

Twelve Things You Need to Know About Timor-Leste

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I

We Australians need to renew our understanding of Timor-Leste. It is a surprising, delightful, deep rooted country. There is a lot that its people can teach us and have to offer. Our governments, of Liberal and Labor persuasion with few exceptions, have based our friendship on gas and petro dollar values and a tinge of paternalism. This is a mistake even from a narrow economic perspective. While Australia is chairing the G20, representing the most developed nations of the world, Timor-Leste is already playing a significant world role as chair of the so-called G7+, 18 conflicted and fragile nations, representing 1.5 billion people. This is taken extremely seriously by Timor-Leste's leaders whose diplomatic arm during the war years was, and continues to be, remarkable. To move forward in our relationship and in our understanding more quickly it will be necessary for us as individual Australians to move from thinking of "East Timor" to understanding *Timor-Leste*: a land with a long, fascinating history, a gestation as a nation and struggles against colonial powers much older than the history of the Australian nation, and with its own timeless local traditions. This is a nation more sophisticated than just the newly emerged "East Timor" forged from contemporary conflicts emerging through democratic elections involving 98 per cent of the people. 78.5 per cent of East Timorese voted for independence despite threats of extreme violence, economic isolation and extraordinary intimidation. To understand this extraordinary will it is necessary to get below the surface into the fabric of village life and you won't be able to read about this on Wikipedia or see it on utube. The best way to transform your understanding is to visit and see first hand the charming grass roots of the society and the remarkable progress and change of the last decade. The flight from Darwin is about the same time as from Melbourne to Sydney, you barely have time to drink a cup of tea before you are landing at Dili. In what follows I hope that I can give you some reason to hop on that plane and to spark your intrigue and interest about a place that once visited is never forgotten.

Mention Xanana or Ramos Horta or Fretilin to my generation of Australians and it brings certain feelings and images to mind. Perhaps we hear Yothu Yindi's song "Free East Timor". Perhaps we remember now Governor-General Peter Cosgrove and the Australian troops during the elections that resulted in self determination. Perhaps we remember the harrowing tales of Indonesian occupation, of deaths, torture and of Dili being burned to the ground by the departing, revengeful Indonesian troops. The estimated 1500 people massacred during the election process were more visible because of the media presence at the time, but this was just an indicator of what had taken place away from the world's media. During the war years, in a population of under a million, some where in the order of 250,000 people were murdered by the Indonesian occupying forces. The famous Australian journalists, the Balibo Five murdered during the Indonesian invasion and occupation of Timor-Leste, continue to remind us that justice, truth and honesty should always come before strategic and economic considerations in world affairs. Greg Shakleton's moving broadcast, made the day before he was shot, takes pride of place in *Dili's Restitensia Timorensis Arkivo ho Muzeu*. The death of these courageous men should also remind us of what every single Timorese family endured over decades of bloody, cruel conflict.

Many Australians will be aware of the injustice of the controversial Timor Gap Treaty in which Australia, in my view, used the Indonesian invasion and annexation to ride over the interests of the people of East Timor. I have heard Labor figures defend their actions at the time, but when independence came the fledgling nation had to accept a petroleum revenue sharing formula while deferring permanent boundary resolution. The special oil and gas zone of the Greater Sunrise field which was deemed to be 80 per cent Australian deprived Timor-Leste of its rightful share of oil and gas resources and the right to develop the field in its own right. Alexander Downer was responsible for this injustice. There have been continuing controversies about a gas pipeline for Darwin, with the Timorese arguing for a processing plant on its south coast (see below). Lately the spying scandal in which the Timor-Leste's Prime Ministerial office was bugged may also be in our minds. These are symptomatic of why our Australian governments seem to have no clue. We the people, through our travels and our person to person friendships, can bring a better, deeper relationship and understanding between our nations into effect.

Here are twelve things about Timor-Leste that may surprise, and hopefully intrigue, you. I hope they indicate why Timor-Leste is such an important destination for us physically, spiritually and culturally and why we need to develop closer diplomatic and political relationships and stronger joint business relationships.

II



Xanana Gusmao's prison paintings are a portrait of a future peaceful, prosperous Timor-Leste that is becoming a reality, in the foreground is a sacred village house ⁱ

- 1 Timor-Leste's traditional peoples are the soul of the county and the key to its majic.** The first thing to know is a secret that has been oblivious to many Australians, or those with a superficial gaze, and that is the majic of Timor-Leste is held by its traditional owners. The traditional peoples were a major reason why a small army with, at one stage, only 120 weapons was able to overcome one of the biggest and most powerful armed forces in the world. I suspect this secret was very well guarded because the traditional peoples were the reason why the tactics of military, diplomatic and civil activists were so well coordinated. If you talk to many of the veterans of the war they will tell you that they were protected from harm by traditional ceremony and majic as well as sustained by local food during the perilous and long war years. The fabric of Timorese villages and their sustainability is held together by the teamwork and vision of the traditional people. In their world everything has meaning. Buildings, structures, food, life has to be imbued with care and knowledge. If you want to do business or have a good time in East Timor then you need to do so with knowledge of the primary importance of Timorese traditional owners. If you want to see the country in a good way then you need to do so with their blessing. Need I say that Australia has so much to learn from Timor-Leste in this respect. It has been a great privilege to help to renew the ties between our Australian first peoples and the traditional owners of Timor-Leste. As Torres Strait Islander leader and Chairman of Cape York's Balkanu said in his visit in the last week of May 2014: "we are renewing a trade link that was broken by colonisation". This relationship was disrupted particularly by Federation and the formation of the Australian nation when the regular annual visits of traders were prohibited after centuries of regular contact and even people exchange. Timor-Leste has, in effect, gone farther than Australia as a nation, they have beaten our constitutional recognition of our first peoples, by developing formal agreements for trade and cultural renewal with the Yolngu of North East Arnhem Land and the several Aboriginal peoples of Cape York Peninsula. More will come with time and when the priorities of Timor-Leste and the Aboriginal peoples of Australia come into alignment. To my knowledge these are the first formal agreements between a country and Australian first nations. This is just an automatic response from the people of Timor-Leste who revere their traditional owners. The important lesson for all Australians is that just as traditional peoples unlock extraordinary secrets about our land, so too does the nation of Timor-Leste with its 54 amazing regions and towns start to reveal itself.
- 2 Timor-Leste is a power house of economic growth and development.** Timor-Leste's economy is developing at a faster rate than China. Freedom from the shackles of colonialism has given a new lease of life, however, unlike Papua New Guinea and other developing countries the wisdom and knowledge of the traditional peoples in every region is part of how governance and growth works. I venture to say that so long as this relationship is strong and is part of the fabric of decision making this small country will go ahead in leaps and bounds because ordinary grass roots people will benefit from development. Of course Timor-Leste is a very small country. But unlike China the government process is open and transparent. You also have the feeling that every single citizen from the oldest to the youngest is doing their bit for the country. As in the construction of a village sacred house everyone has their role to play. There is very little conflict and the government wants to maintain a relatively free market society with government enterprises paving a way for local business ownership. There are some obvious reasons why things are going so well. There is

no welfare in Timor in every village there is an entrepreneur selling mandarins, peanuts, bananas. People build their own houses. It is a subsistence economy with something extra. That something extra, after years of division and conflict, is a force unleashed, a force more powerful. It is a striving for prosperity. However don't wait for the statistics from the World Bank the sort of progress you see in the country is not calculable through statistics you just have to come and see. If you want to invest in Timor-Leste now is the time. Just 12 years ago Timor-Leste's capital Dili was burned to the ground. There were few structures that survived. Now it is a thriving, vital metropolis and there is simply miraculous development going on. I hesitate to say that the first Burger King opened in Dili this month but this is a sign that there is a greater number of people with discretionary income to spend. Certainly the standards of doing things are undergoing rapid change. But when the best of the old and the best of the new marry you can see that Timor-Leste is going to be something special.

- 3 **Dancing is a national healing force.** After so much suffering Timorese people love to dance. When they dance they like to dance close, Portuguese style. It is so much fun to participate in a Timorese party. Women and men ask each other for a dance and there is this lovely rite of courtship. When a woman approaches she simply says "Dancer?" and away you go. There is friendship and mutual respect between women and men underlying even the cheeky courtship of the young ones. Fathers dance with daughters. Grandfathers with granddaughters. Mothers with sons and of course husbands and wives. It is a collective sharing of love and care and a great way for people to get together and enjoy each others company. The week we were in Dili, top of the bill, was the Tango Festival. Many Australians will recognise Timorese dance as the kind of event that united communities before television and home entertainment. But it is also one of the very positive legacies of the Portuguese. Timorese dance and music is people based fun and it is a real treat to experience it. I can see many refugees from the lonely screen based lounge rooms and internet based relationships flocking to Timor just to dance.

- 4 **The passion to learn is infecting the countryside.** The new generations have the work ethic of lions and with a tremendous hunger for information and knowledge. If the Chinese are famous for their thirst for education, the Timorese people are equally hungry to learn. One of the extraordinary stories is the development of the three agencies around the development of gas and petroleum under Minister Alfredo Pires. Only a few years ago there were few graduates. Now all of the agencies are run by Timorese nationals who are expected to be fully qualified and to perform on merit. The so-called "young guns" people like Gualdino da Silva, President and CEO of the National Petroleum Authority, Helio Guterres, President of the Institute of Petroleum and Geology, and Francesco Monteiro President and CEO of Timor Gap, Timor-Leste's National Oil Company, are expected to perform above and beyond the call of duty and they do. Many of the people who now populate the statutory authorities and public service have been educated in Australia but also Europe and the United States and Indonesia. There is too much at stake for Timor to not have an agency run by the very best people. The Prime Minister apparently expects minor miracles from his Ministers and gives people great autonomy to achieve them. This enthusiasm and trust filters downwards. In making their pathway forward the Minister and his team of "young guns" and "junior young guns" are moving forward at a pace that has

confounded their critics. They are inspiring young leaders determined to do the best for their country. They have sought to learn from the best in the world and to take these lessons and apply them Timorese style. But even more impressive is the way in which the legendary work ethic of the Timorese villagers in the countryside is being transformed by innovative outdoor English, mathematics and computer classes. In just three months the SOL (Science of Life) program operating on the south coast of the country is creating relatively fluent and grammatically perfect English speakers with strong mathematics and computer skills. The young and the old alike are learning with passion. More information about SOL and its remarkable teaching program can be found at www.sols247.org

- 5 Timor-Leste is developing as a new, happier, different Singapore just 40 minutes by air from Darwin.** Tim Fischer was one of the few, several years ago to foresee that Timor-Leste, as a small country, would excel. Like Singapore, Fischer saw that Timor had a strategic place in the world. Singapore is admired for its economic development. But recent surveys indicate that its citizens are amongst the most unhappy people in the world. If this period of recovery after a vicious war is any indication, happiness will never be a problem for the Timorese people. The humblest villager is always smiling, no matter how hard or mundane his or her work seems to be. You can't help but think that Timor-Leste does have the ingredients and the drive to be another happier, Singapore. In his Independence Day speech the Deputy Prime Minister announced that Oecusse the West Timor enclave will become a free trade zone – a masterstroke that will significantly ease tensions there. On the South Coast, just forty minutes by air away from Darwin, the Tasi Mane projects involve massive billion dollar plus investments from the revenues of Timor Gas and Oil. There will be three clusters of development: The first cluster in Suai involves a multi-faceted transport and supply hub. Its primary role will be to support the oil and gas areas in the Timor-Leste exclusive development area. The runway at Suai, once a landing zone for hated Indonesian helicopters is being lengthened to accommodate fixed wing planes with 20-50 capacity. State of art control tower and terminals are now under development. Nova Suai will initially house oil and gas workers, contractors and visitors. It will become a major source of new industry and development. The associated supply base will involve a major new port facility with the capacity for oil and gas equipment storage and new industries and enterprises. The second cluster of developments is situated at Betano and will involve a refinery and petrochemical plant. The refinery will have the capacity to produce 30,000 barrels of petroleum products per day including LPG, gasoline, jet fuel, diesel and gasoline blending. A new city of Nova Betano will include office, commercial areas, hospitality areas, single and multi family residence, public schools and an international school. This will occur over an area of 1191 reserved hectares. The third cluster at Beaco will be a marine facility and will house TIMOR LNG. The marine facility will be the area where the natural gas pipeline reaches Timor-Leste's mainland and will be the site of the LNG plant. The plant is being developed in partnership with Korea's KOGAS. The three clusters will be linked by 155 kilometres of double lane highways, which will also form the basis for new links to Dili and the North Coast. The procurement stages of the project were completed in February 2014. Only 30-40 minutes from Darwin and equally close to the powerhouses of Asia the South Coast of Timor-Leste is going to go ahead in leaps and bounds. Those who are fearful of such industrial complexes, and I have been a prominent critic of the James Price

Point/Walmadany development in WA, need to understand, that unlike the Broome based developments the traditional owners are consulted at every stage of development and are expected to give their blessing to each new structure. This will become an ongoing challenge but such is the bond between the traditional owners, the government and opposition parties and the people that without the traditional peoples blessing no development will occur. There is a clear understanding that without the traditional owners good decisions will not be made and new developments will not be safe or healthy. At the airport at Suai this week, politicians, contractors and business leaders alike waited patiently and respectfully for the traditional owners to walk by foot from their sacred house to consecrate the airport development along with the local Catholic priest. Equally impressive is the way in which government and opposition politicians and parties cooperate on issues of national importance. This unity is something to be envied.

- 6 **The mystical mountains of Timor-Leste are unforgettable.** Perhaps we all knew that Timor's mountainous provinces were the heart of the resistance during the war years but to see them is another thing. The mountains and the villages perilously perched on cliffs are wondrous and delightful to explore. The roads are terrible and are continually washed out during the wet season. But it is worth making the effort to explore. There is nothing better than to explore slowly and walk through a small village. The people and children are so friendly and surprised to see someone from a foreign shore that they are full of questions and of course the small road side stalls are full of bananas, mandarins, peanuts for sale at not more than one dollar. The wooden structures are all self built. Often you will see a family, fathers, mothers, sons and friends building the foundations of a house. The carpentry is quite fine and the way in which the materials of palms, and other plants are woven together for roofs, walls and fences is mesmerising. The traditional buildings are works of art and symbols of team work.
- 7 **Timor-Leste is a refreshing place to run a business.** Expatriate Australians fleeing from our "nanny state" where everything is regulated say Timor is a wonderful place to do business. Australians living here running bars and cafes say that there is so much that can be done that would be impossible in Australia. Island resorts are emerging that are Bali plus. The diving is world class. There is talk of mountain walks and experiences to rival the Kokoda Trail re-tracing the walks of Xanana Gusmao renewing the Fretilin forces in 1978 and also to commemorate the WWII cooperation between Australian commandos and Timorese sympathisers. Timor-Leste does not want to be Bali it wants to be a place of sophistication and poise for discerning and respectful travellers.
- 8 **The "Interfet Frog" is an unfortunate legacy of Australian landing craft.** One of the bad things that Australians brought to Timor-Leste is the so-called Interfet Frog. Cane toads aboard the landing craft of the Interfet forces coming from Darwin have unfortunately invaded the countryside. It is one of our unfortunate and unwanted legacies! So be prepared to be regaled but the Timorese are very grateful to Australians. The Balibo Five are, as mentioned above, very much heroes for the Timorese people and Greg Shackleton's

broadcast, two days before he was killed, is played continuously in Dili's remarkable Museum of Resistance. It is a very moving broadcast.

9 **The Xanana Gusmao Museum, Art Gallery and Reading Room is a symbolic modest monument in Dili.** Flanked on one side by the by a bullet ridden car of the attempted assassination of February 11 2008, and on the other side by a modest vehicle which was the Presidents first official motor car, the museum is a simple, moving, monument of humble values with young people moving in and out studying and learning. Particularly moving are Gusmao's prison paintings. They are housed in a single room which is airy and full of sunlight. In so many ways they speak about the hope and natural prosperity of the new Timor-Leste. A sacred house features prominently. The beautiful wandering coastal roads to the West of Dili now under development appear in another painting. Trees and gardens with stone walls feature and in another painting is a beautiful room with a plate of fruit, a coffee pot and a couch. These must have seemed innocuous to his Indonesian captors but now they are a powerful exemplar of the vision of an extraordinary man about the future of his country for all of his people. Three paintings of Kirsty Sword Gusmao are symbolic of the love story of a Timorese and an Australian who have achieved so much together. The first in the trilogy is a picture of Kirsty with her back turned to the viewer overlooking a prosperous rice field of abundant fertility. This was painted in prison and Kirsty is painted with her face turned so that Indonesian authorities will not recognise who she is. The next painting signed with love was painted in 1995 has the turned Kirsty looking at the original painting and a third in 1996 continues the motif. It is a picture of a deepening love and a lasting happiness that is very moving. I suspect there will be a fourth at some point in the future. When you walk out the back door of the museum there is a library and inside are young Timorese studying heavily thumbed text books and precious statistical guides about Timorese agriculture and of course novels and stories of the wider world. If you want a quiet and peaceful reflective moment then these paintings are alone worth visiting.

10 **Timorese coffee is exquisite.** When you visit you discover why. Much of the coffee is gathered by women and dried in small batches on the side of road. It is truly a hand picked, organic product. Like the sacred houses in villages at least in the first few stages of production Timorese coffee is not processed by a machine but a person. It involves love, sweat, teamwork and patience. You can surely taste this in every small bean. One day people will write about the different regional flavours, the altitudes, the growing conditions but now it is probably enough to know that you can taste the humility and hard work of Timorese women in every cup.

11 **Travelling and walking in Timor-Leste is safe and memorable.** One of the great misconceptions is that Timor-Leste is an unsafe destination, before I left home one of my friends, an influential journalist, messaged me to "stay safe". He might have been just wishing me a safe holiday but I had the feeling he was a little apprehensive given contemporary history. The news is Timor-Leste is welcoming, happy, safe and unlike Bali, there is little if no begging. The difference in relative incomes is an issue both within Timor and for us outsiders. The average wage is 3 dollars a day and for many village people the money economy is something that is a supplement to their subsistence trading and ways of

life. So this disparity in money wealth is something to be aware of. It is certainly a responsibility for a rich moneyed Australian to be ethical and honest and that includes being thoughtful about dispensing cash either too tightly or too loosely. One should not be naïve about these things. Needless to say that thoughtlessness can lead to friction. But exploring Dili is very safe, much safer than the Sydney CBD on a Saturday night. Maybe it is a good thing that it is not as cheap to travel to Timor-Leste as it is to Bali or Fiji. In the future I can see Timor-Leste as a world-renowned destination. The Portuguese who travelled the world were smart enough to know this 500 years ago. Timor-Leste is a place where begging of any kind is likely to earn a frown and a stern reprimand from a Catholic nun and where people are proud to be independent, innovative, industrious and free. It is our duty as neighbours to help Timor-Leste develop in a way where our money wealth contributes rather than undermines the strong local values and ethics of the people.

- 12 **Timor's forgiveness of its colonial captors and tormentors is a sign of the power of its leaders and its peoples.** The final lesson and great gift of Timor-Leste is the power of forgiveness. The Veterans are an ever present reminder of the traumatic period in which 1 in 4 people were killed. Many veterans recently attended our ANZAC ceremonies across the country and feel a special bond with our military and speak with awe of the RSL They are now thinking deeply about their role in civil society and to meet them is moving even when there is no great linguistic connection. If the traditional people gave the Timorese soldiers a special aura, they still have it. They seem to glow with pride and this is also evident in the parades of troops at the Independence Day celebrations. Women soldiers were particularly impressive. There is no family in Timor-Leste that was not hurt by the war. Stories of mindless massacres and cruelty emerge as part of every day discussion and there are places on the road where I notice that my brilliant driver, Sebastio Rafi Lopes, crosses himself, parps the horn in acknowledgement and says a little prayer. These are alternatively places where people had been killed, dangerous places on the road and burial places. Senior government ministers talk of recovering the bones of their relatives, finding children's bracelets to help them identify their relatives and of the over whelming grief. But the power to forgive is a force more powerful for the people of Timor-Leste. Victims become victors, the weak become strong, nations are formed, and the real value of peace and posterity in the world becomes part of your marrow. Viva Timor-Leste viva.



Writing this article alongside Xanana Gusmao's Inspirational Prison Paintings. Photograph: Sebastio Rafi Lopes

The National Library of Australia has compiled a comprehensive bibliography of books about Timor-Leste which can be downloaded at this link: <http://www.nla.gov.au/sites/default/files/national-library-of-australia-east-timor-bibliography-may-2009-update-2.pdf> But for those who want to get started and really move into the subject in style read the extraordinary Kirsty Sword Gusmao's *A Woman of Independence: A Story of Love and the Birth of a New Nation*, Pan, 2005

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