



Timor leste Newsletter July 2022



A comedy of Errors?

Soon after I had booked my return to Timor leste. I wrote in my newsletter, *“I am excited but uncertain and a little intimidated at the thought of going back”*.

Sometimes I reckon you should go with your gut feeling and call off a venture that doesn't feel quite right! Not quite three weeks after I arrived I am now back home, for a reset and a rethink.

My first diary entry for the trip - *“After a 2 ½ year hiatus, because of covid and border closures, I am finally back in Dili. Not sure if I am pleased, concerned, excited or what, everyone seems to be excited for me so I guess that will have to be enough until I sort myself out!”*.

I don't want to use the word disaster because I am not in Ukraine, nor in a flood or bushfire or struck down by covid, so what is a word for relative disaster? Fiasco, shambles, disappointment, debacle, or maybe a comedy of errors!? All of these will suit, or as my son would say, **“Toughen up princess.”**

Let's start at the beginning – Firstly, 15th June, a very early start to what turned out to be a long day; on the shuttle at 04.45 and at the airport by 0600. Once I found the correct check-in counter for an International flight from the domestic terminal, all went relatively smoothly, my very heavy bags were checked in all the way to Dili as I was on the new Qantas direct flight, Sydney-Darwin-Dili.

My new knees set off the metal scanner at security, in front of many scowling passengers I had to be patted down and rescanned several times and show my surgery scars. Finally clearing that I throw my backpack over my shoulder and the shoulder strap falls off, I attempted to repair this with a large safety pin but on hoisting the backpack again the second strap falls off! I decided I had to buy a new one as I could not manhandle two heavy suitcases and a strapless backpack; being in the airport this cost a fortune. Then transferring everything from the old to the new backpack and finding somewhere to dump the old one was interesting – security staff watching me through this whole process. We were 1½ hours late leaving Sydney due to some mishap which meant an hour late getting into Darwin, luckily the Qantas connection to Dili was waiting for us. We were rushed through International Clearance then held up on the tarmac for several hours, firstly as a passenger had to be offloaded as did his luggage and then the head count did not match the manifest numbers even though the staff counted the passengers at least 10 times! Why they thought the numbers would change I am not sure as the plane's doors were closed all this time! Our movement out to the runway eventually began but as the Airforce was carrying out a military exercise we waited for another hour as jets screamed up and down blocking all runways – exciting if you were not already exhausted after leaving home at 4.30 am and were into Top Gun and Tom Cruise movies which I am not! Finally made it to Dili only two hours late. I was stopped at Customs because my suitcases were unusually heavy, as I can sincerely contest to as I had to wrangle them on and off various luggage belts, it took me ages to explain about the \$1000 worth of medallions, weighing 14 kilos, which were not for resale but for use in Oecusse. When I eventually made it out of the airport, 14 hours after leaving home in the dark and freezing cold to the extreme heat and humidity of Dili Luis was there to meet me and was not overly pleased when I dropped two heavy bags at his feet saying rather rudely *“That's it, never again!”*

Had time for a quick look around Dili which has fallen into rack and ruin. Looks about as bad as when I first came up here in 2001 after being razed by the departing Indonesians! Many of the bars, restaurants and hotels have closed, buildings empty and in disrepair, rusting iron, graffitied walls, parks and gardens overrun with weeds, rusted, burnt out cars and dead grass, rubbish strewn everywhere! Maybe covid can be blamed for some of it but not all! Maybe some of the blame is on poor government decisions and inaction, disillusioned youth, corruption, general lethargy and lack of leadership! Some people are making a lot of money out of Chinese investments, dubious projects and oil funds but the general population is simply getting poorer!

Next step Oecusse. My bags were too heavy to go on the small ZEESMs aircraft and as the Indonesian borders are still closed driving was not an option, so the small but very heavy suitcase full of medallions had to go on the ferry several days later – Luis organized a strong, affable colleague to take it for us. Great to get back to Oecusse – several old friends were at the airport to meet me and



all the neighbours came out in great excitement when I turned up at Palaban. The house was a sight to see though – mesh peeling off the windows, broken back door eaten through by termites, ceiling falling in, kitchen goods missing, grime everywhere and filthy brown water in the mandie in which I am supposed to wash. Yuck!

I lived amongst this mayhem for the four days it took for a team of workers to scrub, nail, saw, hammer, paint, repair until the house was made



roughly presentable. My neighbour, Mercie, did all the cooking for this team as my fridge and cooktop were amongst the missing items! Luis spent these days sitting in my front garden overseeing and organizing, sending people in all directions to shop, carry water, sweep and basically made sure I had all I needed! I should have been thankful but some of the “shopping” was over the top – 30 rolls of toilet paper, 20 packets

of instant noodles, 20 packets of dry biscuits, 2 litres of milk (no fridge) and an enormous bunch of bananas! He was really trying to help so who am I to complain?

The problems did not stop there. I had arrived just as the government was celebrating 10 years of the Special Administrative Zone of Oecusse – ZEESM – every night, all night for 10 days the music

festival and Expo took place on the field next to my house, 10 nights of non-stop blaring music, cheering, fireworks, dogs barking and general chaos. A bit over the top? I could not help but think about the waste of money, maybe celebrate for one night then spend the rest of the money lifting these poor people out of poverty?



I noticed that the same lethargy blight that infects Dili seems to occur here – lovely historic buildings along the waterfront falling down, parks and gardens overrun with weeds, rubbish littered all along the beachfront, the new government office building in the same state of semi completion as it was 3 years ago! But the new BNCTL (National Bank of Timor leste) headquarters is a sight to behold – huge, all shiny marble and brass, very extravagant! Next problem I was laid low for several days with a violent gastric bug, Luis suggested

that I go to the hospital but knowing what goes on there I felt better off staying at home drinking sprite and chewing gastrostop tablets! Slowly got better then Luis came down with a heavy dose of flu so several more days off work!

We did manage a meeting with the GREENTL team, several of the long-standing members and several new ones, planning for the games which were to start in early July. After our first meeting and sending news out to the schools and villages, quite coincidentally I am sure (NOT) District Administration announced that they were organizing the ZEESMs Cup to begin July 9th! Interesting that they have not organized a sporting competition for three years and decide to do so as soon as GREENTL announces their plans! As you can imagine this angered me somewhat and embarrassed several of my team who work part time with Youth and Sport so were roped into organizing the ZEESMs Cup!



Add to that several people I knew well have died in the last two years, swine flu swept through the country and killed hundreds of pigs and of course unseasonal rain is causing problems with the ripening rice crop. All of this is very disheartening that's why I feel the need to escape for a reset and restart. The locals seem to take it all in their stride – they are far more stoic than me.

Did anything positive happen in the short time I spent in Timor leste? Yes!

I attended a 4th birthday party for Tara, had dinner with Metta and her family, and drank many, many coffees with the neighbours.

My house is now habitable, due to new fridge, new cooktop, vital repairs and delivery of water from Luis'



house every second day, so when I go back mid August I can settle straight in to work. Had a wonderfully cool ocean swim every morning which gave me time to float, think, watch the sun come up and contemplate the world in general.

Work wise did we get anything done?

GREEN Games we at least had the first planning meeting, then due to the afore-mentioned conflict with ZEESM had to postpone the Games until late August. There was a lot of interest expressed by the schools as our games cater for everyone, not just the well-practiced! The equipment is on order from Dili and the GREENTL team are beginning to prepare the field in Lifau. We are planning on soccer, volleyball, basketball and a marathon. As the Games will not finish until the end of November that was another reason I decided on the need to come home for a break as staying in Oecusse for 5 months straight would be beyond me!

Composting Toilet



This has become quite a saga! It took many years to explain the concept of composting toilets to the villagers as they could not see the connection between going to the toilet behind a tree and contaminated water in their wells! Once we got a group prepared to trial the toilet we had the goods delivered to Oecusse from Brisbane, a saga in itself, and then floods swept away some of the equipment and covid put a stop to my travelling to organize the work. We now have a builder who is prepared to do the job so are slowly heading in the right direction.

A GREENTL member drew this poster to show how water in the well can be contaminated.

PRADET

This organization which looks after victims of domestic violence struggles to find sufficient funds for all they need to do. They are getting over 40 cases a month, either calls from the police or from the victims themselves asking for help. Currently PRADET is coping with some extreme cases – severe knife wounds, head injuries, young girls sexually abused by family members, all of these women and often their young children need hospital care, a safe place to stay and help through the police and court cases. I gave some money to them to buy goods needed in the Safe House.

RYPEN (Rotary Youth Program of Enrichment)

This is a Rotary Leadership program run over 3 days for Senior Secondary students, designed at developing young people's potential through a mixture of lecture style sessions and adventure-based learning.

As the Rotarians amongst you will know Theo Glockman and his right hand man, Eddy Pinto, and his team have been running this program in Dili for many years. I have long wanted to send participants from Oecusse but the costs and logistics have been prohibitive. Theo and his team, with a little encouragement from me, have decided to hold RYPEN in Oecusse! This is very exciting as the youth of Oecusse miss out on so much and do not get the opportunity for leadership training unless they happen to work with GREENTL. Pennant Hills, Windsor and Epping Rotary Clubs have put money towards a District Grant to fund this project. Luis and I had a very fruitful discussion with Eddy in Dili. We will meet him and the school principals in Oecusse in September to begin the application process. I imagine we will get hundreds of applicants but only 30 girls and 30 boys from secondary schools can be accepted. Due to Eddy's Rotary commitments in Dili and the planning needed to

organise venues, accommodation, catering and set up the adventure training exercises, we have decided to run RYPEN Oecusse in March 2023. What an event to look forward to!

Wells, Pumps and Fish Ponds!

Plans are in place, as soon as I return in August, (at my own expense as it was my decision to take the break) Luis and I can get on with these projects whilst the rest of GREENTL run the early rounds of the Games. We will probably do a well and pump in Lifau, keep the Chief onside as we are using his private land for the soccer field which means he has to keep his cows elsewhere for a few months! Two villages are keen to put in fish ponds. I spoke to the Department of Fisheries in Oecusse and they are also keen to see this done.

Shipping goods to Oecusse.

A pallet load of goods is on its way to Oecusse via Rotary's Donations-in-Kind (DIK) in Melbourne, shipping to Dili then ferry to Oecusse. The pallet includes, laptop computers, school uniforms, soccer boots, and 30 boxes of school goods donated and packed by boys from Epping Boys High. The boxes will be given to one of the more isolated primary schools in the hinterland of Oecusse.



The Year 12 team from Epping Boys High, have been supporting Oecusse since they were in year 7. They are happy to know that, at last, their boxes are on the way to a school in Oecusse.

As per usual I am putting in a request for funds for school fees and other general help. Even though this trip was shortened somewhat due to unforeseen circumstances I am heading back to Oecusse in 4 weeks when hopefully things will have evened out. There are many students in Oecusse needing help to further their education. Several are already being helped by friends of mine but there are others just as needy.

1. A young girl, Anita Maria Ucat, (Nita) whom I have known for many years is now in her final year of Public Management and Administration at Dili Institute of Technical Studies in Oecusse. She has had to defer due to lack of funds but is hoping to continue in October this year. She now needs to decide on the topic for her thesis, research and write under supervision and then present the thesis to an audience of DIT staff. **For this she will need \$520US (\$750Aus).**

2. Imaculada Sua Sali (Ima) whom I mentioned in the last newsletter still needs assistance to complete her course. She has three more years to go in her Nursing Studies, a total of **\$1400US (\$1940Aus) should cover her expenses over the three years.** Ima is the first of her family to complete secondary education so to go on to Tertiary level is a great achievement! She is really enjoying her studies and when I was there she was in the middle of examinations which she felt were going well.

Any help you can give to either of these two students will be greatly appreciated.

Donations over \$2 to the Sustainable Villages project are tax deductible:
Donate online by going to the Rotary Australia World Community Service, (RAWCS) website.
<https://donations.rawcs.com.au/Default.aspx?ProjectID=592&ReturnTo=4> (Sustainable Villages Oecusse)
Or via OzGREEN website, donate, choose East Timor.