

Wild West Timor

Suzan Crane enlists the help of a prince for a royal tour of West Timor's mountainous interior, empty beaches and fascinating tribal culture.



From left: Oelekam cultural chief clad in a traditional *ikat* and bell-anklet; Oahalla Falls; catch of the day at Oinlasi market.

If you don't mind sliding off the grid, set your sights on West Timor. This region, stretching nearly 16,000 square kilometers in Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara province, is not to be confused with Timor-Leste, its independent neighbor. You won't find über-posh resorts here, although the bustling seaside capital of Kupang has a few comfortable options and enough sightseeing to keep you busy for several days. Outside of the relative buzz of Kupang, the rest of the island is the very picture of peaceful, which suits the 1.8 million inhabitants—most of Malay, Papuan or Polynesian descent—who subsist on fishing, timber harvesting and slash-and-burn agriculture just fine.

And when you peel back the rugged veneer, you'll discover a rich heritage that harkens back to antiquity, scenic landscapes dotted with beehive huts, and waterfalls cascading through

verdant forests with the fury of an ancient power. The palm-fringed beaches of Lasiana, Gurita Bay and Semau Island promise tranquility while trekking Mt. Mutis, West Timor's highest peak, delivers views extending to Darwin. Of course uncovering these hidden gems can prove tricky for tourists, so why not recruit royalty to lead the way?

On my trip I was lucky enough to rustle up the services of prince Pae Nope, who cites a regal lineage that dates back to the 16th century. With a tiered administrative and social structure defining the culture here, it's a little confusing to decipher the hierarchy. But it goes something like this: West Timor is split into five legislative districts, within which there are a total of 18 kingdoms. Each kingdom is made up of smaller villages run by chiefs, who answer to the king. Nope's kingdom, Amanuban, is West

Timor's largest, spanning more than 2,000 square kilometers and containing 118 villages and 150 clans. His father was Amanuban's 13th king and his eldest brother, the successor, served until his death two years ago. The current monarch is Nope's half brother who will likely be followed by another relative instated by the clan chiefs. In general, Nope says every king must possess a maternal royal bloodline and such requisite qualities as "wisdom, charisma, sufficient wealth and knowledge about the kingdom."

Imperial glory aside, Nope notably hosted Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall in the 1990's and is one hell of a tour guide. He ushered us through West Timor's tribal corridors where crimson-stained betel nut smiles greeted us at every turn, and his pedigree opened many gilded doors. The first of these doors opened

two-and-a-half hours from Kupang in Tetaf village near Soe—a launch point into the indigenous interior—where the wizened blind chief of the None warrior clan and his revered midwife spouse welcomed us in a smoke-tinged beehive hut dripping with dried corn and crude wicker baskets. Smudge-faced children appeared from seemingly nowhere to parade us over cracked dirt trails into sacred enclaves holding keys to just some of the mysteries of this non-industrialized civilization. Later we even shared tea with a chief beneath mounted monkey skulls that whispered of a headhunting warrior past.

Further north in Oelekam village, we were given a crash course in less menacing ancient customs by a Lasfeto clan cultural attaché who, clad in traditional *ikat* (sarong) with bell-encircled ankles, proudly demonstrated time-honored dance moves. Within the hallowed walls of Nope's ancestral palace in Niki Niki, Amanuban kingdom's cultural hub, the present queen swathed us in intricate multi-hued hand-woven garments known as *buna*. Set on sprawling grounds where generations of noble family members are buried amid thickets of banyan trees, this palace bears no resemblance to Europe's imposing royal residences, but has an ornate charm all its own.

It is this living taste of the past, the tang of the undiscovered, the inimitable culture, and scenic splendors unique to West Timor that beckon the intrepid traveler. So channel your inner swashbuckler and visit before the masses uncover its many treasures.

Getting There

Daily direct flights from Denpasar, Bali, or one-stop flights from Jakarta on Garuda, Lion Air/Wings and Merpati Nusantara. TransNusa, Citilink and Sriwijaya also fly. Indonesia's national shipping company Pelni operates passenger ships throughout the archipelago (pelni.com).

Guides

It's possible to explore West Timor on your own, but remote locations and 14 dialects make hiring a multi-lingual guide advisable. For the royal treatment, contact Pae Nope. westtimortor@yahoo.com; 62-82/3391-11937; 62-81/3391-41576; US\$100 for guide, car and driver per day. +



Clockwise from top: Mounted monkey skulls whisper of a headhunting warrior past; working the loom; typical beehive huts; roof-riding on the bus.



WHERE TO STAY

Hotel La Hazienda

Near Kupang's airport, this homey new hotel offers free airport shuttles and reasonably priced transport into the city. *Jln. Adi Sucipto, Penfui, Kupang*; 62-380/800-4333; hotellahazienda.com; doubles from US\$35.

Hotel On The Rock

Stylish 84 room sea-view property in Kupang is the newest addition to the Prasanthi Hotel chain. *Jln. Raya Timor No.2 Kelapa Lima, Kupang*; 62-380/858-6100; ontherockhotel.com; doubles from US\$55.

Hotel Bahagia II

Soe's most comfortable option features fan or air-conditioned rooms and on-site restaurant. *2 Jln. Gajah Mada 55, Soe*; 62-38/821-095; doubles from US\$30.

Grand Royal Home Stay

The newest facility in Kefamenanu offers pleasant fan or air-conditioned rooms. *Jln. Kartini, Kefamenanu*; grandroyalhomestay.com; 62-38/831-880; doubles from US\$25.

Alor Eco Dive Resort

62-38/821-154; alor-divers.com; six-night diver packages US\$1,334 per person.

