



COVID-19 Response Story

Recovery and resilience

Supporting market linkages for Timorese tourism operators

"Unprecedented times" was the cliché of 2020, wiggling its way into every company email and news report. In 2021, people shifted to "the new normal" or "weathering the storm." With no international flight or cruise arrivals in 2021, Timor-Leste's tourism sector has been on hold since mid-2020. Relying on a trickle of domestic tourists or the occasional business traveler arriving via a charter flight, the sector reported an 80 per cent profit decline. There is no "new normal" for Timor-Leste, but tourism businesses are keen to be ready.

Given that the pandemic impact will eventually abate, MDF focused on supporting the tourism industry, especially through information sharing and preparatory work, as businesses set up operations in anticipation of economic recovery. Large-scale initiatives were not pursued due to the uncertainty posed by prolonged travel restrictions and the weak appetite for co-investment in business resources. Instead, the MDF team had discussions concerning partner interests and responded with feasible activities to lay the foundations for future work.



Building marketing assets and connections

According to MDF market research, an estimated 1.6 million Australians express interest in visiting Timor-Leste. However, this enthusiasm has not yet converted to arrivals. MDF identified the reason for this to primarily be because agents do not "sell" Timor-Leste since they lack knowledge about the destination.

To grow the industry's awareness of Timor-Leste as an attractive travel destination, MDF worked with Planet Marketing, an Australian boutique marketing business. Planet Marketing established connections between Timorese and Australian tour operators by building a contact list of more than 30 companies and establishing a Facebook group for easy engagement and idea sharing. To help Timorese operators understand the requirements of Australian travel agents, Planet Marketing conducted a webinar series on how to be "travel trade ready", with marketing and product development tips as well as other related travel trade topics. Timorese webinar participants reported that the most useful information they learned concerned the Australian travel agent requirements and information on developing effective marketing collateral that would appeal to Australian audiences. More than 90 per cent of webinar participants rated the webinars as excellent or good.

Despite the country's natural beauty, tourism operators' marketing efforts are also limited by a scarcity of high-quality communications material, such as attractive photos, that could be used in tourism marketing campaigns. Planet Marketing and MDF addressed this by launching a Timor-Leste-wide photography

competition, in which contributions were collected in a shared content bank. MDF also collaborated with the Ministry of Tourism and the Asia Foundation to create an online library of photos and videos suitable for promoting travel to Timor-Leste. These visual elements were then made accessible to tourism operators for unlimited use. By establishing strong connections with a key market, the Australian tourism sector, and initiating the process of creating high-quality market collateral, tourism operators are well positioned to expand destination marketing once tourism resumes.



Strengthening product offer and collaboration

Timor-Leste is one of the few countries in the world geographically positioned on a migratory route for blue whales and dolphins. Located in the coral triangle and famed for its extraordinary beauty, developing the country's marine tourism sector offers a special opportunity. Timor-Leste's dive operators were working to expand their tour services but were impeded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With no international tourists, MDF and its partner, the Dive Operators Working Group (DOWG), consisting of seven dive operators, shifted their focus to dive site exploration. The DOWG explored two relatively unknown dive sites in 2021 and will survey three more in 2022. The exploration work includes mapping the sites and collecting underwater videography to produce a promotional video showcasing local biodiversity.

Additional dive sites expand the tourism product offerings while generating new interest from divers. Ivan Samra, the co-owner of Dreamers Dive Academy said, "probably 90 to 95 per cent of our customers mention that they've seen the [dive] exploration on social media. It incentivises them to try something new!" While increasing the number of dive locations is essential, the site surveys also strengthen collaboration across the dive operators, the key to industry growth and recovery. In 2022, MDF will continue to work with the DOWG to expand dive site exploration and marketing.



What's next for Timor-Leste's diving scene?

As some international flights resume, MDF and the Timor-Leste tourism sector are optimistic for 2022. MDF will continue to work with the DOWG to develop marine tourism products while also supporting destination marketing to build connections between Australian and Timorese operators. As travel conditions improve, MDF and its partners will promote Timor-Leste as an attractive destination, capitalising on latent tourism demands. Although travel restrictions will continue to pose a challenge under the "new normal," MDF and its partners are committed to forging ahead with optimism, focusing on the sector's potential.



It is positive to see a united industry for common goals, such as safety and conservation. They [tourists] are more inclined to say, 'Oh, this is an organised and professional industry moving in the right direction.' This brings tourism.

Ivan.



Improving communication and uniting the sector was our main interest. Of course, as divers, we all have in our blood this desire to explore new sites.

Ivan,
Dreamers Dive Academy, DOWG Member.

