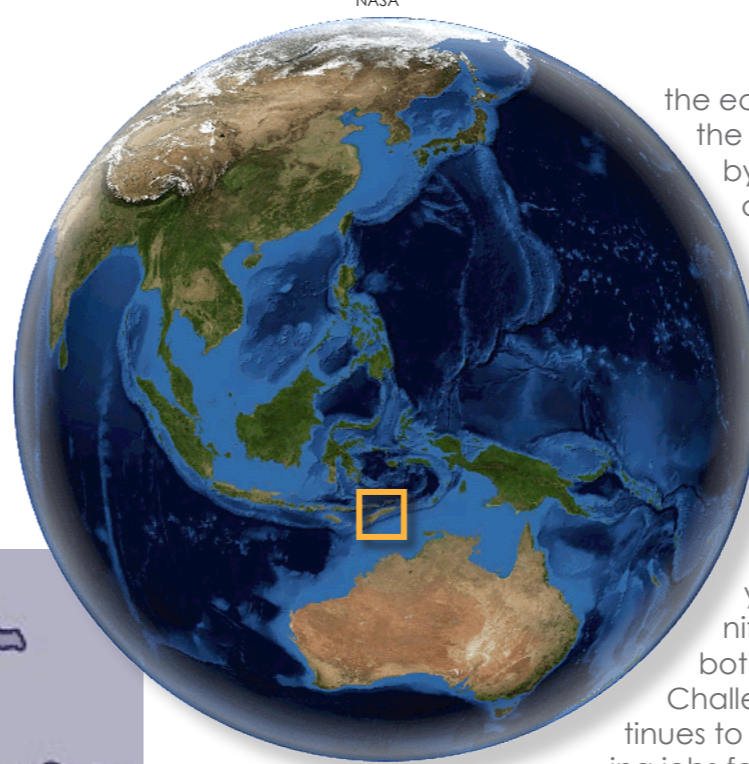


SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, STARFISH.CH

**History** In the early 16th century, the Portuguese began to trade with the island of Timor and colonized it by the mid-century. After clashes with the Dutch in the area, Portugal ceded the western portion of the island to them in a treaty in 1859. From 1942 to 1945, imperial Japan occupied Portuguese Timor, but after the Japanese defeat in World War II, Portugal resumed colonial authority. On 28 November 1975, East Timor declared itself independent from Portugal. Nine days later, it was invaded and occupied by Indonesian forces. In July 1976, Indonesia incorporated it and designated the region a province of Timor Timur (East Timor). Over the next 20 years, an unsuccessful campaign of pacification followed. An estimated 100,000 to 250,000 individuals lost their lives during this period. On 30 August 1999, an overwhelming majority of the people of Timor Leste voted for independence from Indonesia in a popular referendum supervised by the United Nations. In retribution, Indonesian militias supported by the country's military began a large-scale scorched earth campaign as the Timorese awaited the arrival of a multinational peacekeeping force in late September 1999. Around 1,400 Timorese were killed by the militias and 300,000 people were forcibly pushed into western Timor as

refugees. Destruction was rampant and affected most of the country's infrastructure, including nearly all of the country's electrical grid as well as homes, irrigation systems, water supply systems, and schools. The violence was brought to an end on 20 September 1999, when an Australian-led force of peacekeeping troops—called the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET)—were deployed to the country. Timor Leste was internationally recognized as an independent state on 20 May 2002. However, internal tensions threatened the new nation's security again in 2006, when a military strike sparked violence leading to a breakdown of law and order. Once again an Australian-led peace-keeping force—this time called the International Stabilization Force (ISF)—was deployed to Timor Leste at the request of Dili. In addition, an authorized police presence of

RIGHT: Global map with location of Timor Leste  
BELOW: Detail map of Timor Leste



ern end of the Indonesian archipelago in the Lesser Sunda Islands. The country includes the eastern half of the island of Timor, the Oecussi (Ambeno) region on the northwest portion of the island of Timor, as well as the islands of Pulau Jaco and Pulau Atauro. Terrain: mountainous. Lowest point: Timor Sea, Savu Sea, and Banda Sea 0m. Highest point: Foho Tatamailau 2,963m. Coastline: 706km

over 1,600 personnel was organized and deployed in Timor Leste by the U.N. Security Council in what was called the U.N. Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT). Stability was restored in the region by the ISF and UNMIT, thereby allowing peaceful presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in 2007. Since then, the country has experienced stability except for one incidence in 2008 when a rebel group tried and failed to stage a coup. Government: republic. Capital: Dili

**Geography** Timor Leste is located in Southeastern Asia, northwest of Australia. It lies at the east-

the economic infrastructure of the country was devastated by Indonesian troops and anti-independence militias by late 1999. Refugees numbering 300,000 fled westward. A massive international program of 5,000 peacekeepers (up to 8,000) and 1,300 police officers helped to stabilize the country over the next three years. This led to significant reconstruction in both rural and urban areas. Challenges the country continues to face includes generating jobs for young people entering the work force, rebuilding its infrastructure and strengthening the civil administration. Oil and gas resource development in offshore waters has helped to increase government revenues, but not jobs, since there are no production facilities in the country. The economy continues to improve despite the outbreak of violence and civil unrest in 2006. By 2009, most of an estimated 100,000 internally displaced persons came back home. Government increased spending significantly in 2009-2010, for the most part on basic infrastructure, roads and electricity leading to first time national debt in late 2011.

**Currency** U.S. Dollar  
**Language** The official languages are Tetum and Portuguese. Indonesian, English and about 16 indigenous languages are spoken. Tetum, Galole, Mambae and Kemak are spoken by a large part of the population.  
**Health** There is a very high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever as well as vectorborne diseases such as chikungunya, dengue fever and malaria (2009)

**Decompression Chambers**  
BALI: Sanglah General Hospital Hyperbaric Medical Department. Tel: 62-361-227911

MAKASSAR (SULAWESI):  
Rumah Sakit Umum Wahidin Sudirohusodo. Tel: 62 - 0411 (584677) or 584675 ■

**Climate** Timor Leste's climate is tropical, humid and hot, with dry and rainy seasons. Natural hazards include earthquakes, tsunamis and tropical cyclones; floods and landslides are common.

**Environment** Deforestation and soil erosion have developed as a result of widespread use of slash and burn agriculture. Timor Leste is party to the following international agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification

**Economy** About 70 percent of

**Population** 1,177,834  
Ethnic groups: Austro-nesian (Malayo-Polynesian), Papuan, small Chinese minority. Religions: Roman Catholic 98%, Muslim 1%, Protestant 1% (2005). Internet users: 2,100 (2009)



Leaf fish (or paperfish)