



**TIMOR
RUNGURANGA**

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A photographic journey through Timor-Leste

davidpalazón



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A photographic journey through Timor-Leste

A photobook by David Palazón

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A selection of images by David Palazón are available as open edition single prints in different sizes and qualities. For more information, please visit the [Timor Runguranga Collection](#) at Saatchi Art.

Cover image: Du'u Kai.

www.davidpalazon.com

email: david@davidpalazon.com

facebook: [timorrunguranga](#)

instagram: [davidpalazon.photography](#)

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*'From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down,
I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend reading it.'*

Groucho Marx



0001 | Incidental documentation. © Karen Reidy, Vila Maumeta, 2015.

KONLISENSA'

David Palazón

On February 11th 2008 I remember receiving an email from my friend Ricardo, an avid reader of geography and politics, informing me that José Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Laureate and former President of Timor-Leste had been shot in an assassination attempt. Coincidentally, a few days earlier, I had visited Ricardo in my hometown of Barcelona and told him about the idea of quitting London for Timor-Leste. He was slightly worried that I was not quite sure where I was going or knew much about the recent history of the country. A few months later I gave up my job at the University of the Arts London, gave away most of my belongings, handed over my clients, and called a halt to my relationship with Elena. I jumped on a plane and landed in Dili in early July.

I initially went to Timor to work as a volunteer, mentoring design and filmmaking to a group of young artists, but as one thing leads to another, three months later, I curiously found myself flying with a Russian pilot on a UN helicopter while making a peace-building documentary with the very same Ramos-Horta. That was one of many episodes that I accidentally, incidentally stumbled across while working and living in the remote half-island nation of Timor-Leste for almost eight years.

My work as an artist takes aim at exploring the boundaries of the human condition, and Timor-Leste, without doubt prompted me with a vast amount of opportunities to learn much about the lives of others, and consequently about my own. From volunteer arts mentor to government advisor, I had the pleasure to work across the full spectrum of creative practices, mentoring young adults through the years and help them achieve self-employment in the creative industries, designing multilingual books and exhibitions, directing and producing some of the first indigenous, international award-winning documentaries coming out of the country, curating exhibitions, art directing and managing all sorts of events, working with all kinds of artists, artisans and international researchers in a quest to document the arts and culture, both tangible and intangible, as inspirational vehicles for the development of this young nation.

Countless times I travelled from Dili to some of the most remote parts of the country to find unspoilt beauty and wonder as you would find a rough, uncut gem at the edge of the world. Somehow, my experience of working in the districts felt strikingly more honest and pure than being in the capital. Regardless of where I went, most people I met were kind, receptive and would always embrace me as one of their own. The experience of working in Dili, was a totally different story, often it felt like a postcolonial, *malae*² infused, coconut cocktail, laced with a dash of nonsense, frustration, confusion, and contagious laughter mixed into a *runguranga*³ film, scripted by the Max Brothers and performed by the Monty Phytton.

The school of Timor-Leste has taught me many things, most of which would be impossible for me to explain in words, so instead, I decided to make this photobook, and share with you some of my observations about the odd and the not so obvious across the country. In the process of selecting and editing the photographs, I realised my experience was mostly shaped by the many people I had met throughout all these years, and therefore I decided to invite those who were interested to become contributors to this unique piece of artwork.

I am convinced feelings are more important than facts, so I hope this publication might spark enough sentiments of curiosity to its readers (and viewers) so they decide to explore this remarkable young nation, as I did.

To end, I wish to dedicate this book to Karen, my *defactopastafarian* partner, not only for her encouragement and support over the last year to help me realise this book, but most importantly, for the love and laughter that binds us together.

—
1. *Konlisença* is a word of Portuguese origins (*com lisensa*) generally used as a way of making oneself noticed, for example, as a way of proceeding to interrupt a talking audience but also as a formal introduction in traditional ceremonies and official openings. It is also commonly used when someone needs to pass through a group of people generally unaware of blocking a public pathway or corridor; the individual will acknowledge his action by passing through slightly bent, while pointing forward the right hand as the aiming direction—almost like in an Egyptian painting—while pronouncing the word '*Konlisença*' (Excuse me!). 2. *Malae* is an a noun commonly used to describe a foreign person, generally outside of the Malay archipelago region. 3. *Runguranga* is an adjective which meaning swings between 'uproar' or 'disturbance' to 'in a mess' or a 'messy' situation or place; it is perhaps this last significance that makes Timorese people grin like a Cheshire cat when the word *runguranga* is pronounced.



001 | Photographic. © David Palazón. Liquiçã, 2015.

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003 | Distant warrior. © David Palazón. Baucau, 2009.



004 | Welcome. © David Palazón. Tasitolu, 2014.

SIMPLE PAST

Leilana Quinger | English teacher

As a teenager I spent years obsessing about the independence movement in Timor-Leste and had cried, a high school Amnesty International volunteer, genuine tears of joy when that little country got to be its own state. When a man who I hero-worshipped from afar got to be President and was actually a good person. We don't think these things will actually happen in our own lifetimes.

Even so, when I visualized Timor-Leste, directly before I went, I forgot to include the nation state. I spent my days both literally and mentally googling mountains, crystal water teeming with migrating sea mammals, big Catholic churches with charming chipped paint jobs and markets over-flowing with Pacific style root vegetables.

I didn't google institutions, or ministries, or ambassadors.

What I got, landing in Dili, was all of the above, including bureaucracy to make an Indian blush and a ludicrous embassy to house ratio along the best real estate of Dili. Including the very recent history. Including the most violent versions of the modern nation state, the shocks of which were still reverberating in my classrooms.

Teaching the past simple, I would innocently ask a room full of government Ministers: 'Where were you ten years ago? Twenty years ago?'

The examples in the text book were: 'I was at university' or 'I was at primary school, learning to read.' My students, middle-aged, kind and glad to be there, would think and count back on their fingers.

'20 years? Oh, haha, I was in the jungle ... killing soldiers ...'

The class would erupt into laughter and the student who spoke would break into a brief, flashing grin before swallowing it and watching carefully for my reaction.



How could I react? I would smile, always, and say something like 'Huh! Wow!' Then I would let the silence hang, leave room to add details—they often wanted to.

I learned, through my years in Asia, to smile and even laugh when hearing of trauma. It is expected.

And, here in Timor, albeit more Pacific than Asian, my students would gather around their tables—campfire style—eyes dancing and nervous grins blinking between serious pronouncements—and tell me about hiding in the jungle. Tell me about giving birth in the jungle. Tell me about the food one can grow in the jungle.

Right now it's dry season though, so you can't imagine. They'd add. When it's raining, it gets really dense up there.

Outside, we'd drive our motorbikes away in the dust; the mountains above bare, the embassies fortress-like, flags snapping in the wind.

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For further information about the artist and his artworks,
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