

TOM BIDSTRUP

Physiotherapy Tour de Timor Timor Leste

When Physio lecturer Tim Retchford asked fellow physio student Rachael McLeod and I if we wanted to accompany him to East Timor to volunteer for a bike race, we both jumped at the brilliant opportunity. I went straight home to read up about the event named 'Tour De Timor', an annual bike race held in the small island country just an hour by plane northwest of Darwin.

This year, to help celebrate the ten year anniversary of his country's severance from Indonesian rule, President Jose Ramos-Horta decided to open the event to riders from all nationalities, and local airline Air North provided free tickets from Darwin for any Australian riders who wished to participate in the 'tour of peace'.

The race would last five long days and cover over 500 kilometres, and although it was penned as a road race, the conditions of the road were so poor in some areas that for safety reasons riders had to use mountain bikes equipped with heavy suspension. The 300 participating riders would wind through many small villages, along beautiful coastlines, through thick bamboo forests and up mountains as big as any in Australia.

The race both started and finished at the presidential palace in Dili, which president Horta thought was too nice a place for one man, so it is open to the public every day. The first day of racing wound around stunning coastline to the second largest city in Timor named 'Baucau' with the 20,000 locals all lining the streets when the riders arrived. The second day the riders climbed their way up to stay in the mountainous village of 'Loihuno', before descending to the coastal village of 'Betano' by the end of day 3. Day 4 saw the 300 exhausted riders climb 2000 metres over 70 kilometres, to finish the day at an old Portuguese fort in the mountain town of 'Maubisse'.

On the fifth and final day the riders returned to the screaming crowds of Dili, with 3rd year physiotherapy student Neil Van Der Ploeg winning the international event, becoming instantly famous in the eyes of the East Timorese. Tim's fiancée Tory won the women's category, so amazingly both winners were from the small Victorian town of Mount Beauty.

Rachael, Tim and I would roll out of our mosquito nets each morning and pack the rental 4WD with our treatment gear, consisting of physio tables, pillows and coconut oil for massaging (we ran out of moisturiser soon into the trip). We would then set off along the winding roads before the riders each day, arriving in each village in time to set up our treatment tables and then catch the first riders (usually Neil) crossing the finish line.

We befriended an Australian army sergeant named Shane who performed remedial massage, and between us we treated around 50 battered and bruised riders each day, until it got too dark to work safely anymore. Injuries ranged from broken collar bones and dislocated shoulders to sore legs that just required a rub down.

Overall it was an amazing experience for all involved and I strongly hope that other students will get to have the same experience that we had in years to come. The most lasting thing for me is the smiling faces of the locals, with most living on only a bowl of rice a day and in the most basic of conditions, yet they still seem so happy and content with the little they have.

The Tour De Timor will continue to bring international athletes to this tiny nation for years to come, in a celebration of peace for this once war ravaged country.

Thanks CSU Global for giving me and Rachael a hand with finances. If you are interested to find out more about East Timor, the movie 'Balibo' is a violent but honest portrayal of the county's recent history.



