

Diving the Lembah Strait

with Anne Owen

Many of you will have followed Constantinos' adventures when he spent four months at Kungkungan Bay Resort (KBR) via his continuous stream of e-mail newsletters and like me, will be awaiting the belated publication of his book on the Lembah Strait. The thing is - is it all it's cracked up to be?? Can anywhere be as awesome as Constantinos made out? Or had the sun and the nitrogen gone to his head?

Well, let me say this - if you like diving in clear, blue waters - on pristine, sun-dappled corals reefs - off sparsely inhabited, romantic islands - with whirling shoals of fish dancing all about you - DO NOT GO TO LEMBAH!

KBR is situated a little to the north of the large port city of Bitung, the area densely populated with people who make their living mostly from the sea and at night the whole Strait is alive with the lights on their fishing platforms. There is virtually no coral, and the visibility over the endless black volcanic sand bottom is horrible. So wide-angle freaks, forget it! But for macro lovers this has to be one of the greatest shows on earth!

Having arrived there almost by accident in October last year after another trip was cancelled at short notice I was so sure that 10 days were not enough that I re-booked as soon as I got home and spent another 2 weeks at KBR in March of this year.

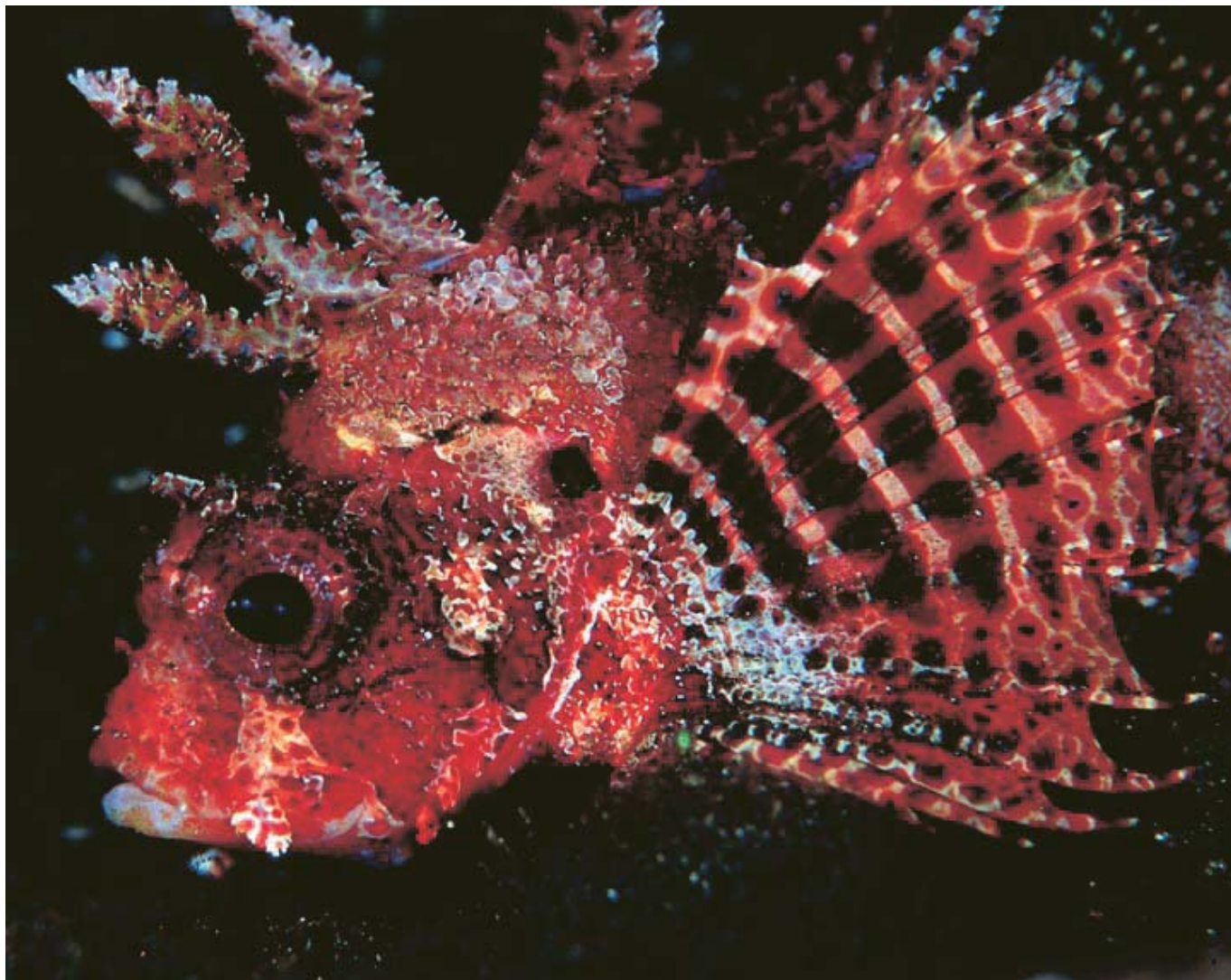
Firstly, let me say that the resort is brilliant. Fully customised for divers and indeed for photographers, they go out of their way to ensure you have a great time. The dive operation runs like clockwork, with boats leaving the dock four times a day, staff are always on hand to carry dive and camera kit for you and a great menu of freshly cooked dishes is available 24 hours a day (in case jetlag should strike).

Furthermore, the dive guides are totally dedicated to finding the critters that you want to photograph, so no-one need fear going home with little to show for it. This is definitely my kind of destination.

One the diving front, none of the sites is more than



10 minutes from the dock and most are only 5 minutes away, across a narrow Strait that is very sheltered and so always relatively calm. The boats usually tie up to a permanent mooring and you will come back to the boat at the end of the dive. You will rarely experience much current, though occasionally there will be some tidal movement. In this sense, therefore the diving is pretty lazy.



On the other hand, the great hazard is the fine, silty, black volcanic sand which makes up the bottom almost everywhere. The merest touch of a hand or a fin and you (and more importantly, your subject) can be instantly enveloped in an evil black cloud. More to the point, the merest touch of someone else's fin etc can have the same effect, which can be a problem if inexperienced photographers 'crowd in' on your subject to see what you are doing.

Even so, this is a great place to shoot the weird and wonderful - where to start? Five species of frogfish, all sorts of lionfish and scorpionfish, including some rarities, eels and monstrosities like the stargazer are all found on the sand and patches of sponge. Crabs and shrimps are there in abundance, with an amazing range of camouflage tactics - but without the vigilance and experience of the guides, you will surely miss most of them.

Nudibranchs are amongst my personal favourites and there are over 200 species recorded here. At dusk, you can photograph Mandarin Gobies and at night, there is a whole new crew to see.

In a single week, I photographed mantis shrimp, harlequin shrimp, blue ribbon eel, flamboyant cuttlefish, ghost pipefish, bubbleshells, emperor shrimp, wonderpus, pygmy seahorses and many more. My only disappointment was that with two cameras on each dive, I could only manage 8 films per day!

Seriously, this is a terrific spot for the serious macro-freak. I love it - I'm sure I'll be back - or maybe that's just the nitrogen talking!



Anne Owen