

Life in East Timor—a personal account

By Jennifer Stokes

Customs investigations officer Jennifer Stokes, from Fremantle, worked in East Timor from July 2000 to January 2001. Her work in assisting the reestablishment of border services in the newly independent country was varied and filled with new experiences. She joined a colleague from Passenger Processing at Perth Airport, Lorraine McCann, who had gone there in the first contingent from Customs. During her time there, Jennifer sent a series of email messages to her friends back home about her experiences. These are some extracts.

29 July 2000

After leaving my computer in the taxi in Darwin and doing a bit of detective work to get it back, I have settled into life in Dili. I am now the owner of a cute blue UN beret and badge which will be a good keepsake as I cannot see the necessity for keeping the head warm here. I am batching with Lorraine until either I find something or we drive each other nuts, but so far so good.

Everywhere there is evidence of the destruction that went on here. Hardly a building is left unaffected. Drove up to Batugade where the bulk of our Customs team are situated. Beaut spot right on the beach. Fabulous scenery on the coastal drive, although it's a bit on the dangerous side with a narrow curvy rode. Had my first feed of dog. Unfortunately, I was not aware until too late.

The next day we went to Maliana (about 1½ hours by road) but got my first ride in a helicopter (yippee!) to introduce the local population to the concept of paying duty and sales tax—something that

will coincide with the border office opening shortly. Until now, people have been crossing the border via the river with goods from West Timor.

The Timorese people are incredibly friendly despite the horrors they have seen, especially out in the villages. I am enjoying myself despite the frustrations and am finding every day a learning experience.

10 August 2000

Since my last message, I have pretty much stayed put in Dili trying to sort out the training for Border Service which covers the Customs and Immigration functions in East Timor and working my way through the UN bureaucracy. It is not always easy. I wish I could just concentrate on my job. Just to get some basic, essential equipment is a problem. I spend hours going around to various supply posts to acquire an electrical plug here, a couple of desks there. But it's amazing what a female with a big smile can accomplish.

This working seven days a week is starting to show. I feel pretty drained. There are plenty of good places for a feed and a really good supermarket opened up a couple of weeks ago. They run out of most stuff after a few days but they seem to have a steady supply. Prices are a bit steep but things are slowly getting better. I can even get yoghurt.

I run home along the beach most nights after work. It's hard to get a good work out when you have to stop to reply to the constant "hello Mrs", which I feel obliged to answer. The little house we are living in is very comfortable



Jennifer conducted aerobics for local women, but their children also joined in.

despite the mandi (a tub of water for assisting with showering and other useful purposes) and squat toilet. All in all we seem to be fitting in well to the community.

Monday I went to Baucau about 2½ hours drive along the coast from the West Timor border. There is a big turnaround of military at the moment. The Thais, Portuguese and Jordanians have been changing guard and for about two weeks there are teams required to go to Baucau to process the military. I thought it was a good idea to see the operation and a bit more of the countryside. Baucau is a pretty town set on a hill with coastal views.

Things are starting to hot up over here with increased militia activity leading up to the congressional meetings where the East Timorese leaders are going to sort out what is going to happen with elections and self government.

14 September 2000

I have been organising IT, English training and the Basic Management course that I have developed. I am delivering it for the local staff to prepare them to take on the supervisory roles in the Border Service. After a disastrous day of problems with translators, things settled down and it is all going quite well despite the occasional blackout and intermittent banging and hammering that is going on. Lorraine was jumping around in

had no water. But we have managed to obtain most things. Even got an overhead projector. So I have got all my overheads in Bahasa Indonesia, which helps.

I am now taking aerobics classes for the local ladies (including Lorraine). Every Tuesday and Saturday they rock up to our front yard and I put them through their paces. It is hilarious at times with the kids joining in. I have managed to run it about four times now. Despite my poor attempts at Bahasa, I'm making real progress. I have one to four down pat—satu, dua, tiga empat (not bad eh?).

I am still running home. Have become used to the constant: "Hello Mrs". But the other day was a bit taken back when a couple of lads yelled, "I love you, I love you". It is amazing how by simply not being East Timorese, you take on celebrity status.

20 October 2000

Since my last letter I have completed two Basic Management courses and am into the third and last scheduled course and working on developing other modules.

We play basketball with our East Timorese neighbours at the college nearby. Despite being 20 years older, we have no trouble teaching them about defensive basketball.

We have had a taste of the rain already. It was very welcome as it

is really heating up now. Trouble is we have also had blackouts every time we have had rain. So I am not looking forward to the rainy season as it will be very hard to sleep without a fan to keep cool.

Lorraine befriended a local dog named "Borro" about two months ago and would share her leftover lamb bones with him. The other day she went out to call "Borro" and he was not around. When she enquired about his whereabouts, she was told the family ate him.

We went to the AFP UN and Overseas Policing medal presentation the other day. They are about to complete their six months secondment. The Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, flew in for it and we were able to spend a short time briefing her about our activities in Dili.*

At the moment we are assisting a couple of people who want to join the police force. Then of course there are the English classes. We serve as someone who they can practice their English skills on. Mind you, this works both ways. I am learning just as much Bahasa as they are learning English.

Politically things have been very quiet lately. Thus normalcy is slowly returning after the recent problems associated with the massacre of the UN workers in West Timor. Still no major refugee movement across the border.

29 November 2000

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Life is pretty much the same except the rainy season has arrived with its regular pattern of afternoon rain and the puddles are getting bigger. Work is progressing well. I have finished the last of the Basic Management courses, recruited our full local training staff compliment

of four, put them all through a train-small-groups and workplace-assessor course and then put them to work running sessions on their first Basic course (under guidance from Lorraine and me). They have really taken up the challenge and have been frantically developing session plans and session materials since. The first course finished Friday and went well. This has been the most rewarding part for me as you can really see changes in skills and confidence level. They had only very basic computer skills and now we can't get a look in with only three computers and six of us. They have been given the responsibility to develop session plans for all the sessions so that they will be prepared to run the next course on their own.

There have been a heap of smuggling incidences on the border and Border Service has been seizing truck loads of gear. It has now become a political hot potato. The National Council of Timorese Resistance (an umbrella independence organisation for the political and civic groups operating in and outside East Timor) is involved, accusing Border Service

of picking on the poor peasants. There have been a few incidences with angry people demonstrating and remonstrating for their goods and vehicles back. Border Service is taking a hard line especially after one of our local officers was turfed out of the truck at knife point.

12 January 2001

Left Dili at seven this morning and am currently sitting at Darwin Airport waiting for a connecting flight to Perth. Lorraine and I are sad to be leaving. Yesterday, after work, we had a lovely farewell from our East Timorese Border Service officers with about 100 people turning up to say goodbye. We both held it together through the speeches and even through the singing (they sang *Auld Lang Syne*, *Leaving on a jet plane* and *All my lovin*).

But when we said our final goodbye to our training staff, it was just too much and we were both blubbering. The evening before we had a lovely get together at the Dili Hotel with our international work colleagues and friends and this morning the families who we have

lived among for the past six months got up at five to say farewell.

The East Timorese training officers that we have been training and nurturing for months are about to get the ultimate test as they are now in charge of the training unit (the first work group that has completed East Timorisation). We have been working frantically over the past few weeks to ensure that we have left them in good order to commence this onerous task.

The last words to us this morning from the village chief as we left our house to travel to the airport were: "Don't forget Timor Lorosae because Timor Lorosae will never forget what you have done for us."

Obviously it will be impossible to forget East Timor and the experiences I have had. As I close another chapter in my life, I feel very fortunate in having been given the opportunity to be a part of this period in East Timor's history.

**Chris Ellison was appointed Minister for Justice and Customs on 29 January 2001.*



Villagers from Maliana district, known as the 'rice bowl of Timor', work together in the fields.