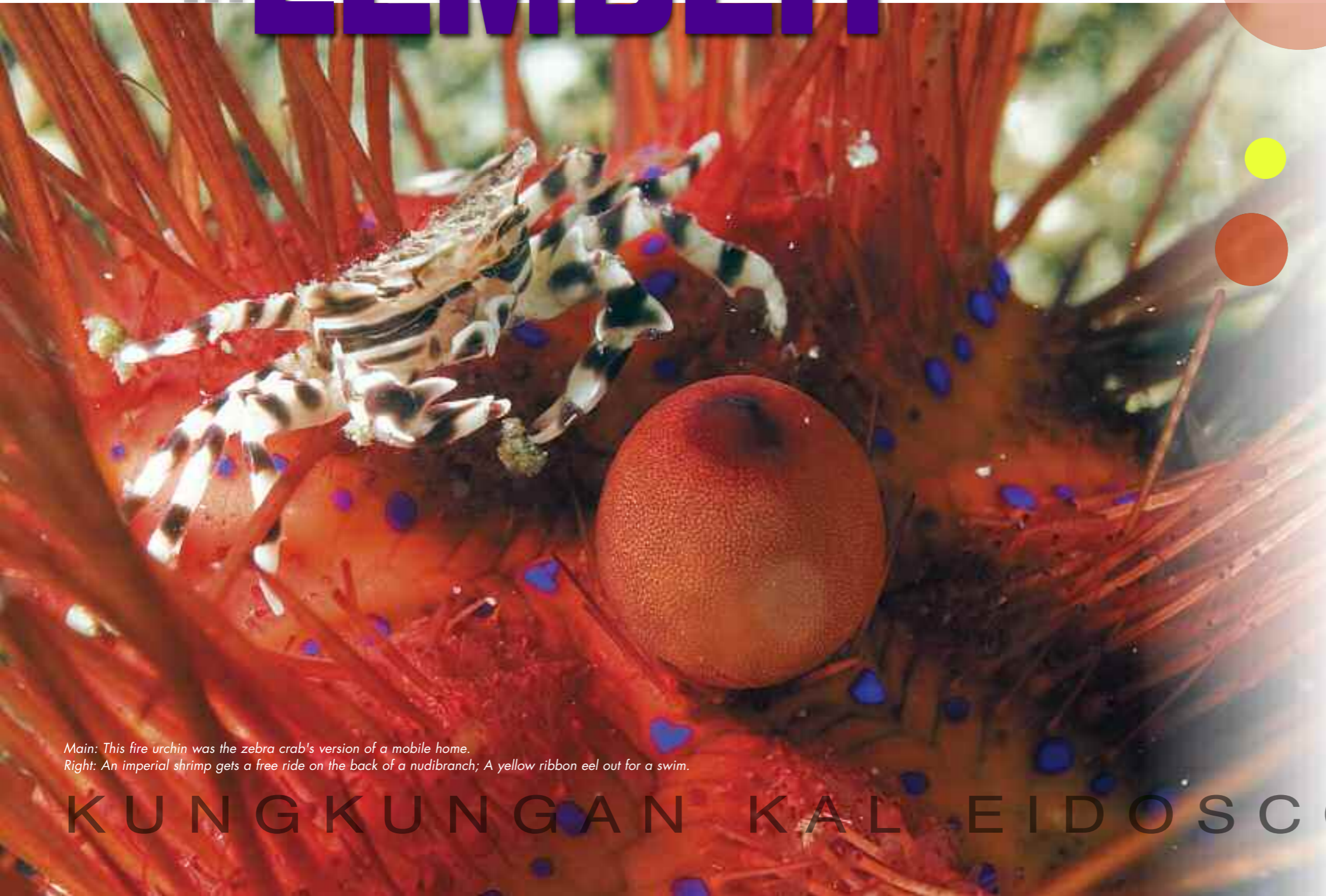


laid back in **LEMBEH**



Main: This fire urchin was the zebra crab's version of a mobile home.

Right: An imperial shrimp gets a free ride on the back of a nudibranch; A yellow ribbon eel out for a swim.



: GLEN COWANS

> AS WE DESCENDED THE MERE 10 METRES TO THE BOTTOM, BLACK VOLCANIC SAND STRETCHED IN EVERY DIRECTION AND DOWN INTO THE GLOOM. AN AMAZING ECOSYSTEM HAS EVOLVED HERE. ALMOST DEVOID OF WAVE ACTION AND WITH VERY LITTLE STRONG WINDS, DELICATE CORALS AND FRAGILE CREATURES GROW IN ABUNDANCE. THIS DOES NOT MEAN IT IS PEACEFUL – THIS MINIATURE WORLD IS A PLACE OF CAMOUFLAGE AND STEALTH AND THE RULES IN THE STRAIT ARE SIMPLE, EAT OR BE EATEN. WELCOME TO LEMBEH.

On the eastern side of the very northern tip of North Sulawesi, Lembeh Island is separated from the mainland by a 12 kilometre long narrow band of water known as Lembeh Strait.

North Sulawesi is blessed with a warm tropical climate. Politically it's part of Indonesia but traditionally the local culture is Minahasan with the majority of the religion being Christian – there's an incredible number of churches seen during the 80 minute drive between the airport and Kungkungan Bay.

Dive sites are no more than 15 minutes from the Kungkungan Bay Resort. The well planned dive centre has a multitude of rinse stations, two dive briefing huts and camera preparation room. Best of all are the open air hot showers, so post dive you can strip off your wetsuit in luxuriant warm fresh water. Diving is done from fully covered dive boats able to take up to eight divers each and maximum divers per guide is four, though the norm is two or three.

K U N G K U N G A N K A L E I D O S C O P E



Diving here is best done with good buoyancy and if you can adopt a fins-up frog kick position it's even better. There's nothing worse than finding a magnificent subject then have it smothered by another diver's careless fin kick. Best movements are slow and deliberate, don't rush and use your buoyancy and flutter kicks to float in and out rather than fins and arms. Most subjects here are either stationary or slow moving, and guides make sure everyone gets a close look.



Crustaceans, seahorses and frogfish are just a few of the denizens that mimic the colour, shape and sometimes even the texture of what they inhabit

The house reef is situated right in front of the resort and is accessed from the jetty. In the centre of the jetty is a cutout where you can look down into the water, a huge boulder just under the surface bursts with encrusting sponges and large orange or pink gorgonians that go right to the surface at low tide. You can do unlimited dives on the house reef, that is if you have the energy after your three boat dives per day. We did several dives and managed to find nudibranchs, two harlequin ghost pipefish right under the ladder, banggai cardinalfish in numbers so vast they were almost smothering an anemone, juvenile batfish, pipefish and a huge sloping bank of beautiful euphyllia coral as well as many anemones, anemonefish and commensal shrimp and crabs. Also available are night dives and a must do is the mandarin fish night dive.

Most dives, no matter how prepared you are for them, have you wondering within



the first few minutes if you are actually going to see anything. You look around at an almost barren terrain and wonder how the guide will find anything, let alone you actually see something first. But then once into your dive, as you commence swimming down the slope, little oases of life start to appear. Your attention is immediately drawn by the insistent tapping of the guide's pointing stick on his tank, he has discovered something worthy of your inspection. Magnificent

vase-like sponges, rock outcrops, anemones, crinoids and whip corals all sanctify life here and looking close reveals discoveries that at first glance were almost completely invisible. Crustaceans, seahorses and frogfish are just a few of the denizens that mimic the colour, shape and sometimes even the texture of what they inhabit. At first you look and go, "oh a whip coral, yeah I have seen those already," but then you realise it is actually what is on the coral that is the reason for the excitement. Often even then it is hard to see what all the fuss is about. I have found that shining a torch on what is being shown will often reveal the colour difference far better than natural light.

It is not just these micro habitats of rock, coral and sponge that harbour life. On many an occasion some of the most incredible discoveries are out on the flat and seemingly barren open ground.

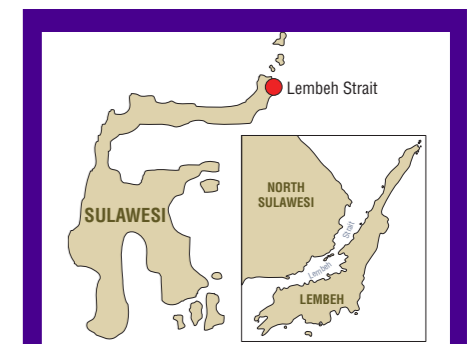
These guides do an incredible amount of diving here but there is no sign that they are in any way jaded with their subjects. In fact the opposite is true. Our guide found us a large nudibranch with two imperial shrimp sheltering on its back as it slowly traversed the silty seabed. When I settled to photograph such a magnificent subject I could not help but notice the guide laughing and whooping with excitement. This was something he repeated on many subjects found including a gorgonian hosting a pygmy seahorse party, several wonderpuses and a mimic octopus doing its best to resemble a flounder. Diving here was also the first time I had seen ribbon eels of blue, black and yellow, sometimes on the one dive.

Once you start looking small and recognising how anything can appear almost anywhere, you begin making discoveries on your own (although it is pretty hard to beat the guides to finding it first). Sea urchins can be numerous and the first fire urchin I looked at was actually the mobile home of a perfect little zebra crab. It brought to light the first rule of Lembeh macro; If you find something, even a simple sea urchin, examine it very closely, you never know what will be living on it. The next urchin I stopped to look at actually got up off the bottom and ran away from me at high speed. A small urchin crab was holding it onto its back as defense and camouflage. Sometimes it takes your movement in passing to cause a subject to appear. Flamboyant cuttlefish resemble a lump of mud on the bottom until they sense the gentle water movement from your hand or fin passing

nearby. This causes an immediate reaction in colour and shape, with quivering pulsations changing from yellow to white and the typical 'fingers up' salute of a cuttle in threat display as they say hello.

Hairy frogfish sit completely still, often their appearance only revealed as they wave their fishing pole complete with wiggly lure around in the hope of tempting a passing fish to within range of their voluminous mouth. Amusingly whenever you stop to photograph them they seem to delight in walking with their awkward slow motion rocking gait, directly towards your lens. Sit quietly and wait for the right shot and they often yawn large as they tire of the game and present it as a warning for you to go away.

The diving is the main draw card for Lembeh but topside the resort is luxurious. Recently added is a health spa and with prices at a fraction of what you would pay in Australia, a massage after a days diving is something well worth considering. Louise partook of several during our stay and informs me the standard is first class and very professional. So much so that I agreed to a couple of massages myself and I must admit it felt quite decadent and a pleasant indulgence at the end of the day before you settle down for a delicious meal at the restaurant or a drink at the top bar with its balcony overlooking the water. So even if your partner does not dive, the resort is perfect for relaxation and pampering, enough for anyone to feel refreshed by the end of your stay.



TRAVEL FACTS

Getting there Flights are available direct to Manado via Singapore, Bali, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

Health & vaccinations We did not notice one mosquito during our stay in September and the resort does fog for them but generally recommended for Indonesia are anti malarials and insect repellent. Like all remote locations, tetanus, and hepatitis 'A' could be considered.

Electricity 250v European style outlets - twin round pin. Adapters available.

Entry & exit requirements Visa required on entry to Indonesia, 7 day stay US\$10, up to 30 day stay US\$25. Departure tax is US\$15. Can be paid in Australian dollars but if you have Indonesian Rp all these fees come out cheaper, for instance Rp\$100,000 departure tax is just above US\$10.

Airport transfers The resort will pick you up from and return you to the airport.

Nitrox Available as an optional extra.

Climate Warm tropical climate, water temp. Jul-Nov 26°, the rest of the year 28°. A 3mm suit or lycra is recommended. Wet season Nov-Apr, the rest is the dry season but suitable for diving year round.

>Visit the Kungkungan website at www.divekbr.com



Left: This little crab runs around holding an urchin on its back; The incredibly cute orangutan crab; This coconut octopus had decided that a bottle top and clamshells would improve the look of its abode; Look in and around the huge barrel sponges for these tiny hairy squat lobsters.

Left: This mimic octopus swam off in a perfect simulation of a flounder; A magnificent yellow Ambon scorpionfish; I managed to be the first to discover this red rhinopias; Banggai cardinalfish surround an anemone.





A sleeping seasnake; A yellow jawfish - a tiny fish with the jawline of Arnold Schwarzenegger; An orange scorpionfish, almost completely hidden until the colours show up in torchlight.

The attention to detail at Kungkungan Bay Resort is wonderful. Meals are fully included and available 24 hours. Wifi runs throughout the resort. All cottages are roomy with a lounge, your own balcony and giant bathroom. Diving also comes with a nitrox option and they even think of fresh water for you on the transfer to and from the resort. It all shows careful thought for making your stay as delightful as possible. The prize for best attention to detail though, for me, goes to how they look after your camera equipment. Besides having a very spacious and functional preparation room, each photographer is given a plastic crate of the correct size for your own equipment. During the day it stays within that crate at all times, especially within the rinse tubs. It is loaded onto the dive boat in the crate

and is only lifted out when you go underwater. This completely removes any chance of dome ports being scratched and equipment fouls from separate sets of gear coming into contact with each other. To me this, along with their complimentary print out of every dive you did, is something all resorts and dive operations should consider.

The end of your stay is just as friendly as the beginning (and the middle). All of the staff on duty gather at the foyer, you are not sure what is going on and then your van arrives. It is not that they are eager to see you go, instead, guitar in hand they sing and clap with bright smiles, a local Minahasan song wishing you a pleasant trip and hoping for your soon return. "Kembalilah" ■

