

Macro in Palau's Muck

by Ethan Daniels

Manure, dirt, sewage, mess. Those are synonyms that most computers will spit out for the word “muck.” Certainly, muck can be thought of in a slightly different and more pleasing light, especially if you are a diver or snorkeler. What is “muck” to a diver? It could well be defined as an area with a shallow, sandy or muddy bottom, high nutrient level, low visibility, little current and generally lacking in aesthetics. The divers’ definition would also include the fact that some of the most peculiar and fascinating marine animals, both vertebrates and invertebrates use mucky habitats as their home.

Palau is best known for its vertical walls adorned with gorgonians, soft corals, and reef fishes. Sharks, rays, and currents are the main attractions rather than the inner lagoon muck habitats that attract a variety of marine life little known to most people. The thrill of hunting seahorses in brown algae, discovering a stonefish’s eyes poking above the sand, or finding a banded sea snake slithering across the mud is the enticement.

One of the remarkable things about spending time in the muck is that the fishes you find are often in juvenile stages, so their colorations may differ dramatically from what books depict. A general muck dive might include juvenile spadefish, which mimic fallen leaves drifting close by a wildly dancing juvenile harlequin sweetlips; small cuttlefish jetting over the flattened profile of the



Crab carapaces litter muck dives. This one ended up on a giant clam mantle.

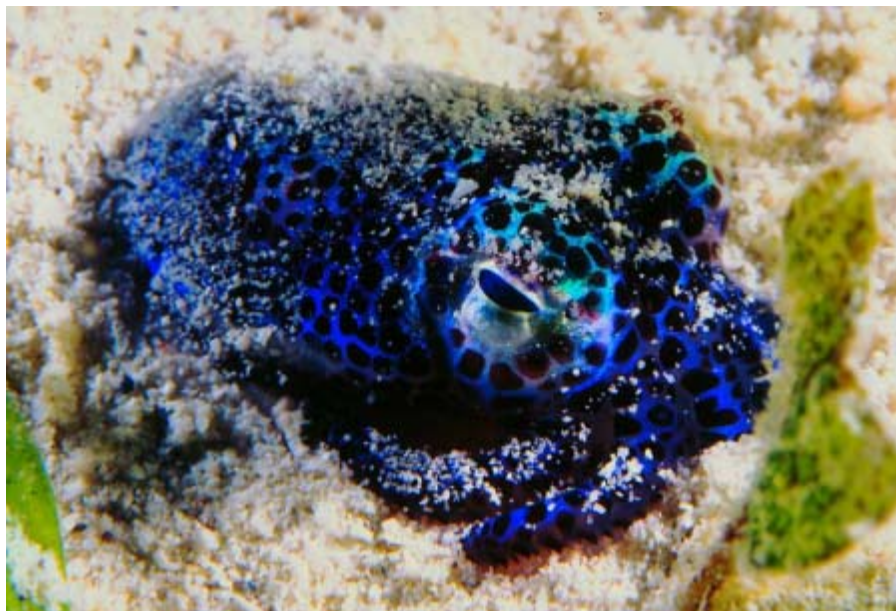
A juvenile cuttlefish (Sepia sp.) imitates a dead leaf while stalking prey in the shallows.



rapacious crocodilefish; a tiny frogfish sitting out in the middle of the muck patiently fishing with its esca. All the while, an array of shrimp, crabs, gobies, and blennies scurry hither and thither wary of the many camouflaged predators in their

midst. It’s difficult to be disappointed on a muck dive considering many of the organisms that can be observed are not seen out on the heavily visited dive sites.

One of the most consistent muck dives in Palau lies right



A Bobtail squid (Euprymna sp.) buries itself in the muck.



Muck denizen: Spiny devilfish (Inimicus Didactylus).



A nudibranch (Chromodoris elizabethina) crawls over a stonefish's eye! Now, that you don't see every day.

under the dock at Sam's Tours. The sand bottom never exceeds 30 feet, the visibility rarely reaches 25 feet and there are no currents. What to expect? Well, whether you're looking for the elusive mandarin fish, octopus, spiny devilfish, banded pipefish, nudibranchs, or cuttlefish, this is a dive that won't disappoint. There are even a dozen giant clams, *Cassiopea* jellyfish, and various hard corals lying here and there along the gentle slope. Night or day, the dive provides plenty of delightful thrills and unusual animals continue to be discovered no matter how many times one makes the plunge.

The main point is that there is more to diving than sharks, rays, and pretty corals. Becoming familiar with the bizarre organisms that survive in the lesser-known, yet abundant marine habitats, like mangroves, seagrass beds and muck, only accentuates the enjoyment of being underwater. Muck could possibly be said to be the underwater photographer's best friend as most of the creatures found in such environments are either slow moving or masters of camouflage. Witnessing the wide array of evolutionary techniques that animals' employ to survive in such habitats will astound both experienced and novice divers alike.

I am a biologist and photographer who has been working in Palau for the past eight years in all sorts of capacities. My interest in marine life originally came about by being exposed to flora and fauna found in the waters of Cape Cod, MA. Eventually, this interest in the ocean's inhabitants led me to graduate school at the University of Guam Marine Laboratory

where I focused on the behavioral ecology of anemonefishes. I now live and work out of San Francisco, regularly making trips back to the Indo-Pacific to photograph the astounding biological diversity there.

I shoot macro with a Nikon N90 and a 105mm lens, housed in an Aquatica 90 with two Sea & Sea sub 30 strobes on TLC arms. Wide angle is done with a Nikonos V and 15 and 20mm lenses, and a single Sea & Sea YS-120 strobe. I use Fuji Velvia film almost exclusively as my film of choice.

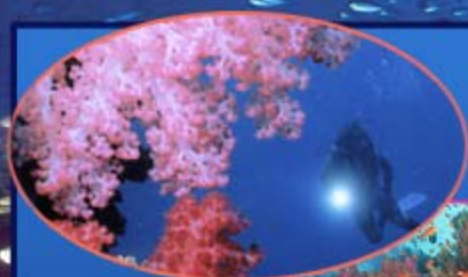
When shooting macro, I use the N90 on manual, using a 1/60th of a second shutter speed, and varies between f/32, 22, 16, and 11, depending on the distance of the lens to the



subject. Using these settings and varying the angle of the dual strobes makes shooting small creatures relatively uncomplicated and painless. The less technical matters you need to think about the easier it is to

concentrate on the setup, which is more critical to the end product.

Ethan Daniels



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