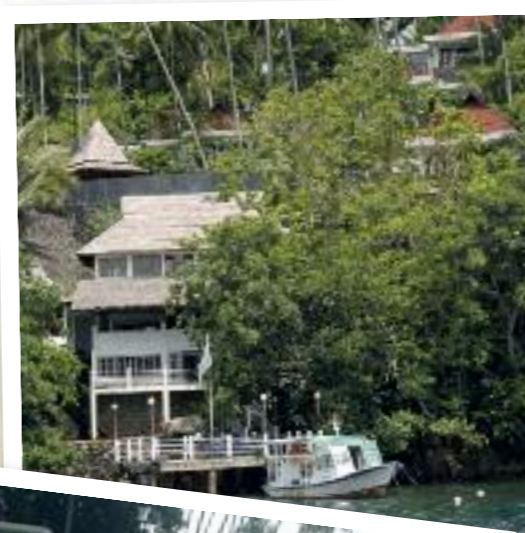


: KEN HOPPEN

# STRAIT + NARROW



> IT TOOK SIX OF MY SEVEN DAYS IN LEMBEH STRAIT TO FIND WHAT HAD BEEN MY MAIN OBJECTIVE PRIOR TO THE TRIP – A MIMIC OCTOPUS. BUT BY THE TIME WE FOUND IT I'D SEEN SO MANY THINGS I DIDN'T EXPECT TO SEE, THAT THE MIMIC HAD BECOME A SECONDARY CONSIDERATION.



**O**n my last dusk dive we decided to go over to Aer Bajo on the eastern side of the Strait, some three minutes away by boat.

Mimic octopus had been regularly reported there in previous weeks but while this site had delivered other spectacular critters, we hadn't spotted a mimic during our three previous dives there. Time was running short so I suggested a long dive on the shallow black sand slope, but 25 minutes later I thought I'd done the wrong thing – it was my least productive time of the entire trip. I hadn't taken a photo or seen anything of interest.

But as night approached we came across a coconut octopus strolling across the sand... and then our guides found a mimic octopus. The tiny creature changed colour and shape as it watched us from a prone position before starting to flee. After swimming about six or seven metres it started to parachute down, which allowed me to take some shots from unexpected angles. Though I didn't see an obvious mimic posture, just seeing this magnificent mollusc in action was definitely a highlight. Its life must have been a hard one – three of its legs had been shortened by whatever had been lurking in the holes that they'd been exploring.

The show wasn't over, though. On the way back to the boat my guide Ben and I stumbled upon a small flounder of some sort. Ben has only seen this small fish three times in his 14 years of diving the Strait and believes it to be adult even though it's only about three centimetres long. An amazing find! And when we surfaced in the dark we discovered our boat back-dropped by the sparkling lights of the mainland, and sheet lightning racing over the cloud lighting up the entire area. To the north, we could see the lanterns of a hundred or so small vessels reflecting on the water as they fished for prawns and squid. Simply stunning.

The mimic wasn't the last find for the week. The final dive provided an Ambon



#### Previous page

- Demon stingers were on my wishlist, and I encountered several during the week but this was the only red one!
- Lembeh Hills Resort has 23 villas and suites located in a beautiful setting of rolling hills right on the water.

#### This page

- Mimic octopus are excellent swimmers, and parachute down to the bottom at the end of their runs.
- This is a fish I never expected to see in my diving life. I believed Dampier stonefish to be deep water inhabitants of northwest Western Australia. I wasn't expecting to find one in five metres of water here!
- Several giant frogfish were found close together on one dive.
- This thorny seahorse was one of the first creatures I encountered.
- Let's go for a walk!

scorpionfish, plus a shaggy anglerfish which actually ate a sandperch right in front of me. It was that sort of week!

Lembeh Strait with its black sand bottom is reputed to be the macro capital of the world, and during my time here it lived up to this in ways that I'd not even imagined. The Strait is not for those seeking pristine coral reefs in 30m+ visibility, or huge creatures. It is for those who like to see the small, the strange, the unusual, and the stunning. The visibility here ranged from 10m at the worst, to about 25m at best, and was most commonly around 20m. The strait is about 20km long, and averages about 1.5km across, so is very well protected from most wind and weather conditions. A non-diving day here is very rare indeed.

I saw fish here that I'd never thought I'd see, and observed behaviours that I've only dreamed about. I bounced from subject to subject, shooting Dampier stonefish, exotic shrimp gobies with their crustacean cleaners, beautiful juvenile fish, nudibranchs and ugly/beautiful scorpionfish. But it is the octopus of Lembeh Strait that I'll remember forever. I photographed five different species here, and it was the most regularly seen variety that gave me the most memorable moments. Coconut octopus are smaller than a tennis ball and were the most common octopus we saw during the

course of the week. For the most part they're found happily hunting and scuffling amongst the rubble and black sand that make up the local terrain. They're very often sheltering under coconut halves, or in and around dead shells. They're also called 'vein' octopus, as their camouflage often suggests a rich lined pattern on the skin.

I'd never encountered one of these before, so the first one was pretty special. I nearly fell over backwards when it

“ I SAW FISH HERE THAT I'D NEVER THOUGHT I'D EVER SEE, AND OBSERVED BEHAVIOURS THAT I'VE ONLY DREAMED ABOUT. ”

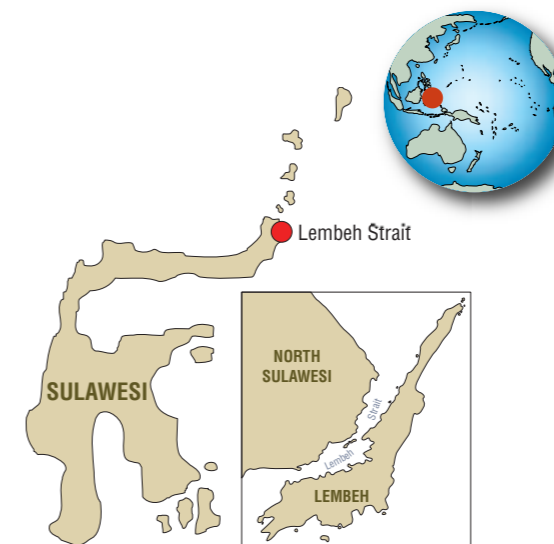
decided it had had enough of me, picked up its shells, and walked some three metres away before plonking down again. I'd seen this activity before on a doco, but never imagined I'd be lucky enough to see it in real life. It then proceeded to do it twice more. Watching this obviously intelligent creature rearrange its protective shell hideaway was simply staggering. To top it off, the same thing happened again a couple of days later!

Lembeh Strait has several must-do dives such as Nudi Falls, Angel's Window, TK3, and the Mandarin Fish Dive, but all of the 50 or so sites are full of incredible critters. What surprised me during my visit

was not only the diversity of the benthic life here, but how often I was able to quietly observe the most amazing behaviour. Every day I was treated to predators stalking and capturing prey, mating, living in a symbiotic or parasitic relationship, laying eggs, and it all occurred without any apparent concern about a diver with a camera loitering in close proximity. Here every divers and photographers dreams can come true on a daily basis.

Yos Dive runs several diver facilities in Indonesia, and have recruited top local dive guide Ben Sarinda to head up their Lembeh Strait operation. The boats are great and the crew service and support is fantastic. Hot towels, drinks and fruit are offered after every dive, and I didn't have to lift a single item of gear all week!

All the dives I did here were within seven minutes of the wharf by boat, which indicates that the Lembeh Hills Resort is perfectly placed to access the best of Lembeh Strait. The dive guides know their stuff, and consistently pointed out creatures I wouldn't have otherwise noticed. Come here with a



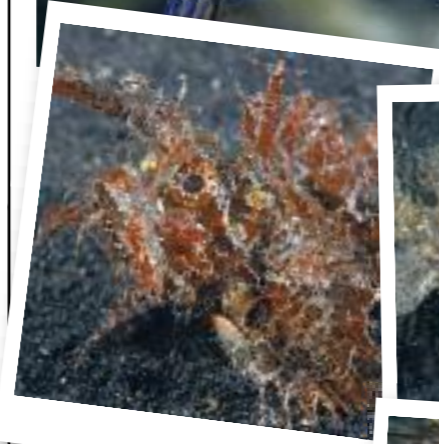
**LEMBEH HILLS RESORT** is the new 5-star accommodation venue located on the mainland overlooking Lembeh Strait. The rooms are magnificent, very spacious, with a TV, bathroom, a sunken shower/bath, an outdoor shower, airconditioning, and bar fridge. Basically everything you could want, including a view to the strait! With a pickup service from Manado Airport, the 90 minute car ride to the resort goes quickly as there's plenty to see along the way. Checking in was quick and easy, and in no time you can be lounging next to the pool, having a drink at the bar in the restaurant, or setting up your gear at the dive centre. Yos Dive runs the in-resort dive centre, which is very modern and well set out. Above the dive centre is a dedicated camera room.

Meals are taken at the restaurant, and a magnificently prepared four course meal is available every lunch and dinner, and of course breakfast in the morning. They are a wonderful blend of Indonesian, Asian and Western cooking. You won't go hungry here; between-dive snacks are served with hot or cold drinks. Free Wi-Fi is available from the restaurant and there's a laptop available if you haven't brought yours, so keeping in touch with home is easy. The diving is fantastic, more critters than you can imagine, but for those who'd like a day trip there's several to choose from: National Parks, volcanoes, monkeys and tarsiers, to shopping trips to Manado. There's an onsite gym, meeting rooms, plus a sea spa with massages and treatments. The comfort of your stay here is assured.

Lembeh Hills Resort  
Desa Makawidey - Lembeh Strait,  
North Sulawesi, Indonesia.  
Tel: +62 21 788 39 889  
Fax: +62 21 781 6489  
Email: info@lembenhills.com  
www.lembenhills.com

## LEMBEH STRAIT

wish-list of the creatures you want to see, and the guides will select the sites accordingly. If I'd done this before I left home I'd have successfully photographed seven of my top 10 'wants', seen another, and have taken shots of four that I'd never have put on my list because I wouldn't have thought them possible!



- Mandarin fish come out to hunt in the late afternoon, and can be seen mating most nights. Here, eggs are being released by the smaller female.
- Ambon scorpionfish have strange 'eyebrow' flaps. This one was only eight centimetres long.
- A shaggy anglerfish takes a reticulated seaperch for lunch. It grabbed it on the fly as the seaperch turned the corner of a log.
- Urchin carrying crabs use their rear two legs to haul around an urchin for protection from predators.