

## Considerations for marketing Timor-Leste as a tourist destination

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In a recent speech on tourism, Prime Minister Rui de Araújo (2015) argued that the government of Timor-Leste is ‘committed to breathing new life into this sector so as to improve the socio-economic standard of our people.’ However although sustainable and socially responsible tourism has been a priority in Timor-Leste since independence (Cabasset-Semedo 2009, 216), annual tourist figures remain low. While many factors contribute to this, one major impediment is the image of Timor-Leste as a ‘dangerous place’, as purported by the travel advisory warnings of many developed nations (Carlos and Carlos 2011). The current DFAT warning for Australians in Timor-Leste is to ‘exercise a high degree of caution... because of the uncertain security situation’ (smartraveller.gov.au 2015). Former President Ramos-Horta claims this is ‘blatantly and maliciously misleading’, given the country has been peaceful and stable since 2008 with a very low incidence of violent crime (Ramos-Horta 2015).

For many post-conflict destinations, image can be impacted by negative stereotypes and prejudices (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012, 89) created over many years and reinforced in the public mind by sensationalised media coverage (Avraham and Ketter 2013, 146). The image of a nation as ‘politically unstable’ can become an institutionalised barrier to tourism development, regardless of whether perceptions are worse than reality (Novelli et al. 2012, 1461). To date it has proved very difficult for Timor-Leste to overcome its negative and outdated image.

For negatively viewed nations, marketing is seen as vital in repairing post-conflict image, as it emphasises the three R’s: recovery, rebuilding, and re-imagining (Volcic et al. 2013, 729). For Timor-Leste, marketing the country for tourism could not only promote the nation as a beautiful and peaceful destination, but in doing so, counterbalance the persistent negative stereotypes and replace the past media coverage with new and positive associations. This in turn can help grow a much-wanted tourism industry that can create jobs, build businesses, create income for national and local economics, improve regional economic imbalances (Timor-Leste-Government 2011, 141) and reduce poverty (Araújo 2015). To date marketing and promotional attempts in Timor-Leste have been fragmented. A ‘Turismo Timor-Leste’ logo was developed by a Portuguese agency in 2005, though lacked stakeholder consultation in its design and is now infrequently and inconsistently used. In 2011, the government invested in tourism marketing when a former Miss Australia controversially secured a lucrative tourism contract (Whyte 2011, 26), however this yielded minimal results.

The *Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*, the most recent planning document to date for tourism in Timor-Leste, insists that: “an international tourist marketing strategy will be developed to promote Timor-Leste as a preferred destination for travel” (Timor-Leste Government 2011, 149), however it fails to detail the specifics of the Timor-Leste product and the implications for marketing these attributes internationally. Given marketing is about promoting the ‘authenticity of a unique place’ (Morgan et al., 2003, 287), a cursory understanding of a destination’s strengths as ‘tropical waters rich in marine life, white sand beaches, spectacular mountain ranges’ (Timor-Leste Government 2011, 141) will not suffice. While these attributes are undoubtedly part of the Timor-Leste tourism product, they are not sufficiently nuanced to differentiate the destination from its competitors.

Furthermore, tourism promotion is essentially the packaging of imagined people, places and experiences (Rogal 2012, 49) that propels tourists into illusion, fantasy, and seduction (Urry 2002). Tourism marketing, if not sensitively developed, risks reinforcing historically embedded colonial myths (Amoamo 2007, 456). Therefore, a consultative and complex understanding of the nation’s environmental, cultural and historic attributes is essential, to avoid commodifying the tourist product and stereotypically representing the nation of Timor-Leste.

This article therefore presents research conducted from 2013 to 2015 with key tourism stakeholders within Timor-Leste. The purpose of the research was to better understand the nation’s attributes from which it could be then possible to develop a strategy for tourism marketing and assist the government in promoting Timor-Leste.

## Methodology

A total of 56 tourism stakeholders in Timor-Leste were consulted as part of this research. Interviews were qualitative and semi-structured with most lasting between one and one and a half hours. Purposive sampling was used to ensure accurate representation of stakeholders from all tourism sectors and geographic representation across Timor-Leste. In total the study comprised stakeholders from government, NGOs, education and the private sector, which included tour operators, hotel owners and airlines. Seniority and a strong understanding of an organisation was a leading factor in selecting a research participant, the only exception being tourism students who are considered 'emerging' tourism leaders.

### *1. Natural assets*

It is not surprising that as a tropical island, boasting beaches, marine life, rainforests and rugged mountain ranges, the natural environment is a crucial selling point for Timor-Leste. Nearly 90% of all stakeholders interviewed named 'nature' as a core strength of the Timor-Leste tourism 'product'. This supports recent research conducted by the Asia Foundation, which found that 90% of tourists to Timor-Leste participate in activities relating to the country's biodiversity and natural environment (Rajalingam 2014, 8).

However, while nature-based tourism is important for emerging destinations (Zhao and Li 2006, 207), questions have been raised about its sustainability. As Jansen (2008, 136) argues, a significant increase in tourist numbers can eventually destroy the natural environments that were the tourist attraction in the first place. Thus care should be taken to determine the type and number of tourists Timor-Leste wishes to attract, particularly given that, at present, there is limited government policy surrounding the management of natural assets.

One natural asset that presents an important marketing opportunity for Timor-Leste is its marine environment. The nation lies within the 'Coral Triangle', one of the world's most bio-diverse areas of coral and reef fish (Teutsch 2008, 4). Not only are the reefs bio-diverse, they are also largely unspoiled, given that for decades tourism to Timor-Leste has been underexploited (Rohner 2006, 113). The sea here is unique; the channel here is unique, and there's a current that's keeping reefs at constant temperatures, so we're not seeing sea-warming impact as much ... They're finding biodiversity here is very special; it's one of the richest places in the coral triangle (Interview with author, Baucau, December 2013).

A 2009 report into the marine ecotourism potential in Timor-Leste found there to be 'globally significant marine wildlife' and coral reefs that are 'highly accessible, intact and characterised by high marine diversity' (Edyvane et al. 2009, 18). Since Timor-Leste's north coast sits on the edge of the Wetar Strait, a marine trench approximately 3km deep, it provides a corridor for migrating whales, dolphins, turtles, tuna, sailfish and stingrays. Similarly grazing dugongs, mantas and eagle rays can be found in waters just east of Dili (Edyvane et al. 2009, 34). It's the only place in the world where the species of the northern hemisphere are co-habitating with the species of the southern hemisphere (Interview with author, Dili, November 2013).

Unfortunately, the marine environment is also extremely fragile. Reefs can be easily damaged if tourism numbers, and therefore fishing and diving boats, begin to increase. As Zhao and Li (2006) argue, loose policy in third world nations around nature-based activities, such as scuba diving, poaching and touring ecologically sensitive zones, can allow multinationals to take advantage and over-promote such forms of tourism, despite their long-term environmental impact (Zhao and Li 2006, 207). Once the tourism product has been exploited, the destination's residents are left with little alternative but to suffer the consequences of bad environmental practices (Chok et al. 2007, 154). Therefore, tourism promotion must be accompanied by strong government policy to protect the marine environment and determine the type and amount of tourism that is permitted.

For a small island state such as Timor-Leste, the beach is undoubtedly an important natural asset. The Asia Foundation survey revealed that 'beach leisure' is the most common activity undertaken by tourists whilst in-country (Rajalingam 2014, 10). However, although the government currently markets 'white sand beaches' in tourism brochures and the Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 (Timor-Leste Government 2011, 141), the reality is that these beaches are the exception and difficult to reach. If you are looking for nice beaches, this is not perhaps the best country. Because most are not white sand

beaches, they're not really black but brown. And especially Europeans they don't like this – even with clear waters (Interview with author, Dili, October 2014).

Furthermore, from a marketing perspective, promoting islands solely based on 'sun, sea and sand', (otherwise known as 3S marketing) is risky. Beaches are not unique to a particular nation (Harrison-Walker 2011, 137) and can render island nations as indistinguishable from one another (Morgan et al. 2003, 286) leading to easy substitution if natural disasters or political problems occur (Pratt 2013, 607).

Fortunately, Timor-Leste has an opportunity to diverge from developing a stereotypical representation of a 'tropical island paradise' (D'Hautesserre 2011, 383) and distinguish itself from other island destinations. Indeed, many tourists now seek more than 'passive sun-lust', preferring education and experiencing the cultural and historical attributes of a destination (Poon 1993, 114; Lewis-Cameron and Roberts 2010, 13). Given many of Timor-Leste's natural attractions are also rich in heritage, a depiction of the depth and story behind each asset can provide a more compelling basis for marketing as opposed to just images of white sand beaches.

While the coastal and marine environments are often viewed as the core natural attributes of island destinations, Timor-Leste also boasts a stunning in-land environment with tall mountain peaks. Its tallest mountain, Mt. Ramelau, stands at 2,963m (CIA 2015), making it taller than Mt. Kosciuszko in Australia and, at the time of Portuguese occupation, the highest peak in any Portuguese colony (Ramos-Horta 1987). These mountain ranges also hold important historical significance, having sheltered Australian soldiers during the Second World War and resistance fighters during the Indonesian occupation. Developing a 'war-time' hike presents an opportunity for tourism promotion in Timor-Leste. In Papua New Guinea, for example, wartime history has 'captured the Australian imagination' and every year five thousand Australians walk the mentally and physically challenging Kokoda Track (Department of Veterans' Affairs 2015).

While these natural attractions provide an important attribute in the Timor-Leste product, many of the natural sites are little known, hard to reach and inadequately developed for tourists. The Morobo Hot Springs, for example, could be ideally promoted for tourism, given its beauty and historic significance, however although the Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 suggests tourists access the springs 'by travelling along a spectacular mountain road' (Timor-Leste-Government 2011, 149) in reality the terrain is treacherous and there is limited signage outside Dili.

At the same time, from a marketing perspective, the ruggedness of the Timor-Leste landscape is also part of its attraction, as it will appeal to adventurous and intrepid tourists. Target market selection will be important to ensure the right demographic is approached and tourists are not disappointed on arrival if attractions are difficult to reach. Stakeholders agreed that since Timor-Leste is a nation of only 14,874 km<sup>2</sup> (CIA 2015) one of its strengths lies in the diversity that it offers within a relatively small area. Tourists can experience a national landscape including beaches, mountains and rainforests, without having to travel long distances. As one stakeholder put it: "The selling point is that it's like a mosaic of experiences this country. It's not just one thing" (interview with author, Atauro, November 2013). Another stakeholder commented: "It's variety in a small package" (interview with author, Dili, September 2014).

## *2. Culture*

Culture is one of Timor-Leste's most valuable attributes and presents an important opportunity for marketing the nation. The Asia Foundation survey revealed that more than half of departing tourists surveyed had experienced cultural activities whilst visiting Timor-Leste and 97% rated the experience as enjoyable (Rajalingam 2014, 11). It is not simply the culture of Timor-Leste that may be fascinating for tourists, but also the depth of spirituality and connection Timorese have to their cultural traditions. It's that relationship with their earth, the lulik and with the spirit and the balance of society that I think is really interesting. There's a mystery here, a depth, a spirituality, which not many tourists get to experience (Interview with author, Dili, December 2013).

Timor-Leste is an ideal place for travellers looking to connect with indigenous culture and communities and to enjoy a more native experience – something which is becoming increasingly rare among today's destinations, as so many are suffering from overdevelopment or 'tourism overkill' (Tourtellot 2007, 108). Developing cultural tourism could help also celebrate Timor-Leste's cultural

traditions and artifacts (Dutra et al. 2011, 271) and lead to greater awareness of, and pride in, the nation's history and tradition (Engelhardt 2005, 177).

At the same time, there are risks involved in promoting indigenous culture. MacCannell (1973) argues that the search for cultural 'authenticity' is a key motivation for many tourists visiting developing nations. However, this often creates a sense of 'staged authenticity' where cultural products are made to look authentic by focusing on pre-conceived stereotypes (MacCannell 1973, 596). We don't want cultural shows where they put on a fake ceremony or dance in traditional dress on a stage in front of a group of tourists (Interview with author, Balibo, October 2013). Directing cultural traditions solely towards tourism can result in complex cultural heritage being simplified, homogenised, packaged and in some cases, trivialised (Engelhardt 2005, 177).

Thus in promoting Timor-Leste's culture, local knowledge will be vital. Place marketing commonly fails when developed by creative agencies that merely 'sneak' cultural content in the campaigns with limited understanding of its depth and meaning (Jansen 2008, 136). To avoid promoting a stereotypical and homogenised representation of Timorese culture, stakeholder and community consultation will be essential.

### 3. History

Interlinked with the country's cultural traditions is the long and varied history of Timor-Leste. Timorese history comprises a number of 'stories', which are important and unique attributes of the nation that could be promoted to potential tourists. We tell our guests stories as we go around the country – the big stories are the traditional stories of the kingdoms, the colonial story, the WW2 story, the Indonesian invasion and occupation story, the UN story, and now what people always contemplate is the present and future story (Interview with author, Dili, November 2013). The colonial 'story' began in the early 1500s when Dominican Friars established a settlement in Lifau, in what is now the enclave of Oecussi (Kingsbury 2009). Although Portugal contributed little in the way of development (Guterres 2007) Portuguese food, language, arts and architecture are very much infused throughout the cultural landscape of Timor-Leste. As one respondent explained: "Timor-Leste is a little bit of Europe in Asia" (interview with author, Dili, November 2013).

Interestingly, during the early years of independence, more recent history was seen as undesirable for tourism promotion. One respondent explained that, when developing early marketing materials, "we never mentioned the struggle" (interview with author, Dili, November 2013). This was largely to avoid inflating Timor-Leste's negative image, given the country was, and arguably still is, seen as dangerous and war-torn. However, the Ministry's latest brochure features the Santa Cruz cemetery, as well as the two museums: the *Chega!* exhibition, as part of the CAVR archives, and the *Resistance Museum*.

We felt it could be now considered history, rather than what happened last year. Not ancient history, living history, but history nevertheless and a tourism asset (Interview with author, Dili, November 2013). However, in promoting historical assets there is the risk of commodifying an understanding of the past or creating historical tourism as just a means to profit from tragedy and pain (Volcic et al., 2013, 730). Further, while historic sites may be appealing and interesting to tourists, it may be difficult for locals to 're-live' the violence through promotion or to see traumatic events simplified into attractions for tourists. For others, historical tourism may instigate 'animosity stemming from old wounds' (Novelli et al. 2012, 1451). Thus stakeholder and government input will be vital, so that the people of Timor-Leste can determine how they wish to present 'the struggle' and the extent to which they are comfortable with painful histories being retold and promoted for tourism.

Stakeholders also suggested it is not just the history of events that could be promoted for tourism, but the strength and resilience of the people who survived this history. Indeed, the spirited people of Timor-Leste, while not a tourism 'asset' themselves, are an important part of the Timor-Leste story. How can such a beautiful place become shelter for a group of guerrillas? How can such a small island resist 24 years with a big country like Indonesia? (Interview with author, Aileu, December 2013). Indeed, it is also the history of resilience that many stakeholders suggested makes Timor-Leste so special.

### 4. Unspoiled & Undiscovered

Timor-Leste has the advantage of being a new destination, largely undiscovered by most tourists. For intrepid travellers, destinations such as Bali and Thailand may be becoming over-crowded and

commercialised, thus Timor-Leste provides an ideal alternative. It's difference that attracts people. Some of the people have travelled the world, and its like they've run out of everywhere else and this is where they want to visit (Interview with author, Dili, November 2013).

Promoting the angle of 'unspoiled' and selling the country *as is*, also has the advantage of attracting tourism *right now*, avoiding spending money on tourism infrastructure and development. In doing so, this avoids the negative consequences of infrastructure development for the purpose of tourism, such as the displacement of rural communities (Chok et al. 2007, 157). Promoting 'unspoiled' as an attribute will require the preservation of natural and cultural assets. As one stakeholder argued: "You must preserve what you have. The better you protect it, the more valuable it will become" (Interview with author, Dili, December 2013).

This reinforces the need for government policy to guard against large-scale and potentially intrusive development. Furthermore, it must be remembered that if a marketing campaign is successful, and tourism grows, the idea of Timor-Leste being 'unspoiled' and 'undiscovered' cannot be promoted forever.

## Summary

This paper has discussed the four core destination attributes of Timor-Leste and the implications for promoting these assets for tourism. While each attribute provides an important angle for tourism marketing, the risks and implications of each must be considered alongside the advantages. The paper has argued that Timor-Leste's image is negatively impacted by past violence and that its true situation, as a beautiful and peaceful nation, is still little known. To overcome this negative image and begin to grow tourism, the promotion of the aforementioned assets will be vital. It is only through positive and proactive promotion that nations like Timor-Leste can hope to 'overcome the conflict theme and replace it with more positive narratives' (Harengel and Gbadamosi 2014, 50). This research is part of a larger project that will ultimately develop an understanding of the nation's attributes, personality, competitive environment and target market to develop a tourism marketing strategy and destination brand for Timor-Leste.

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