

The Lembeh Strait welcome to the weird

Simon Rogerson reports from the Lembeh Strait, home to some of Indonesia's most unusual sea creatures



It's always a bit embarrassing when journalists get gushy, so let's get it over and done with. I'm about to write about one of the best places I have ever dived, and at one of the finest dive resorts. Reader, I am in love.

The Lembeh Strait is famed for its small, enigmatic creatures. A single dive can yield more macro marvels than a week of diving in generalist destinations; there's something about this small stretch of water that makes it a magnet for strange benthic creatures that a certain type of diver obsesses over.

Why so many? Location, plus environment, plus current. The seas around Borneo and Sulawesi have incredible biodiversity, with species counts revealing a greater number of different critters than anywhere else in the world. The most persuasive theory for this is that climate change around the Indonesian archipelago caused patches of sea to be enclosed from the ocean and then reopened as the ice ages caused sea levels to rise and fall. Over periods of geological time, species were isolated, evolved to suit the environment, and were later re-introduced to the wider ocean when sea levels rose again – an evolutionary diversity pump.

For the diver, this means that instead of swimming around and finding a few creatures here and there, each dive is a non-stop parade of A-listers, the sort of animals that aficionados will cross continents to see. After a while, I began every dive in the certain knowledge that we were going to see something amazing, possibly something I had never photographed before. As the filmmaker John Boyle once put it, the Lembeh Strait is the ocean's weirdest square mile. »

◀ Left: A harlequin crab rests on a tube anemone

▶ Above: This dwarf cuttlefish has adapted its colouring to mimic a balled-up crinoid



1: Mantis shrimp with eggs
 2: Coleman's shrimp on toxic sea urchin
 3: Eyes of a humpback prawn
 4: Emperor shrimp on *Ceratosma nudibranch*
 5: A tiny soft coral cowrie
 6: *Bargibanti* pygmy seahorse
 7: Decorator crab with urchin

» **Lembeh luxury**

For this trip, I chose the Lembeh Resort, which had been recommended to me by several underwater photographer friends. This place really won me over with its balance of informality with high standards of service. For accommodation, you get a choice of traditional or modern villas with views over the Strait. For those who fancy keeping fit, the cliffside cottages at the top of the hill will give you plenty of exercise, with the reward of superb 180-degree views from the top.

The rooms are well appointed with all the facilities you'll ever need, but really it's more about the experience of the resort as a whole, with its sumptuous gardens and sunset views of hazy volcanoes. Meals are served in an airy restaurant, where you get tip-top buffets for breakfast and lunch, and a la carte service in the evenings. The food is a delicious balance of Indonesian and Western cuisine, with options for all palates and no shortage of treats.

The dive centre, Critters@Lembeh, is actually a separate business owned by Danny Charlton, who owns the Murex resorts at nearby Manado and Bangka. It's a textbook operation with attention to detail ensuring every last diver-friendly detail is taken care of, right down to the lengths of rubber hose covering the hang-line ropes on the sides of the boats. All you have to do is check your nitrox, slip into your wetsuit and get on board for your dive. I loved the spacious kitting-up building, with its well-tended rinse tanks and clearly marked locker areas. Every now and then the staff would deliver kit owned by someone named 'Simone' to my locker, but no-one's perfect, right?

At the top of the pyramid of staff are the guides, whose knowledge of the sites and animals is simply astonishing. These guys have honed »



» their senses to find critters – all but four of the photos you see here are of animals pinpointed by a knowledgeable guide. You can find stuff by yourself of course, but you'll see a lot less than divers who use guides. The C@L team operates a system with two buddy pairs to a guide, so while you're busy checking out a critter, the guide will be busy looking for the next one.

Underwater, you can hear the guides shaking their rattles quite a lot – they have an unfathomable set of codes to let each other know what's being found. For me, underwater sounds give little clue as to their locations, but the guides seem to be able to follow a 'shaker' to its source every time. These dive guides are Lembeh's front of house staff, the rock stars of the operation, and I found myself working with two of the best, Opo Kecil and Jhoe Joho Wongkar.



Book it

Trips can be tailored to your needs; the seven-night Lembeh Resort Package is \$2,196 (£1,403) on air or \$2,358 (£1,507) for nitrox users. The price includes seven nights in a deluxe cottage based on full board, plus transfers to and from Manado Airport. For more details go to www.lembehresort.com or email reservations@lembehresort.com. You have the choice of two carriers for the international segment – Singapore Air www.singaporeair.com or Air Malaysia Airlines www.malaysiaairlines.com. Expect to pay between £700 and £1,200 for return flights from the UK. I travelled in mid-March with Singapore Air and paid £800.



Strange days

For each dive, the guides compile a list of sighted critters on their slates, Latin names and all. I noticed that most dives would feature at least a dozen 'finds', but even among so many opportunities, a few examples stand out. On my first dive at a site called *Nudi Falls* I remember seeing a tiny emperor shrimp scuttling around the rhinophores of a nudibranch traversing the black sand, a tiny rider on the world's slowest steed. Then at *Tanjung Kubur* I saw a hairy frogfish walking down the sand slope on its modified pectoral fins, pausing to flick its lure in an attempt to attract an unwary cardinalfish to striking distance.

Another time, Opo K found a beautiful harlequin crab resting on the lip of a tube anemone, its fine

tendrils curling upwards like smoke. This sort of find is gold dust for photographers, because it creates a striking background for the subject. I saw so many things over my seven days – each dive held such promise I joined every possible dive including dusk and night excursions. I spent 90 minutes waiting for the magic moment when mandarinfish would briefly rise from the reef for a dusk dance that ended abruptly with spawning; I peered at tiny skeleton shrimp locked in territorial battle on a whip coral... I was routinely amazed.

They say that nothing can beat big animal diving, but some of the smallest marine creatures can prove endlessly fascinating. On my very last dive Jhoe drew my attention to a balled-up crinoid and pointed at »

- ↑ Top: The demon stinger scorpionfish
- ↖ Top left: Banggai cardinalfish
- ↖ Above left: Juvenile lionfish
- ↑ Above: *Flabellina exoptata* nudibranch

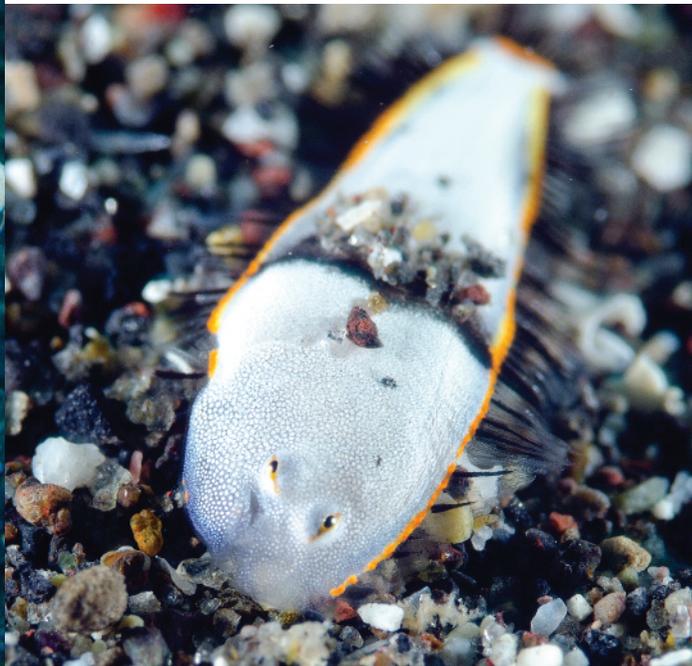
- 👉 Below: A hairy frogfish traverses the sand
- 👉 Below right: A juvenile flounder
- 👉 Bottom: Scowl of a painted frogfish



» its body. At first I saw nothing, then suddenly a second form materialised – a pygmy cuttlefish the size of my little finger, expertly mimicking the colours and textures of the invertebrate. Confident of its camouflage, the tiny cephalopod held its ground as I snapped away with my camera.

I remain an avowed fan of big animal diving, but Lembeh won my heart. It's a safari in miniature, and in a relatively short time, you can find an astonishing variety of animals. If you're the sort of diver who likes to try different things, I'd say it's certainly worth a visit, but to do so without a camera might prove frustrating.

I should also add that tip-top buoyancy skills are essential when diving above the black sand, which is bristling with little creatures. One day while gazing at the sand I thought I saw a tiny shard of shell moving – after taking a few shots with a +10 magnifying lens it turned out to be a juvenile flounder about the size of a match-head. ●



Black sand photography

The camera is the new logbook, and nowhere is this truer than at Lembeh, where 90 per cent of visitors carry a camera of some sort. With so many creatures waiting to be found, it's satisfying for visitors to record what they see and add an additional challenge to their dives.

As is often the case, serious photographers with expensive rigs get the best photographs, but macro photography is one arena in which a carefully augmented compact camera can excel. Many of the subjects are so small that you really need to have a supplemental magnifying lens, but if you don't have one Lembeh's resident photo-pro can run one up with his supply of stock lenses and a mount he can create using a 3D printer.

The challenge when photographing these little beasts is to try and minimise the drab background of the volcanic soil, either by shallow depth of field, carefully directed lighting or careful use of other backgrounds. It pays to get low on the seabed, but don't even think about resting on it, as the sand is home to numerous life forms, most of which will sting, bite, skewer, spear or stab. Everyone uses a metal pointer and neutral buoyancy to stabilise themselves while taking photos.





The day (and night) of the octopus

The Strait has seasons, but they are hard to define. Sometimes certain animals are easier to find, sometimes they seem to disappear altogether. My third day at Lembeh yielded some amazing octopus encounters, starting when my guide Jhoe found an algae octopus, which as its name suggests, is a master of camouflage and was all but invisible in a clump of hydroids. Later the same dive he showed me a mimic octopus that unfurled its legs into beautiful shapes, a living work of art. After lunch I watched as a veined octopus tried out a shell for a mobile home, a characteristic behaviour for this most active of cephalopods. The third dive gave us a wonderpus, similar in looks to the mimic but red instead of black, and with white spots on its mantle. Then Jhoe pointed to a tiny bit of fluff that turned out to be a blue-ringed octopus, tiny but venomous, advertising its displeasure with those titular rings. I thought that was it, but on the night dive Jhoe found a starry night octopus, vivid red with white spots, a living gem. I had never seen any of these octopus previously, but in one amazing day I photographed six different species.

🕒 Clockwise from top left: Mimic octopus; veined or coconut octopus; starry night octopus; algae octopus; blue ring octopus

