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# 8

# History and Politics of Tourism in Timor-Leste

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## Introduction

Timor-Leste is one of South-East Asia's Small Island Developing States (SIDS), located on the eastern half of Timor Island, 640 km North of Darwin, Australia, and is a part of the Lesser Sunda Archipelago (CIA, 2016). The whole territory of Timor-Leste is around 14,500 km<sup>2</sup>, nevertheless it has an enclave – Oecussi, which is located in the west of Timor island, surrounded by the Indonesian province of West Timor and is accessible from the rest of Timor-Leste only by sea (Molnar, 2005). Timor-Leste had been under Portuguese rule for four hundred fifty years until 1975. Subsequently, it was illegally occupied by Indonesia from 1975 to 1999. Since Timor-Leste became independent from Indonesia in 1999, successive governments and international agencies have viewed tourism as a sector that can boost development and alleviate poverty. Timor-Leste possesses various tourism resources. It is located on a scenic tropical mountainous island in the Wallacea region, which has high biodiversity and a number of endemic fauna and flora species. It is also a part of the Coral Triangle, one of the world's most biodiverse marine areas. The people of Timor-Leste speak 16 different languages from Austroneasian and Papuan groups of languages. Timor-Leste has a rich history that includes the following:

- Prehistoric migration of peoples between Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands,
- Portuguese colonisation and colonial conflicts between the Dutch and the Portuguese,
- Japanese invasion during the World War II and co-operation between the Timorese and Australian troops,
- Indonesian invasion and the consequent resistance in a bid to gain independence.

(Tolkach and King, 2015)

This chapter reviews the history of tourism in Timor-Leste, and discusses themes arising from that review related to political change and tourism development in Timor-Leste. Statistical information and up-to-date analyses of tourism in Timor-Leste have been lacking. Taking these factors into consideration, the chapter draws upon the limited statistical information available, government documents and non-academic publications (e.g. newspapers and magazines). The findings are presented

in a narrative and chronological form dealing with historical and recent developments in tourism. The latter section of the chapter reflects on the themes arising from the past and present challenges for tourism development since it became independent.



Figure 8.1: Map of Timor-Leste (CIA, 2016)

## Historical development of Timor-Leste

### Pre-tourism

Little is known about Timor-Leste's history prior to Portuguese colonisation. Stone tools and rock paintings have been found on the island and dated to 11,500 years BC. These first residents are assumed to be of Australoid or non-Austronesian origin. The island of Timor is considered one of the routes for human migration to Australia. Some of the rock paintings are present in the caves close to scenic Tutuala beach, which is becoming a relatively well known destination, while another archaeological site is en route to Mt Ramelau – the highest point in Timor-Leste. The appearance of agriculture on the island dates back to around 3000 years BC and is associated with the arrival of the Austronesian peoples (Fox, 2003; Glover, 1972; Glover, 1969; Molnar, 2005). Later representatives of other language groups presumably arrived from the Malay Peninsula and are similar to the groups inhabiting Borneo, Sunda and the Moluccas islands. There was no single nation built in Timor prior to colonisation by Europeans. Timor was separated into small chiefdoms which represented different cultures and languages where the major linguistic groups were Bunaq, Tetum and Kanak. Some chiefdoms had an affinity with the powerful Wehale kingdom. The people of Timor traded with seafarers from China and Java, with the main trade item being sandalwood (Molnar, 2005).

The first contact with Portuguese explorers was made in present-day Oecussi in the early XVI century. Dominican priests introduced Roman Catholicism, while Timor Island was gradually colonised. By the early XVII century the rivalry between

the Dutch and Portuguese colonisers in the region intensified leading to continuing wars between the two countries on Timor island. Nevertheless, neither the Dutch nor the Portuguese managed to assert their power over the whole of Timor. Since the middle of the XVIII century the island was divided in half between the Dutch and the Portuguese. The borders were formalised in 1859 and the definitive border was drawn in 1916. Nowadays this border divides Indonesian West Timor and Timor-Leste (Fox, 2003; Gunn, 1999; Molnar, 2005). The following figures illustrate some of the characteristics of the landscape and cultural heritage.



**Figure 8.2:** Jaco Island, Nino Konis Santana National Park. *Source:* Author.



**Figure 8.3:** Traditional sacred houses (Uma Lulik), Tutuala. *Source:* Author



Figure 8.4: A cannon at the Balibo Fort, Balibo. *Source:* Author



Figure 8.5: Archive & Museum of Timorese Resistance. *Source:* Author