

MOSTLY

MUCK



A painted frogfish on the move

> I WAS FINNING SLOW AND LOW OVER THE BLACK SAND. A FLASH OF ELECTRIC BLUE CAUGHT MY ATTENTION. I'D BEEN ABOUT TO SWIM DIRECTLY OVER A BLUE RING OCTOPUS. I WAS FAR TOO EXCITED BY THE SIGHTING TO CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF MY NEAR COLLISION WITH ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMALS IN OUR OCEANS.

: TEXT AND IMAGES SUSAN EAMES



The rarely seen hairy octopus



An endearing little hairy frogfish



A superbly camouflaged thorny devilfish



A vividly coloured painted frogfish

North Sulawesi gives divers the opportunity to mix it up a bit. Bunaken has spectacular wall dives and Lembeh Strait offers superb muck diving. Since coral reefs are prolific in the tropics and good muck diving is more elusive, I knew in advance that our adventure would lean towards mostly muck.

Established in 1991, the Bunaken National Marine Park is located off the mainland from Manado and consists of five islands and their surrounding waters. With some of the highest recorded levels of biodiversity in the world, first-class diving is on offer. If you like wall diving, you'll love Bunaken. The gradients vary from sloping to vertical and are rich in corals and plenty of macro subjects including pygmy seahorses, orang-utan crabs and nudibranchs.

We went in November, the start of the rainy season. However rainfall came in short heavy blasts and had no effect on our diving. The water temperature was a toasty 30°C so I was more than comfortable in my 3mm wetsuit. The visibility ranged around 20 to 30 metres and depths averaged 25 metres. Along the reefs, fusiliers streamed in all directions. Large populations of pyramid butterflyfish and red-tooth triggerfish kept us entertained. Out in the blue, giant trevally, dogtooth tuna, Napoleon and Maori wrasse and the occasional whitetip reef shark patrolled. Periodically the predators would move in, bullying the reef fish up against the wall for protection.

The shallows were home to the juveniles. Tight swirls of catfish flowed like single entities. Schools of juvenile barracuda slicked back and forth. Rockmover wrasse danced like harlequin



marionettes and boxfish dipped and ducked. Oriental sweetlips used plate corals to conceal themselves and clouds of anthias sparkled like miniature explosions.

Turtle populations are in reasonable shape here. I was delighted to discover that Bunaken turtles aren't overly shy either; a feeding turtle continued ripping, biting and chomping despite our proximity. Then we found the mother of all green turtles who was unfazed by enthusiastic divers and remained parked on a ledge like a VW Beetle with flat tyres.

After the vibrant colours and sweeping vistas of Bunaken, Lembeh is a huge contrast. A narrow 12 kilometre long strait separates Lembeh Island from the mainland. Within this some of the strangest animals in the underwater world can be found. Most Lembeh dive sites aren't attractive – rubbish litters the black sand and the pure muck dives seem grim at first glance, but it doesn't take long for the creatures of Lembeh to work their magic. You swiftly becomes absorbed in the search for unusual animals and from our first dive we were hooked.

The visibility averaged 10 metres – better than I'd anticipated – and the water temperature was an unprecedented 30°C. Lembeh temperatures are usually a degree or two cooler than Bunaken. I stuck to my full length 3mm wetsuit because most of the dives involved close exploration of the sandy bottom. With a proliferation of animals that can cause grievous bodily harm, I preferred full length cover to a shorty.

Patience, concentration and perfect bouyancy skills are necessary in Lembeh. We quickly learnt to slow right down and examine every scrap of debris or growth on the sea floor. Pfeffer's flamboyant cuttlefish pulsed yellow and purple when we approached. Longhorn cowfish and helmet gurnards skimmed fast and low. Decorator crabs camouflaged themselves by carrying colourful fire urchins on their backs. Painted frogfish



Facing page, from top left - Nudibranch *Risbecia tryoni* with an emperor shrimp hitching a lift; Mandarinfish mate every evening at dusk; Orang-utan crab on bubble coral at Bunaken; A wonderpus foraging in the sand;
This page, from top left - The beautiful but deadly blue ring octopus; The strikingly beautiful mimic octopus; An orange-spotted pipefish on brain coral; Ambon scorpionfish blend into their surroundings

seemed frozen in time as they waited for their prey. I found the hairy version of the frogfish remarkably endearing. Mantis shrimps rushed around, diving in and out of their burrows like demented bugs. We were concentrating on a baby hairy frogfish when a mantis shrimp popped out of its burrow and struck a glancing blow at my husband's hand. The anemonefish in Lembeh are feistier than most and divers reported being nipped if they got too close. While photographing a tiny juvenile Batavia batfish, it decided to adopt us, trying to snuggle up against the camera lens. I gently ushered it back to its coral home.

The Lembeh seadragon or pygmy pipe dragon, *Kyonemichthys rumengani* was only described in 2007; these tiny pipefish look like random strands of vegetation and would be almost impossible to find without a knowledgeable guide.

Of the scorpionfish varieties found at Lembeh, the Ambon scorpionfish and the rhinopias are among the rarest. The



GETTING TO NORTH SULAWESI Flights to Manado International Airport operate via Singapore or Bali from major Australian cities.

DIVE OPERATOR: The author dived with Two Fish Divers, which runs all-inclusive budget resorts on Bunaken and Lembeh Islands. They meet guests at Manado airport and look after all transfers thereafter.

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Bunaken: (62) 812 3671 2929
Lembeh: (62) 813 4086 2337

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scorpionfish's camouflage is so successful it took two dives of solid searching to find the weedy rhinopias known to be in the area.

There are rules governing diver numbers to a maximum of 15 including the guides on all Lembah dive sites. For the mandarinfish dive site, the resorts have arranged a rota system. Mandarinfish emerge at dusk to mate and you can set your watch by them. The courtship of these gorgeous little fish is

enchanting. The male flits in and out of the coral heads strutting his stuff to attract a female. Research has shown that size matters, with the female always choosing the largest male available. Once she makes her decision she lays her fin on his back. Together they swoop up the water column to simultaneously release their eggs and sperm in a tiny puff. While we watched, they repeated the sequence several times in a delicate ballet until darkness descended.



This juvenile Batavia batfish tried to adopt us

Many species of octopus abound in Lembah. With their slender striped tentacles the mimic octopus and wonderpus are strikingly beautiful. The veined – or coconut – octopus is less pretty but equally fascinating to watch. This octopus carries its home, often in the form of half a coconut, for an instant disappearing act when threatened. The hairy octopus is a rare beast. When my husband found one it took a few moments for us to spot the hair filaments and realise what we were looking at. At less than 15 centimetres, I was surprised at how small it was. But for me, the major highlight was no less than three sightings of the even tinier blue ring octopus. The neurotoxin carried by the blue ring will paralyse and kill you in seconds and there is no known antidote. Fortunately, these little octopuses aren't aggressive. If their warning blue rings don't deter an intruder they'll try to swim away to avoid further confrontation.

Lembah is a place for superbly camouflaged critters, and for unusual, dangerous, rare and beautiful animals you may never have encountered before. As a dive destination, North Sulawesi is the place to find the cute, the weird and the ugly.

From gas mask & dustbin lid to Siebe Gorman rig...

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Ivor Howitt was one of the world's first post-war recreational air scuba divers and the first known in the UK. Ivor and his friends formed the first UK sport dive club, the Aberdeen-based Amphibians divers, canoe, caved, mountaineered, hiked, biked, and skied. Ivor's sense of adventure eventually landed him in Australia with his Siebe Gorman rig. Fathomeering has a full colour section of possibly the first colour images taken in Australia and contains records of the Amphibians' exploits and purchases.

Mono and full colour, 167 pages, soft cover.

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