

Presidential Calling

Huw Kingston was one of many who made the pilgrimage to Timor Leste for the inaugural Tour de Timor...

Would the person who has parked a prime mover in the passenger drop off zone please move it?

These words woke me from a fitful sleep on the floor of Darwin airport. We'd arrived on the night flight from Sydney and were awaiting the dawn hop across the Timor Sea to Timor Leste, the youngest country in the world.

The prime mover behind the Tour de Timor, a 450km five day bike race, was Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and President of Timor Leste, Jose Ramos Horta. He'd decided that a bike event was as good a way as any to show off the beauties of his country and its people. A race that would show that Timor Leste, despite its recent bloody history of occupation and independence, was indeed a safe place to travel and explore.

Timor Leste was a Portuguese colony for over 400 years. When the Portuguese finally left in 1975, the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste was proclaimed. This infant country lasted a mere 10 days. Indonesia invaded the country and remained there for 24 years until a United Nations brokered referendum on 30 August 1999 which voted overwhelmingly for independence. It was the 10th anniversary of this vote that President

Horta wanted to celebrate, and chose to do so by inviting mountain bikers to his country.

► ORDERS FROM ABOVE

And when the President called, nearly 300 riders came with bikes. Well most had their bikes, as an airport mix up left a few back in Darwin. Still, this wasn't such a problem; just call in a UN Hercules transport plane to get the bikes there before the start! This was the beauty of the race; the whole country was behind it along with the UN that maintains a strong presence in Timor Leste, a presence that includes 1,000 Australian troops.

Even Middle Eastern Princesses were in on it. The night time presentations were held under a huge banner proclaiming 'Princess Haya of Jordan - The Personal Sponsor of the Tour De Timor'. Now Princess Haya, who rode in the Sydney Olympics (on a horse), is married to the Emir of Dubai. When the President called she offered substantial funding for the race. This sponsorship, plus other commercial support meant the event had no entry fee and a huge prize pool of \$75,000. Fortunately little or no Timorese money was involved in putting on the race in a country still finding its feet in the world.

Whilst the vast majority of riders were from Australia, there was good representation from Malaysia (with some very strong female riders), Singapore, Indonesia, NZ and a range of expats from across SE Asia. Importantly, 25 Timorese riders had made it through a tough selection process and had been given bikes and gear for the race.

President Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao gave us a warm send off from the Presidential Palace in Dili on a hot

August morning. Day one would take us along the sparsely populated coast eastwards for 131km to Baucau. What seemed like the whole of Dili was out to see us race through their city. Indeed this was a feature of the race; all the residents of Timor Leste were given a holiday on the day the tour came through their district. For most of us mug punters, it was like being in that other 'Tour'; thousands of people lining the roads, waving flags cheering 'Viva Timor Leste!'

► RIDING WOUNDED

With temperatures in the mid 30s, staying hydrated was the main game. The ocean to our left offered cooling temptation as many riders tried to stay in groups to feel the draft. The Tour de Timor (TDT) was a strange hybrid, something akin to a road race on mountain bikes. You couldn't do it on a roadie (both the event rules and the poor nature of the roads made sure of that) and whilst the race spent the majority of time on some form of blacktop, it was this 'some form' that led to plenty of carnage through the week. Groups of riders flying along, wheel to wheel, would fall like skittles as they dropped into potholes deep enough for the bottom never to see light! Vicious holes or skittish gravel would lurk in the shadows on flying descents. The Red Cross were kept busy patching up the troops, sending most into battle the next day. Indeed the end of race presentation was more like a ceremony for the diggers returning from war. Bandaged, broken riders hobbling up to collect medals.

Whilst the first 100km of day one had been pretty flat, it finished with a 500 metre climb in the heat of the day, a climb that took its toll on many. Joy then to arrive in Baucau, a pretty town with



From blacktop to dirt—a regular cause of mishaps in the Tour de Timor
Photo - Zoe Marley

Photo - Fiona Dick



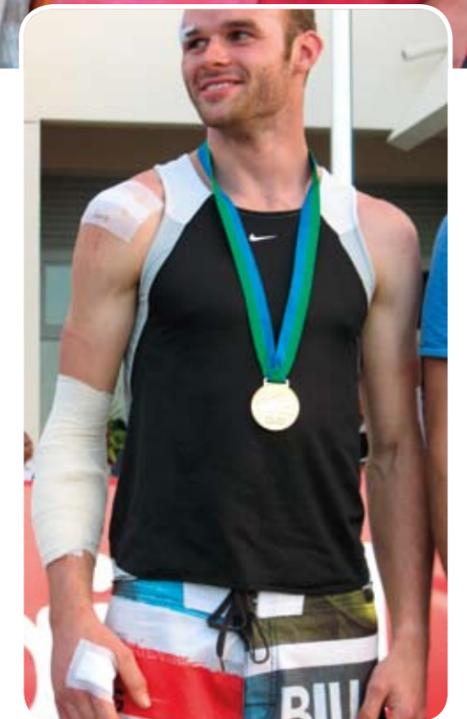
Local children in Same, coaxed out of their shyness.
Photo - Fiona Dick

an unbelievably perfect deep, cool swimming pool fed by natural springs. Anchi, the sole female Timorese rider, was given the biggest cheers when she rode into her home town. Baucau showed touches of elegant Portuguese architecture, some in ruins from battles past. Camp, as on most nights, was a cosy affair, scattered around the grounds of the school and church. Meals were prepared by the locals and were of great quality. However, you had to be quick to ensure the voracious appetites of a few hundred riders didn't leave those at the back of the pack with a bowl of rice. It was not the easiest place for us vegetarians either. Generally I was reduced to picking out a carrot here, a cabbage leaf there, a few potatoes perhaps, from the meat dishes.

► HITTING THE DIRT

Day two from Baucau to Luidhuno was the shortest day of the race, a mere 56km. At the start line on the main street of Baucau we admired the race murals painted on the walls of old buildings. These murals were a feature of the race along with hand painted banners strung across the roads. Run in conjunction with the TDT was the Festa Ba Dama (Festival of Peace); an arts and cultural festival aimed to show off the creativity of the people of Timor Leste. Via ups and downs, we headed into the beautiful interior of Timor Leste, climbing a 1,000m high pass surrounded by spectacular limestone cliffs. The descent from this pass took us into some real mountain biking; a steep, rutted and rocky drop that claimed at least two collarbones, led to some grassy trails and roller coaster creek crossings. The small village of Luidhuno was nestled below impressive limestone hills filled with caves from which flowed cool waterfalls. The village

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Troops with their war medals.
Photo - Huw Kingston

had gone all out to welcome us, putting on local dancing and theatre. Watching this from a seat in the river with a cold beer; life was good.

That night and every night a huge screen would be erected in the town and the locals given a chance to watch the movie 'Balibo' which was travelling with us to premiere across the country.

The third day would see us descend to the southern coastline, to the small fish-

ing village of Betano, a distance of some 105km. A steep, rough downhill brought a few riders unstuck as handlebars were locked in that 'all important' race for a few seconds advantage. Once down on the coastal plain it was a long, hot 70km of windless riding; the track hemmed in by spangars. Villagers sprayed us with cooling water flicked from palm fronds as we passed. I joined the bandaged, when the rider in front of me decided to reach

THE RACING

The Tour attracted some top notch male riders who battled hard for the substantial \$15,000 first prize for men. All week it had been closely fought between Neil Van Der Ploeg, Mark Frendo, Ben Mather, Luke Fetch, Brendan Brooks and Benjamin Grieve-Johnson. Going into the final day, Grieve-Johnson had a useful two minute lead over Van Der Ploeg, however Van Der Ploeg and Frendo made a move at the 35km mark and did just enough for Van Der Ploeg to take the title.

In the Women's, Tory Thomas won every stage for a clear win over Malaysian rider Masziyaton Mohd Radzi and veteran Queenslander Meg Carrigan.



Photo - Zoe Manley

The 'peloton' makes its way through the pothole strewn roads of Timor Leste.

THE ORGANSIER

Two years ago Major Mike Stone was seconded from the Australian Defence Force as Military Affairs Advisor to President Horta. In May this year the President suggested that, whilst it had little to do with security, he'd like Mike to organise an international bike race! With plenty of logistics experience but no cycling or event background, it was a major challenge to showcase the country and its varied environments and cultures. Mike pulled together a team which included Dave White (best known from the Mont 24 Hour) as Race Director and Russ Baker as timing guru.

I asked Mike what gave him the most satisfaction during the Tour de Timor and also what plans there were for a 2010 event.

'Seeing the tens of thousands of Timorese people along the 450km route and the excitement in the children's faces was priceless. Many of the local people in the rural areas commented on how proud they were for their country to be hosting an international event which allowed them to welcome so many foreigners to their land.

As far as 2010 goes, the date will be announced before the end of the year. The route will be new; travelling through a number of different areas of Timor-Leste. There are likely to be more bush trails through remote areas in the mountains and an equally if not more challenging course in terms of hills.'

for his bidon just as we hit a potholed section. Into them we tumbled.

All the roads were closed along the race route so there was little chance of coming out of a corner into the path of a bus or a tractor. Animals were less predictable though. A chicken played chicken and lost as it was taken out in a 'fowl' accident. Another rider came away with much missing 'bark' after hitting a dog at 40kph.

At Betano, tired, dusty, sweaty, sun-burnt bodies plunged into the ocean where waves tickled the black sand beach. It was magic, even if none of the locals were swimming. Timor Leste is known as 'The Land of The Sleeping Crocodile'—we all hoped he was.

One thousand eight hundred and fifty metres in one straight up climb of 50km in length! You simply couldn't do a climb of that altitude gain in Australia. Day four had hung over us all week; 1,850 metres—uphell? Whilst the pointy end of the field attacked each other from the base, most riders settled into their own world of rhythm or pain. Fortunately much of the lower section offered some shade and by the time we reached the feed station at 1,400 metres the cooling effects of altitude were noticeable. I grabbed a banana, peeled it and promptly threw the banana on the ground and

stuffed the peel into my mouth. Perhaps the climb was having more effect on me than I realised!

The final 400 metres kicked up into a series of horribly steep switchbacks in full sun so it was a relief to plummet 500 metres and to arrive at Maubisse, a town perched in a spectacular location. Camp that night was in the grounds of an old guesthouse, high above the town with 360 degree views of cloud topped mountains and clear valleys.

The final day was our reward; 93km of a lot more down than up. Long fast descents to hit the coast 10km west of Dili. A final battle into a strong headwind returned us once more into the streets of Dili lined with thousands of cheering locals. In the spirit of peace and cooperation, three of us held hands to cross the line together at the Presidential Palace.

It had been an honour to be part of the inaugural Tour de Timor. I think it achieved its goals of showcasing the country, both through the eyes of the accompanying media and through those of us riding. I for one look forward to returning to this friendly island with huge potential for outdoor activities. The Tour de Timor is planned to take place again in 2010, perhaps with some more 'mountain biking' and certainly with an entry fee! 



Photo - Huw Kingston

Isolated beaches and a tropical climate—what a nice place to relax after a ride.