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Title : Cycling race part of efforts by Timor Leste to boost tourism

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SINGAPORE: The Tour de Timor is the name of an inaugural five-day bicycle race to be held in Timor Leste at the end of August. The event is part of a new drive by the government to promote tourism.

While in Singapore for a quick stopover, Timor Leste's President, Jose Ramos-Horta, met some of the cyclists who will be taking part in the Tour de Timor.

They will be travelling through nine of Timor-Leste's 13 districts in just five days, spending four nights amongst traditional villages of the country.

So far, some 300 participants from all over the world have registered for the race.

Timor Leste, which is building up its economy since becoming independent in 2002, has seen some violent times in the past. The United Nations sent its peacekeepers to serve in Timor Leste from 1999 to 2005.

Although Australia is advising its citizens not to travel to Timor Leste if they can avoid it, there are more than 100 Australians planning to take part in the race.

Dr Ramos-Horta said: "The Australian travel advice is absolutely nonsense. The streets of Dili are safer than the streets of Darwin and Melbourne. The Americans, who are far more sensitive to security than any other country, have dropped their travel advisory on Timor Leste."

To lure more investors and companies to Timor Leste, the government has been investing money to improve its infrastructure, which it said will be the catalyst for tourism to flourish.

Dr Ramos-Horta said: "This year, we're beginning a major power project, close to US\$400 million investment, to provide the country with 24-hour reliable, cheap energy."

He added that a Singapore-Malaysia investor will be pumping in some US\$300 million in August for the development of a major hotel, while there are others from Australia keen on investing in its old airport, as well as to build golf courses.

Timor Leste's president is also hoping for an international telecommunications operator to come in and set up a reliable and cheap network as good as the ones in Southeast Asia.

He expects some major changes over the next two to three years and quipped that the main selling point for tourists will be the nature element of the country.

He said: "We cannot obviously offer casinos, we don't plan to. No sex tourism, we are totally opposed to that. What we can share with other human beings on this planet is the beauty of our sea, our corals, our dolphins, our whales."

And there are some Singaporeans taking up the offer to experience the landscape of Timor Leste while being challenged by a 450-kilometre country terrain.

One Singapore team has been training hard during whatever free time they can get in between their jobs