

SPIRIT *of* SERENITY

Taking a time out in Dili, Timor-Leste

WORDS: BEN MACK

Obayedul Haque Mokul is building a juice factory. But not just any juice factory: his will be the first factory to make juice from local fruit in Timor-Leste.

Obayedul's story isn't unique, either. This I realise within a few minutes of landing in Dili, when my cab driver proudly explains his plans to start his own version of Uber. This is surprising, considering I haven't seen any other taxis on the road for the entire 15-minute ride to my hotel. But who am I to question things in a place where time seems to have no meaning?

Timelessness is a strong selling point in Dili. You can take as little or as long as you want doing almost anything. Case in point: the same couple are still sitting in front of the rustic-looking Farol Lighthouse when I come back

about three hours later.

My talk with Obayedul that night, similarly, continues for a while. Sitting in the dim light of his store, we discuss anything and everything – including his juice factory plans. Infrequent customers bring warm night air in with them every time they open the loud aluminium door.

It's from our conversation that I gain a greater understanding of the sense of possibility that exists in Timor-Leste.

Because it's such a young country (it became independent only 15 years ago, in 2002), Obayedul says there are few barriers to trying new things and opening new businesses.

And because this island nation has such a small population: everyone pretty much knows everyone. Obayedul has even discussed his

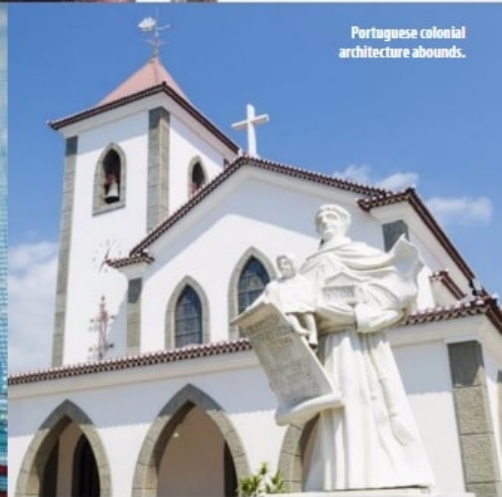
“With so few people and a profusion of jungle terrain to go along with its beaches, Timor-Leste is, unsurprisingly, an ideal ‘adventure tourism’ destination”



Timor-Leste is famed for its snorkelling and diving.



You'll have the beaches almost to yourself.



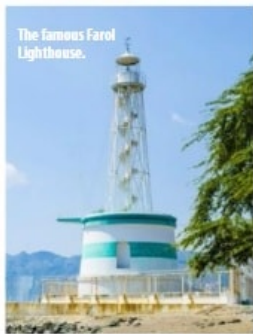
Portuguese colonial architecture abounds.

juice factory vision with the Prime Minister of Timor-Leste, Rui Maria de Araújo.

Obayedul is far from the only friendly local I meet. My driver from the day before, Fernando, reappears the next morning, not long after I've rolled out of bed and woken myself up with an icy shower (a necessity, when the air can be as sticky at night as it is by day). Together, we set out to do what many visitors to Dili do: hit the beach.

Being a tropical island, Timor-Leste boasts beaches in spades. And considering it receives fewer than 60,000 visitors per year, odds are you'll have those beaches almost all to yourself.

This is evident at near-deserted Cemetery Beach, near the slow-moving Comoro River. But



The Famous Farol Lighthouse.

the rocky sand is practically broiling. Why does it have to be so hot? Pretending I am Usain Bolt, I sprint into the surf. The water's crisp coolness washes over me. It is glorious. As we bob up and down on gentle waves, the air also has a freshness thanks to a persistent breeze.

With so few people and a profusion of untouched jungle terrain to go along with its beaches, Timor-Leste is an ideal 'adventure tourism' destination.

There's enough here to satisfy even the most intrepid explorer. Whether it's climbing or hiking around Tatamailau (also known as Mount Ramelau), the nation's highest mountain, about 70km south of Dili, or elsewhere in TIMOR-

“... usually, however, the water is so clear ... spectacular corals and sea life are visible to the naked eye ...”

Leste's interior, there's no shortage of things to see and do on land.

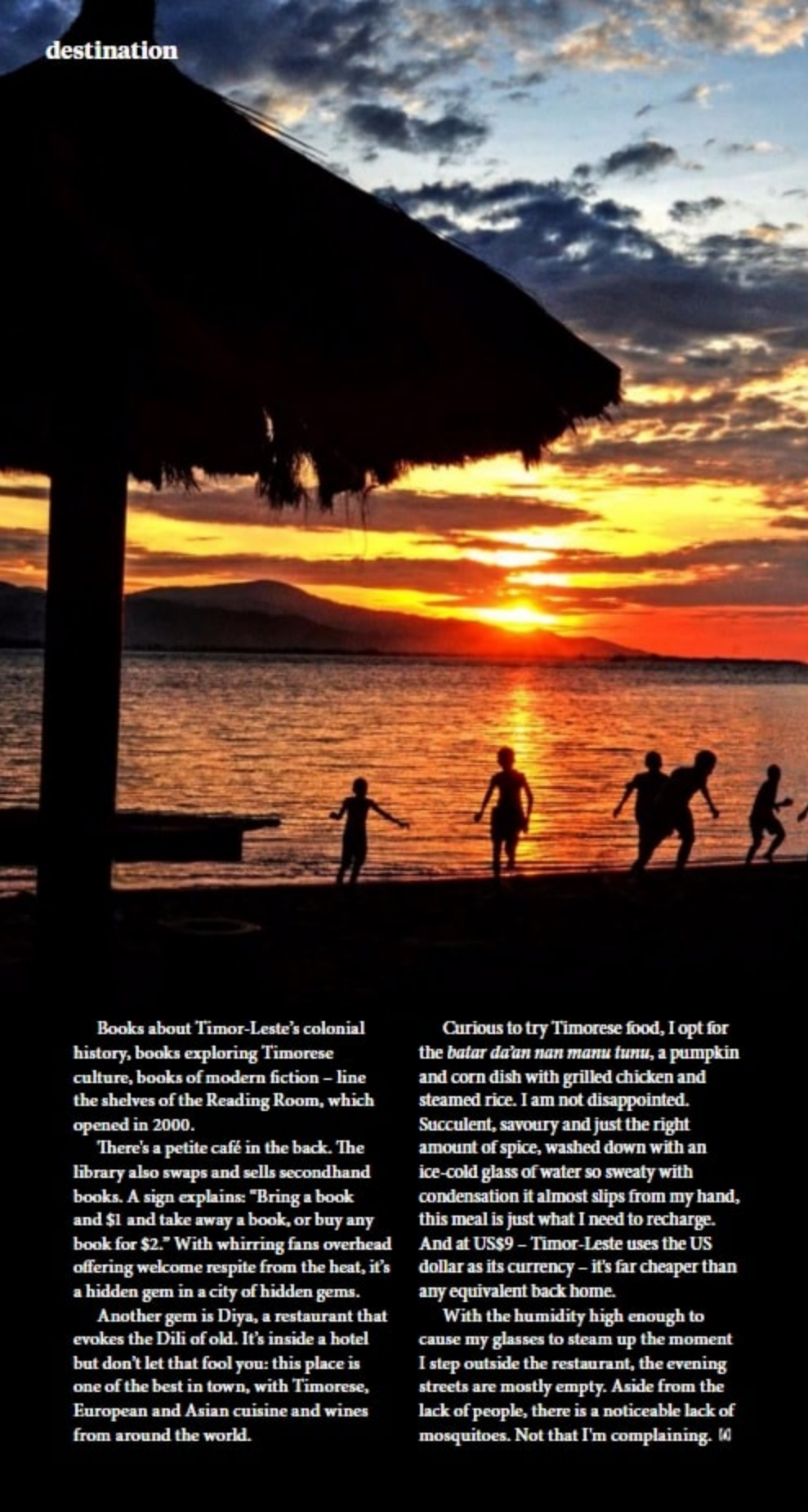
In the water, diving among the corals around Dili or Atauro Island (25km north of Dili) offers spectacular opportunities to see wildlife in abundance – including the occasional enormous whale shark.

The fact Timor-Leste is the youngest country in South-East Asia also means word hasn't gotten out internationally yet, meaning there's a good chance you'll have a dive site all to yourself.

Usually, however, the water is so clear you don't need any special equipment. Spectacular corals and sea life are visible to the naked eye.

There are also adventures of a cultural kind to be found, which I discover visiting the Xanana Gusmão Reading Room – Dili's public library, named after Timor-Leste's first post-independence president – a stone's throw from the sea along the bustling (by Timor-Leste standards) Rua Belarmino Lobo.

The first thing that strikes me about the place is the historic appearance of the Portuguese colonial-style building. The second striking detail is the musty smell – which I'm not expecting at all. It's as though I've stepped through a portal that has transported me back into the 1800s. ◉



Books about Timor-Leste's colonial history, books exploring Timorese culture, books of modern fiction – line the shelves of the Reading Room, which opened in 2000.

There's a petite café in the back. The library also swaps and sells secondhand books. A sign explains: "Bring a book and \$1 and take away a book, or buy any book for \$2." With whirring fans overhead offering welcome respite from the heat, it's a hidden gem in a city of hidden gems.

Another gem is Diya, a restaurant that evokes the Dili of old. It's inside a hotel but don't let that fool you: this place is one of the best in town, with Timorese, European and Asian cuisine and wines from around the world.

Curious to try Timorese food, I opt for the *batar da'an nan manu tunu*, a pumpkin and corn dish with grilled chicken and steamed rice. I am not disappointed. Succulent, savoury and just the right amount of spice, washed down with an ice-cold glass of water so sweaty with condensation it almost slips from my hand, this meal is just what I need to recharge. And at US\$9 – Timor-Leste uses the US dollar as its currency – it's far cheaper than any equivalent back home.

With the humidity high enough to cause my glasses to steam up the moment I step outside the restaurant, the evening streets are mostly empty. Aside from the lack of people, there is a noticeable lack of mosquitoes. Not that I'm complaining. *W*

INFO GUIDE

STAY

Casa Minha Backpackers is one of the cheapest at US\$25 (AU\$33) a night. It's in a good central location, and includes free breakfast. ohmgroubpd@gmail.com

Discovery Inn's level of luxuriousness rivals that of a hotel with rooms that cost twice as much. US\$135 (AU\$177) discoveryinntimorleste.com

Beachside Hotel is one of the few hotels in Dili that's actually on the beach. Only US\$85 (AU\$111) a night, it's a real bargain. +670 7754 9681, beachsidehoteldili.com

EAT

Diya Restaurant at Discovery Inn has high-quality Timorese, European and Asian cuisine in an upscale colonial setting. discoveryinntimorleste.com

Lil's serves up Australasian fare, with mains costing less than US\$5. It's across from the ANZ on Rua Belarmino Lobo.

Letefoho Specialty Coffee Roasters supports local farmers. It's also right by the beach. *Beach Rd, Kampung Alor*

DO

The **Timorese Resistance Archive & Museum** is the place to go to learn about Timor-Leste's struggle for independence. amrtimor.org

Cristo Rei is a 27-metre-tall statue of Christ near Cape Fatucama. Expect an uphill walk, but spectacular views.

Xanana Gusmão Reading Room is housed in a beautiful old colonial building. The library/bookshop also has a café, and regularly hosts cultural events. *Belarmino Lobo, Dili*

The best close beach is **Jesus Backside Beach**, with Cristo Rei looming behind it, but **Cemetery Beach**, near the airport, is usually quieter and offers great diving.

MORE INFO

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