

Brave New World

The world's newest nation, East Timor is serving up some of the planet's hottest diving and thrill-seeking

Words by **John Stafford-Mills**,
photos by **Daniel J. Groshong**



below A view from Dili's spectacular hotel grounds, with a view of a village that once belonged to the king of Suai

above A bird's-eye view of the city of Dili

WHEN A BUNCH OF US decided to try somewhere different for our annual offshore dive trip, my buddy casually mentioned a friend he wouldn't mind visiting in East Timor. Waterfalls. Rainforests. Beaches that stretch for miles. "And the diving's good too," he said matter of factly.

"Hang on," said one of our wimpier friends, as he coughed into his beer. "Isn't there a war going on there?"

While that was true five years ago, you could've said that about half the planet. Now, travelers are discovering the world's newest nation offers undemanding, beautiful diving, set amidst beautiful topside scenery and a fascinating culture.

Understated

Before we arrived in Timor Leste, as it's known locally, we didn't have any idea what to expect. East Timor is, after all, a mere speck on the map of Southeast Asia.

At first glance, Nicolau Lobato International Airport looked like a rural airstrip in Central America. I knew I was in Asia, but it didn't feel like it. I remember thinking the pilot must have got us lost as we came in to land; there didn't seem to be an airport here, let alone a capital city, and the trees dwarfed the lowly buildings along the airstrip.

We didn't actually see the sleepy little capital, Dili, until we had driven into it. East Timor has charm in abundance, especially in Dili. Although the locals are friendly, creature comforts are rare. There are certainly no purpose-built dive resorts, and on much of the island there are no actual hotels — although we could usually get our hands on an ice-cold flintang beer. The whole place was remarkable for being unremarkable, if that makes any sense. That is, until, we went diving.



above The world's best scuba divers flock to East Timor for its reefs and a variety of life



Dry Land

A drive to Com and Tutuala is worth doing not only for the diving, but to enjoy the scenery and the rural beauty of East Timor. The coastal road from Dili to Baucau, the country's "second city," was spectacular in parts, with some exhilarating hairpins. As well as the occasional suicidal cow or goat careering into the road in front of us, we also had to negotiate the enormous potholes that looked capable of swallowing a horse.

For such a small area (the entire country is only 35,000 sq km), the landscape is unbelievably varied. In a few short hours we passed through the dry mountainous coastline of southern Spain, to the paddy fields of Indochina, via the plains of the Serengeti, with herds of water buffalo grazing in the distance. There was even one patch that looked like the island in *Jurassic Park*, complete with rows of tall pine trees and giant cacti shooting up all around.

As unusual as it is, from anywhere in East Asia or Australasia, East Timor is right on the doorstep – only 400 km of the Timor Sea separates the island from Australia. Getting there is easy, a point many divers and adventure seekers are starting to discover. The best advice I have is to pack your bags and go now. Be one of the pioneering few, and you just might be rewarded with your most adventurous, satisfying dive trip ever. »

EAST TIMOR NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE: The most popular way to fly to East Timor is with the Indonesian domestic airline Merpati (merpati.co.id), via Bali's international airport. Alternatively, you can take Air North (airnorth.com.au) from Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory. Both fly daily to each direction.

ENTRY VISA REQUIREMENTS: Lesser travelers are required to pay US\$30 for a visa on arrival, which allows a 90-day stay. An extension of 30 days will cost an additional US\$30 at the Migration Department in Dili.

LANGUAGES: The official language is Tetum, spoken by eight out of 10 East Timorese. Indonesian is also widely spoken, with a small number of Portuguese and English speakers in the main towns.

BEST TIME TO DIVE: East Timor's year is divided into two distinct seasons. The wet season runs from December through April, and is best avoided, especially if you intend on exploring the interior. The best time to visit is the dry season, when rainfall is minimal and conditions are good, both on land and in the water. Diving is possible year-round, but the dry season is best for visibility – up to 30m. Water temperatures hover around 28°C.

CURRENCY: The official currency is the US dollar, although East Timor does not issue its own coinage, with each denomination of equal size to its American counterpart. Credit cards are only of use in the more expensive restaurants and hotels in Dili, very rarely elsewhere. There are several banks and ATMs in Dili.

DIVE WITH: [Dili Dive \(dilibdive.com\)](http://Dili Dive (dilibdive.com)), [Dive Timor Lemosan \(divetimor.com\)](http://Dive Timor Lemosan (divetimor.com)),

[Explore Dive \(exploretimor.com\)](http://Explore Dive (exploretimor.com)), [Freeflow \(freeflowdiving.com\)](http://Freeflow (freeflowdiving.com))

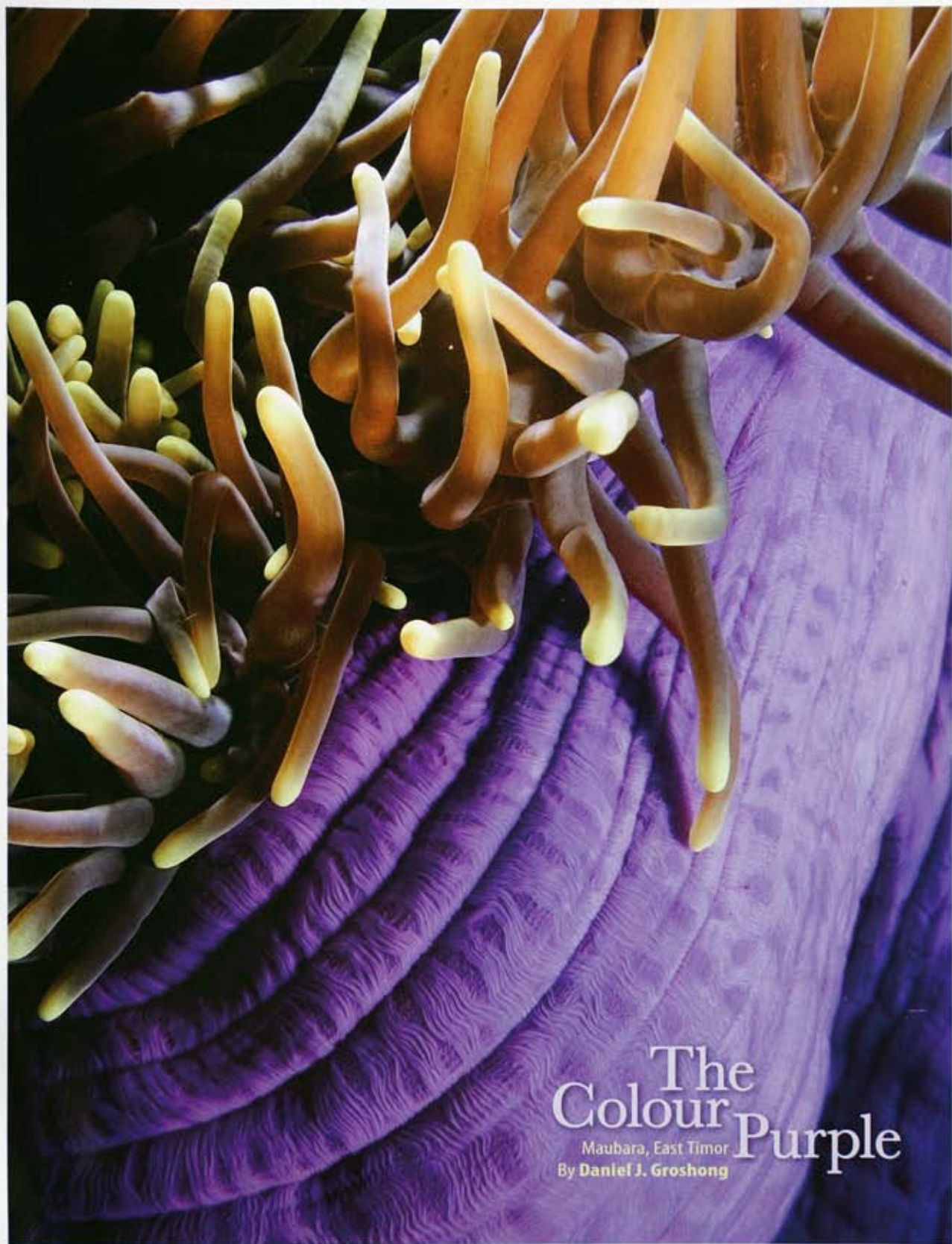
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: [Discover Dili \(discoverdili.com\)](http://Discover Dili (discoverdili.com))

If your plan is to venture out of Dili and dive further along the coast – especially if you want to get as far east as Tutuala and Jato – you're going to need a 4WD vehicle. There are a number of hire companies in Dili, all about the same price, with a typical car costing roughly US\$70 a day. Whatever you hire, be careful when moving inland from the main coastal roads – the "roads" are in terrible condition. Public transport around the island is provided by buses or minibuses, but these can be highly uncomfortable and not really practical if you're hauling dive equipment around.

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above View from above of Ilbar Bay and Fala' Tolo (Three Coastal Lakes), near the capital of Dili. The international airport is visible on the horizon in the upper left.

left A scene with an almost mystical light of sunset. The sky over Com provides an epic backdrop for two fishermen working their nets.



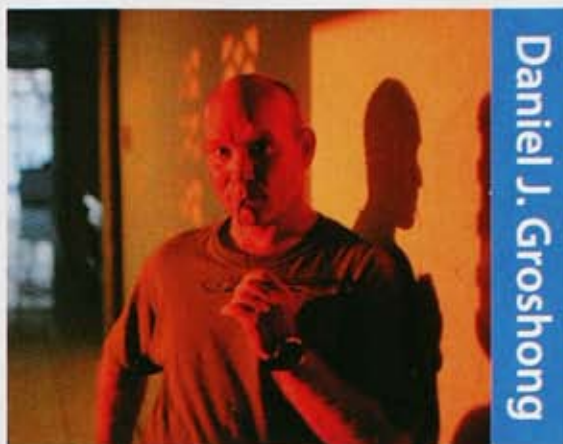
The
Colour Purple

Maubara, East Timor
By Daniel J. Groshong



John Stafford-Mills

John Mills is a keen traveller and (aspiring) travel photographer. When not working in public affairs consultancy in London, he grabs every opportunity to explore and, where possible, dive the far corners of the planet – of which East Timor (“Brave New World,” page 38) certainly is, if you happen to live in England. The trip was organised with four friends from the BSAC section based at London’s Royal Automobile Club. A second trip to Timor is definitely in the cards. In the meantime, John is just getting back into the swing of things in London after a successful excursion to Central America, diving Costa Rica’s famed Isla de Cano.



Daniel J. Groshong

A native of America’s Pacific Northwest, Daniel J. Groshong has been a professional photographer since 1986, covering some of the biggest news stories from Asia to Africa and Latin America. A veteran of seven armed conflicts around the world, Groshong has photographed crises in Somalia, Afghanistan and East Timor (“Brave New World,” page 38). “When I made my first visit to Timor-Leste in 1999, it was a difficult and dangerous time for this small country. I was there to photograph the referendum for independence. Despite the shadow that hung over the land, I couldn’t help but notice the natural beauty of the island and the strength of its people.” Indeed, he stayed on for several years, and recently published *Timor-Leste: Land of Discovery*, a coffee table book that is the product of more than 700 rolls of film and more than 15,000 digital images, including photographs taken during nearly 200 underwater dives. “Despite pouring my heart and soul into it, this book remains a mere slice of what the country and its people have to offer,” said Groshong. “There is a natural beauty that can only exist in a country that is untouched by the world’s lust for natural resources.” *Tayophoto.com*