

## Formidable Experiences: Judy Charnaud

Since 2001 I have been managing an environmental project in Timor leste, one of the world's poorest countries – this work has been a formidable challenge -

awesome, frightening, remarkable, insane! Even social occasions such as dinner parties can be confronting!

Imagine twelve people, Bandu, his parents, wife and young son, two teenage nieces, sister, brother-in-law, their two children plus several small tables, nine chairs, two benches, a motorbike and a tricycle in a small room behind their house; dirt floor, cement walls bearing black marks due to burning by militia, no windows, tin roof and rotting timber door. Add four puppies, two adult dogs, a cat and a kitten. A formidable crowd!

The door is closed to prevent dogs from entering, however they constantly squeeze under via a hole they have dug in the dirt floor. As each dog attempts this it gets hit with a large stick, squeals, squeezes back outside to simply try again a few minutes later. The young son is a bright, hyperactive boy, so the noise; the son throwing a tantrum, dogs yelping, cats meowing, women giggling loudly as they each downed a beer which has rendered them tipsy! Heavy rain drumming on the roof, dogs and cats fighting over food scraps then getting hit by afore-mentioned stick. To add to the excitement a large crab digs its way out of a hole in the floor, crawls across the room causing the cats to jump, the dogs to bark and one of the nieces to chase it with that useful weapon, the large stick.

The food; rice, papaya leaves, chicken and beef. I skewered a piece of liver, one of my greatest culinary dislikes, but in semi-darkness it is hard to see what to select. The chicken, having been roughly chopped with a large machete, is tasty but contains small shards of bone so must be eaten carefully. The cat did not take enough care causing it to cough and retch leading to the well-known stick treatment.

As a thank you for helping Bandu through University, I am presented with a woven tais which his mother has wrapped me in so I am obliged to wear it in this heat.

Talk about awesome!

I dream about my Sydney townhouse – quiet, peaceful, clean, fresh food, whiskey over ice, ..... no dogs, cats, crabs, screaming children!

Where would I rather be? Good question.

Judy Charnaud © 2024