

Prologue

The first time I visited (East) Timor, I was there for an hour. The passenger ferry I was travelling on through the eastern Indonesian archipelago had docked just long enough for me to jump in a waiting taxi and do some shopping. I wanted to buy *tais*—the famous Timorese woven cloth. Yet, as we drove to the local handicrafts shop, I felt a little unnerved. The streets were near deserted, eerily so. There was not a tourist in sight, and the local people stared at me blankly. Still, the owner of the handicrafts shop greeted me enthusiastically. I looked through the piles of cloth he had on display and chose a boldly coloured one with Portuguese-inspired patterning, a design that marked it out from all the Indonesian *ikat* cloth I had seen elsewhere.

Engrossed in my choice of cloth, I didn't notice that the taxi driver was hovering around me nervously. He was anxious to get going. When we arrived back to the docks, I found out why! The ferry was pulling off its mooring and the gangplank was already raised. Yet the sight of a 20-something white girl stranded alone by a taxi on the docks was enough to bring the captain round. He returned the ship back to its mooring and the gangplank was lowered. As I boarded, a battalion of on-rotation Indonesian troops cheered me on wildly. I was horrified at having created a spectacle. The ship set sail and I found a place to hide on the upper deck.

It was from there in 1997 that I first studied island Timor. From my vantage point, I stared earnestly out across the water at the windy narrow coastal roads and stony dry river mouths that dotted the coastline. This land was full of its own horror, I knew. But from this distance it gave little away.

More than 20 years on, I can read the twists and turns on those narrow coastal roads and I am familiar with the names and origins of those many stony coastal rivers. I have heard many of the stories that follow the turns on these roads and that accompany the intermittent flows of the rivers. I have also come to know much more about the pain and the joy that infuses the cultural depths of the entire Timorese landscape.



Photo 1: *Tais* purchased in Dili, 1997.

This text is taken from *Island Encounters: Timor-Leste from the outside in*,
by Lisa Palmer, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.