The East Timorese people are known for their hospitality. They instinctively make an effort to communicate with guests to their country. In turn, they appreciate it when guests make a special effort to communicate with them. Language is the key to entering a new culture and it’s the best way to show respect for another’s way of life. Hopefully, this vocabulary list will help get you -- be you Timorese or a guest in the country -- more conversant with one of the frequently used languages in East Timor, including, of course, Tetun. Spend the small amount of time it takes to learn the phrases and you’re started in a new language. They’ll open up a whole new world to you, and truly delight a few people in the process!

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Cultural Notes

The word Obrigadu/Obrigada is a loan word from the Portuguese. In the Timorese culture there is no word which can truly express someone’s gratitude. When said by a female, one says obrigada (feminine) and when said by a male, one says obrigadu (masculine).

The pronunciation of Tetun vowels are as follow:

A = haat as in English pronunciation for b
E = bele as in English pronunciation for s
I = Dili as in English pronunciation for r
O = kolo as in English pronunciation for go
U = sunu as in English pronunciation for good

With words which contain double vowels or accent-ed vowels, they are lengthened, prolonged or stressed:

AA = haat as in Hut
A = deedeer as in English pron. for a
EE = deedeer as in English pron. for ee