

LEMBEH Critter on demand

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> WHY ARE THE CRITTERS HERE? A SIMPLE PRINCIPLE APPLIES TO THE WORLD'S OCEANS AND SEAS AND THE MARINE BIOTA THEY CONTAIN – WHEN SOMETHING DIES IT USUALLY SINKS TO THE SEABED. THIS DETRITUS OF DECAYED ORGANISMS RICH IN PHOSPHORUS AND NITROGEN, WOULD REMAIN ON THE BOTTOM WERE IT NOT FOR THE INDONESIAN THROUGHFLOW, THE PHENOMENAL FLOW OF WATER FROM THE PACIFIC OCEAN THROUGH THE ARCHIPELAGO INTO THE INDIAN OCEAN.

It was day three of eight in Lembeh Strait and the previous two days had been spent diving some of the dive sites I'd heard so much about from friends who'd been here – and I wasn't disappointed when it was my turn to dive Hairball, Nudi Falls and the Police Pier! Our dive guide Andreas was his usual cheerful self as we handed our cameras over to the crew, but I thought he must be pulling my leg when he casually asked "What would you like to see today?" He'd firmly established his credentials as an alpha male dive guide by searching out critters my buddy Bruce Yates and I would have swam right past. But was Andreas getting a bit too cocky... or could he really find critters on demand?

I decided to test him by saying that I'd like an orange Rhinopias, as the only images I had were the green version. Quick as a flash Andreas was on his cell phone activating one of the most interesting logistical aspects of diving this part of Indonesia – the dive guide network!

Nature has created ideal conditions for critters to flourish here and due to it's sheltered location, Lembeh can be dived virtually any day of the year. A range of resorts offer escorted diving to the 20+ sites where these critters exist; the guides they employ are local Indonesians who dive these sites five to six days a week and most have logged thousands of dives. Many also have a genuine interest in the critters and make sure visiting divers experience the best of Lembeh. It took Andreas two calls to identify the best spot to see an orange Rhinopias and a confirmed sighting the previous afternoon. Sure enough, an hour later I was face to face with a fine specimen of this unique, highly sought-after and very photogenic scorpion fish!

Pair of harlequin shrimps feeding on the legs of a sea star



Left: Strapweed filefish
Below: Blue ring octopus
Right: Superb purple band flabellina nudibranch



IF MUCK DIVING IS THE SORT OF DIVING YOU ENJOY BUT YOU CAN ONLY DO ONE TRIP A YEAR, GO TO LEMBEH. IT JUST DOES NOT GET ANY BETTER!

the Indonesia archipelago because of the Throughflow is 20-22 Sverdrups, or 10,000 times that of those fast-flowing rivers.

North Sulawesi, together with Halmahera and Irian Jaya, is where the flow of water from the Pacific Ocean and the cold water upwellings from the deep trenches and basins north of Indonesia, first touch major landfall – which also helps explain why all those regions have such rich biodiversity. The Lembeh Strait not only channels and concentrates these upwellings into one location, it also provides the other two criteria required for critters to flourish – sheltered coves and bays, which allow the critters to thrive in relative safety, and freshwater run-offs which provide additional organic nutrients. This troika is the key to understanding why critters can be in one location but not another, and in Lembeh Strait it all combines to create the mother of all critter hotspots!

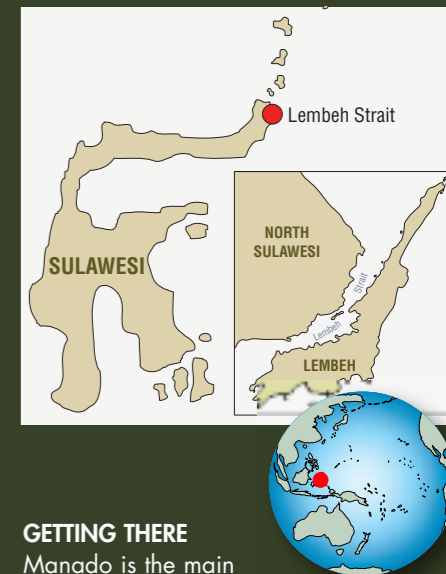
What You Will See

The diversity of creatures that can be seen at various dive sites in the Strait seems to be almost limitless, but they're also seasonal so some critters will be abundant at certain times of the year and nowhere to be seen at others.

Over an eight day period in June, diving three to four times a day, the huge range of critters I saw included numerous frogfish, robust and ornate ghost pipefish, multiple varieties of devilfish, leaf scorpionfish, pygmy seahorses, snake eels, blue ring octopus, Rhinopias, harlequin shrimp and numerous rare crabs. It was without doubt the most photographically productive trip I've ever done.

Where To Find The Critters

There are over 20 main critter sites inside Lembeh Strait, but with the seasonal variation that occurs, what critters are in residence at which sites is impossible to know without access to the people who know best about these things – the dive guides. All the resorts offer guided dives as a standard part of their packages, but any more than two to three people per



GETTING THERE

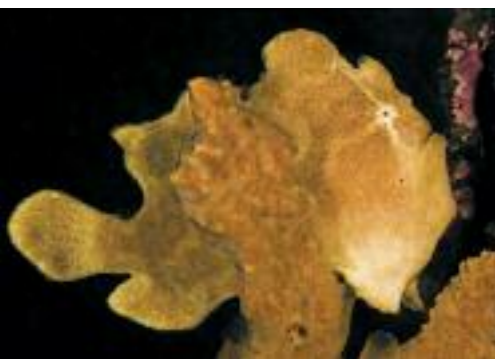
Manado is the main airport in North Sulawesi. There are regular international flights from Singapore, and domestic flights from Jakarta, Makassar (Ujung Pandang) and Bali. Visas are required to enter Indonesia. Note there is a Rp75,000 departure tax.

WHEN TO GO Temperatures average 32°C to 24°C year-round. The wet season is November to April and the dry season is May to October. The strait provides excellent shelter, which means it can be dived all year. Many critters are seasonal, but September and October are generally considered to offer the best combination of dive conditions and critter activity, whilst August is reported to have the most number of critters, but the worst visibility.

WHAT TO TAKE Average water temperature is about 27°C. I took all my own personal dive gear, although all the resorts have rental equipment available. **SAFETY** Both malaria and dengue fever occur in North Sulawesi, so standard precautions such as regular application of insect repellent is required. There is a well-maintained recompression chamber in Manado if needed.

WHO TO DIVE WITH There are a number of dive resorts in the Lembeh Strait ranging in price. I personally used Divers Lodge. Divers Lodge: www.diverslodgemalembah.com Kungkungan Bay Resort: www.divekbr.com Lembeh Resort: www.lembehresort.com Black Sand Divers: www.blacksanddive.com Bastianos: www.bastianoslembeh.com

Right: Orbicular burrfish poses reluctantly for its portrait
Below: Giant frogfish
Below right: Lacy scorpionfish or rhinopias – the red version
Below left: Ornate ghost pipefish



Critter Central

Here's my definition of 'critter':
A critter is a generic, totally non-scientific, term used by divers to describe a broad and unrelated group of underwater creatures. Features that allow them to be included in this highly desired classification, are one or more of the following: small (occasionally tiny); an amazing ability to disguise themselves; flamboyant colouration; either intense beauty or brutal ugliness, but rarely anything in between!

Critters are highly sought after, particularly by underwater photographers who consider them as trophies to add to their image collection. Besides being photogenic, an endearing feature is that they're usually static and seem confident that their ability to camouflage themselves has made them invisible.

They are synonymous with 'muck diving' – a term defined by Bob Halstead, the godfather of liveaboard diving in Papua New Guinea – diving done at any site which does not have beautiful underwater scenery. Lembeh Strait is the epicenter of critter and muck diving, and has an unparalleled reputation for producing the most astonishing variety of weird and wonderful creatures the sea has to offer. If muck diving is the sort of diving you enjoy but you can only do one trip a year, it's a no-brainer - go to Lembeh, because it just does not get any better!

However, many of these critters look their best underwater in the millisecond that they're illuminated by a camera strobe (as

I hope my images demonstrate) and to a casual observer they often look like pieces of weed or strangely shaped rocks and they don't appear to move too much...

Diving in Lembeh Strait is not for everybody, and if you prefer open water diving with clear blue water, coral reefs, schooling pelagics, and diving in a lycra suit, then don't go to Lembeh because you probably won't enjoy it. There are sites outside the Strait that offer such diving, but you need to make sure that the resort you've booked into intends to dive these, because the focus is usually on the critters!

Why Are The Critters There?

The Indonesian Throughflow is the phenomenal flow of water from the Pacific Ocean to the northwest of Indonesia, into the Indian Ocean to the south of the archipelago. It is the result of monsoonal weather patterns and oceanic currents that combine to create higher water levels and temperatures in the Pacific Ocean. This, together with its lower salinity, result in a flow of water so large that traditional measurements are not big enough to measure it! The 'Sverdrup', named after the Norwegian scientist Harald Sverdrup who invented it, is used – one Sverdrup is one million cubic meters of water per second. A popular analogy used to visualize this flow of water is if you imagine a river 100m wide, 10m deep and flowing at 4 knots. Then imagine 500 similar rivers - that's one Sverdrup! It's estimated that the total amount of seawater passing through



Leaf scorpionfish; snake eel with it's parasitic cleaner shrimp; a pair of robust ghost pipefish. Below: Dive boats and guides ready to go.

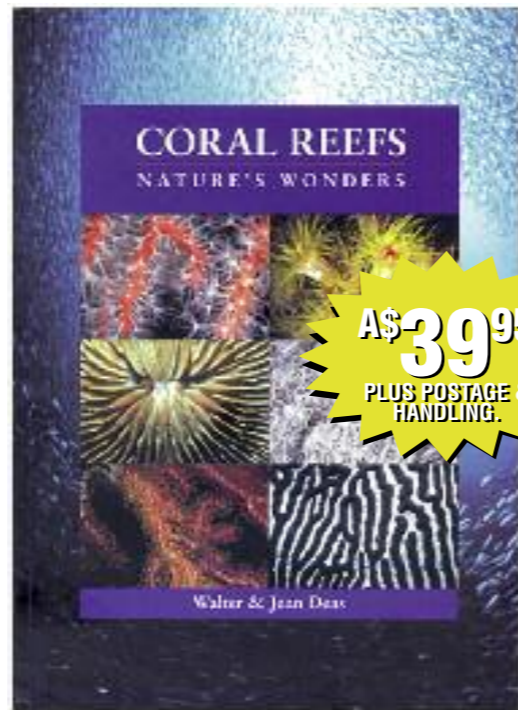
guide can lead to a degree of frustration as queues form to see and photograph the critters.

A good dive guide really is the key to a successful trip to Lembeh, because not only will they be plugged in the network and

know which sites are most active, they will understand how to make your time underwater. It's well worth paying extra to make sure you get personal attention. On my trip my buddy Bruce Yates from Seattle and I shared a boat and Andreas between us. It was just fantastic to have somebody who knew the area, and what we wanted to see, scouting whilst we were photographing! Andreas would signal for attention by emitting a kind of high-pitched humming noise, and we soon learned that this meant he'd spotted something he thought we should see... we also learned that variations in the pitch of this humming indicated Andreas'

level of excitement at what he'd found. We became underwater versions of Pavlov's dogs, ignoring low-pitched hums to concentrate on the current subject in our viewfinders, whilst dropping everything when the ultra-high pitched hum came in!

If you like critters, it just does not get much better than Lembeh!



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