

## Portuguese Timor

Shortly we were flying around what seemed to be a large mountain. We then came through a high saddle and on looking down noticed that the land sparkled with what we presumed were paddy fields. We made out thatched roofs of what must be a populous town. This was really great stuff, such a contrast to the barren browns of Australia yet so very close.

With a strong feeling of accomplishment and having travelled a long way we tramped from our plane to the primitive tarmac. Soon we would be passing our first customs check. (if we had known how many of these we would undergo, we may not have felt quite so cocky). We changed some currency and were soon bumping along an atrocious road in an open "bus" (our first acquaintance with these detestable vehicles).

We were put off in front of "Hotel Orient" Baucau. By this time we were feeling dehydrated. The sun was hot but not nearly as debilitating as Darwin. We had arrived in Baucau at 9am Timor time and there was a "barge" leaving immediately. There was no rush however and we decided to let it go- a fatal mistake as we shall see. We spent the first night sleeping on a grassy patch almost in the centre of Baucau with a number of other young travelers. Actually it was the best sleep we had had for quite some time. The evening was cool and sleep came on us quickly. In Australia's north the nights has been unbearably hot.

We had to wait till Thursday to get transport out of Baucau. At the time this turn of events didn't worry us. Baucau was a garden and held a great interest for us. The centre of town was made up mostly of Chinese shops and other non-

descript offices and buildings, one of which was the Orient 'hotel'. Directly across from this architectural wonder were the ruins of some European-type building. Actually it was a building started but never completed, a kind of reflection on Portugese imperialism. All streets were dirt and at night they were filled with people wandering this way and that socializing. There are three groups of people on Timor, the Timorese (short, dark-skinned, happy Indonesian type) the rightful owners but now most wretched; the Chinese who owned practically all businesses and the Portuguese conquers (made up entirely of soldiers and police-type officials). We could talk to the soldiers, many spoke English (the officers were Uni students) but they could tell us almost nothing about Timor because of the Fascist-like control on all. We slept in a soldier's vacant house the next night.

Baucau had two restaurants whose quality of food and standards of hygiene were the poorest imaginable. I once took the table-cloth off the table and used the bare wood in preference. Dishes consisted of rice with little else than a few meager vegetables. I can't stand crud food (*I had a lot to learn*). We noticed the soldiers ate well, no matter what, we could not purchase anything similar.

We took a ride into the inland mountains to visit a native village. Despite seeing the photographs prior, it was something else. The people lived among pitiful corn fields. Beds were up off the ground and the pigs had the run of the place including the living areas. We saw some beautiful cloth being made and sold to tourists. Children were everywhere. As we drove the impossible track we were hailed and chased by hundreds of them.

We came to a place where the Japanese had tunnelled deep into the mountain during the war. Here they cached weapons

and ammunition. The tunnels were black inside but big enough to drive a large truck.

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We came to another village and wandered at will looking at the little buildings and lush tropical surrounds. A large concrete building was a war-time hospital. It still had a huge red cross painted on top for allied planes to identify. This trip gave us a chance to see at first hand the paddy fields and water buffalo.

One of the nicest things about Timor was the beautiful little beach at Baucau and it was here we spent the next night. The idea was to catch the landing barge to Dili early next morning, so Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> Feb we trekked the four km down to the beach where we found a couple of coconuts to refresh ourselves ( this was not good form. We did not know at the time we were eating someone's property)

The antique WW2 landing barge arrived very early and as soon as it hit bottom we climbed on. The barge began to leave and was a little off shore when and a middle-aged couple from Australia had to hire a row boat at ridiculous prices to go 100 mtrs. The barge was the only transport, all roads had been destroyed and dirt airfields were out due to heavy rain. The pilot would not go back in for them.

Half-way to Dili the barge stopped at a little beach and who should drive up but the governor of Timor! His chauffer driven limousine certainly contrasted to anything we had seen in Timor. He exited at a place called Manatutu with a trumpet fanfare and applause. The inhabitants were spurred on by an official who stood behind the governor. He motioned to the people when they should clap and when not to! Not exactly spontaneous. While at Manatutu we chanced to see dancing by the locals who formed a huge circle. The

better dancers held the floor in the enclosed space waving swords and beating drums.

At 7.30 pm we arrived in Dili, capital of Portugese Timor . We were not allowed to disembark and had to stay out of site with other local passengers until the governor had done so under ceremonial spotlights and welcoming committee. The barge then moved to a more obscure landing place for us to get off. Even then we were held by police until the crowd had dispersed. It seemed it looked bad for us to be seen riding with the governor.

There is a place in Dili where foreign travelers can stay so long as they are willing to rough it. For one American dollar a beach hut is available for as long as you like, so naturally this is what we did. A roof, no walls. The place had a fence and a guard who kept the locals from entering.

Dili is not a large city, if city it is. It looked reasonably modern, especially the banks and government buildings. Those parts away from the main thoroughfares comprised mainly village huts with bamboo and thatched roofs interspersed with a great number of small and dark Chinese shops and dwellings. It was obvious the Timorese were an underclass and were employed in the most ill paid work. We even saw men squatting cutting grass with knives one stalk at a time, to make a lawn! This was beyond anything we had imagined so close to Aus.

The market, an early morning enterprise consisted of a large series of open buildings housing numerous stalls, at least one half of which was devoted to tobacco. Here tomatoes the size of cherries, were being sold and haggled over along with various other European vegetables of ridiculously small size and quality. We managed to purchase a number of

items and cooked ourselves a meal consisting entirely of fresh vegetables- a far cry from the fare from Chinese restaurants in Timor.

It would be a week before the barge returned to Dili to take us to the Indonesian border. Next day we tried to get transport out. A bus it was going but had broken an axle. We even tried a private aeroplane owner but without result. It was a fifty km walk to the border and some kid had done this before us according to the notes left in the "beach house" by other fortunates

On the third day a group of travellers from Baucau joined us in our luxury dwelling! Coming the other way we met Janice, an English girl who had come overland by herself heading for Aus.

Monday found us making a personal call on the local General of Militia at the huge military barracks to get a permit to ride a military barge out. We were successful but still had to wait till Wednesday night to leave. The barge did not finally leave till Thursday at 12 midnight!

It happened, while in Dili it was possible to sell blood at the local hospital, 7 aust dollars for 250ml. To make up for some lost money we decide to chance it. Heather and I arrived with another Australian guy and were led into the room. Somehow they managed to make both me and the other guy feel quite sick, in fact he passed out. Heather on seeing this declined to offer her goods. Good thinking. With our seven dollars worth of Esquidos we headed of to an eatery to make up for lost blood. Unfortunately the food was wasted on me. I managed to regurgitate all I had eaten. I was therefore not in the best condition for a barge trip with pigs, chooks and crowd.

Another day was spent at Dili at a beautiful beach east of the main town. The beach at our 'Beach House' was absolutely unusable due to litter which completely covered the sand. We chatted to Janice about how things are relative. For example the colour found on a single stone is equal to that seen anywhere, no matter how far one travels. So it was not travelling which is important, but to actually see. To be able to really see the things that surround us. A desert is a beautiful thing if only we would really see it.

Friday twelve midday Friday March 2, we hit the beach at Batugarde in our WW2 landing barge. We had to decide to whether to enter Indonesia here or go on to Oecusse. We and some others decided to dis-embark, we had been on the barge long enough. (We had gotten our visas in Dili all using the same shirt and tie as each fronted up to the official - who we discovered was a pig. Shoes were scarce, and what is more we had to show 400 American dollars to get a one month visa).

The first thing we did was find some thing to eat. The only eating place was a roof and some rickety tables and chairs. We ordered chicken and soon the Chinese proprietor was chasing, killing and plucking the unfortunate victims around our feet. There was not near enough to go round the seven or so "travelers". I was so hungry I bought and ate two eggs raw, by poking a little hole in the end and sucking out the contents. We didn't know it at the time but food in Portuguese Timor was very expensive.

All of us were now desperate to get of this paradise of hell so we went straight to the local official to get our visa stamped for exit. After much trouble did we found it had been necessary for the 'official' official to travel from another place

six kms away. We would have to wait. He took hours, we figured the idea was for us to spend as much time in the local shop before our departure. He finally arrived and the dirty deed was done after much effort and argument on his part – even though one of our group spoke fluent Portuguese and translated all details for him. He said that before working on our visas a fee would be necessary. It was obviously a bribe and we were the victims, however after receiving our passports we simply decided not to pay and began to walk to the border, three kms away. The hitch was the army base in Batugarde. With an order a dozen armed soldiers with fixed bayonets came running our and surrounded us. At this we immediately threw up our hands and waved white handkerchiefs in mock surrender! We all thought, could this really be happening? Unfortunately for our purses it was no movie. With barrels pointed we decided under the circumstances, it was best to pay. If we had our brains blown out no-one would ever know. So we paid, all but one. He however succumbed after beating and kicking then being held upside down so the contents of his pockets was dutifully extracted by the efficient military, this we found out later when we reached the border and re-met. So endeth the last chapter on Portuguese Timor, a fitting end to an insane system. I personally advise all tentative travellers to stay out.