

Virtual Trek for Timor 2020 John Tweedie



One evening in late July 2017 I stood before a gathering of people in Hatobuilico, a village high up on the slopes of Mt Ramelau in the hinterland of Timor Leste. I spoke to the gathering, of the friendship between our Blue Mountains community and the people of Hatobuilico.

The gathering included many of the students and teachers from the local Senior Secondary School and they were all farewelling two of our local Blue Mountains people, Mary Waterford and Jude Finch, who were finishing up an 18 month stint as Australian aid volunteers in Timor.

I had travelled to Timor Leste many times since my first visit there in 2002 and had acquired sufficient of the local language Tetun to be making my short speech that evening in Tetun. I really felt I was part of the community that evening.

I always felt so very welcomed in Hatobuilico. I sometimes visited there with friends from Australia (including a memorable walking trip for Blue Mountains residents organised by Jude Finch in 2013). Other times I was there by myself - but I never felt alone.



With Timorese friend Antonio on the 2013 Blue Mtns walking trip. Antonio has been an important link between the Hatobuilico and Blue Mtns communities.

As with many who have visited Timor Leste, a love for the country and its people started from my very first visit and only grew stronger over time. I was always seeking reasons to visit and when I joined the local Blue Mountains support group I had the opportunity to visit on a number of occasions (at my own expense of course).

Whilst I had been involved with some personal projects, such as assisting the English teachers at the Senior Secondary School in their day to day teaching, the focus of my recent visits to Hatobuilico had been the projects supported by the Blue Mountains community, particularly through the fundraising from Trek for Timor. One of those projects was to provide significant material support to the Senior Secondary School, for example through payment of salaries for many of the teachers.

Trek for Timor funds were instrumental in getting this school up and running and in making its ongoing existence viable. From very rudimentary beginnings less than 10 years ago, it is now strong and expanding.



Opening of new buildings at Senior Secondary School January 2017

There have been, and continue to be, many other projects in Hatobuilico supported by our Blue Mountains community. These include a new primary school at the nearby village of Taurema; support for a preschool; support for women's business ventures and with generous assistance from Blue Mountains City Council, support for university scholarships for local students.

If you would like more information on how the funds from the 2018 Trek for Timor have been used please follow this link: <http://trekfortimorbm.org.au/projects-in-east-timor/plans-for-funds-from-the-2018-trek/> .

I recall that July evening in 2017 as a very joyful one, with much singing and dancing in typical Timor style. But for me it was tinged with sadness. As I spoke to the group, I wondered whether I would ever be able to return to this place, that I had come to love as a second home.

I had for some years been aware that I was prone to develop a type of blood cancer – multiple myeloma. I had a condition described as “smouldering myeloma”. While I was in Timor that July, word came through that I needed

to see my haematologist urgently. Recent blood tests showed my smouldering myeloma had developed into a conflagration.

Three years on, after much chemotherapy and double stem cell transplants, I am in complete remission from the cancer and feeling very fit. So what to do with that fitness!

I have been involved to a greater or lesser extent with every Trek for Timor since the first was held in 2010 - either as a volunteer or as a trekker. Whilst my life had very much been turned upside down by my tumultuous personal events over the past few years, I knew that the Trek for Timor is held every second year and that 2020 would be a Trek year. I wondered whether I would be able to participate again, and help raise funds for the ongoing needs of the projects in Hatobuilico.

The Trek itself was also affected this year by tumultuous events of its own. With bush fires, track washaways due to storms and finally the pandemic, it looked like the Trek would go the way of the Olympic Games and have to be delayed by a year. But the needs of our friends in Timor and the projects we have been supporting would not then be met this year. What to do?

When the decision was made by the Trek committee to hold a “virtual Trek for Timor” in October, I immediately wanted to be a part of it. The virtual Trek would take the participants on a “virtual” 100k journey from Dili up to Hatobuilico and Mount Ramelau.

I decided to challenge myself by mirroring this virtual journey with a real 120km trek over a number of days from the Sydney suburb of Chatswood all the way up to my Blue Mountains home in Blackheath. My Trek will start on 17 October and friends and family have offered to join me on all or part of the journey.

I'm hoping that sponsors will now get behind me and help make this year's Trek for Timor as successful as the past Treks. If you would like to sponsor me just follow the link to the virtual Trek webpage at <https://trekfortimorbm.org.au/virtual-trek/> and go down to the heading "Donate by Sponsoring a Trekker". Then go via the link to the sponsorship page where you can find my name under the list of registered trekkers.

Of course there are plenty of trekkers to choose from, so it really doesn't matter who you decide to sponsor. The important thing is that we raise much needed funds to keep the various Blue Mountains supported projects on track. Donations above \$2 can be tax deductible, just tick the request for a tax receipt.



Old Taurema school -2013



New Taurema school funded by Trek for Timor - 2016



With some students and teachers at the new Taurema school