

Discovering Timor-Leste: MDF and Intrepid Travel reveal a hidden gem



All those who visit it agree that Timor-Leste is a hidden gem, with breathtaking landscapes and a rich cultural tapestry. However, despite offering unique and niche experiences like mountain biking, historical treks and cultural experiences, only around 74,400 tourists visited the country in 2023.

The good news is that change is on the horizon. As part of MDF's work to support tourism in Timor-Leste, it signed a new partnership with world-renowned travel operator, [Intrepid Travel](#), in 2023. As part of the agreement, MDF helped identify local Intrepid partners, resulting in a collaboration between Intrepid Travel and Timor Unearthed that generated [Intrepid's 9-day Timor-Leste Expedition](#). The inaugural trip took place in October 2023, with four more scheduled for 2024.

In a conversation with Natalie Kidd, Intrepid Travel's Managing Director Asia, MDF explored Intrepid Travel's journey to develop and promote tourism in Timor-Leste.

? Could you elaborate on Intrepid Travel's journey to develop and promote tourism in Timor-Leste?

Intrepid Travel is the world's largest adventure travel company and a leader in responsible tourism. Intrepid operates more than 900 trips on all seven continents and we have a long association with Timor-Leste. We operated trips in the country from 2011 to 2022. However, due to various reasons, we had to stop our operations at that time, but we've always recognised the potential of Timor-Leste as an emerging travel destination, and hence we are so thrilled to be back in 2023.

It's been an interesting journey to develop the Timor-Leste product with the local team of MDF and our local partner Timor Unearthed. We received good support for our on-the-ground research, development and capacity building, and finally Intrepid's new Timor-Leste Expedition was launched in 2023. We ran our first departure with a group of Australian journalists and so far, the trip has been popular with travellers and is selling well.

? What specific challenges has Intrepid Travel identified in the Timor-Leste tourism market, and how are you working to address these challenges?

During our research trips and from passenger experiences, we have identified some challenges such as limited infrastructure, perception of safety and limited tourism development. We believe these issues could be resolved by working with local stakeholders and with more investment in tourism infrastructure.

Three ways that Intrepid Travel is working in Timor-Leste to address these challenges includes:

- Working with local authorities and communities, we share our 35 years of operational experience and insight to address infrastructure limitations and safety perceptions. Intrepid is also committed to promoting travel in Timor-Leste and sharing stories to help overcome negative perception of travelling in Timor-Leste.
- Providing training and capacity building to our local partner and team in Timor-Leste to enhance their skills in hospitality, tour guiding and tourism management.
- Collaborating with government agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders to promote Timor-Leste. Intrepid Travel operated a media trip in September 2023 and hosted five Australian journalists, with the support of MDF and DFAT. All these articles have been published, including in leading outlets such as Qantas and Escape, and help in promoting Timor-Leste inbound tourism to the broader Australian public.

? What were the key considerations and objectives when designing and launching the 9-day excursion to Timor-Leste by Intrepid Travel in March 2023?

Our key objective was to create a trip that truly captured the diversity, history, culture and stories of Timor-Leste, while ensuring we could operate in a responsible manner. We wanted the trip to be truly 'Intrepid', while also capturing all aspects of the destination. The trip covers large parts of the country – from the capital city to island life and exploring the mountain areas. We have run two departures so far and all the feedback has been positive from our travellers, which shows that we have a good product in place. That said, there are some areas for improvement in the tour and we are addressing those.



The whole concept of the trip started with the idea of exploring one of the newest countries in the world, right next to Australia and Indonesia, which offers some of the most diverse marine life and corals in the world.

The fact that Qantas operates flights from Darwin was also a consideration, as that makes Timor-Leste accessible from the Australian market.

? How does Intrepid Travel ensure that its partnerships with local operators in Timor-Leste contribute to the economic development and empowerment of local communities?

We looked at various factors when assessing our potential local operators in 2023, including fair wages and working conditions for their employees. We invested in capacity building and training programs for local operators and guides to enhance their skills and necessary knowledge to run successful tourism businesses, thereby helping them enhance their economic self-sufficiency and long-term viability. Our product in Timor-Leste offers multiple opportunities to engage with local communities to understand their needs and aspirations. This engagement helps us to involve them in the decision-making process, ensuring equitable distribution of benefits and giving voice to the community. On the tour, all accommodations (including one homestay), restaurants (many of which are social enterprises) and shopping opportunities are owned or supported by locals.

? How has the partnership with MDF progressed thus far, and what impact does Intrepid Travel hope to achieve through the partnership in terms of international arrivals, revenue generation and socio-economic development in Timor-Leste?

The partnership with MDF has been a very successful collaboration so far. We plan to achieve some shared goals for the region, such as working together on capacity building so young people can pursue careers in tourism, promoting Timor-Leste through targeted campaigns, and fostering partnerships with local communities and businesses. We also aim to increase international arrivals through our shared vision and efforts in Timor-Leste by promoting responsible travel practices and through targeted marketing.

By investing in the local tourism industry and engaging with communities, the partnership aims to improve livelihoods and enhance socio economic resilience in Timor-Leste. Finally, we also know that Timor-Leste offers our travellers an incredible experience through shared cultural connections and shared understanding. Following the success of the partnership in Timor-Leste, Intrepid has since agreed to a new partnership with MDF in Sri Lanka to help develop more capacity for women in tourism in that country.

In preparation for the first Qantas-supported expedition, MDF and Intrepid Travel organised a familiarisation (famil) trip for travel journalists. This was done to promote the itinerary and raise awareness of Timor-Leste as an attractive tourist destination.

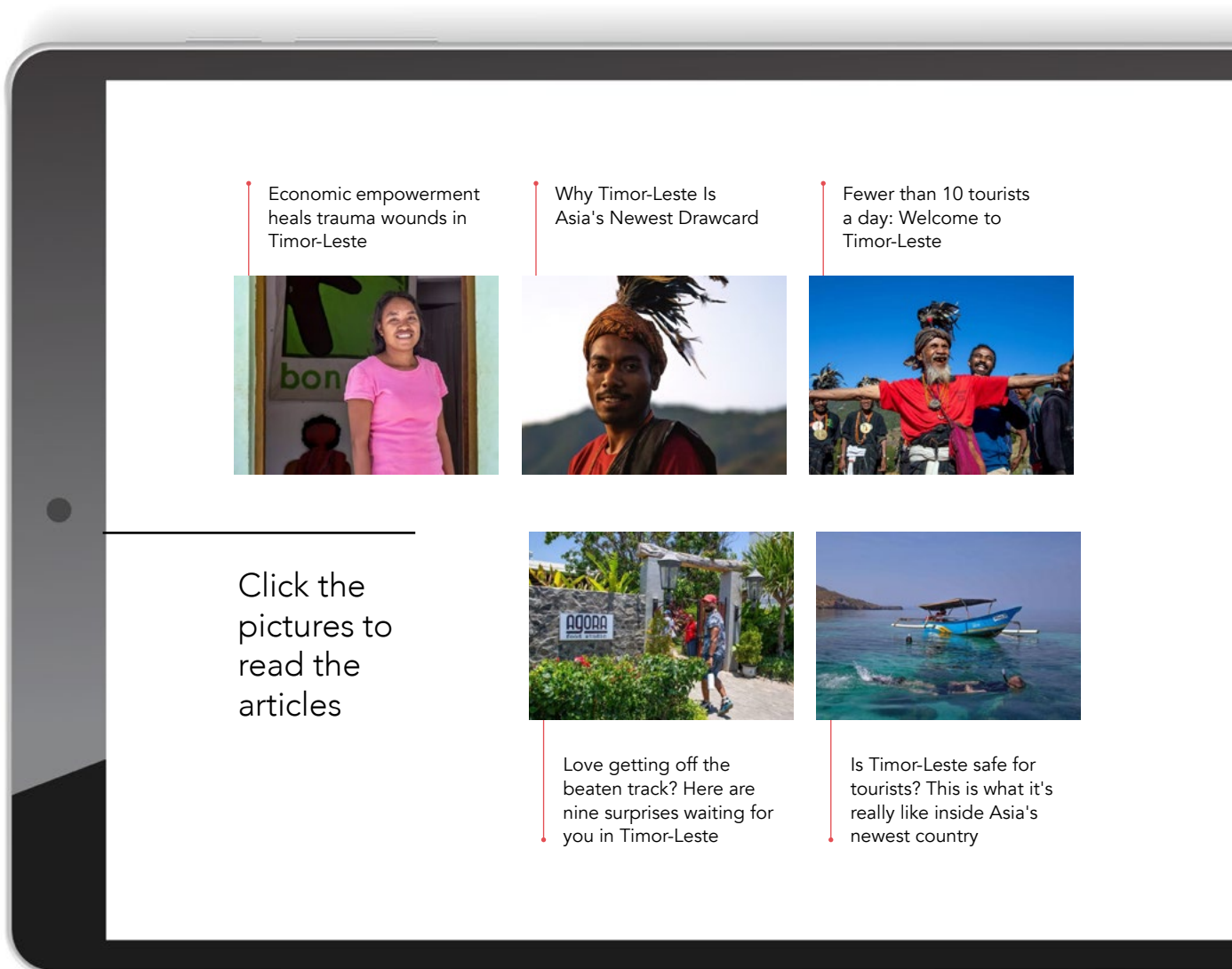


Famil trips are an excellent way to showcase a destination, and for Timor-Leste, which is one of the least-visited countries in the world, media coverage from a famil can be a destination's first exposure to a potential tourist. By highlighting the beauty and uniqueness of Timor-Leste through the eyes of travel journalists, this familiarisation trip sets the stage for a successful tourist season. After the famil trip, seven articles were published in travel media.

? What are Intrepid Travel's future plans, and how do you envision continuing to support sustainable tourism development in Timor-Leste and beyond?

Intrepid Travel plans to expand responsible tourism initiatives globally, through partnerships, community investment, environmental stewardship and advocacy, aiming to empower local communities, preserve cultural heritage and minimise environmental impact.

This collaboration has successfully highlighted the tourism potential in Timor-Leste. Despite its unique attractions, challenges remain, such as limited connectivity and infrastructure. Strategic marketing, especially targeting key markets such as Australia and Indonesia, is crucial. As tourism in Timor-Leste continues to gain traction, the partnership signifies a promising future for sustainable growth, showcasing the destination's appeal to global travellers.



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