

Timor-Leste

— *Off the Beaten Path*

Text and photos by
Brandi Mueller





View from the Cristo Rei of Dili monument in Timor-Leste (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Anthias, damselfish and anemonefish with staghorn, leather and brain corals



Admittedly, I knew almost nothing about Timor-Leste until I started seeing a lot of great underwater images online of the diving that could be found there. I became curious and started following a local dive operator's Instagram feed, watching them post daily photos of cuttlefish, nudibranchs, peacock mantis shrimp and beautiful reefscapes. Where was this place and how did I not know about it?

After climbing over 500 stairs, one can visit the seventh tallest Jesus statue on earth, Cristo Rei of Dili.

Other research on the Internet did not give Timor-Leste's dive secrets away. Located within the Coral Triangle, which contains the most marine biodiversity on the planet, it was boasted to be some of the most pristine diving left on earth—an untouched area and mostly not dived. But there were so few dive reports or pictures; it seemed like few people were diving there, or even going into the country. I wanted to find out about this off-the-beaten-path destination and experience it for myself.

Where is Timor-Leste?

In the weeks leading up to my trip, anytime I said I was headed to Timor-Leste, I was greeted to blank

faces and the question of, "Where is that?" Initially, all I knew was that it was somewhere in the vicinity of the islands of Indonesia (but was its own country).

Northwest of Darwin, Australia, the island of Timor hosts two countries. Timor-Leste is mostly situated on the eastern side of the island, and to the west, is the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara. Often, the Indonesian side of the island is called West Timor, but there is also a small enclave of Timor-Leste within the Indonesia side of the island, which is also often called West Timor. Confused yet?

What is now Timor-Leste used to be called (and is sometimes still referred to as) East Timor.

Timor means "east" in Bahasa Indonesian, so the name translates to "East East." Now officially named Timor-Leste, "Leste" translates to "east" in Portuguese. The Tetum (local language) version is Timur Lorosa'e (which it is also sometimes called) and "Lorosa'e" means "east" in Tetum. So, no matter how or in what language you say it, the country is "East East." The longer, most official name is the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

Brutal past

One cannot discuss the current state of this country without remembering the brutal, not-so-long-ago, past. Colonized by

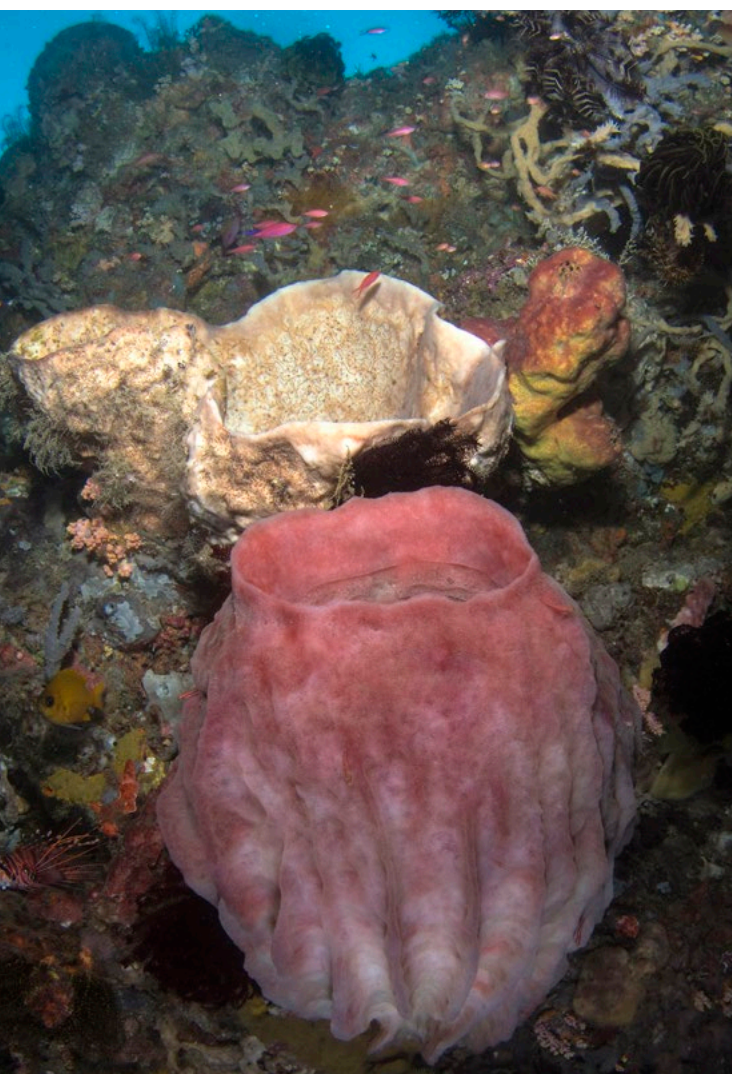


Pink anemonefish





A healthy reef with many different types of corals and sponges



Large barrel sponges on reef

the Portuguese in the 16th century, it was a colony of Portugal until 1975 (except for a short while when the Japanese took over during WWII). After the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, the Portuguese began withdrawing from its colonies, included East Timor. In 1975, as the Portuguese left, there was a revolution for independence won by a party known as the Fretilin. This lasted for nine days before Indonesia launched an invasion backed by American, Australian and British support. Provided with weapons, Indonesia easily took the province as its own.

For 25 violent years, Indonesia occupied East Timor with an estimated 45 percent of the population being killed in genocide, as well as from lack of resources resulting in death from diseases and malnutrition.

Guerrilla forces fought back against Indonesia throughout that time, but the country was essentially kept silent about what was happening within it until 1991 when the world saw reports of the Dili Massacre. This demonstration against Indonesian occupiers started off peacefully and ended with over 250 demonstrators killed in the Santa Cruz cemetery. Journalists broadcast the events, showing the rest of the world what was happening in this small country.

Finally, in 1999, after Indonesian President Suharto resigned, the United Nations was able to take over East Timor through the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor. The year 2001 saw the first election, and the new constitution was approved in 2002, which was also when it was recognized as inde-





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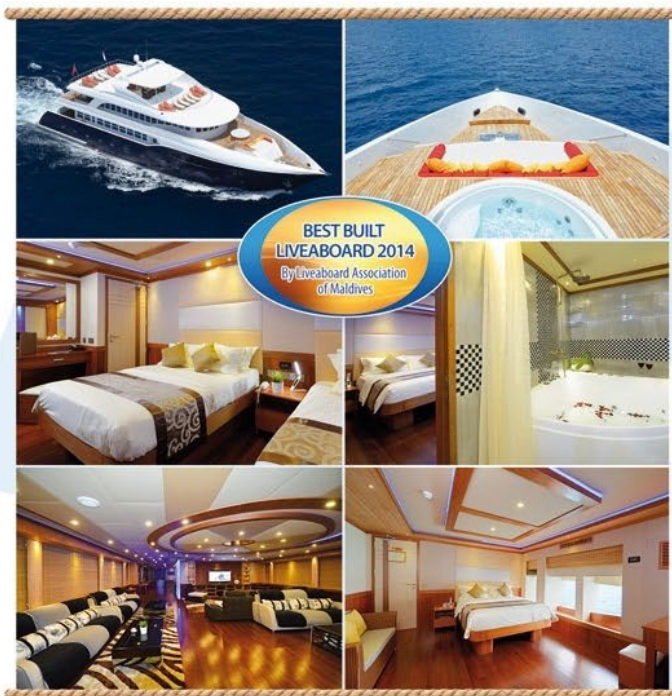


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Timor-Leste



Lionfish on reef (above); Pregnant male seahorse (right)

pendent by the UN. The UN ended its peacekeeping mission in 2012. With the revolution behind them and gaining their much-deserved independence, the country today seems to be one on the upturn.

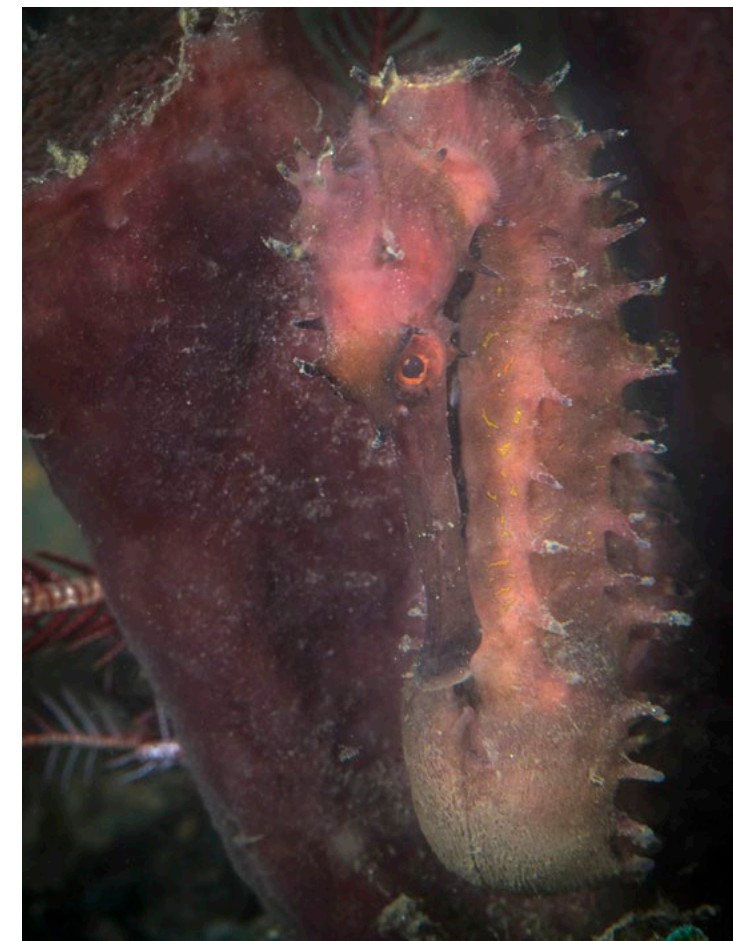
Dili

While my direct flight from Bali to Timor-Leste's capital city of Dili was on time (and less than two hours flight time), my previous flights from North Sulawesi to Bali had been such a mess of flight delays and missed connections, I just barely made the flight to Dili. I arrived in a traveler's daze of exhaustion and disorientation, but soon found myself at Dive Timor Lorosae and its on-site accommodations.

The dive center offers several lodging options to suit all types of travelers, including back-packer-dorm-style rooms, a guest-

house with several rooms to rent with shared facilities, as well as studio apartments. I stayed in one of the spacious, well-furnished studio apartments, and it was great. There was a small grocery store just down the road, so I was able to get the basics and make myself breakfast in the morning as well as a few lunches. It was nice to have this option, and it gave my stay a bit of a homey feel, which was really nice.

There are not a lot of accommodation options in Dili (or the rest of the country) as tourism has not yet taken off, and Dive Timor Lorosae is rated as one of the best places to stay. There is a hotel in town, but it seems like more guesthouses and small hotels are popping up, which is a good sign, suggesting tourism is increasing.





THIS PAGE: Woven mats were laid out for divers to prepare their gear—a brilliant way to keep sand off the equipment; The dive center's van drove right up to the surf for a beach dive (right); Fishing boat on the beach (below); Curious children stopped by to watch divers prepare their equipment and enter the water (lower left)



Diving

After going to sleep quite early, I woke up refreshed from my travels and ready to dive. I became aware quite quickly that it was the rainy season and probably not the best time of the year to dive here, but that meant it was also the slow season and I was the only diver at the dive center for most of the week. With my private dive guide (the perks of being the only diver) and our driver, we loaded up a van with tanks and gear, and set off east of Dili along the coast.

Being no stranger to the bad roads of the third world, the roads outside of Dili were some of the worst I had ever seen. We bumped and jolted along the unpaved, pot-holed road, often with sheer cliffs (and no guard rails) on our right side and occasionally slammed to a stop, dodging children, motorbikes and livestock. The question, "Where am I?" rolled through my mind more than once.

But after about 90 minutes and both the inside and outside of the van being

covered in dust, we arrived at an entirely empty beach, and the driver backed up and parked just a few feet from where the waves were breaking the shore. Two woven mats were laid out in the sand,



and we assembled our gear on the mats (what a brilliant way to try to keep the sand off everything).

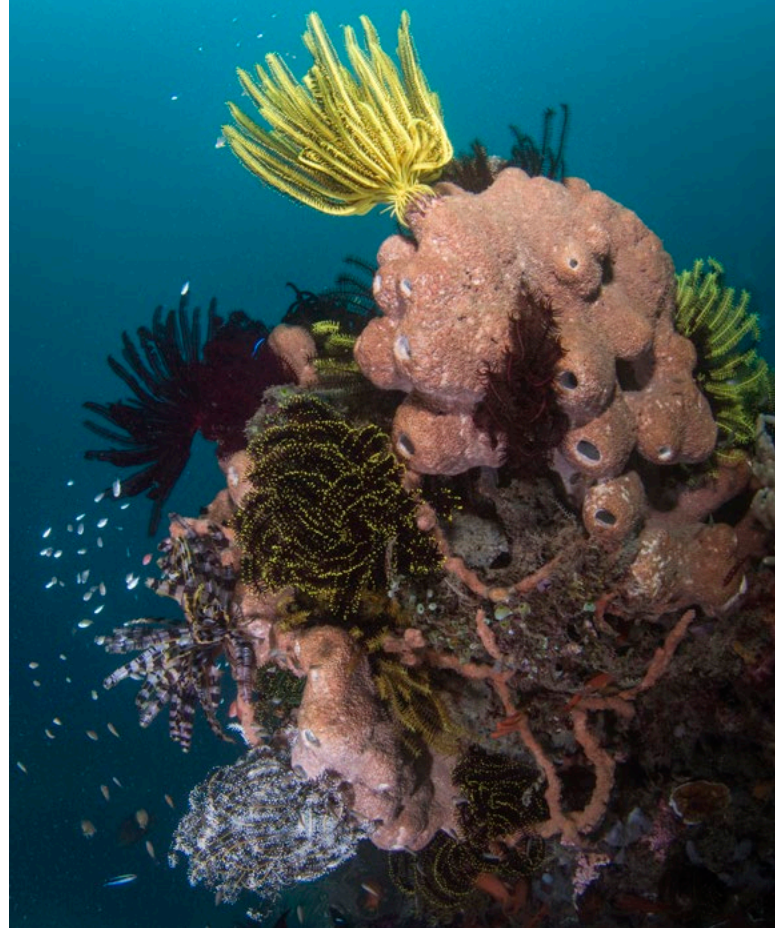
The driver helped us into our gear, and we walked right into the waves. The bottom quickly sloped downward, and not far from shore, it dropped off into a mini-wall on either side. I had been warned there might be some current and that we would decide which way to go based on those conditions. But there was no current, so we went in the direction my dive guide said was his favorite.

The seasonal rain and wind contributed to poor visibility, but even with only about 10m of viz, the reef was nothing short of glorious. It really did look untouched, with many different species of coral growing like a beautiful garden of color and variety. And the fish were huge! I was shocked

by moorish idols as big as dinner plates and a midnight snapper that was probably two feet long.

We swam past a gorgonian sea fan that was over 12ft across, and I saw my guide stop to look for pygmy seahorses. I thought to myself, "The fan is too big—there's no chance of finding this fingernail-sized seahorse on such a big fan." Huge barrel sponges and other sea fans all seemed to be super-sized and covered in many colored crinoids.

The reef looked very different from many other beautiful reefs I had seen within the Coral Triangle and around the Indonesian islands. Trying to put my finger



Timor-Leste

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Midnight snapper and sea fan on reef; Crinoids in many different colors on sponge; "Shawn the Sheep" nudibranchs; Pikachu nudibranch; Napoleon snake eel

food, Indian cuisine and several fast food options.

While walking around the waterfront area in front of the dive center, just a five-minute walk away, I found a small coffee

shop, Letefoho Specialty Coffee Roaster, serving locally grown and roasted coffee. Coffee is the second largest export for Timor-Leste, and you can find it in many Starbucks blends. As some-

one who quite enjoys coffee, I made this little spot a daily afternoon stop to chase away the post-dive sleepiness.

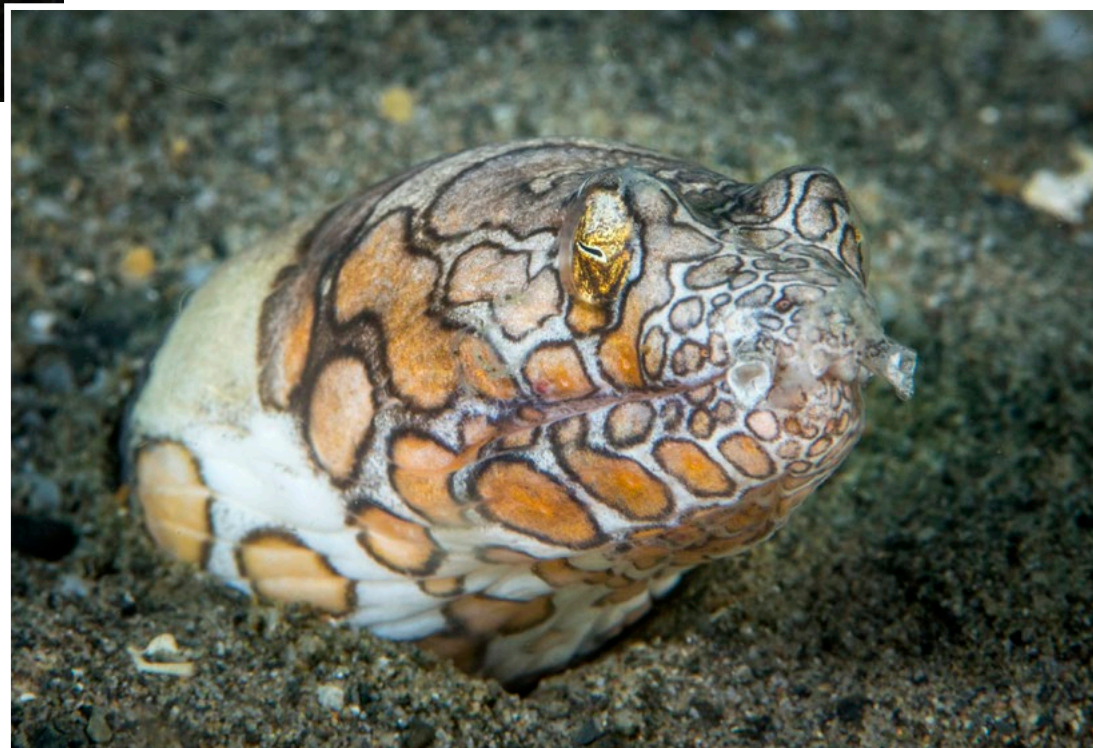


on what was different, it dawned on me: The difference was there were very few divers. It may be just my personal assumption, but with no people to accidentally kick and damage the reef—especially in the high numbers popular locations like Komodo and Raja Ampat see—I wondered if this was what all the reefs would look like without divers.

We did three shore dives in the eastern coastal dive area, and they were all lovely. Heading back towards Dili on the bumpy road, I was excited for the rest of my week diving Timor-Leste.

Dining

Just upstairs from the dive center is the very popular Castaways restaurant and bar known for its western cuisine and expat patrons. I enjoyed a few meals there during the week and also headed next door to Osteria, an Italian restaurant with excellent pizzas, as well as Arriba, a Mexican restaurant. A bit farther away, there was a popular Chinese restaurant. In Timor Plaza, the small shopping center in Dili, there was Thai



Muck diving

The weather turned against me on day two with more wind and rain, so we decided to stay closer to Dili and check out Tasi Tolu, which is known for having excellent black-sand muck diving.

Tasi Tolu. The sandy beach made for a slightly easier entry than the rocks on the western coastal dive sites, and with there being larger waves, this was a good thing. Visibility was not very good, but it did not matter, because we were critter hunting—and we did not have to look too hard. The list of critters we found is too long to

name in its entirety, but we found a Napoleon snake eel, Pikachu nudibranchs, a beautiful purple seahorse, frogfish and more "Shawn the Sheep" nudibranchs (*Costasiella kuroshimae*) than I have seen in all my previous muck dives combined.

Dili Rock. Our second dive was at Dili Rock, which had a nice reef and lots of the muck critters. Leaf scorpionfish seemed to be everywhere, and an orange mantis shrimp peered out at us from its hole in the sand. We found several teeny-tiny juvenile yellow box-



Juvenile yellow boxfish (above); Leaf scorpionfish (top left); Frogfish on sponge with crinoids (left)



School of striped catfish (above); A pink leaf scorpionfish (top left) tries to hide behind coral, but its bright color gives it away.

fish darting about the reef and a school of small striped catfish.

One little area around 20m (60ft) was bursting with life. Anemones, sea fans, black coral and barrel sponges were home to quite the busy marine community. Perched within the branches of the black coral were two leaf scorpionfish. False clownfish, porcelain crabs and cleaner shrimp filled up the anemone, and there was an orangutan crab as well as several nudibranchs nearby. Not bad for a day we thought might be lost to bad weather.

In the next few days, we came back to the same beach and dived Dili Rock and Tasi Tolu as well as the areas around it, because it was our best option due to high winds, which created rough surf entries. The diving was still very good. One of my favorite aspects of diving here was how

the local kids would stand around us as we assembled our dive gear, and they would walk into the water with us (and be splashing around when we came back). It was fun to have an audience.

We headed to the coastal dives sites to the west of Dili one day, but visibility was very poor, so we decided to do only one dive there and went back to Tasi Tolu again.

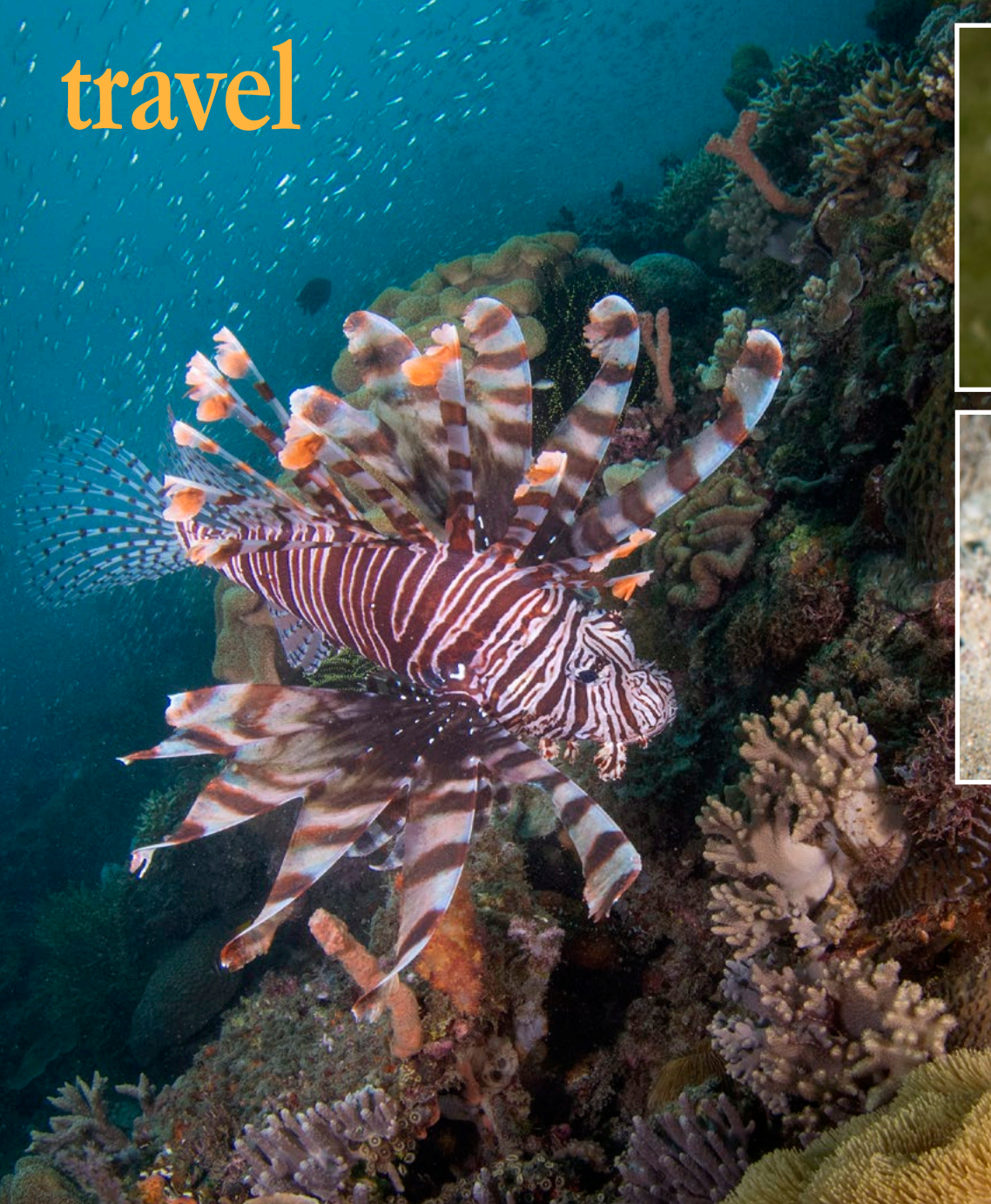
Boat diving and certifications

Travel by dive boat to Atauro Island is available when conditions are good and there are enough divers. I did not get to dive the island this trip, but it is said to have excellent visibility (it does not suffer from the river run-off from the mountains of Timor) and great marine life. It is something to come back for on my next trip.

The dive center offers a variety of dive



Orange mantis shrimp



Tiny cuttlefish (top); *Berthella martensi* sea slug (above); Skunk anemonefish and domino damselfish on large anemone (right)



Lionfish (top left) and scorpionfish (above) on reef

Dive Timor Lorosae; it is always nice to see places that train and then employ its own students—it shows the dive shop and location are worth sticking around for.

Should've been here last week

This is the story of my life. In fact, I should have been here a month before. Sometime between October and December, migrating pygmy blue whales and sperm whales passed by the island of Timor, close enough to see them (and sometimes snorkel with them) from shore. While preparing for my trip, I had seen the social media posts of these beautiful massive mam-

mals and held some hope that maybe a few strays would swim by once I got there, but unfortunately, I had missed them.

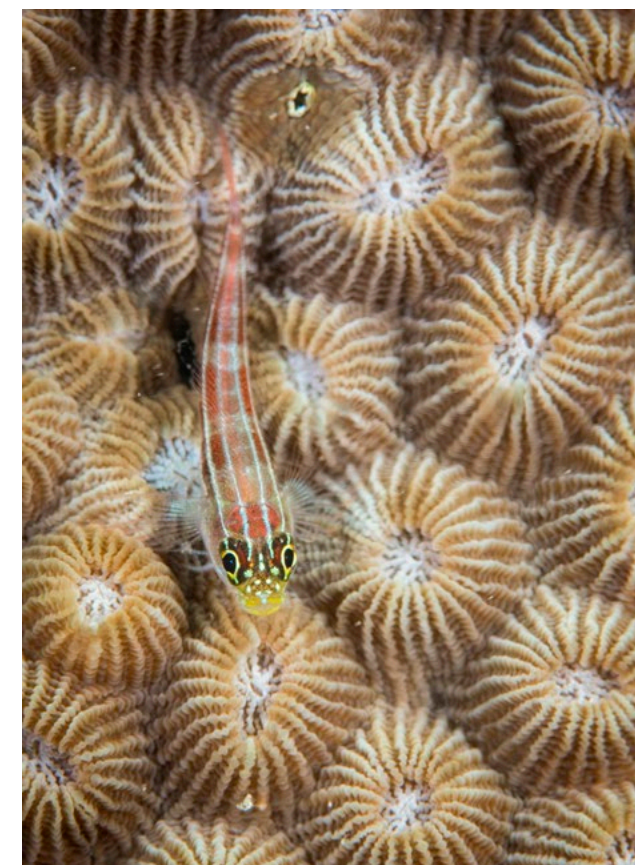
I also arrived during the rainy season, which, again, due to the shore-diving nature of the location, made for some bad visibility. Many rivers and drainage from the mountains run directly into the ocean, bringing with them silt and other things to mess up the visibility. Winds are also stronger November through February, which can stir up sand and make it murky. Winds prevented us from going out for a boat dive or to Atauro Island, which is supposed to be a very nice diving location.

Dugong sightings are not uncommon. In some areas where the dugongs live, there are also saltwater crocodiles and not necessarily the ones that like having their photos taken. Several beaches are known for dugong sightings. I was told the best

way to see them was to stay on the beach and watch for the dugongs to surface for a breath and then going snorkeling to see them underwater. But choppy seas make dugongs hard to spot, and it is unlikely they will swim over to you while diving (or that I would notice if they did while my head was in the sand, searching for nudibranchs).

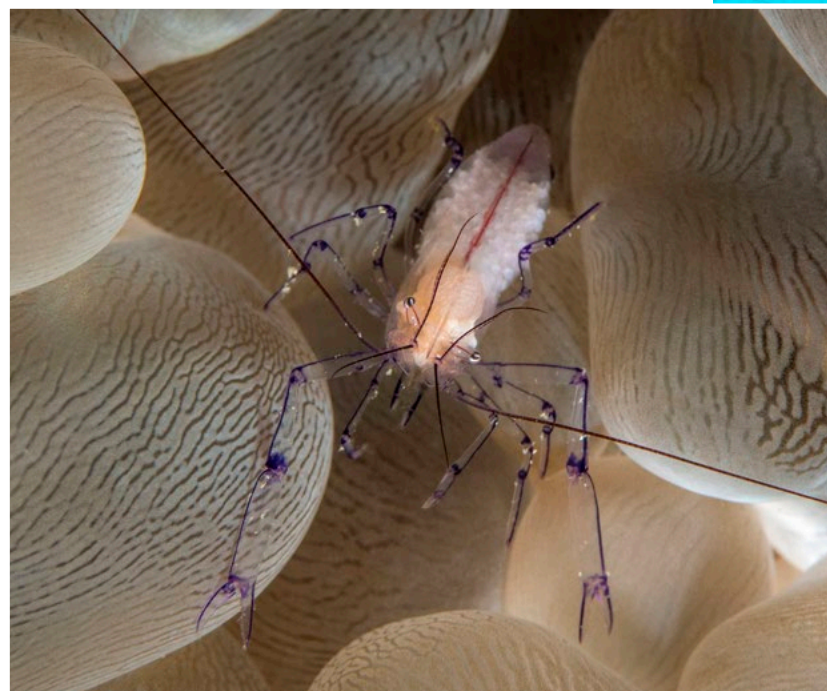
Surface interval

A trip to the Resistance Museum is a must for anyone visiting Timor-Leste. For the small fee of one dollar, you can spend several hours in the air conditioning, reading and seeing images from East Timor, mostly from 1975 to the present. The brutal treatment throughout 25 years of resistance to Indonesia shows the strength and resilience of the people of Timor-Leste. I do not think you can understand the country without learning about its past.



Goby on hard coral





CLOCKWISE: Cuttlefish; Skunk anemonefish; Bubble coral shrimp with eggs; Indo-Pacific sergeants guard eggs laid on a wall; *Phyllidiella pustulosa* nudibranchs

be Roman Catholic. The statue was a gift from Indonesia in 1996, and it is a popular place where locals like to exercise.

The future

Timor-Leste seems to be bursting at the seams for the future, and I can see where it could become a popular spot on the Asian diving list, as well as for adventurous travelers. It seems to be just starting up, and tourism overall seems to be heading in the right direction with more accommodations opening up, as well as several dive shops and hospitality features like eco-lodges and cultural stays.

Some of the reefs I saw, especially those outside of Dili, were exceptionally healthy. Many dif-

ferent types of corals, large fish and tons of marine life went on for as far as we could dive, in either direction. It is clear these reefs have not felt the pressure of scuba divers as seen on many of Asia's other reefs. I hope that Timor-Leste realizes the fragility of this precious resource and takes early precautions to protect it—not only for the environment's sake, but also because dive tourism could be useful income for the economically struggling country. With a population growing rapidly and tourism bound to increase, the reefs could very easily be destroyed before they even have a chance to be seen. The runoff from the island (directly into the areas divers would go) could easily cover the

reefs in silt and pollution, destroying them quickly.

As a well-traveled diver, it is rare to be able to dive a place not many people have visited, about which not a lot of information exists. I enjoyed checking out this untouched, little-known area. If you happen to find yourself in Timor-Leste, I encourage you to call up the friendly staff at Dive Timor Lorosae and let them take you out on a few dives. ■

Special thanks go to Dive Timor Lorosae (divetimor.com).

Brandi Mueller is a PADI IDC Staff Instructor and boat captain living in Micronesia. When she's not teaching scuba or driving boats, she's most happy traveling and being underwater with a camera. For more information, visit: Brandiunderwater.com.

SOURCES: DIVETIMOR.COM, WIKIPEDIA.ORG

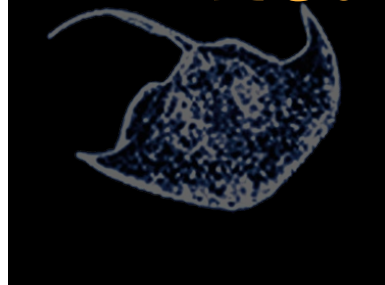
Just a few miles out of town is the Cristo Rei of Dili. The seventh tallest Jesus statue on earth looks out over the ocean and can be seen from miles away on many of the beaches in Dili. Climbing over 500 steps takes you to the top, and it is lit up at night (although

petty crimes have been reported after dark, especially to women, so it is not recommended that one venture there alone). Timor-Leste is one of only two countries in Asia that are predominantly Christian, and around 97 percent of the population is reported to



fact file

Timor-Leste



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, CDC.GOV, OSAC.GOV, STATE.TRAVEL.US, WIKIPEDIA.ORG, XE.COM, DIVETIMOR.COM

History East Timor was colonized by the Portuguese in the 16th century until 1975. After the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, the Portuguese began withdrawing from overseas colonies. In 1975, the Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) declared the territories independent. Nine days later, Indonesia invaded with the help of the United States, Australia and Great Britain. Indonesia occupied East Timor until 1999—a particularly brutal and violent time—until it relinquished control, and East Timor joined the United Nations and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries. Timor-Leste became independent in 2002. Government: republic. Capital: Dili

Geography The country of Timor-Leste resides on part of the island of Timor, with the other part belonging to Indonesia. It consists of 15,410 km sq (5,950 sq mi). The mountainous island with submarine volcanic activity has plenty of coastline with a fringe reef and many dive sites being accessible from shore. To the southeast, the Timor Sea separates Timor-Leste from Darwin, Australia. To the north are other Indonesian islands and the Ombai Strait, Wetar Strait and the Banda Sea. Terrain is mountainous. Highest point: Foho Tatamailau 2,963m. Coastline: 706km

Climate May through September is the dry season and best for visibility and low winds. October through November is whale season; pygmy blue whales and sperm whales are known to migrate past the island. November through March is the rainy season, and as most of the diving is done from shore, river-runoff and wind contribute to lower visibility. The climate is tropical with air temperatures of 26-32°C (78-90°F) year-round and high humidity. Water temperatures are 27-29°C (80-84°F). Air temperatures in the mountains can be much cooler. Natural hazards include earthquakes, tsunamis and tropical cyclones; floods and landslides are common.

Environment Timor-Leste's population is increasing dramatically, which is likely to put more pressure on natural resources and further contribute to pollution issues. Climate change brings the threat of stronger and more frequent natural disasters such as typhoons and more coral bleaching events due to increased water temperatures. Deforestation is an

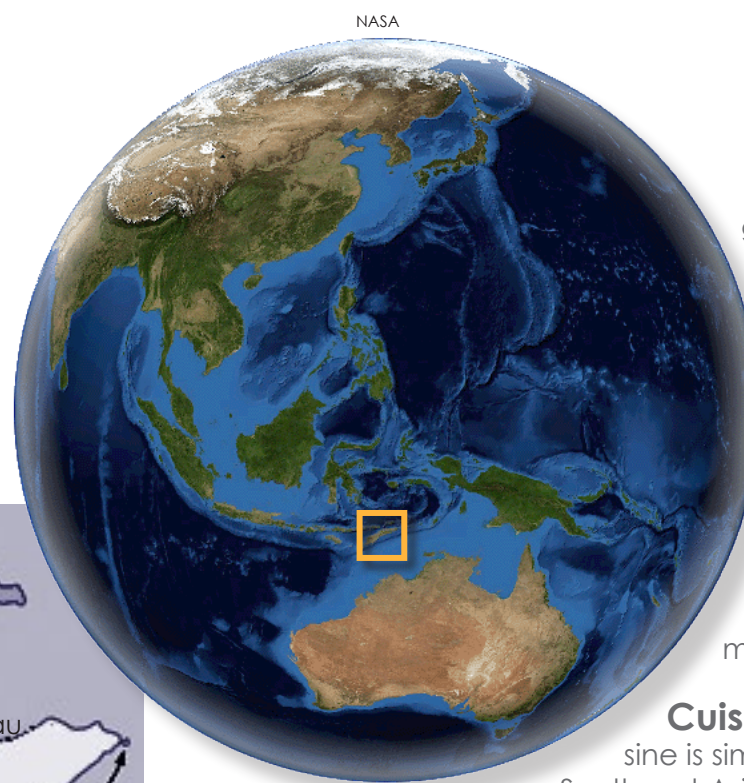
issue as land is being repurposed for coffee and other agricultural uses, which is contributing to excess pollution runoff and sediment deposits flowing directly into coastal environments. Mangrove ecosystems are being replaced with urban development. Overfishing and trade in threatened species such as shark fins and turtle eggs are a problem. Waste management in many forms is an issue, including garbage ending up in the ocean due to lack of sewage treatment.

Economy Timor-Leste is one of the poorest countries in Asia. Petroleum is the largest export, although there are complicated and disputed previous agree-

RIGHT: Location of Timor-Leste on global map
BELOW: Location of the capital city of Dili on map of Timor-Leste



US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK / PUBLIC DOMAIN



ment, although Bahasa (Indonesian) is still spoken by some of those who survived the Indonesian occupancy. Basic English is spoken in some tourist establishments.

Cuisine Local cuisine is similar to other Southeast Asian cuisines with rice, noodles, pork, fish, vegetables and fruits. In Dili, there are several western-style restaurants including a few well-known fast food options like Burger King. Outside of Dili, expect basic options.

Phone/Internet Wifi internet is available (but slow) at some restaurants and hotels in Dili. It is easy to get a local SIM card for unlocked cell phones with data, although Internet service is generally slow and coverage is spotty outside Dili.

Voltage 220V, Schuko socket (two round pins).

Travel/Visa A visa on arrival good for up to 30 days is available at the airport for US\$30.

Getting There There are flights from Singapore, Bali and Darwin, Australia, to Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport in Dili.

Transportation Taxis are easy to find in Dili. Outside Dili the roads are atrocious (including the ones getting to some of the coastal dive sites). The further you go from Dili, the worse the roads get.

Security In spite of its violent past, the current situation in Timor-Leste is peaceful. There are still occasionally demonstrations, but most are not violent. It is a good idea to avoid public demonstrations as they have become violent in the past. Petty crime can be an issue and it is best to not go out alone at night.

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). Routine vaccinations are suggested as is typhoid and hepatitis A. Malaria prophylaxis is recommended by the CDC, although cases of malaria have been few in the past five years. Avoid mosquito bites as dengue, zika and other mosquito-borne viruses are an issue. Do not drink tap water. Travel insurance is highly recommended as local healthcare options are not usually up to Western standards, and for any major concerns, evacuation to Darwin or Singapore is the best option.

Decompression Chambers There is no chamber in Timor-Leste. The closest chambers are in Darwin, Australia, and Bali, Indonesia.

Royal Darwin Hospital
Hyperbaric Medical Unit
Rocklands Drive Tiwi NT 0810
Phone: 61 8 8922 8230

Sanglah General Hospital
USUP Sanglah Denpasar Jl.
Diponegoro, Denpasar 80114
Bali, Indonesia
Phone 62-361-227911 ext. 232

ments with Australia and Indonesia over petroleum and natural gas deposits in the Timor Sea. Coffee is the next largest export, with Starbucks being a large purchaser, and on a smaller level, cinnamon and cocoa. The country receives donations from foreign donors, many NGOs and aid programs.

Population 1.2 million in 2015 but rising. Ethnic groups: Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian), Papuan, small Chinese minority. Religions: Roman Catholic 97.6%, Protestant/Evangelical 2%, Muslim 0.2% (2015 estimate). Internet users: 318,373 or 25.2% percent of the population (July 2016 estimate).

Currency The US dollar is the official currency. There are ATMs in Dili, but they often run out of money. There are no ATMs outside of Dili.

Language The official languages are Tetum and Portu-