

Words STEVE MADGWICK

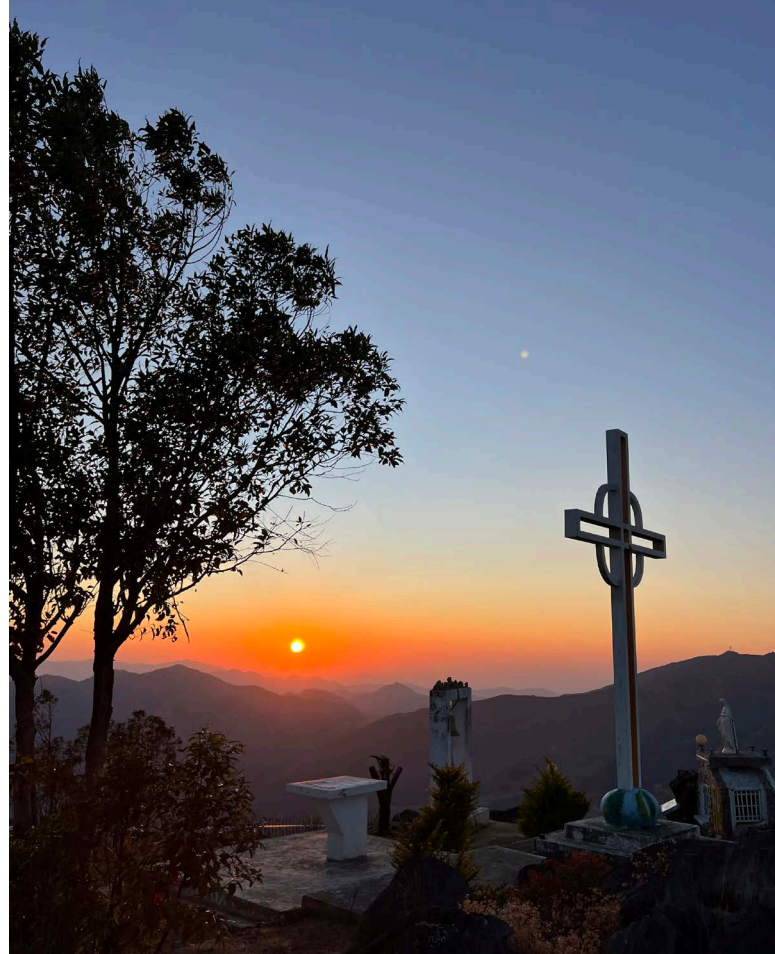
# How *the* *light* gets *in*

A BRAND-NEW EXPEDITION TO THE YOUNG SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATION OF TIMOR-LESTE IS AN OPTIMISTIC STORY OF HOPE OVER ADVERSITY AND A CHANCE FOR INTREPID TRAVELLERS TO EXPLORE A PLACE OF MANIFOLD BEAUTY AND CULTURE BEFORE OTHERS DO.



PHOTOGRAPHY RACHELLE MACKINTOSH-INTREPID TRAVEL

*Cristo Rei Beach,  
Dili, a sandy stretch of  
Timor-Leste's coastline.*



**O**ur shaky pinpricks of head-torch light succumb to the fast-gloaming horizon, unveiling vast forested valleys behind sheets of diaphanous atmosphere. The climbing wall-of-light turns marble-white Virgin Mary, unbudging on her fenced-off plinth against a hand-numbing gale, a divine shade of peach.

From the summit of Mt Ramelau (2986 metres), the apex of Timor-Leste's mountainous core, the entire midriff of this half-island nation reveals itself, piecemeal, at the whims of zooming clouds. An outline of its north coast here, an inkling of the south there. A lone Japanese trekker enraptured by the majesty and our small group are the only humans braving Timor-Leste's highest point this sunrise.

Reaching this statue on immense Tatamailau (in the Tetum language) seemed insurmountable in the drama of the prior evening's waning dusk, outside a guesthouse in the country's highest village, Hatu Bulico. But this trek – my highlight of Intrepid Travel's inaugural Timor-Leste Expedition – teaches me that the young people of this young nation always find a way.

We had set out at 2.30am, aiming to summit pre-sunrise, shuffling behind our shy, calm and confident local trekking guide, and three Timorese Intrepid guides, deeply inhaling the exhalations of the sub-alpine forest. The switch-backing trail is grooved by the shoes of Catholics pilgrimaging to the statue seeking solace and good exam results. They take a pew, literally, in front >>

**THIS PAGE:** *The marble-white statue of Virgin Mary at the summit of Mt Ramelau.*

**OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left): *A well-worn bell on a rocky outcrop above the village of Rabilau; It's here a Christian cross and ai-tos (a cow-horn crowned 'traditional' cross) share space; Two of Rabilau village's leaders.*

PHOTOGRAPHY RACHELLE MACKINTOSH INTREPID TRAVEL (VILLAGE LEADERS); STEVE MADGWICK (REMAINING IMAGES)





Travellers can expect a recently opened book of uncrowded manifold natural beauty, a barely touristed flashback to the Southeast Asian travels of our parents' generation.



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** *The villagers of Rabilau bid us farewell after a matak malirin ceremony; Dili's coast is underneath the watchful eye of the 27-metre-high Cristo Rei statue atop a headland in the distance; Colourful boats in the waters of Atauro Island. OPPOSITE (from top): Local fishermen zip about in a tinny; Fishing boats anchored along Dili's coast.*



PHOTOGRAPHY STEVE MADWICK (OPPOSITE IMAGE OF DILI COASTLINE); RACHELLE MACKINTOSH INTREPID TRAVEL (DETAIL); RACHELLE MACKINTOSH FAUNOGRAPHIC.COM (REMAINING)

of a makeshift palm-leaf-roof chapel, wind-blown into a jaunty lean, near where the forest thins into mountaintop.

Obviously, the statue atop Mt Ramelau is Portugal's (enforced) religious legacy to Timor-Leste, a given after 400-plus years of colonisation. Without a guide, however, some things would be less obvious. In the middle of the trail below Mary, I'm drawn towards the unspoken aura of a rock pile, graced by a single coin and two fresh candles.

It's one of countless sign-less shrines memorialising the nightmarish post-Portuguese chapter in East Timor history. Tens of thousands (some estimates claim 200,000) people perished in massacres, fighting and of starvation in 24 years of Indonesian occupation. For outsiders, it is an unfathomable, unmentionable time that still defines Timor-Leste, even two decades into official independence, but locals share their experiences cathartically, to remember the fallen and to ensure it never happens again.

"People in their twenties and thirties now were all born during the 'war' and have some memory of what happened," says Anastacio Madeira (Anas), 28, Intrepid tour leader and UNDP youth ambassador. "Whether their father was taken away by Indonesia or their mother sexually abused. Children were stolen, families killed. Sure, people have trauma, they're furious, but they say, 'enough of this shit, we don't want to fight or have any more problems'."

Anas was separated from his mother for his formative years, after she witnessed his father being killed by a man who still lives (basically unpunished) within sight of the family home. His inspirational ability to rise above his own trauma embodies the forgiving, optimistic vision

of Timor-Leste's young population. Tourism, Anas says, can help the country heal and rouse its 'low-income' economy, ostensibly reliant on limited oil and gas.

Yet tourism-wise, Timor-Leste is no charity case. Travellers can expect a recently opened book of uncrowded manifold natural beauty, a barely touristed flashback to the Southeast Asian travels of our parents' generation.

Intrepid's expedition is a vanguard in this respect, led by inexperienced but fast-learning local guides, bursting with humour, humility and humanity; itching to share Timor-Leste's best bits. The B-Corp partnered with MDF (Market Development Facility) to kick-start its first trip here in a decade, an initiative co-funded by DFAT to "promote sustainable economic growth". (Helped by Qantas flights, announced in 2022, from Darwin to Dili, an hour north-west across the Timor Sea.)

The nine-day itinerary visits fledgling social enterprises – many established by foreigners but gradually ceding control to Timorese – that reside in stunning corners of the country. Atop that list is heavenly Atauro Island, 90 minutes by private boat ride north of Dili (there are also various ferry options throughout the week ranging from the 75-minute fast ferry to the three-hour ferry barge). The sparsely developed island, fringed by a shallow – dare I say 'pristine' – coral reef offers visitors a chance for meaningful connections with tiny communities unjaded by mass tourism. >>



### Ripe for the picking (and biking)...

Few places in Southeast Asia are a sustainable-tourism blank slate like Maubisse, a bewitching town in Timor-Leste's interior blessed with hike-able mountain villages and coffee plantations.

Just a year ago, there wasn't a single place for a 'decent cuppa', despite the region being renowned for quality organic coffee. That changed when an Australian customer walked into Sara Guesthouse/restaurant, owned by Maubisse village chief Wilson Nivio Mendonca, in search of one.

Light-bulb moment identified, Wilson began serving big-city quality long blacks, Americanos

and, naturally, traditional Timorese coffee. He now explains the local coffee scene and culture to travellers (inviting people into your home for a coffee/betel nut is a big 'thing' here).

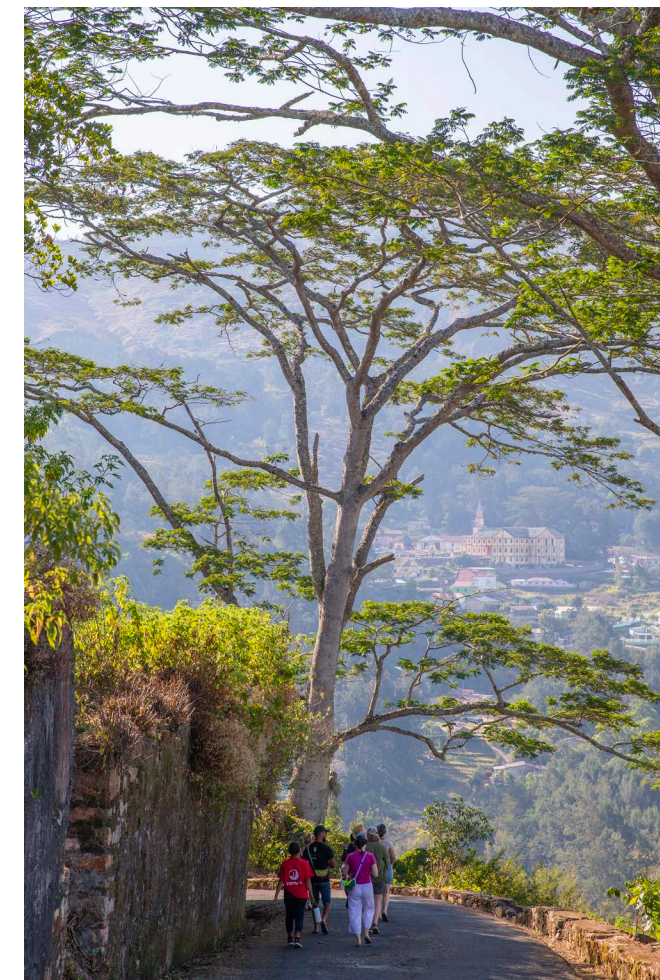
The chief has recommended 15 young locals for barista courses down in the capital.

He and others are also exploring the possibilities of Maubisse as a mountain-biking destination, with the potential for village-to-village rides with coffee-plantation pit stops.

Watch this space.



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Tuktuks and scooters are Atauro's main modes of transport; Walking down to town from Pousada Maubisse. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left): Former Portuguese fort turned dormant hotel, Pousada Maubisse; Maubisse chief and coffee shop owner, Wilson Nivio Mendonca; Watching the sun rise from the summit of Mt Ramelau.



PHOTOGRAPHY STEVE MADGWICK (MOUNTAIN AT SUNRISE); RACHELLE MACKINTOSH INTREPID TRAVEL (REMAINING IMAGES); RACHELLE MACKINTOSH FAUNOGRAPHIC.COM (POUSADA MAUBISSE)

Homestay life here is a slow exhale. After a few minutes being-boinging down pot-holed dirt roads in a tuktuk, past mopeds carrying entire families, I plonk down my backpack on the meticulously swept tiled floor of Antonio de Araujo's pastel-blue concrete home. I freshen up with a bucket shower and a fortifying local-style cuppa.

The widower's well-tended yard is alive with pink-and-white bougainvillea, fruit trees and randomly frequented by neighbours transiting to places unspecified. Antonio's grown children prepare monster portions of garden veggies, snapper lined by Dad, and rice, always rice. At night, in my mozzie-net-draped four-poster, a ceiling fan puffs away the tropical swelter when electricity allows. A conspiracy of consistently cock-a-doodle-doing roosters, barking geckos and woofing street hounds accompany me in dreamland.

Atauro's homestay network was established by Blue Ventures Conservation, a UK-based social enterprise that landed here in 2016, aiming to protect the island's seagrass, shoreline and reef. The charity has since handed over homestay control to islanders.

Semi-retired Antonio supplements his homestay income by taking tourists out onto the reef in his outrigger fishing boat. The kaleidoscopic coral that beckons in the shallow, protected, limpid tropical waters, rivals [insert any place you care to name]. Knowing scuba divers have deliberately not been talking about this place for decades.

Life is good for Antonio since independence. During childhood, his family "lived in a place reserved for animals", often going hungry. The nearby Cadeia Antiga Sub Terraneo memorial shines a light on just how dark this idyllic place was during Portuguese times (essentially, starving prisoners lived, died and were buried in the pits of "prison island").

Increasingly, Atauro is a good-news-story nursery these days. The island's widows, disabled women and single mothers – often disadvantaged by the country's staunchly patriarchal culture – gather at Boneca de Atauro co-operative to chat, heal and handweave dolls

and *tais* (textile handicrafts), whose sales support around 60 families. Some walk two hours down and two hours back to their villages in the island's hilly heart.

Back on the mainland, the expedition zig-zags 70 kilometres up from steamy Dili through Timor-Leste's steepening interior, past metal-roof hamlets clinging to cliffs, to Maubisse. The lesser-travelled mountain town is still a true snapshot of rural life (see opposite page). Its local market looks after local needs with betel nut stalls, outdoor racks of knock-off fashion and deftly stacked tomato towers. Overlooking town is Pousada Maubisse, a Portuguese fort turned Indonesian administration hub turned currently dormant hotel – the architectural equivalent of tree rings.

Family coffee plantations, which feed into a couple of co-ops, spread into the hills. Farm co-ordinator Miguel Comeicao da Costa says his grandparents brought back plants (on the sly) from the plantation where they worked in Ermera – Timor-Leste's most famous coffee area – to establish this one. Coffee was left to grow wild during Indonesian times, he says, but Maubisse has since earned a reputation for high-quality organic beans.

Miguel has spent much time, energy and US dollars (the official currency) to build an *uma lulik*, a grass-roofed family-church-like structure fundamental to Timor-Leste's 'cultura' system. Inside, life-defining decisions are made, community rules and moral codes >>

enforced, with fines issued in livestock. Miguel wants to turn his into accommodation, once he can afford to finish it.

In pre-dawn darkness, the Troopy bounces up the 'road' above Maubisse into a speck of a village called Rabilau where Anas's extended family stage a *matak malirin* ceremony (blessing guests before 'entering the soil').

Villagers inch forward in formation, singing, ululating, drumming and clanging. Shadows against a stripe of advancing daylight, they're draped in tais blankets and beaded disc necklaces. Men lead, heads swaddled in headdresses topped with sprouts of rooster feathers, carrying ceremonial knives. Cow-hair anklets cover bare stomping feet. Smiles expose betel-nut-red teeth.

On an exposed outcrop high above, a Christian cross and *ai-tos* (a cow-horn crowned 'traditional' cross) share sacred space; Animism and Catholicism intertwine. The mountain range glows a timeless hue, strikingly silhouetted by fire-smoked sunbeams. Sun high, we are invited to dance, reluctantly edging back to the Troopy. It's a welcome I don't need to understand to understand, a heartfelt interaction that made this non-dancer dance freely, wildly (after being crowned a king).

After Mt Ramelau's magic, the expedition crawls Dili-bound, down a spectacular if diabolical road/track that asks difficult questions of the battle-ready Troopy. En route, we lunch on margherita pizzas at Montanha in Aileu.

Established by Brazilians in 2012, the social enterprise has an expansive remit: to train and educate isolated mountain populations in hospitality, arts and crafts, and introduce 'modern' life skills to be shared with remote villages. Its myriad programs are funded by restaurant sales and the likes of handmade

earrings and handbags. Montanha is now managed by dynamic former students like Marciana de Silva de Jesus. She says students are taught to use resources close at hand to make gift-shop treasures, such as banana plants made into placemats.

Dili sits on Ombai Strait, a postcard-worthy coastline made un-swimmable by crocodiles and unfortunately tainted by a noticeable amount of plastic waste, especially around river mouths. The mildly bustling capital (by Southeast Asian standards) is at the beginning of its tourism trajectory – especially accommodation-wise – but offers an intriguing sprinkling of cultural and culinary attractions.

'Best lookout' award goes to the 27-metre Cristo Rei statue, which lords over an eastern headland (some 600 steps). The city's biggest (only) mall, Timor Plaza, hosts a buzzy night food market on Saturdays (surreally, next to a Gloria Jean's Coffees). Letefoho Specialty Coffee Roaster is a fine place to buy killer coffee (\$18.50/kilo) while Alola Foundation – founded in 2001 by then first lady Kirsty Sword Gusmão to raise awareness of sexual violence – sells absolute bargain tais-style hats, shawls and purses.

For some fascinating, oft-confronting context into Timor-Leste's darkest days, visit the expansive Timorese Resistance Archive and Museum and drop by Santa Cruz Cemetery, where journalist Max Stahl helped expose the country's plight by filming a massacre of pro-independence demonstrators in 1991.

Intrepid's expedition finishes at Agora Food Studio, established in 2015 by former aid workers and this year handed over to five locals, including general manager Cesaltina de Arujo (who started as a trainee barista). The catalytic social

enterprise funds itself by serving traditional food and coffee in a new groovy space that could nestle comfortably into an inner-city anywhere. There's also cooking classes, teaching dishes such as *katupa*, a coconut rice dish wrapped in palm leaves.

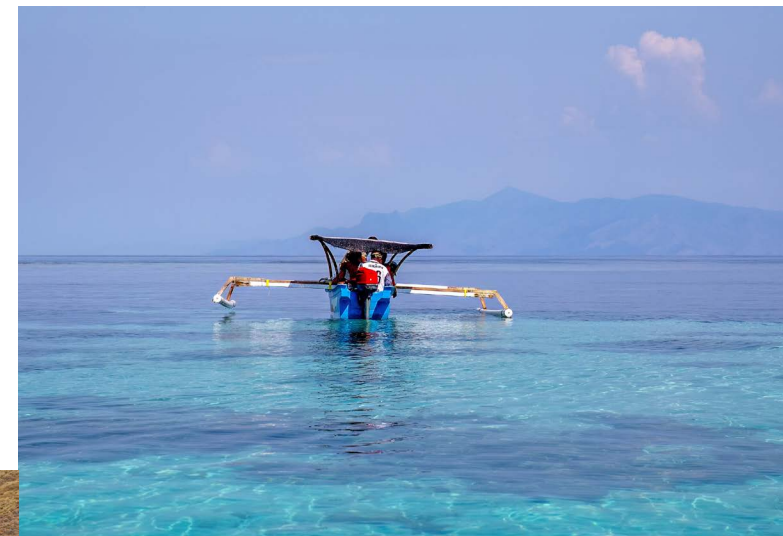
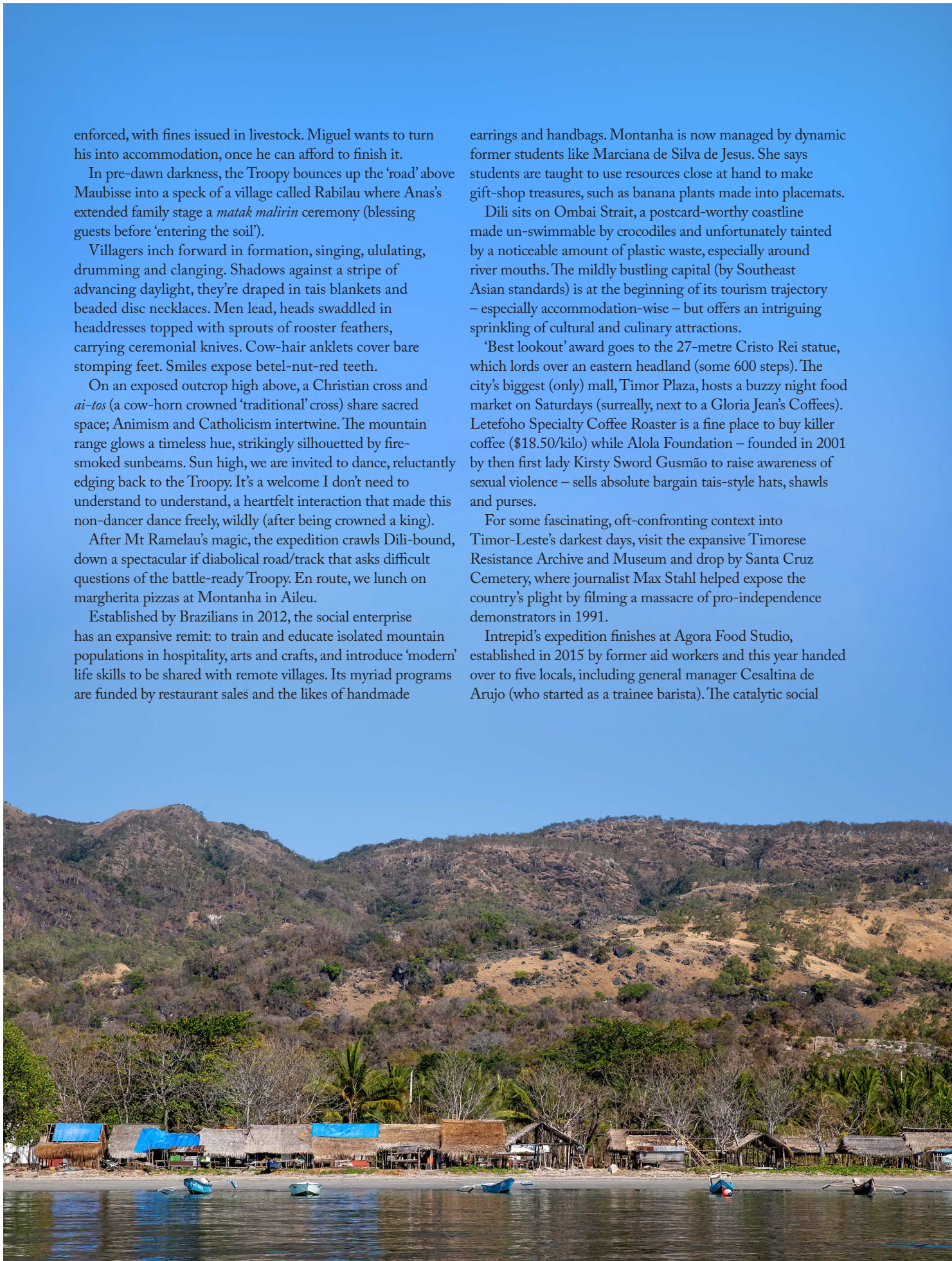
Agora trains young people from 13 municipalities, who venture into communities to share ideas, source produce and collaborate with farmers to create a Timor-Leste 'food map'. Its ethos is rippling outwards, with former staff beginning a couple of spin-offs – including excellent lunch spot Ahi Matan (Dili).

Intrepid arrives in Timor-Leste at a genuine 'see-now-before-the-rush' moment when you can still count the number of fellow tourists on your flight on two hands. It's a diverse-cultured, stunning and raw destination (you might have to use a squat toilet or two) but I felt privileged to travel in a resilient realm still enthusiastically wriggling into nationhood.

Hopefully, truly excellent tours such as this and sustainable local enterprises will be at the forefront of the country's fledgling foray into tourism. Honestly, the above-mentioned projects need tourism to survive and thrive. Others see Timor-Leste as the 'next Bali', spruiking foreign-backed resorts and casinos, 'zero-dollar tourism', with money potentially flowing out of the country, as it has done for hundreds of years.

Whatever the path, the only voices that matter in Timor-Leste's exhilarating upcoming journey will this time come from within. IT

PHOTOGRAPHY RACHELLE MACKINTOSH, FAUNOGRAPHIC.COM (OUTRIGGER); RACHELLE MACKINTOSH (BELOI, BOATS); STEVE MADGWICK (HIKERS & HATU BULICO)



### A Traveller's Checklist

INTREPID TRAVEL has four scheduled departures of its nine-day TIMOR-LESTE EXPEDITION in 2024 (from May onwards); prices start at \$3685. [intrepidtravel.com](http://intrepidtravel.com) Qantas flies daily from Darwin to Dili. [qantas.com](http://qantas.com)

### CLOCKWISE FROM

**TOP LEFT:** *The country's highest village, Hatu Bulico; Local Atauro Islander Antonio takes visitors to the reef on his outrigger; A guide and hiker on the way back down from Mt Ramelau; Intrepid travellers walking from Rabilau's Animist/Catholic shrine to the village itself.*  
**OPPOSITE:** *Beloi, the main port of Atauro Island.*

