

Oecussi



Welcome to one of the most peaceful slices of East Timor. Wait, that's an understatement. This 2700-sq-km remote enclave, surrounded on three sides by Indonesian West Timor, a series of jagged mountain ranges and fronted by the sea, feels like one of the most peaceful places on earth. Oecussi's sweet cocktail of wild beauty, isolation, a deliciously slow pace and the incredible warmth of the mostly Dawan population, whose traditional conical-shaped *lopo* and *ume kebu* houses dot the landscape from the peaks to the shore, oozes serenity. There's a reason the international members of the current occupation force (the UN) consider this assignment to be a 'five-star mission', and it ain't the luxury lodging.

Pantemakassar is the main population centre, but its deserted, dusty, counter-intuitively wide streets see far more goat traffic than vehicular movement. The rest of the 50,000 or so inhabitants are huddled in traditional villages scattered throughout the coastal mountains and along the Tono River.

When Dominican missionaries settled here in 1556, Oecussi became the first Portuguese colony in Timor, and this is where Catholicism initially took hold on the island. Portugal moved its colonial capital to Dili nearly 200 years later, but Oecussi remains aligned with Dili, regardless of the fact that geographically, culturally, linguistically and economically, Oecussi actually has closer ties to Indonesian West Timor than East Timor. Alas, religion has once again trumped logic, and today, travel between these three distinct territories is a bit complex. Nevertheless, Oecussi is well worth a detour, and if you do make the effort, you will be handsomely rewarded.

HISTORY

A band of Dominican brothers first settled at Lifau in 1556, on the coast 5km west of Pantemakassar, but it was not until 1656 that Oecussi became a colony with a Portuguese administrator. In 1701 a governor from Lisbon was appointed, but the Topasses who controlled Lifau drove out his administration. The Portuguese returned but, due to the local insurgency and a rash of attacks by Dutch forces that were conquering present-day Indonesia at the time, finally abandoned the colony in favour of Dili in 1769.

Although the Portuguese always laid claim to the area, it served little purpose and was not formally part of Portuguese Timor until the treaty of 1904 was signed with the Dutch, and The Hague formally drew the border in 1916. Apart from a fort and a small port in Pantemakassar, it was the forgotten part of East Timor. In 1911 a rebellion broke out against Portuguese forced labour policies, and the brutal Portuguese response sent many Dawan refugees fleeing to West Timor.

Oecussi was integrated into Indonesia without resistance on 29 November 1975, just one week before Indonesia's invasion into greater East Timor. Despite escaping the horrors of the independence struggle, the people were keenly aware of events further east, and politically Oecussi remained very much a part of East Timor.

Portugal neglected Oecussi and so did Indonesia. Although good roads were built in the eastern part of East Timor to transport the army, Oecussi had just one ramshackle road from Kefamenanu to Pantemakassar and one partly sealed coastal road. In 1999, an inferno of political and ethnic violence, civil unrest and terrorism swept through East Timor, and Oecussi suffered one of the worst massacres of all. On 8 September members of the Sakunar militia, supported by Indonesian forces, killed more than a dozen men from the villages of Tumin, Kiobiselo, Nonkikan and Nibin. The next day 70 young men were marched out of the village of Imbate to Passabe where they were murdered.

PANTEMAKASSAR

Pantemakassar, aka Oecussi town, is a beguiling coastal town, a conglomeration of thatched and rusted tin roofs, cradled by groves of banana and coconut palms, and mango and papaya trees. Its wide roads are



scattered with goats, cows, pedestrians and the occasional vehicle (most of which are white UN SUVs). It's backed by red-clay coastal mountains, and there are almost no street lights, allowing the black night sky to reveal endless galaxies. Pantemakassar was the first permanent Portuguese settlement in Timor, but the mestizo Topasses settlers rebelled against Portuguese rule, forcing the colonists to flee to Dili in 1769. The town was later recaptured by the Portuguese, who built a fort, garrison and mission. If you aren't up on the local dialects, do not fret. In Pantemakassar you can get by with broken Bahasa Indonesia, freckled with Portuguese (or Spanish if that's all you've got), and a smile.

Information

Oecussi is part of Timor Telecom's mobile phone coverage.

Fernando's General Store You can change rupiah into US dollars at decent rates here. Directly opposite the sports complex.

Hospital (Jl Ir Soekarno)

Post office (Rua Jose Osorio)

Timor Telecom (Rua Francisco Mousinho) A three-in-one stop for international calls, reliable and fairly swift internet access (per hour US\$2), and minimal banking services. East of the traffic circle.

Sights

Pantemakassar is set on a wide, grey beach, which is good for swimming. The best stretch of sand, and most pristine reef, begins 2km

east of town on **Pantai Mahata** and extends past a stunning red rock headland. There are beached wooden fishing boats, swaying coconut palms, and if you get lucky you might see pods of dolphins and migrating orcas and pilot whales. Snorkellers should jump off the old wharf at the abandoned **Japanese Peace Keepers Compound**. The barnacled pillars beneath the surface have become a thriving reef attracting butterfly fish, huge trevally, and resident white-tip and grey sharks.

Locals prefer to do their beachcombing at lovely **Lifau**, 5km west of Pantemakassar, which is the site of the original Portuguese settlement. A memorial marks the spot where the Portuguese supposedly first landed on 18 August 1540, and a couple of cannons point out to sea. This is where families descend for Sunday picnics after church.

The most interesting colonial relic is the old garrison, known as **Fatusuba**, overlooking the town from a hilltop 1.5km south. A winding road climbs up to the decaying, thick walls of the old fort. The gun turret on the front west corner was once the local prison, and miscreants were pushed down into a dank, black hole from above. Within the courtyard is a coral grotto housing a statue of the **Virgin Mary**. Locals only visit the fort to pay their respects to her.

The only notable colonial structure in town is the former **concelho** (administrative office) on Jl Gajah Mada, the waterfront road. Its faded, crumbling façade contributes to Oecussi's tumbledown romanticism. Indonesians didn't leave much evidence of their occupation either, apart from yet another tacky **Integration Monument** on the west side of the town close to the waterfront. A Portuguese Mary statue on the east side offsets it.

There isn't much in the way of nightlife unless you stumble into the **Hard Rock Cafe** (don't worry...it's an impostor) within the confines of the UN compound, though this is for hardcore partygoers only. Proceed at your own risk.

Sleeping & Eating

Lodging is barebones basic.

Rao Homestay (r US\$10) The cleanest digs in town are still a tad scruffy, but they can be found a block south of the sports complex, on the opposite side of the street. Rao has private bathrooms and serves three meals a day. Management is a tad surly.

Lily Homestay (Jl Integrasi; r US\$10) Friendly Lily has by far the best food (think tasty chicken, beef or fish dinners, with potatoes and salad; meals US\$5), and a guesthouse with shared *mandi* and washroom facilities.

Hotel Oecussi (r US\$7) Just across the main road from the beach, west of town. The location is gorgeous with both sea and mountain views but, sadly, the place is filthy and doesn't serve meals.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The airstrip at Pantemakassar is just 1km or so west of town, but at present only UN choppers use the facility. Civilians are very rarely granted passage (which is free, by the way), so if you're gonna try to hitch the hour's ride to Dili, make sure you've got a good story to tell, or it's the night ferry for you.

Land

You cannot enter Indonesia overland from Oecussi at all. Indonesian visas are granted in Dili only, which means you must fly or sail to East Timor proper. But you can enter Oecussi from Indonesian West Timor. From Kupang or the East Timor border, take a minibus to Kefamenanu, West Timor, and charter a *mikrolet* to take you to the border (about one hour). You'll cross the border on foot and then hire an *ojek* (motorcycle taxi, US\$5, one hour) to drive you down the steep winding road to Pantemakassar on the coast. See p91 for details on Indonesian visas for reaching Oecussi.

Sea

The **Nakroma** ferry (business/economy US\$14/4) travels between Dili and Oecussi twice a week, departing Dili on Monday and Thursday nights and arriving in Oecussi some 12 hours later. The return departure is around 5:30pm the following evening. In Pantemakassar the office is opposite the vaguely functional dock near the Integration Monument. You can't miss it. See p49 and p93 for more details.

PANTEMAKASSAR TO OESILO

From Pantemakassar the road climbs for 12km to Pasar Tono, passing through the most fertile valley in the enclave. Not far out of Pantemakassar, the large village of **Padiac** sprawls along the road. Life is very traditional

in this village, which is noted for its potent palm wine, known as *sopi* in Indonesian. Villagers are warm and welcoming, so don't be shy if you'd like to peek inside their huts and hang with the locals. En route to the village of **Naimeco**, the extensive wet-rice paddy fields make a glorious carpet of green in the dry season when everything else has died off.

Pasar Tono has a colourful produce market that attracts villagers in traditional garb from the hills and the beach to the luscious shade of giant banyan trees along the Tono River (Sungai Tono). It's primarily a produce market so handicrafts are hard to find. Serious buyers come early in the morning, but the crowds linger for hours to socialise. On other days this is just a small market with scrappy vegetables and rows of *sopi* bottles for sale. *Sopi*, an alcoholic drink distilled from pandanus juice, fuels the men who gather under the trees to play cards and the dice game known as *kupu kupu*. The East Timorese are big gamblers, and cockfights are also regularly held.

From Pasar Tono the road crosses the wide Tono River. The river carries flash floods in the wet season, but is otherwise a nearly dry arroyo trickling with the narrowest of channels. During the dry season vehicles bump across the riverbed, an often-impossible task in the wet. From the river, the road makes a sinuous and spectacular journey up into the mountains another 16km to Oesilo, where the cool yet arid hills are dotted with traditional Dawan houses that have mind-blowing mountain panoramas.

Oesilo is perched on a mountainous escarpment that rings the entire Oecussi enclave, with peaks rising to more than 1200m. The last town before the West Timor border, Oesilo has a Portuguese flavour noticeably different from the Indonesian towns across the border. Perched above the road, the town's hospital is a classic example of whitewashed Portuguese architecture, and the roof is rimmed with terracotta tiles. The route to Oesilo from Kefamenanu, located on the main Kupang–Soe–Atambua road, is a gorgeous rumble beneath a range of steep, rocky peaks.