



Atauro Island

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Why Go?

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

Atauro Island is directly north of Dili, 30km across the Wetar Strait. The 140-sq-km island, which can be reached by ferry or water taxi, stretches about 25km north to south, and is thinly populated by 8000 people who mostly live in two villages on the island's eastern side.

There are a handful of small and delightful places to stay, where you can just relax while you work up the energy for some amazing diving, snorkelling, remote trekking or intensive reading.

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 Island, where days can turn into weeks.

When to Go

Like Dili, the best weather on Atauro Island is during the dry season from May to November. You will not only be able to enjoy the water and trekking during this time, but you will also catch the last part of the whale migration (towards the end of the dry season). As there is really only one road on the island, roads washing away is not an issue. Be sure to book, as accommodation is limited and it has become a popular weekend destination for the Dili crowd.

History

Like the rest of Timor-Leste, Atauro Island's population is predominantly Christian, but it's not 98% Catholic like everywhere else. Here Protestants outnumber Catholics, and the animism that always underlies Timor-

Leste'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. Criminals and political prisoners from as far away as Macau, Angola and Guinea Bissau were banished there. The location of the underground prison they constructed in Vila can be pointed out to visitors, but there's nothing to see. On 27 August 1975, the UDT (Timorese Democratic Union) versus Fretilin civil war swept Timor-Leste, and the Portuguese governor and his administration fled to Atauro Island – marking 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. 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 a memorial close to the jetty at Beloi records that Antonio Pacheco, the village chief, was killed on 22 September 1999.



Atauro Island Highlights

- 1 Relax, swim or snorkel at **Barry's Eco-Lodge** (p91) or another of Atauro's beachfront eco-resorts
- 2 Dive on some of Timor-Leste's best sites, including **Manta Cove** and **Watertank** (p91)
- 3 Tuck into a delicious Italian meal at **Restaurante Mahukoko & Guesthouse** (p91)
- 4 Shop for a must-have, NGO-made doll at **Bonecas de Atauro** (p92)
- 5 Trek and explore the interior and western side of the island (p90)
- 6 Climb Atauro's highest peak, **Mt Manucoco** (p91)
- 7 Spot dolphins and whales in the Wetar Strait on the **boat ride** (p92) to the island

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-