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Southeast Asia

*Curt Gabrielson, a science teacher and an Institute Fellow, is observing the re-establishment of education in East Timor.*

## Changing Places in East Timor

By Curt Gabrielson

DECEMBER 1, 2001

BAUCAU, East Timor –“Every cloud has a silver lining.” This adage has been turned on its head for me here in East Timor. It has come to express the grim reality that, no matter how pleasant the good cloud and its kind shade, it is sure to pass and leave the way clear for the evil sun to blast forth mercilessly, thrusting its cruel radiation down the short path through the tropical atmosphere to scorch all it touches.

Even in the shade, the wet heat here makes me feel like a damp rag. While invisible, it is a thick, heavy, prickly substance that fetters my body and mind. In the heat, minor physical tasks require enormous energy and fortitude, and mental work drags forward slowly like an anchor pulling through dense seaweed. Sweat pours from my body to drench my clothing and hair. More than once I have looked closely at the pores on my hands because I thought I could feel the sweat actually spurting out. As I sit bent over the desk, my shirt is stuck like a stamp to my back and rushing rivers of sweat course down my chest and stomach. The papers before me are stained with salty blotches where my arms have touched them. The computer keyboard has shallow pools of brine where my wrists rest.

The rains have already come to East Timor this year. Here they come stalking, creeping around the mountains, blackening the afternoon sky after a noontime of excruciating heat, then calling out with thunder and lightning and dumping life-giving waters onto the land. The land cannot lap it up fast enough, and any minor gully or impression becomes a river or pond. With the downpour come cool



*Dili, surrounded on three sides by high mountains, simmering in the December heat.*

breezes, but usually the storm is over within an hour, and by mid-evening the heat is on the upswing again.

The East Timorese know well the patterns and variability of the heat and rains. They plant corn at the first sign of rain, be it October, November or December. As in my native Missouri, corn requires a season of wetness followed by a season of heat. Last year the rains didn't come to Dili until the first week of January and the corn crop was a failure. But the cassava did ok, and people were not hungry.

While the seasons are well known, who knows why they are as they are? I've been told by other internationals that the proximity to Australia governs weather here on the island of Timor; something about moist air from the Indian Ocean drifting across the Australian continent, which then tosses the moisture left over up to Timor like the government of Australia tosses aid money. Others say it is a variation of the same monsoon system that washes all of South and Southeast Asia.

Whatever the case, Dili is hot. Locals love to say it: "*Dili manas.*" They'll list other towns that are cold — Maubisse, Ermera, Bobonaro — and then conclude again with, "Dili is hot."

They often ask me, "Is it hot where you come from?" Well, it is hot for a few months and then it gets cold. "Cold like Maubisse? Maubisse is cold." No, cold like the inside of a freezer. Everything is frozen, the earth is hard as a rock and you can walk on top of the ponds. You have to wear thick, thick clothing and when the clouds come it doesn't rain, it snows! I love it!

I have the feeling they would not love it, in the same way that I do not like the heat. I am convinced that the metabolism of local people is entirely different from mine. For example, I now teach in a classroom that is not on the air-conditioned wing of the university, and many times I have strolled into the room to find 30 hot bodies waiting for me in the small space with not a window opened and the ceiling fans hanging motionless. I can feel the wave of heat across my face as I walk through the door, but as I stand staring at the students in bewilderment, I can see that the heat just does not register with them. There is not a single drop of sweat glistening in the room aside from the rapidly soaked body of the foreign teacher.

It makes sense. These students' ancestors have been living in this climate for thousands of years. Of course they are accustomed to it. Likewise, my ancestors made their homes on the snowy slopes of Sweden and the brisk, blowy bluffs of Britain. The insipid conclusion I have come to over and over in the midst of a sweltering afternoon is that I am accustomed to that, not this.

After a bit of traveling I've come to realize that, in terms of heat as well as many other factors, nearly every place in East Timor is more likeable than Dili. There is a theory that the East Timorese of old conned the Portuguese colonizers into thinking that the heat hole of Dili was the best place in the country, and thus kept them confined and sedated there. At any rate, my partner Pamela and I have had thoughts of moving from Dili since we first came to East Timor. There are plenty of reasons beyond escaping the heat. For one thing, Dili is a poor representation of East Timor. As in nearly every country I have visited, the capital is strange. Most of the country bears little resemblance to the capital, and people in the capital live differently. If I want to gain insight into East Timorese culture and society, I can't spend all my time in the capital. Also, Pamela's work involves popular education and information gathering. This must be done in all areas, not just in the capital. Over the past two years of UN rule, the country's government and public services have been centralized in Dili. Many organizations in Dili never act beyond the city limits, and even out in the districts some organizations seem more focused on events in Dili than on those in their own community.

We chose Baucau<sup>1</sup> as the base for our second year in East Timor. Baucau is the second largest city in East Timor and boasts the largest airport in the country, a Catholic Diocese complete with Bishop, a Teacher-Training College set up by the Diocese, and easy access to the three other eastern districts of Lautem, Viqueque, and Manatuto. We now rent a tiny house in Baucau, and still make frequent trips to Dili.

We have been to Baucau many times. Connecting Baucau and the capital is a reasonably good-quality, sealed road that stretches 131 kilometers (according to Indonesian-made road markers) through widely varying scenery. First out of Dili is the port town of Hera, then another flatland town named Metinaro, where the East Timorese military, called the Defense Force of East Timor, resides. Then the road hugs the walls of several mountains that come sloping sharply down to the sea. A bus with a notoriously wild driver hit a Filipino UN army truck last month and 14 people died in the roll to the sea. The spot where the bus left the road is now piled with flowers and stone markers. When I stopped to look down, I found it astonishing that anyone had lived: the bus looks like a smashed beer can in the sand hundreds of feet below. The waves now wash over the wreckage, returning it slowly to the earth whence it came.

When the steep mountain slopes have been negotiated, a large river is crossed and the city of Manatuto appears. A fishing center and trailhead to many inland villages, Manatuto was destroyed, terribly, in 1999. I was told that even the chicken and pig sheds were burned.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Baucau is now often spelled Baukau, as part of the standardization of the Tetum language. As C is a redundant letter, it not used in the writing scheme for modern Tetum.

<sup>2</sup>See my first newsletter for more information on East Timor's painful recent history.



*Mighty snake hunters of Vemasse*

Now it is fighting its way back to life. Just past Manatuto you can buy freshly refined sea salt in palm-leaf baskets from a number of family operations.

Then the terrain changes again to short bumpy hills, dusty dry and thorny, as the town of Laleia approaches. Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao, East Timor's beloved guerilla leader, was born in this harsh environment, and locals tell us the people are as rough and stubborn as their land. The town itself perches at the base of a jutting rock cliff with stunning views of a barren river valley and the lush hills to the east.

Before those lush hills comes the village of Vemasse. The forests here have been fought back, and now surround a highly productive patchwork of rice paddy. Once we stopped amidst the paddy fields where a group of kids was standing near a long segment of thick rope stretched across the road. The rope turned out to be a seven-foot-long dead snake that had more meat on it than many of the fish people eat here. The kids said no one would eat it — it was bad luck — and were just interested in seeing it run over again.

Baucau is on the northeast edge of a high plateau. To reach the top of

the plateau from the west requires winding one's way up the thickly forested slopes of Bucoli. We have good friends in Bucoli, and we are looking forward to seeing more of them, as they are less than a half-hour away from our place in Baucau.<sup>3</sup>

When the top of the Bucoli hills is reached, the rugged-rocky flats of the Baucau plateau come into view. The earth is a jumble of stones, crevasses and sparse, hearty plants. Very few houses are visible before coming to the Baucau airport, and after the airport there is another blank stretch leading the unsuspecting to think the barren plateau will continue to the sea. But then, a sudden curve leads over the edge of a limestone cliff, and the steep

road winds down past vine-covered caves and overhanging rock walls into the rich green oasis of Baucau.

Baucau is a city rushing with water. An enormous spring erupts in the center of "Old Town," flows north past shops and houses, then drops off down a series of short waterfalls and stony streambeds four miles and one thousand feet of elevation to the sea. The town was



*Water cascades from the blue and white pump station to a wading pool. People come to bathe in the cascades, making the purity of the pool questionable.*

<sup>3</sup> My 10<sup>th</sup> newsletter (October 2001) contains more information and pictures from Bucoli.



*Water pipes slither over the rocky plateau on their way to the upper reservoir, then on to New Town. Here, stones have been piled up to create fences that are meant to keep foraging goats out of fields.*

founded on this spring and still relies heavily on it today. Kids swim in the pools surrounding the spring, and small shops sell vegetables under the soothing shade of several enormous banyan trees, which take their water from the spring as well.

Astride the main spring outlet stands a pumping station and the roar of the diesel engine within can be heard. You see, people were not content to live at or below the level of this paradisiacal spring. They built back up the hill and onto the lip of the plateau, farther east, where there is not a drop of water and wells dug 200 feet deep yield nothing. Thus, the pump station quite literally pumps life into the upper city, called "New Town." There, in scattered houses and an Indonesian-constructed housing development, lives half the population of Baucau.

Pamela and I had a choice to make when we were house-hunting in Baucau. In New Town there is an an-



*Old Town Baucau, from the limestone cliff above*

tenna that provides mobile phone service to all those within its site. This is obviously a key item for maintaining contact with Dili and the rest of the world. (No standard phone lines exist outside Dili – the Indonesian military and their militia destroyed them all in 1999.) On the other hand, the pump system is apparently not what it used to be, and water comes up the pipes to New Town only about three times a week for less than an hour. So, we could choose Old Town, overflowing with water but a ten-minute drive away from telephone service, or New Town, with in-house telephone service but little water. Which would you choose?

In the end, a high-school physics teacher that attended a training session I gave earlier this year set us up in a house right next door to his on the outskirts of New Town. Thus we have phone service and built-in good neighbors. The water service has been reasonable — once we bought our two 50-gallon petroleum barrels, cut off the tops, scrubbed them, painted them to discourage rust, got the water department to come put a hole in the supply pipe, and ran a smaller pipe from the hole to a tap near the barrels. When water comes, if we are there, we can usually fill the two barrels and get a start on filling the concrete tank in our bathroom.

Every house in New Town has this barrel system, or slightly fancier plastic or concrete tanks, and every house is equipped with enough scrap sheet metal to channel rain water off its roof and into the barrels if need be. Every homemaker in New Town waits for the water to come and chats with neighbors about when the water might come and how nice the water service used to be in Indonesian times. But one had to pay in those days, and now the water is free. You get what you pay for, I'm led to believe.

With this system it is easy to see how much

water one uses. We use around 40 gallons washing clothes for the week, and approximately 50 gallons every three days for bathing, cooking, and cleaning.

The problems arise when the water doesn't come, or when it comes and no one is around to put it in the barrels.<sup>4</sup> When this happens, we, like everyone else in New Town, have to go down to Old Town to bathe, wash clothes and fetch drinking water. For us it is a breeze, thanks to our car. Without a car, life in New Town gets pretty rough when the water doesn't come.

Another burr under our saddle has been that often the New Town antenna is not working and there is no phone service. Not to worry, there is another antenna at the airport, and a 10-minute drive takes us to a place by the side of the road where we sit and check email and make phone calls. Across the road from this prime communication spot a family lives in a traditional house and works the desolate land. I often wonder what they think



*Pamela checks email near the airport with her mobile phone.*

<sup>4</sup> Those practical-minded readers wondering why I haven't got an automatic system for filling my barrels, rest assured: I'm working on it.

of the steady stream of people, mostly foreigners, coming to this particular road shoulder to talk on the phone and fiddle with their laptops.

Electricity in Baucau has proven to be very reliable, if a bit thin. Everyone gets it from 7:00am to noon or so, and then no one gets it in the afternoon. At 6:00 in the evening either Old Town or New Town gets electricity again, and has it all night until the following noon. The next evening, the other half of the city gets it. As with the water, no one pays yet, and the same Catch-22 situation was explained to me by the folks at the electricity department when they came to hook up our house: all is in disrepair so we can't start people paying, but if people don't start paying we can't afford to make repairs.

It was worth the cost of hooking up our electricity just to watch the electrical worker shinny up the pole. I was expecting a ladder, or some sort of climbing equipment, but the man put on a simple waist harness, strapped his tools and a pipe bracket to the harness, took off his flip-flops and attached them too, then went right up the pole like it was a coconut palm. (Coconut palms often lean a bit, though, making the topside easier to climb, and you can chop footholds into the side.) The man got to the top of the pole then hung on with *one hand* while he calmly removed the bracket from his harness, removed one of the side bolts and its nut, wrapped the bracket around the pole, replaced the bolt and threaded the nut on, tightened both nuts up, then gingerly stepped up onto the bracket, which held solidly. Then he removed his flip-flops from the harness and put them, on one by one, since the bracket had very sharp edges. Only then did he attach himself to the top of the pole with his safety harness. After he made the electrical connection, he performed each operation in reverse, though this time chucking each item to the ground instead of attaching it to the harness again.

A fall would have meant serious injury or death. There are plenty of better, safer ways to do what he did, but he had little choice in his methods, as his boss was standing beside the pole offering critique the entire time. Clearly this worker needs a union.

We were anxious to have light in our house for more than one reason. One primary use would be to increase our effectiveness in doing battle with the various critters residing here with us. We have spiders that could bear-hug a baseball, mobs of ants in all shapes and sizes, ever-present mosquitoes, flies and other winged insects, roly-poly" sow bugs, armored beetles, giant cockroaches, praying mantises, crickets, grasshoppers, tiny wasps of unknown poisonous ability, centipedes of known poisonous ability, and most troubling of all, scorpions.

Pamela was stung by a scorpion in Dili several

months back. As she writhed in pain I searched out and destroyed the guilty creature, fumbled around to find our *Where There Is No Doctor* medical handbook, and read the section on scorpions. Comforting information was sadly lacking — "*Most* scorpions cannot cause death." and "*If* the person is allergic, medical help must be sought immediately." — so we became a bit worried. Pamela described the pain as a thick, rusty nail being driven through her finger, and then said the pain and numbness were moving up her arm, through her shoulder and toward her heart. At this point she asked again if maybe we should go to the doctor, and I can't recall personally, but she says I said I thought maybe it was too late. She allowed later that perhaps a more encouraging response, even if not entirely accurate, would have been more appreciated.

Soon we learned from locals that indeed scorpions rarely ever kill, but the pain is notorious. Pam's arm felt better by the next day, and after a week the numbness in her finger had gone away.

So, when in Baucau we found 13 scorpions in the course of cleaning our house the first day, we were concerned. We have killed about one a day since then, all inside the house. Our neighbor smiles and says, "Be care-



*A small, unwanted visitor. This photo was taken shortly before the scorpion met an untimely death beneath my shoe. The carcass was presently carted away by an army of able ants.*

ful. When the rains come, there will be a lot of scorpions." Apparently one per day is not a lot.

We were pleased to find Baucau has plenty of the familiar *teki* — a tiny, wall-walking, chirping lizard that eat bugs. We encourage teki when we see them, and often ponder if they could take on a scorpion.

Aside from the intense bug situation, another noticeable difference between Baucau and Dili is that Baucau has no industry to speak of. Backyard blacksmiths beat

old truck springs into machetes and iron digging sticks, carpentry and welding shops serve those few rich enough to be in the market for fine wood and metal work, and families make coconut oil and baskets for sale. But no high-capital enterprises exist. Under the cool cathedral of the banyan trees, individuals market splendid, colorful piles of vegetables and fruits produced on the rough terrain nearby, as well as the familiar display of used clothing and cheap consumer goods from Indonesia.

The most significant presence in Baucau seems to be the Diocese. With several of the largest, most ornate buildings in town, the Catholic Church dominates Old Town. A monastery and a convent stand side-by-side near the spring and, as usual, the best schools in town are run by branches of the Catholic Church.

People look nearly the same as people do in Dili, with the exception of the occasional redhead. I haven't found the origin of this pigment, but it makes for quite a double-take on my part. As for the locals' view of us, we are getting used to it. Kids and adults continue to call to us "Mister, Missus!" and then, likely as not, descend into peals of laughter. People continue to mistake me for Jesus.



*The old Portuguese market in Old Town. It was destroyed in 1994 by locals discontent by the overwhelming presence of Indonesian merchants from the island of Sulawesi. It now stands vacant.*

And many times locals speak Portuguese to us, thinking that we are two of the many Portuguese working in East Timor these days.

We chat with our neighbors in the evenings and watch kids playing nearby. Much of their chatter is in Makasai, the dominant language here. It has been good to find that most folks here can speak Tetum with us, but vaguely frustrating to find we often can't understand communications between locals. We are cut off from the great insight that is gained by listening in on people's idle chitchat. We vow to learn Makasai, but this could be easier said than done with no dictionaries, no cassettes, not even any standardized writing scheme. Plus, I am still working on Bahasa Indonesia and Portuguese.

What's more, there are several other languages hovering on the edges of Baucau: Makalero, Naweti, Galole, Waimo'a, Fatuluku to name a few. Some of these languages overlap, but some are from completely different roots. It is a sobering thought to realize that a lifetime may not be enough to learn the languages of East Timor.<sup>5</sup>

For now, we are content to be working and teaching with Tetum in Baucau, and learning as much as we can in our



*Pamela and I on the front porch under the orchid.*

<sup>5</sup> I describe the fascinating language situation in East Timor in my third newsletter of March 2001.



*The glorious view out the back door of the Santa Antonio Catholic Secondary School includes old Portuguese ruins and the calm waters of the Wetar Strait. On a clear day the island of Wetar is visible, 90 kilometers to the north.*

short time here. The coolness of the altitude and different climate reenergizes me; inspiration comes easily. Both Pamela and I are full of plans and ideas for the coming year, and friends from Dili are lining up to visit us.

From our front porch, we can see magnificent cumulonimbus slowly building and churning in the afternoon sky before the rain arrives. On nights with no electricity we can watch the southern constellations creep across the heavens. Scorpio and Sagittarius no longer sulk along the horizon as they did in Missouri – they strut proudly through zenith. We can see both the Andromeda galaxy and the Magellanic Clouds, reminding us once again that we are truly standing on the waist of the world. Life on the equator is still new and different to us, and we are happy to be here living it. □



*If this were your field, how would you go about farming it? The topsoil is thin and rocky, but the locals get a crop of corn and another of cassava from it within a year. This field has just been planted with corn, as the rains have just begun. The bushy green plants are goat food, and can be burned for firewood.*

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