

> We lay in the water staring up at a star spangled sky. No one spoke. We were lost in our own thoughts, reflecting on the most extraordinary night dive of our life.



# north sulawesi vanishingACT



**N**orth Sulawesi in Indonesia offers world class diving of two distinct types close enough to sample in one trip. The Bunaken National Marine Park "has some of the highest levels of marine biodiversity in the world" according to Wikipedia and Lembeh Strait offers some of the best muck diving on the planet according to anyone who's tried it.

We began at Bunaken off the mainland from Manado. The marine parks' five islands are renowned for fabulous wall dives and vast reef fish schools. At Panglisan we were dazzled by swirling shoals of trevally, batfish, snappers and fusiliers. Juvenile red tooth triggerfish, black snappers and butterflyfish tucked in close to the wall for protection. Muka Kampung gave us nudibranchs galore plus a beautifully camouflaged leaf scorpionfish. Tanjung Pisok II yielded a school of Napoleon wrasse while a bumphead parrotfish as big as a bumper car single-mindedly headbutted the reef. A steep wall dropped vertically at Lekuan and we nearly missed a snoozing turtle when thousands of pyramid butterflyfish blocked our vision.

At Sachiko a whitetip reef shark angled in from the blue and headed straight for us. A curious shark is always special and this one seemed very interested in my fins. Not wishing to scare him off I remained motionless, but when it got close enough to sniff me I prudently flicked a fin. It skewed away, vanishing in a blink.

Six days later we transferred from Bunaken Island to Lembeh Island on the opposite coast. The narrow 12 kilometre long Lembeh Strait separates Lembeh Island from the mainland. Unlike Bunaken, the dive sites aren't pretty, but they're packed with unusual critters. I'd defy even the most jaded diver not to be wowed by the sheer strangeness of muck diving in the Strait.

The Lembeh dive sites were dismaying at first. Rubbish littered the black sand and after the vibrantly coloured reefs of Bunaken these sites looked bleak. I soon learned how many treasures the discarded tins, bottles, old boots, bits of plastic and sacking concealed. Divemaster Winston showed us how to

: SUSAN EAMES

*Clockwise from bottom left:  
An improbably hued rhinopias  
Rigid shrimpfish crowd divers on a night dive  
Orange painted frogfish  
Flying gurnard glides away from the divers  
Nudibranchs - trailing Risbecia Tryoni*





Top: Nudibranch - Girdled *Glossodoris*  
Bottom: A striated-hairy-frogfish goes hunting

gently examine each scrap and our patience rewarded us with nudibranchs, shrimps, crabs and octopuses. Little bulgy-eyed orbicular burrfish seemed to specialise in boots and old paint tins. A seahorse covered in algae was curled amongst bits of junk at Makawide. Helmut gurnards swooshed across the sand like miniature hovercrafts and boxy longhorn cowfish zipped away like unwilling extras in a movie. Flatheads and flounders blended into the dark grey sand so effectively, we only spotted them if they twitched. Lethally camouflaged dragonets, waspfin, scorpionfish and lionfish required constant vigilance as we homed in on vegetation, scruffy coral clumps and rubbish in our search for critters. Multi-coloured Pfeffer's flamboyant cuttlefish pulsed at us. At Retak Larry (named after the late Larry Smith) eagle-eyed Winston found a cuttlefish the size of my thumbnail and equally tiny yellow boxfish at Tandu Rusa.

An experienced divemaster is essential at Lembeh. Winston knew how to interpret every lump and bump in the sand and 'tickled out' crabs, octopuses and mantis

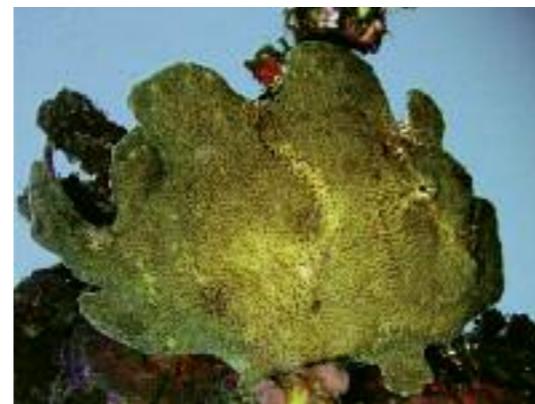
Winston knew how to interpret every lump and bump in the sand and 'tickled out' crabs, octopuses and mantis shrimps we'd never have found by ourselves.

At Nudi's Retreat, the only genuinely pretty site at Lembeh, Winston showed us pygmy seahorses, a halimeda ghostpipefish and a winged pipefish. He knew where the strange flame file shell was coyly tucked into an overhang and he demonstrated great skill at spotting impossibly tiny nudibranchs.

Within a couple of days we'd settled into a new rhythm of diving. The sites are generally shallow at Lembeh with the deepest dives being around the 20 metre mark. Visibility ranged from 10 to 20 metres. The diving was exceedingly slow and dives averaged 70 minutes. Patience and perfect buoyancy were virtues. A typical dive began with a backroll entry into a slightly chilly 26-27° and descent to a murky bottom in just five or six metres. We'd then fan out to slowly work down the slope, zig-zagging from one promising looking clump to another.

Lembeh is nudibranch heaven. I positively identified 29 species of nudibranchs I've never seen before and probably spotted double that number. Snake eels hole-up in the sand with just their heads protruding. While we were watching one being attended to by a cleaner shrimp at Nudi Falls a ghostly spaghetti-like tentacle emerged from the sand. It quested blindly for a few seconds before vanishing again. Never has the underwater world felt as alien as it did for those few eerie moments.

Lembeh provides good hunting grounds for the elusive wonderpus and mimic octopus. We weren't lucky with these species but we did see several veined octopuses, aka the coconut octopus. The nickname derives from this creature's habit of finding and retaining half a coconut shell to use for shelter. We were fortunate to see a coconut octopus in

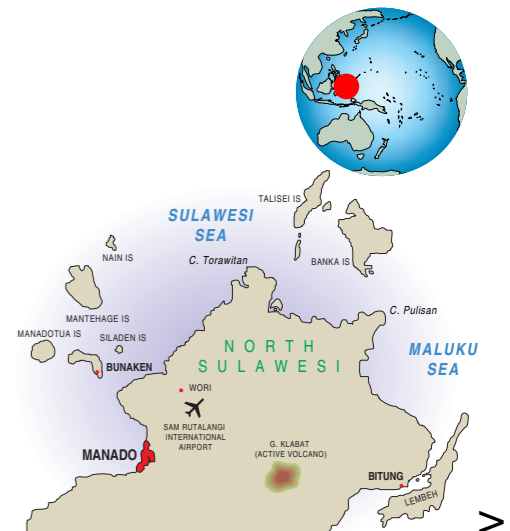


action at Hairball I. Once he'd decided his photo call was over, he picked up his home and began sidling off across the sand with it. When that tactic didn't work with us, he simply closed up shop by disappearing under the shell.

The astonishingly colourful little mandarin fish emerges at twilight and is notoriously difficult to photograph as it flits in and out of its coral hidey-holes. Our attempts to capture a decent photograph at Aer Prang met with failure, but these fish were a delight to watch as they played peek-a-boo with us.

Frogfish - or anglerfish - in an unlikely range of colours remained motionless no matter how closely we approached; stoical and somehow dignified despite their absurdly comical appearance. I fell for the hairy version big-time. Of course it's not hair at all but skin filaments. Nevertheless the hairy frogfish looks cute and cuddly enough to pet. At Hairball II a hairy frogfish treated us to a hunting demonstration. He trundled along in the sand then paused. The lure on the top of his head suddenly shot out and wiggled furiously. He repeated this strategy several times. When he caught something the action was so rapid I missed it!

Clockwise from bottom left:  
Nudibranch - *Halgerda Malessoi*  
Spinecheek anemonefish at Bunaken  
Giant frogfish  
Nudibranch - *Nembrotha Cristata*  
Snoozing Turtle at Bunaken



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Our North Sulawesi experience culminated in a 70 minute night dive at Jahir. Painted and hairy frogfish abounded. Octopuses undulated. Helmut gurnards and longhorn cowfish were less timid under the cover of darkness. Rigid shrimpfish crowded so close we felt as if we were being herded. The dive site was thick with nudibranchs on the move. But the star of the show was the aptly named orangutan crab with his ginger-furred appearance and long fluffy-looking pincer arms.

As I lay on the surface waiting for the boat to pick us up I stared up at the stars and wondered if diving got any more diverse than North Sulawesi. Bunaken and Lembeh – you can't possibly experience one without the other.

*The hairy-looking orangutan crab sits on bubble coral and warns us to keep back*



**GETTING TO NORTH SULAWESI:**  
Flights to Manado operate via Singapore from major Australian cities and other

**DIVE OPERATOR:**  
The author dived with Bastianos Diving Resort. Bastianos runs all-inclusive budget to mid-range resorts on Bunaken and Lembeh Islands. They meet guests at Manado airport and look after all transfers thereafter  
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