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Timor tough Tory

If ever a person embodied the qualities of the new nation of Timor-Leste it is Australian mountain bike rider Tory Thomas. Always looking composed and always smiling, she was the first woman to cross the finish line every day in last year's ***Tour de Timor, World Race for Peace***.

Like Timor-Leste, Tory always seems delightfully happy. She has formidable strength, as do the Timorese. She has the ability to quietly endure unimaginable pain. And give up is not in her vocabulary. She seems gentle and is courteous – like the people of Timor-Leste.

Tory has fought back from a terrible accident in 2005 that almost crippled her. And the Timorese are fighting back from some pretty tough times too.

This year Tory will be watching from the sidelines as her husband Tim and 350 other national and international riders tackle 420 kilometres of the world's toughest tracks through the west of the country. Says Tory:

> "*Despite being disappointed to not be able to be part of this year's Tour, I am admittedly very happy with being pregnant. Tim and I are both really excited about the prospect of being parents - we would love to be able to head back to Timor-Leste in 2011 to take part in the Tour de Timor as a family, that'd be really special!*"

After the stunning success of the 2009 race, Digicel has again sponsored the richest mountain biking race in the Southern Hemisphere – with a total purse of $US100,000.

The 2010 race follows a different track from last year's tour of central Timor-Leste. The course this year travels west from Dili along the scenic coastline, past Portuguese forts stopping the first night in the historic town of Balibo. The place is steeped in the Australian and Timorese consciousness and was the subject of the gripping drama Balibo.

The finish line is alongside of "Australia House" – a memorial to the five Australian newsmen killed during the Indonesian invasion. The house where they were executed is just across the road and remains much as it was that day.

Day 2 winds through the farm and rice plains of Maliana to Suai and the lush valleys of Ermera coffee country. This finish line is in front of the city's partly-built new cathedral. The huge building was started before independence in 1999 and today many of the skilled artisans working to complete it are Indonesian. It is hoped to have the building finished around May next year.

Days 3 and 4 see riders climb through the mountainous areas of Ainaro and Maubisse – up and over "Horta's Heartbreak Hill" at 1900 metres.

His Excellency the President of Timor-Leste, José Ramos-Horta, has welcomed riders back: *"You are all heroes and each and every one of you are special friends of the people of Timor-Leste. I am delighted to invite riders, both new and returning, to experience the world's toughest bike race, in Asia's newest nation."*

An excellent article in the August/September issue of ***AirNorth Magazine*** tells the story of Tory's awful accident. Tory was in hospital for months after she was knocked off her bike when she was riding home from work: *"I was told I probably wouldn't be able to walk again," she says. "I had surgery to repair some of the damage: a screw through the sacroiliac joint in my lower back and a plate a screws around my left hip. Miraculously, the surgery left me with legs that worked. Once I could move my muscles I became determined to do everything in my power to be able to ride my bike again."* AirNorth is again a major sponsor of the race.

Unseasonal torrential rains just a few weeks ago have washed away bridges and large sections of roads. Riders will have to be especially alert to avoid the massive pot-holes that dot the course. The tracks into Suai on Day 2 are a nightmare, even in a four-wheel drive. Suai is sometimes referred to as the "forgotten" city because it gets cut off from Dili by big rains. There are a number of detours across rivers where the bridges have been badly damaged.

And once again perhaps the most dangerous and unpredictable obstacles are the goats, pigs and chickens. Hit one of these at speed and your bacon is fried.

This year will also see increased participation from Timorese riders. There will be a team each from the Timor-Leste National Defence Force, Police Force and Fire fighters, two National Cycling Federation Teams and 13 district teams from right across Timor.

Polygon has donated hundreds of bikes to local youths to help grow this incredible sport throughout the country.

Getting there:

Air North flies from Darwin to Dili (1hr 15min) for about $600 return including tax. Jetstar flies to Darwin from Sydney and Melbourne (4hr 30min) for about $390 return. Tourists can obtain a $US30 visa on arrival for a stay of up to 30 days. Air Timor (Silk Air Charter), fly return flights from Singapore every Saturday and Tuesday. You can also fly daily from Bali.

Staying there:

Dili Beach Hotel has double rooms from $US100 and two-bedroom apartments from $US110; see dilibeachhotel.com. Esplanada Hotel in Dili has double rooms for $US115; see hotelesplanada.com. There are a full range of accommodation booking options at timorleste-hotels.com/.