

# History, human value and place-making in Timor-Leste

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research interests and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences and teaching, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a broad overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia in the region. Our preferred style is subjective and conversational. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and the region. In the current edition, we explore history, human value and place-making in Timor-Leste.

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## Why destination marketing matters. Reflections on tourism in Timor-Leste

Sara Currie

Between 2011 and 2016 I conducted my doctoral research in Timor-Leste. During my final year in-country, I worked as a consultant for The Asia Foundation, where I implemented the findings of my research to develop Timor-Leste's tourism marketing strategy and new destination brand. Across those five years, I was asked the usual tourism questions, their nature dependent upon the experience of the asker. Those who had spent only weeks or months in the country asked me, "What's the tourism potential here?" Those with more experience in tourism tended to probe more deeply and would ask, "I can see there's tourism potential. What do you feel are the main issues that are preventing tourism from growing?" And finally there were those who, like myself, had spent years working in Timor-Leste and for whom the answers to the first two questions were abundantly obvious. This group asked the more difficult question: "We know the potential, we know the barriers – do you think tourism in Timor-Leste can succeed?"

Above: Images from a presentation which provided the basis for Timor-Leste's new destination brand. The complete presentation can be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/mockTL>.

In responding to this sort of question I always found myself caught between the need for honesty and the desire for optimism. My doctoral research had confirmed that the country has great potential for tourism. Timor-Leste is blessed with incredible natural assets, including one of the most diverse marine ecosystems in the world, alongside culture, history, friendly people and a tropical climate. It's only a one-and-a-half-hour flight from Denpasar, Bali.

At the same time, the weaknesses in the tourism product are significant – cost, accessibility, poor infrastructure and a hospitality industry that is still in its infancy. Access to medical facilities, mosquito-borne disease and crocodiles add further problems, while the nation's poor destination image continues to have a negative impact. However, the challenges to tourism in Timor-Leste are not entirely dissimilar to other Asian nations, certainly those with a post-conflict history such as Sri Lanka or Cambodia. Yet the most recent statistics suggest that Timor-Leste welcomed fewer than 40,000 leisure travellers in 2017,<sup>1</sup> a tiny number compared to near neighbour Bali, which received over five million tourists in the same year.

When I first arrived in 2011, Timor-Leste was enjoying what many called a 'false tourism economy', thanks to a sustained UN presence. The UN workers themselves provided a boost to the economy and domestic tourism, as well as created a steady flow of friends and family visiting from abroad. It was a captive audience of 'ideal' tourists. UN workers usually spoke the language, had their own vehicle and a local phone, and were accustomed to Timor-Leste's level of service. Exorbitant prices were not prohibitive, given their international salaries. Since the withdrawal of the UN in 2012, however, tourism numbers have steadily declined. Many bars and restaurants that opened during the UN boom have failed, due simply to insufficient patronage. While the government talked passionately about how 'real' tourism would fill the UN void, very little was done to encourage this.

This is where my doctoral research, conducted with the support of the Ministry of Tourism, Timor-Leste, and The Asia Foundation, found its place: ultimately, we hoped to develop a marketing strategy and destination brand to grow tourism and to replace the 'false tourism economy' with 'real tourism'. But, what began as simply a marketing strategy to grow tourism evolved across my five years in-country. Instead of pondering the issue, "Can tourism succeed?" the more pressing question became, "What would success in tourism actually look like for Timor-Leste?" Would it be simply 'number of visitors'? More and more travellers, at any cost to the natural environment and local lifestyle? Or was there a more sustainable model we could achieve?

Indeed, with global tourism arrivals now over a billion per annum and countries such as Iceland, Spain and Italy struggling with what is now commonly termed 'overtourism', it is difficult to justify a marketing strategy that simply targets continuous growth. Today, as concerns about the environmental and cultural impacts of tourism increase, more destinations are acknowledging that a handful of affluent travellers is better than many cash-strapped tourists.<sup>2</sup> Places that were once keen to attract travellers 'at any cost' are now, understandably, becoming more selective.

My research included conducting interviews with many stakeholders in Timor-Leste, and not surprisingly it uncovered a diversity of opinions. For the then Minister for Tourism, the focus was on growth – any type of tourist, any age, from any country – so long as they came. He explained: "Let's say 28 million tourists to Thailand. If I can get 5%-10% of Thailand tourism that's a big number for us. Let's say seven million tourists to Indonesia; if I can get 10% that's also a big number." But for a diverse mix of stakeholders from NGOs, education and the private sector, the priority was on the quality of tourist and on avoiding the negatives and pitfalls of 'overtourism'. Despite five million tourists per year and strong tourism revenue,

the 'Bali model' of development was seen as undesirable. As one local stakeholder, working for an environmental NGO told me: "We are afraid that the complaints of the Balinese will repeat here in the future. The real owner of the resources will become the everlasting observer, watching other people come and take their resources and leaving them with nothing."

Destination marketers hold considerable power, not only over tourists, but also over the destinations they promote and the people living there. Responsible destination marketing creates a representation of place that includes expectations about the nation and its people, and the type and volume of tourists it may seek to attract. For young nations such as Timor-Leste, tourism marketing represents both an opportunity and a risk.

The tourism marketing strategy and destination brand we developed for Timor-Leste, with its focus on sustainability and an honest representation of the country, was well received by all stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> It is now up to Timor-Leste, its leaders and its people, to decide the manner in which they proceed. I still ponder the question I've been so often asked, "Can tourism in Timor-Leste succeed?" and grapple with the need to balance honesty with optimism, or hope, in answering it. If the government can turn words into action, then most definitely it can. But this requires those at the top, who currently hold the power, to truly invest and support sustainable tourism, and to start taking concrete, well-planned action towards developing it. Timor-Leste does have incredible potential as a destination for tourism. But realising that potential requires strong leadership, sound policy and, most importantly, coordination between government and the many diverse stakeholders who can contribute so much to the destination's future.

Can tourism grow? Definitely. Can this be done in a way that benefits the people of Timor-Leste and respects its environment? Only time will tell.

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### Notes

- 1 Find the 2017 Survey of International Travellers from The Asia Foundation online at <https://tinyurl.com/TAF2014TL>; the summary of the 2017 survey is available from The Asia Foundation upon request.
- 2 *Travel Megatrends 2019: Undertourism Is the New Overtourism*, Skift, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/skift-utot>
- 3 A mock brand presentation can be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/mockTL>, which provided the basis for Timor-Leste's new destination brand.



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