

: MISS UNDER H2O
(AKA LANI TIMBRELL)

DILI DISCOVERIES

> PEOPLE DON'T OFTEN CONSIDER DILI OR TIMOR WHEN PLANNING A DIVE TRIP. WITH A HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND UNREST, MANY MIGHT OVERLOOK THE FACT THAT IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BECOME A NEW DIVING MECCA. ONLY A ONE HOUR FLIGHT FROM DARWIN, THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE GEM WAITING TO BE EXPLORED.

Dili hosted its inaugural Underwater Photography Competition between 9 to 15 October 2010. Published or award-winning underwater photographers from around the globe were the first lucky participants. What will no doubt be a recurring event, participants travelled from as far as Houston Texas, via Moscow, a feat within itself.

The aim of the competition was twofold. Firstly, to demonstrate the potential of dive tourism for the local people and enable another avenue of industry to help rebuild their economy. Secondly, to share an amazing dive location that's still an unexplored, unbelievably healthy and pristine underwater ecosystem.

The local Timorese are wonderful and accepting people, and unlike many other locations throughout Asia, Timor's underwater paradise hasn't been subjected to the damaging effects of dynamite fishing. Because of this, the entire region is a rich and colourful landscape of soft and hard corals, large and small fish and abundance of other marine life. It's a diver's paradise.

Established and known dive sites have been found along the meandering road that sits closest to the coastline, running east and west of Dili. If you can get your vehicle and dive gear there easily, it's a dive site. The opportunity to have a boat and explore from the northern sea side is very enticing. It's likely that whoever does this will be able to say they were the first person to ever dive there.

There are two very professional dive operators in Dili and both were involved with the competition. On the Saturday prior to the Monday start, I was able to dive with Dive Timor Lorosae. Travelling with fellow Perth underwater photographer and friend, David Baxter, we thought the Saturday dive would be a good introduction to what lies beneath, and to see if our expectations would be met or exceeded.

Our first site, called Dirt Track, was 30km to the east. We left at 9.30am and I thought we'd get our first taste of the blue by about 10.30am at the latest. We were in for a surprise – the trip took close to two hours due to



Main: Lacy Rhinopius at Tasi Tolu

Left top to bottom: Support diver Michael Smith at Dili Rock; Juvenile filefish at Tasi Tolu; Coral reef at Dili Rock.



“IT'S AMAZING HOW DIVERSE THE CRITTER LIFE IS HERE”

badly pot-holed and damaged roads; the drivers slow right down to ensure as smooth a trip as possible. All part of Dili's 'island time'.

Once underwater we immediately knew this was going to be a great trip, with amazing visibility of 30 plus metres of fantastic reef. We swam out from the beach for about 20 metres over rocks, then sand, to a fantastic wall. David and I were lucky to find large bombies oozing with a mix of marine life, from anemones to clownfish and hard and soft coral, perfect for wide-angle photography.

Our second location was Behau Village and is on the northern side of the road of the village. Set slightly inland, it's protected from the currents by a small reef outcrop to the east. The walls to the east and west offer a choice of directions to dive. We chose to go west to a maximum depth of about 25 metres. Again visibility was 25 metres, with a slight current that changed direction mid-way through the dive. At our halfway point we swam to the top of the reef at about 10 metres. This is a wide-angle or macro photography site with stonefish resting peacefully in the sun's rays, the ever popular nudibranchs, great visibility, and beautiful rich corals. We kept an eye out into the blue in case we caught a glimpse of a dugong or turtle, but no such luck. We then headed back to Dili to prepare for the competition.

The beauty of this competition was that we were allowed to choose our own dive locations and times each day. A dive location map, a trusty Mikrolet and driver, as well as a good relationship with your support diver meant the underwater world was ours to discover, explore and photograph to our heart's content. I was lucky to be paired with Michael Smith, a dive instructor from The Black Manta in Singapore, and an excellent spotter.

There were 10 dive sites to choose from, but I chose to dive at only six of these. The locations of the sites varied from Pertamina Pier, only a few minutes from the contest hub at Timor Lodge, to almost 2½ hours away at K57. Pertamina Pier was a fantastic and typical pier. At 200 metres long it's still used by major ships, as we discovered on the last day. Mantis shrimp, starfish, goby's protecting excavating shrimp, porcelain crabs, clownfish and anemones are all easily visible. At the end we saw a couple of small moray eels, a range of lionfish and stonefish.

Tasi Tolu is about 10 minutes from the centre of Dili and is macro heaven. There's a patch called the Badminton Court, named for its size and rectangular shape. It's amazing how diverse the critter life is here. The elusive lacy rhinopus can be found along with schooling catfish, seahorses and frogfish. This is also excellent night diving. In season, this is the place to see inquisitive dugongs. We didn't see one, but the day after the competition there was claim to a sighting at about 25 metres away from where we were diving.

Dili Rock was my favourite and only a minute further east from Tasi Tolu. Enter from the rocks nearest to the shoreline and follow the reef west. It's a very easy and diverse site. At about 18 metres there's a buoy tied to a very large submerged tree. A small cleaning station hosts anemones and clownfish and a resident inquisitive banded pipefish. Thanks to Michael we found a blue ring octopus, a rare and amazing sighting.

The best part of Dili Rock is further round west for another eight metres at about 20 or so metres down. A large cleaning station littered with varied clownfish, a beautiful and friendly triggerfish, schooling bug eyes, small blue-striped

Left top to bottom: Spotted sweetlip; Timorese boy fishing the traditional way; Lionfish; Aerial view west of Dili towards Sandy Bottom.

Below top to bottom: Pertamina Pier; A fishing village west of Dili.

Right: Cleaning station at Dili Rock.

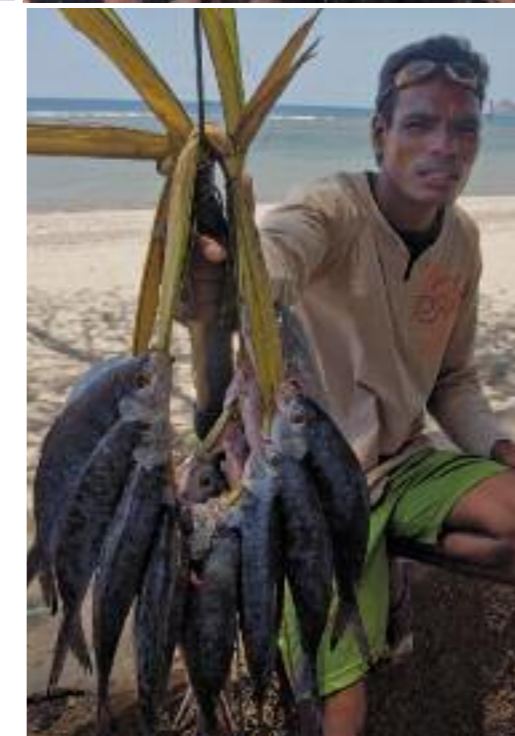
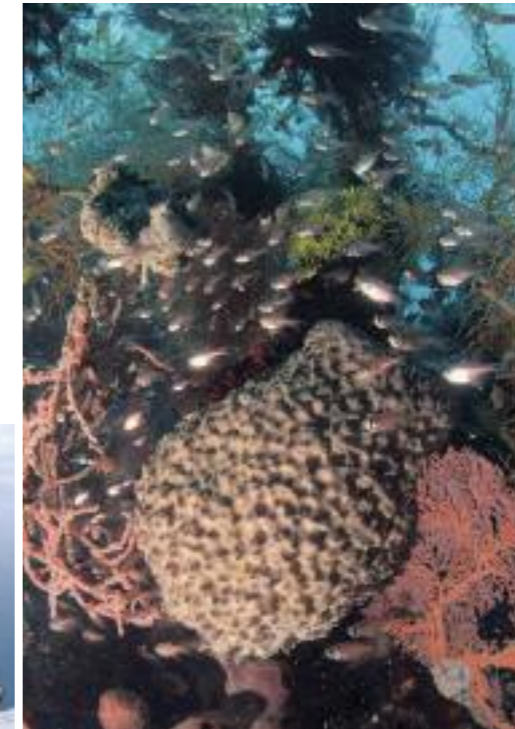


snapper and more. Turtles are also sighted here and as with the dugong, one was spotted after the competition.

Dan's Sandy Bottom is about 45 minutes west of Dili, along a scenic coastal road through some local fishing villages. This road is much better than the one to the east. At the dive site look for a large tree stump on the beach, enter here and swim straight ahead about 20-30 metres, then move east, to a completely different dive location. It's a lot shallower than other sites; the deepest here is about 20-25 metres. There are colourful pelagics, and hard and soft corals. Macro or wide-angle is OK here.

Bubble Beach, named for the bubbling action of sulphur coming from the white sandy bottom at about 20 metres, is an easy entry from any sandy spot on the beach. Swim north for about 20 metres and then again to the east. The sloping reef is a mixture of corals and sandy patches. There is said to be a beautiful balled-up anemone at about 20-25 metres, but we didn't get time to explore this far down as there was so much to see, including a shelf of huge crayfish, whip coral, blennies and a diverse range of coloured featherstars.

Overall the beaches are more like rock than sand, and accessing some of the sites can be a challenge, especially if



you're holding a camera. Take your time getting in. I also recommend checking the tide charts available from the local dive shops, and be aware of strong and changing currents too. We had a few dives when the current would shift direction mid-way through, apparently very common in Dili.

The United Nations and other various organisations occupy much of Dili until their withdrawal at the end of 2012. Not only

TIMOR-LESTE'S population of over 1 million is one of the fastest growing in the world at around 4% per annum. The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste achieved formal independence on 20 May 2002, following a UN sponsored referendum in August 1999 in which over 78% of the population voted for independence. One of the poorest countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Timor-Leste has abundant natural beauty including rugged mountains and a spectacular coastline. There's kilometre after kilometre of pristine coral reefs, offering some of the best diving in the world. Several diving companies run scuba safaris to sites in Dili, Atauro Island, Manatuto District, Tutuala and Jaco Island in Lospalos. Timor-Leste's reefs host a vast diversity of marine creatures, from turtles to whale sharks and dazzling shoals of colourful tropical fish.

GETTING TO TIMOR-LESTE

- From Darwin, Australia, Air North fly daily to Dili from Darwin. Their new jet can do the trip in just on an hour. Divers should advise any excess luggage (cameras and dive gear) as there is a 20kg limit. www.airnorth.com.au
- From Singapore, AustAsia airlines fly three times a week direct from Singapore to Dili. www.austasiaairlines.com
- From Bali, Indonesia, Merparti flies daily from Bali to Dili. Booking online is not an option as yet and the only way to secure a ticket is at the Bali airport (domestic counter for Merparti). Tickets are easy to come by as there are always seats available except around holidays. www.merparti.co.id



are there lots of expats here, prices can be very high for some services, especially accommodation. When these groups do move out, Timor will need the support of other industries including tourism. Diving will be a fantastic opportunity for this wonderful country and its people to move forward. This place is definitely on my 'go back to' list!

FAST FACTS

- US Dollars are the official currency, with local small denomination coins.
- Portuguese is the official language along with Tetum, the local dialect, though Bahasa Indonesia is still widely spoken by the general population. Some English is spoken, particularly in Dili.
- Visas on arrival cost US\$30* for a 30 day stay. Visa extension applications must be submitted directly to the Immigration Department in Dili, Timor-Leste. Extensions cost US\$35* for each extension of 30 days, or US\$75* for extension of 60 days. A departure tax of US\$10* also applies. All foreigners seeking to enter Timor-Leste on a temporary visa must have a valid national passport with an expiry date no less than 6 months from the date of entry.
- Dress standards are neat and conservative. Visitors will experience many local customs and cultures and respect should be shown.
- Drink bottled water only. Avoid ice and pay attention to non-cooked food. Salads



should also be avoided if washed with tap water. Fruit should be peeled. Prevent dehydration by drinking a lot of water, using high factor protection sunscreen and wearing a hat.

- Avoid contact with animals as they are generally not vaccinated and can transmit diseases. Use insect repellent, especially at dawn and dusk, and sleep with a mosquito net. Malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases are widespread.
- Security is improving but caution is still recommended – refer to the most current travel advice for Timor-Leste from www.dfat.gov.au or from your national embassy.

* Prices correct at time of publishing. Visit www.migracao.gov.tl for full details.



Top: Christmas tree worm.
Bottom: Esplanade of Dili.

Continued from Page 78

approach the birds, but be cautious or you'll scare them away and they'll abandon the nest and egg to a certain death. Hosnie Springs and Greta Beach are only accessible to 4x4. There's not much to see at South Point, except for a Chinese temple and the excavation site of the APSC (Asian Pacific Space Centre). On the south coast the Blowholes are a rugged part of the coastal cliff, where the erosion has carved the limestone in jagged pinnacles. The wave action results in a geyser-like activity through cracks and fractures.

Visually, the west coast is the most exciting part of the island; The Dales is a



- 1 The port of Flying Fish Cove
- 2 The Blowholes, south coast
- 3 Blowhole of Lily Beach



succession of creeks flowing towards the ocean and is the domain of blue, red, and robber crabs. Walk up to Hugh's Dale waterfall for a cool drizzling shower. Climb down the gully of Anderson's Dale that ends up in the raging surf. Not the best place for a swim though, unless you want to be sucked down into the washing machine!

Christmas Island is a place out of this world, without a shadow of a doubt. Tourism is still a new concept in infancy. To a diver, the waters are pristine and the corals simply fabulous. The fantastic visibility is an absolute plus, an exotic dream, that could only be blessed with more fish life, of course. Nevertheless, if you are lucky enough to meet a whale shark, you will forget about the rest. Should you need to get away from it all, this is the place to go. Breeze in and sit down for a cold one at The Sunset, from your balcony facing the horizon. Gary will tell you stories...

TRAVEL FACTS

When to visit: Dry season May to Nov, wet season Dec to Apr. The wettest months are Feb & Mar. Whale shark season is Nov to Apr.
Climate: The average daily temperature is 22-28°C year round. Humidity ranges between 80-90%. Water temperature averages 25-29°C.
Visibility: 30-40m
Currency: Australian dollar; Westpac Bank on the island changes money. Check currency exchange rates before travel.
Transport: Public transport is limited on the island. Taxis are available, but is best to hire a car. You can hire a car from: Christmas Island Car Hire, Tan & Tan, Soong Car Rental, or Kiat service station.
Dining: There is a selection of quality restaurants on the island, including Golden Bosun Tavern, Christmas Island Club, Tracks Tavern, Seasons Palace (Poon Saan), and the Chinese Literary Association noodle house.
Tourism:

- Christmas Island Tourism Association
Ph: (61)8 9164 8382
Fax: (61)8 9164 8080
www.christmas.net.au
- Island Explorer Holidays
Ph: (61) 8 9164 7475
Fax: (61) 8 9164 7174
Email: lisa@islandexplorer.com.au
www.islandexplorer.com.au

HISTORY

On 25 December 1643, returning from the East Indies on the merchant ship *Royal Mary* Captain William Mynors sighted an island. Short of imagination, he named it 'Christmas Island'. The British annexed the island in 1888 after rich phosphate deposits were discovered. In 1899 Chinese 'coolie' labour, Sikh policemen and European supervisors were brought in to start mining, initially exporting to Japan and Germany. By 1901 the coolie population had increased to almost 700, but the harsh life on the island plus malnutrition caused the majority to die of 'beriberi' by 1904. By the mid 1930s the coolie population was back up to 800, however to cope with their harsh life and meagre rations, more than a quarter were addicted to opium, provided by the British employer to maintain a 'docile work force'. Mining continued successfully up until the outbreak of WWI and was finally closed down completely in 1987. Following WWII, Christmas Island was excised and made a separate crown colony. Sovereignty was then transferred to Australia in 1958. Conflicts between conservation and

mining interests led to the appointment of a conservation officer by the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service during the 1970s. The first national park was declared in 1980, and now covers over 63% of the island; this includes the Plateau rainforest habitat of the endangered Abbott's booby *Papasaula abbotti*. A substantial portion of the fringing reef is now also protected. The population of 1500 comprises Chinese, Malay and Australian citizens. The future of the island aims to be that of tourism. However, the new Phosphate Resources NL company, owned by members of the Union of Christmas Island Workers, resumed phosphate production in 1990, processing existing stockpiles. The latest project for the development of the island was that of a Korean investor who in 1998 decided he would build the first 'Asia Pacific Space Centre' on the former mining grounds of South Point.

LINK> www.christmas.net.au

AT LAST... THE LONG AWAITED AUTOBIOGRAPHY FROM JEAN-MICHEL COUSTEAU

MY FATHER, THE CAPTAIN

My Life with Jacques Cousteau

JEAN-MICHEL COUSTEAU with Daniel Palmer

In every legend, there is a legacy. In the life and career of undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau, that legacy beats in the heart of the sea and in the heart of his son, Jean-Michel, the noted French environmentalist, educator and documentary film producer who has spent most of his adult life nurturing the work of his famous father. In *My Father, The Captain*, Jean-Michel Cousteau takes an open and intimate look at the life he shared with his father, and the legend he has taken it upon himself to carry. In so doing, he hopes to shed new and meaningful light on the life and work of a man who inspired millions to reconsider our relationship with the sea and its creatures and, in the process, to understand a little more about himself and his family as well.

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