On the 21st of September 2014, 13 Year 10 students and two teachers from MacKillop Catholic College stood in the Hobart Airport. A year’s worth of preparation had come down to this. I still couldn’t believe it was happening when I said goodbye to my family. It hadn’t dawned when we got on the first plane: “Just another flight to Melbourne.” In Melbourne, we met with Mark Haebich from Destination Dreaming. He would be with us during our time away. It started to get more realistic with the second flight, to Darwin. However, it did start feeling real at 2.50am in the morning in the middle of Darwin as we got ready to drive to flight number 3, to Dili, Timor-Leste.

It was difficult to contain my excitement now as we started to circle over blue water, flecked gold with the rising sun. We stepped out of the plane, just a group of school students, into a country not far but so different from our homeland: Timor-Leste. The first thing I noticed was the heat. At 7.00am it was already as warm as a fine summer’s day in Tassie.

Leaving Dili airport, we headed to our accommodation, Timor Lodge. While simple compared to our usual standard of living, it would prove to be luxury compared to what awaited us in Marobo. We explored Dili, visiting the Mary MacKillop Institute, Santa Cruz Cemetery, the Science Of Life Skills (SOLS) and Chega War Museum. These places were highly significant in showing both what the people of Timor-Leste had been through and how they are now moving forward.

Santa Cruz Cemetery was the sight of a massacre in 1991 and Chega was full of gruesome facts, realities and images of the Indonesian occupation. However, on the other hand, SOLs and the Mary MacKillop Institute were both places of learning and development and are integral in the rebuilding of Timor.

The next day, we packed and loaded our gear onto/in the 4wds which would take us on the 8 hour journey to Marobo. A lot could be said about sitting in a 4wd for 8 hours but in a summary, it was rough, hot and bumpy. I found it incredibly fun, though some people did not share my enthusiasm and a few people felt a bit unwell.

After buying our supply of water bottles and toilet paper in Maliana (a city 2 1/2 hours from Marobo) we arrived in Marobo on dusk. It was remote, it was harsh, it was amazing. The majority of our group chose to sleep outside.

We all soon learned that regardless of the time, Marobo didn’t seem to sleep. A combination of animal noises and the neighbours playing the same two songs all night was enough to keep me awake.

In the morning, after breakfast, we commenced the walk to the school and began our teaching. Most of that week was spent between the SOLS (a smaller scale version of the centre in Dili) the high school and the primary school.
On one of the nights, we climbed a mountain to the old village of Atwaben. Nobody lived here and the huts were all traditional and at least 500 years old. Here we sat and reflected as we watched the last rays of the dying sun sink into the rugged mountains. This country, this village seemed to be a different world to one I lived in, yet I felt at home among the mountains and these amazing people. We descended the mountain to another night of little sleep.

On the Saturday, the day before we left Marobo, we walked to the slightly larger neighbouring village of Bobonaro. We went to market to buy meat and vegetables for a feast to be held that night. There were lots of things to see here and we bought a chicken, which would later appear in lunch. After riding a truck back to Marobo, we bought a goat. Not much needs to be said other than goat kebabs are incredibly delicious.

We were sad to leave Marobo and eventually, after another day of travel and a day in Dili, we were sad to leave Timor-Leste. This was marred slightly by one member of the group ending up in hospital in Dili due to illness. He recovered somewhat and was cleared to fly out with the rest of us.

In Melbourne, we said goodbye to Mark before boarding a plane home to Hobart. It was an incredible experience, one which I will never forget.

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Jeremy Ford, 10 White