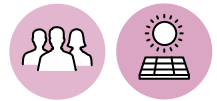


# Another world Light up East Timor



As well as balmy beach-side nights, Tim Adams got lessons in life and new DIY skills on a tour to install solar lighting in East Timor.

WHEN you live in Melbourne, sea breezes, beers on a beachside café balcony and balmy nights don't immediately come to mind as part of early spring. Shift to East Timor though, and this was exactly the experience on the Light Up East Timor tour in September 2015. It was a perfect time to be in East Timor: being late in the dry season, the humidity was not excessive and disease-carrying mosquitoes were virtually non-existent.

## Part holiday, part community development

The Light Up East Timor tours run by Timor Adventures and supported by *ReNew's* publisher, the Alternative Technology Association (ATA), are part holiday, part community development. Timor-Leste is still recovering after centuries of occupation by the Portuguese and then decades of turmoil under Indonesian rule. The people are rightly proud of their recently won independence, but the full repair of structures, systems and souls will take a very long time.

The ATA has been making a contribution to that repair process for some time with a program that installs solar lighting systems. Although electricity generation and distribution has reached larger centres, there are no plans to extend the network to many remote hillside villages. For those villages, ATA's approach of installing 20 watts of photovoltaic generation capacity, battery storage and two lights in each house means that many activities can happen after dark, including cooking and reading. The impact on the ability for children to study is profound.

Lessons learned from other well-meant aid programs have not been lost on the ATA. A



↑ Installation team at a thatch house. Daytime activities are carried out on the lower platform. A sleeping space and living room are in the upper level within the roof space. The addition of some lighting within this windowless space is a great advantage. A bamboo ladder is drawn up into the house at night for security.

trade training program at the National Centre for Employment and Professional Training (CNEFP) in Tibar makes sure that there will be technicians on the ground to provide ongoing maintenance and servicing of the systems long after the volunteer installation teams have flown back to Australia.

## Non-homogenised tourist experience

Now in its third year, the partnership between ATA and Timor Adventures combines solar system installation with an 'adventure' holiday. With the immensely knowledgeable Timor Adventures director as tour guide, our group's holiday began with one of the most hassle- and delay-free immigration

and customs procedures for any overseas expedition, at both Darwin and Dili. A quick trip in a small yellow Dili taxi delivered us to a beach lodge with adequate accommodation. Luxury hotels, resorts or glamping are not yet part of the offering for tourists in Timor-Leste. This may be disappointing for some, but for others it differentiates this destination from the many homogenised tourist experiences on offer.

Similarly, if an image of adventure tourism triggers visions of theme parks, global franchise hotels and restaurants, adrenalin-inducing water sports, air-conditioned everything and non-stop excitement, then the East Timor experience will not fit the bill.



↑ Pre-wiring activities at our village base outside the eating and sleeping hut. Technicians and team members all pitched in.

### On the road

By definition, installing off-grid lighting in remote villages entails driving on rough, steep roads to arrive at the destination. The jarring impact was minimised by the skilful operation of off-road vehicles by our drivers. The rationale for the design of a Toyota LandCruiser, not immediately obvious on Australian roads, was made abundantly clear!

On arrival at the village of Buibela-Lena, the welcoming party exuded warmth and a high level of appreciation for the work we were there to do.

### Setting to work

Before we installed the new systems, three houses with existing systems were in need of a maintenance call. Two systems appeared to have defective charge controllers and the third had suffered a more catastrophic failure: 20W PV panels do not remain viable after they have received a direct hit when used for rock throwing target practice by local lads.

Prior to trekking to the installation sites, we prepared the equipment, entailing significant amounts of wire stripping and twisting, terminal crimping and fitting end caps to battery cases. The technique for attaching the wires to the PV panel mounting block, a screwed compression device, was for an amateur hobbyist like me, a revelation and a lesson for life.

Once armed with sufficient numbers of battery packs, PV panels and rolls of cable, we were ready to start trekking up and down through the far-flung stretches of the village. Walking time far outweighed the time to install the equipment. The 14 houses and the village chapel each received two 10W panels,

a battery pack, a charge controller with level indicator and two light switches, plus two LED lamps located at the discretion of the owner.

Different methods are required for securing panels to steel or thatch roofs, and battery packs and cabling to bamboo wall frames, but suffice to say that light-gauge wire, self-tapping screws, saddle clamps and cable ties all made invaluable contributions.

Special endeavour was made by the villagers to ensure their visitors were well nourished. A task carried out with rudimentary equipment was a clear demonstration that kitchen designs driven by master chef wannabes are unnecessary to deliver excellent meals.

Accommodation in the village was basic but totally adequate. Provided that bathing under a bamboo spout of spring water continuously running into a rock pool is not too confronting, then the experience is highly recommended.

Our departure from the village after three days was tinged with emotion due to the shared sense of achievement and gratitude. There was a realisation from the visitors that we were returning to our complex western lives after a brief sojourn in a different, perhaps simpler world, both worlds having attractions and drawbacks. \*

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For more info on Timor Adventures Light Up East Timor tours in 2016, see [www.timoradventures.com.au](http://www.timoradventures.com.au).

For more info on the ATA's projects in East Timor, see [www.ata.org.au/ipg](http://www.ata.org.au/ipg).



↑ Deliberations about attaching a solar panel to Grandpa's house.



↑ Inside Grandpa's house, showing the battery box in the background and the charge controller inside the house.