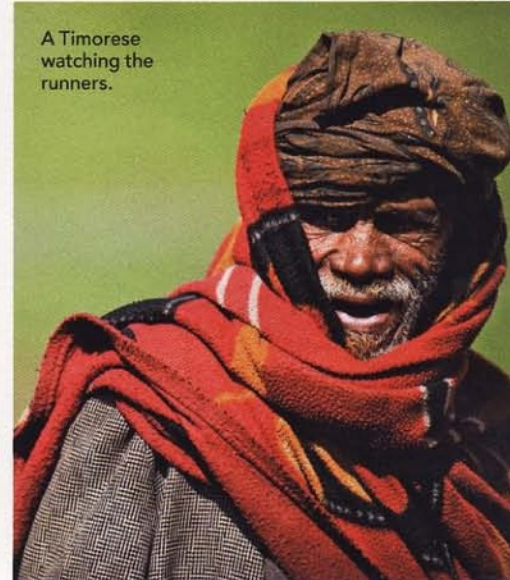




The writer (right) along with the other TCRP girls.



A Timorese watching the runners.

# TIMOR-LESTE FROM A RUNNER'S EYES

HIDDEN BEHIND MANY YEARS OF TROUBLED HISTORY LIES A COUNTRY BLESSED WITH LONG STRETCHES OF WHITE-SANDY BEACHES, BREATHTAKING HIGHLANDS AND WARM-HEARTED PEOPLE. BY JASMINE WONG

**A**s South-east Asia's newest kid on the block and an independent country since May 20, 2002, there is little news about Timor-Leste that travels beyond its shores, apart from a few occurrences of riots and violence. In June this year, The Chain Reaction Project (TCRP, [www.thechainreactionproject.com](http://www.thechainreactionproject.com)) – a quartet of spunky Singaporean women passionate about charity – brought a group of 22 persons to Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, to participate in the inaugural Dili Marathon and to support the work of Hiam Health ([www.hiamhealth.org](http://www.hiamhealth.org)), a nutrition rehabilitation centre for critically malnourished children. Together, they discover the beauty of the island.

## A great place to run

The full marathon route – two loops of a 21km course – begins from the grandiose Palacio do Governo (the Prime Minister's office) and stretches along the scenic waterfront flanked by the deep blue of the Ombai Strait that separates Timor-Leste from the other Indonesian islands. In the distance, the brown hillocks of Atauro Island rise above the sea, and the early rays of the rising sun provide a picture-perfect backdrop to the 1,000-runner event. It's a beautiful start to the 6.30am run.

Curious local Timorese line the streets, watching hundreds of runners weave their way through the city streets. With complete road closure for the event, little gets

in the way of the run – apart from curious children flashing their shy smiles, and bolder ones stretching their palms out for friendly high-fives! Even the course marshals (from the United Nations and local policemen) often have a friendly nod or wave for the runners.

At the 4km mark, the route winds inland, past quiet empty schools on a Sunday morning and churches filled with voices singing hymns of worship (Timor-Leste is 95 per cent Catholic). It's a well-organised race. Clear directional signs keep runners on the right course. Aid-stations are found every 3-4km, manned by enthusiastic volunteers from various non-governmental organisations and international schools in the city.

## Digging deep for a cause

Distractions of sight, sound and smell abound along the route, such as the bustling local market, teeming with people and baskets of produce. But at the 28km mark, the scenery begins to pass by at a blur, as the searing heat takes a toll on us mentally and physically. Still, we persevere, our spirits lifted by the knowledge that it's all for a worthy cause.

When we eventually make it past the finish line, we are overcome by a sense of achievement and assurance, having done our part for the cause. Individually, everyone takes away something special from this race.