

The 2018 Alola tour to Timor-Leste

By Peter McManus



Photo: taken at a Alola Mothers Support Meeting in Liquica. The meeting was to celebrate World Breast Feeding Week and incorporated a healthy baby competition, a talk about breastfeeding and a talk about breast self examination. Our tour was warmly welcomed by Alola staff and many mothers, some dads, and their babies. We shared lunch together before heading out to Balibo.

Heading to Timor-Leste I was not sure what to expect. In the back of my mind I had snippets of information from half-remembered news reports from 1975 and the succeeding years up to 1999 when the now Australian Governor-General led the INTERFET Peacekeeping mission, and then the transition to independence in 2002. I had also done some reading over the years, but as with many other countries, once the media interest moved on to other places, Timor-Leste was only in the news when there was some crisis. More recently being a supporter of Alola had kept me in touch with some of the work happening on the ground through the Alola programs.

My recent visit to Timor-Leste with the 2018 Alola tour, however, has given me (and, I suspect, everyone in our group) a new perspective on the country and its people. I have come home with many images in my mind (and my camera) – the beauty of the coast and the sparkling oceans; the charm of Dili, Baucau, Balibo and the rural villages; the warm,

colourful welcome given to our group by the organisations we visited; the memories of significant people and places of recent history; and, of course, the warmth of the people. While our group – Jock and Elizabeth, Alex, Helen, Christine, Russell, Karin, and I – were an eclectic bunch with very different backgrounds and from different places in Australia (Perth, Canberra, Melbourne), we shared an interest in Timor-Leste that brought us together on the tour. I think that I can speak for us all in saying that, whatever our level of knowledge and interest before our visit, seeing the country and meeting a range of people has deepened our knowledge, interest and understanding – as Jock said, “it was an important opportunity to get under the surface.” And perhaps all of us will return one day – hopefully before too long.

Many of the highlights for our group will be unique to each of us but, as we were reflecting on our impressions at the end of our trip, it wasn't surprising that we also shared many of the same key experiences and, as Christine said, “there was a new highlight every day”. Some of our enduring memories will be:

- the unique privilege of being hosted by Kirsty Sword Gusmão and meeting Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão and Jose Ramos-Horta (as Helen said, “I had to pinch myself!”)
- the commitment and eloquence of the Timorese who spoke to us (“smart young people” – Russell)
- the women in key roles and leadership in many organisations – from the CEO at Alola and her teams in many locations across the country to the nuns leading schools and other services for their communities; the women leaders at Estrela Plus (supporting people living with HIV) and Casa Vida (supporting girls who are victims of abuse); the international lawyers and civil servants in the Maritime Boundary Office; and the ministers in the new government (Elizabeth, Alex, Peter) and
- while it was soon clear to us that many, perhaps all, families in Timor-Leste were personally affected by the events of the Indonesian invasion of 1975 and following the Popular Consultation in late 1999, the extraordinary generosity of spirit and capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation in such a young country is an example to us all (Jock).

As supporters of Alola, I think that we were all particularly pleased to see the impact of the focus of Alola on enabling women and children to build a strong future. It is clear that the Alola motto 'Strong women, Strong nation' is much more than a slogan and is becoming a reality – evident, for example, in both what we saw at the Mothers' Support Group at Lau Hata and in the data shared with us by Kirsty Sword Gusmão on the dramatic improvement in a range of key measures such as breastfeeding rates (... which are much better than in Australia). This was but one example of the great work being done through the Alola programs.

It is clear, however, that there is still much to be done and the pressure on the Timor-Leste government and civil society must at times seem overwhelming as they work to do and achieve so much in parallel, to build the facilities and society that the people aspire to. Here in Australia, in the towns and cities where most of us live, we have the luxury of knowing that a substantial level of physical and social infrastructure has been put in place by those who have gone before us during our (mostly) peaceful history ... and that what we might complain about, or wish for, is really at the margins (even if we don't always recognise that Australia is

a relatively fortunate and wealthy country). However, in Timor-Leste, in addition to the work that has been done so far, there remains much to do in infrastructure, health, nutrition, education, justice and resource development. It is a reminder to us all, as supporters of Timor-Leste through the Aloia Foundation and other organisations, that even though Timor-Leste is now rarely on the front page of our newspapers, on the evening TV news, or in our newsfeed on Facebook, we need to continue our support and encourage our government to do the same.

Returning home to Canberra, I was reminded of how close Timor-Leste is to Australia – on a very long day of travel, the international leg from Dili to Darwin was the shortest flight! This proximity to Australia has meant that, historically, we could not afford to ignore what was happening on the island of Timor – whether it was the threat posed by the approaching Japanese forces in World War II or, as independence approached, our participation to support the Popular Consultation in 1999, the subsequent UN Peace Keeping forces, the pre-independence UN Administration and, following the civil unrest in 2006, the (re)deployment of Australian troops to assist civil authorities restore law and order.



Photo: Kirsty Sword Gusmão and staff at Agora Food Studio in Dili. Agora is a social enterprise. (From their website) 'Agora also means 'now' – a reminder that we must act now, not tomorrow, to change the way we eat, to preserve biodiversity and indigenous knowledge, to innovate with empathy for others and our environment'

While the elder statesmen of Timor-Leste, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão and Jose Ramos-Horta, and others we met were unstintingly generous towards Australia, visiting the country also opened our eyes to the fact that Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste has been rather patchy, often fractured, and more than once we have "passed by on the other side of the road". If we did not already know, it became clear that, from time to time, Australia's and other's interests were the prime consideration in our relationship with our small, relatively powerless and impoverished neighbour. It was heartening, however, to understand more about the resolution of the issues surrounding the maritime boundary with Australia and the positive outcome for future exploitation of Timor-Leste's seabed resources (... even though it could be said that Australia had to be pushed or dragged, kicking and screaming, to the negotiating table). Let us hope that ratification by Australia of the most recent treaty is not delayed for much longer. It is clear from this episode that ordinary citizens like you and me can and should have an interest in the Foreign Affairs policies of our government – because the treaties signed in our name have an impact – for better or worse – on real people in other countries. There is a strong understanding in Timor-Leste that pressure from ordinary Australians and civil society organisations may well have been instrumental in our government finally agreeing to resolve the dispute over the maritime boundary and sign a new treaty.

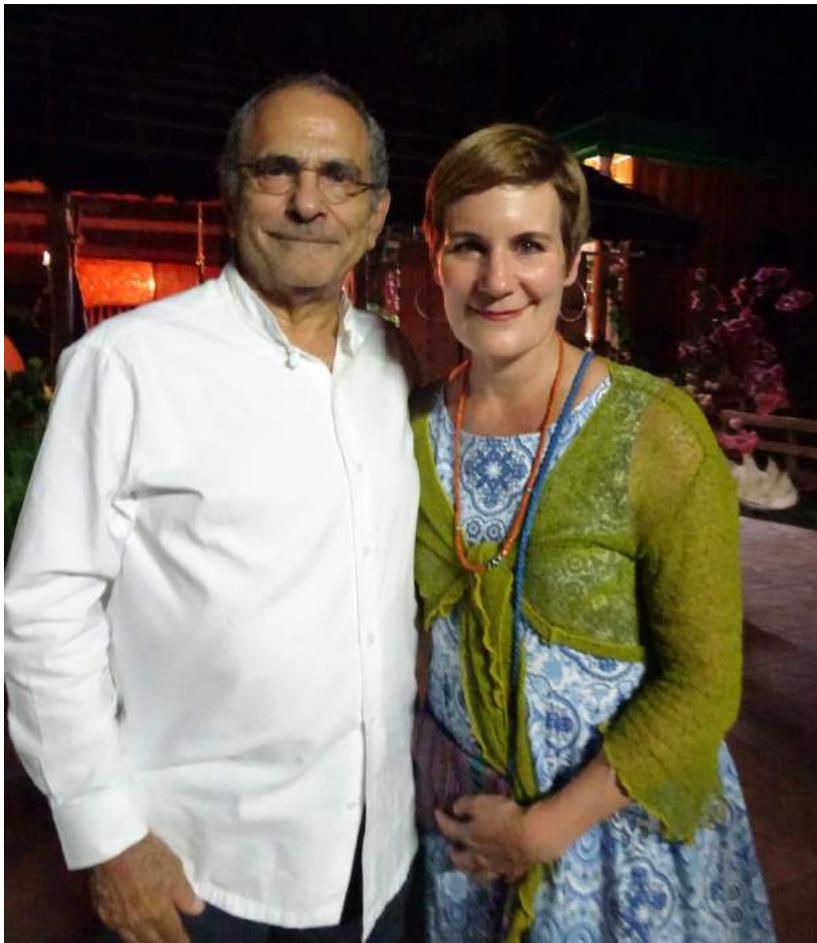


Photo: Jose Ramos Horta and Kirsty Sword Gusmão

On our tour we did quite a number of more 'serious' things as we visited some iconic places, heavy with the impact of history and the names of which we had only heard or read about in the news – Dili, Balibo and the Australian 'Flag House' museum, the church at Liquica, the Santa Cruz Cemetery, and Baucau – and learned about Timor-Leste's recent history through our visits to the CAVR (Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and the Museum and Archive of the Resistance. But also we had time for some fun as well – sunset drinks on the beach at Areia Branca, walking the 867 steps up to Cristo Rei of Dili (and back), snorkelling on the edge of the reef at K41, and the opportunity to make a small (or larger) contribution to the local economy through our shopping for tais and other local craft items at the Alola Esperansa shop, Things and Stories at Hotel Timor, the Tais Market, and Kor Timor at Timor Plaza! And, of course, travelling with any group is not without its lighter, unscripted moments. We all had a laugh when, after inadvertently carrying it in a plastic bag, for most of the day, Jock tried to give Nandy's washing to the Alola breast cancer support team! (Nandy had mixed up her plastic bags and Jock thought he was carrying some post-surgery bras) Having had our formal dinner with Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão on an evening earlier in the week, he then joined us on Friday night in his shorts and thongs having, he said, "just come in from his farm." And then there was the story Jose Ramos-Horta told us about the naming of his suburban street as "Robert Fitzgerald Kennedy Boulevard" – he said "you could not call it 'street' or 'road' ... only a 'boulevard' would be good enough for a Kennedy". As our trip drew to a close, back at home the speculation whirling around our (now former) Prime Minister's position was reaching fever-pitch and, in today's ever-connected world, news had drifted across the Timor Sea to capture the attention of Jock and I – political tragics that we are. So humble apologies to our group if we became a little distracted over the last 24 hours of our trip.

We are grateful to our friends at Alola Australia for helping us to promote the Alola tour to Timor-Leste this year. We successfully raised \$27,000 for Haliku and are looking forward to organizing another tour in 2019.

