

# Atauro Island



Enticingly close to Dili, Atauro Island's siren song can especially be heard when the capital seems just too steamy, dirty and loud.

The 140-sq-km island, which can be reached by ferry or fishing boat, stretches about 25km north to south and is very thinly populated by 8000 people who mostly live in two villages on the island's east side, where the only road is. Life here is hard and even in good times there's just enough food to go around. But the flip side is that the isolation has also kept many of East Timor's tensions of the last decade away. The atmosphere is very relaxed and, although it's clear everyone is poor, they don't seem desperately so.

There are two small and delightful places to stay on Atauro. At either you'll have time to do virtually nothing while you work up the energy for some amazing diving, remote trekking or intensive reading.

The land is not densely wooded, large areas are arid and there's little water. People get by with wells, and electricity is only found in the two main towns, Vila and Belo, and then only for a few hours.

If you like a place where the water is so clear you can see the fish as you arrive, where you can stay in a simple, thatched beachside hut and where your day's activities are simply up to you, then you'll love Atauro, where days can turn into weeks.

Atauro is directly north of Dili, 30km across the Wetar Strait. Its land is similar to the adjacent Indonesian islands of Alor to the west and Wetar to the east. The people are from three clans – the Adade, Humungili and Manroni – and as well as Tetun, they speak three local dialects.

## ATAURO HIGHLIGHTS

You can visit Atauro as part of a day trip on the weekly Saturday sailing of the ferry *Nakroma*. You'll have about four hours to see the two main towns and walk the beach a bit. But to really appreciate the place, stay longer so you can enjoy either or both of the two places to stay. The walks into the hills and along the coast away from Vila and Belo are rewarding, especially if done outside the arid afternoons. Suss out your underwater equipment and enjoy time in the crystal-clear waters. Swimming and dive spots abound, many reachable by chartered fishing boat. Comforts are few on Atauro, but it rewards the self-sufficient.

## HISTORY

Like the rest of East Timor, Atauro's population is predominantly Christian, but it's not 95% Catholic like everywhere else. Here Protestants outnumber Catholics, and the animism that always underlies East Timor's Christianity is particularly strong. Some villages (like Beloi) are predominantly Protestant, while others (like Vila) are mainly Catholic. It was only after WWII that Catholicism first arrived on the island. The large Protestant percentage is an important link to the Christian regions of Indonesia, where the population also tends to be Protestant.

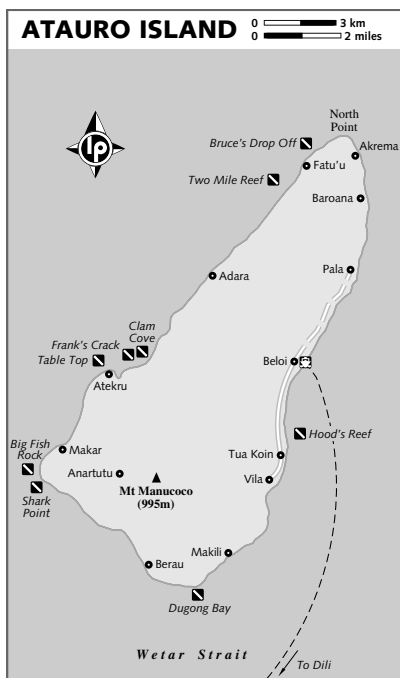
The Portuguese used Atauro as a prison island in the late 16th century, not long after they first moved into Timor. The location of the underground prison they constructed in Vila may be pointed out to visitors, but there's nothing to be seen. On 27 August 1975, when the UDT versus Fretilin civil war swept the island, but still more than three months before the Indonesian invasion, the Portuguese governor and his administration fled to Atauro. This was the final chapter of 450 years of Portuguese colonial history. They were still there when the Indonesians arrived on 7 December, complete with two modern corvettes, the *João Roby* and the *Alfonso Cerqueira*, which would probably have been a match for any of the Indonesian warships. The next day they slunk off to Darwin. Later the Indonesians held as many as 3000 prisoners on the island between 1981 and 1986.

The 1999 Indonesian violence that devastated the mainland had less effect on Atauro, although close to the jetty at Beloi a memorial records that Antonio Pacheco, the village chief, was killed on 22 September 1999. The people remain conservative here. This is a place to dress modestly, except maybe when you're in the water.

## AROUND THE ISLAND

Villages are scattered around the coast with one village, Anartutu, high on the slopes of Mt Manucoco. The biggest village is Vila (formerly known as Maumeta), which has a number of Portuguese buildings and is the site of the old Portuguese underground prison. The island's main market is held here on Fridays. The streets are shady and make for a good, mellow stroll.

Beloi has the main jetty on the island, and from here you can walk to Ekmonu, a spring in



the mountains. There's fine coral directly offshore from Vila and Beloi. The coral reef extends most of the way down the east coast and along the northern stretch of the west coast. Dugongs, turtles and white-tip reef sharks, as well as a varied assortment of colourful reef fish and pelagics, are often seen around the island. It's not unusual to see dolphins and pilot whales between Atauro and the main island of Timor.

South of Vila, the village of Makili is one of the most creative in East Timor. Wooden statues are carved here, and the villagers are also expert basketmakers. Walet birds, the swifts whose nests are collected for bird's nest soup, nest in the cliffs overlooking the village. There's a fine white-sand beach at Lampia near Makili.

Atauro's mountainous spine runs the entire length of the island and reaches its highest point at Mt Manucoco (995m). You can climb the mountain in about three hours from Vila, and there are views of both east and west coasts from the summit. Anartutu, the mountain village, is noted for its traditional weavers. The villagers also carve wooden bowls, play

traditional musical instruments and make knives and metal tools in a small foundry. On the south coast of the island, the village of **Berau** sits on a pretty little bay.

At the northern end of the island the 4WD road from Beloi ends at Pala. A little to the north there's fine coral offshore at **Baroana**, where divers may be able to find fragments of a crashed **WWII Japanese aircraft**. Continue further north to **Akrema**, which has a fine white-sand beach.

The west coast of the island is very beautiful and very isolated. Although you can walk across the island or around the coast, it's easier to reach the west coast's lonely hamlets by sea. They include **Fatu'u**, **Adara**, **Atekru**, with its sacred stone 'drum', and **Makar** near cliffs where walet birds nest.

## SCUBA DIVING & SNORKELLING

Check with the Dili dive shops (p43) for regular trips out to Atauro Island. There are dive sites all around the island, although the most popular ones are along the west coast. The principal sites include **Two Mile Reef** and **Bruce's Drop Off** to the north of the west coast. Further south there's **Big Fish Rock** and **Shark Point**, while **Dugong Bay** is towards the southeast point. Schools of dolphins and pilot whales may be encountered between the island and Dili, although like the crocodile, there's a lot more talk than action here. Dugongs (manatees), the large lumbering sea cows, are regularly seen around the island, and for a couple of months a year humpback whales make an appearance.

If you have your own equipment, you can stay on Atauro and charter fishing boats to take you to dive spots around the island. The sleeping places can help you.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Atauro has two sleeping options that are almost clichés of the remote beach escape. Both are very simple, have shared outdoor bathrooms and rooms less than 60 seconds from the surf. At either you must book in advance as food on the island is so limited that arrangements will have to be made so you can

eat (meals cost from US\$4). You can always ask what you can bring from the Dili supermarkets before heading over. Don't expect to find much for sale here.

**Tua Kóin Eco-Village** (☎ 723 6085; www.atauroisland.com; per person Sun-Thu US\$13, per person Fri & Sat US\$15) Eight simple thatched-roof cabins are located in this shady compound on the beach north of Vila. Operated by Atauro's NGO, Roman Luan, this ecovillage runs on solar power, recycles grey water and has a great beachfront setting with minor dunes and grasses adding interest. The open-air common area has games and intoxicating views. A gift shop sells dark-wood carvings from Makili. The website is a fantastic source of local info.

**Nemas** (☎ 723 6084; r per person US\$15) Just north of the ferry dock in Beloi. Run by an Australian named Barry and his extended Timorese family, there are four sun-drenched thatched cabins right on the beach (one he calls his writer's cabin has idyllic views from an upper level). The food is quite tasty and, as Barry says, 'depending on what's in the market it's lobster one day, rice and beans the next'.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The island of Atauro is 30km directly north of Dili. The **Nakroma ferry** (Map pp36-7; ☎ 728 09638; Av de Portugal, Dili) departs from Dili every Saturday at 9am and returns at 4pm, taking two hours each way. Fares in 'business class' (meaning those charged to foreigners) are US\$5 each way. There's a good concrete jetty in Beloi, so you can walk right ashore.

A fishing boat also makes the run between Vila and Beloi (US\$10, three hours) several days a week depending on tides. Check details with one of the accommodation places.

## GETTING AROUND

Only Vila and Beloi are linked by road. This 6km bit of tarmac is served by constantly shuttling trucks. Flag any down, the cost is about US\$2. If arriving by ferry, scramble aboard the first one you see before it fills up with chickens, kids and bags of rice. You can arrange for fishing boats to take you to places around the island, otherwise you'll be trekking.

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