

A dive of two extremes

by Tony White

My love of macro photography, is no secret to anyone who knows me, and to this end I now spend a large part of my time underwater trying to perfect this art. Elusive as this may be, my love of these small and beautiful creatures drives me ever onward.

It was a beautiful February day that found me leaving Bitung Harbour, with the early morning sunlight dancing on the waves that marched up the Lembah Straits giving a sense of peace to all who surveyed this tranquil setting. This place, in North Sulawesi, Indonesia is a magical dive destination of two extremes.

The seabed is miles of endless black volcanic sand with the plankton sucking into its narrow entrance reducing visibility down to between 5 and 10 metres. But amongst this apparent desolation live some of the most beautiful and bizarre creatures on our planet.

My quest has always been to experiment and this was my intent today. When photographing marine life in the range of half an inch through to three inches, I settled on my Nikon 105mm lens. My other treasured piece of kit is a plus four Dioptre supplementary lens screwed on the front. Hopefully it will become apparent to all who read this article why I have made this choice as we go through the dive.

Today's dive site was Angel's Window, a tall pinnacle rising some 30 metres from the seabed, chosen as one of the only sites in Lembah that has some reasonable background coral and also for its myriad of small critters. As we descended into the gloom, visibility settled at around 5 metres. We approached a ledge at approx 20 metres, which we knew to be home to a number of very colourful featherstars although it wasn't these that were to be the focus of our attention, but the creatures that lived in symbiosis with them. It wasn't long before we found what we were looking for. In the centre of one, we could clearly see a yellow squat lobster no more than half an inch in length.

Using the plus four dioptre reduces depth of field down to approx half an inch at f16, this should not be looked on as a problem but something that can be used to creatively enhance the subject perhaps to separate the subject from the background. I always lock magnification at its longest point and rock back and forwards until my eye gets the point of focus I deem to be the most important (usually the eye). Bracketing around f16, the increased magnification (up to one and a third life size) gives more dynamism to these minute creatures. Taking a break for a moment, I surveyed my surroundings and am always in awe at what is in reach.



All photos were taken with a Nikon F90x in a Sea & Sea housing with a 105mm Micro-Nikkor and +4 dioptre lens. A single diffused YS120 flash provided the lighting and the film used was Fuji Velvia underexposed by 1/3 of a stop using the compensation function on the camera.



On a nearby gorgonian sit two pygmy seahorses no bigger than my finger nail going about their busy daily life. I sometimes ponder, whilst watching them, what their perception must be of these giant creatures that all too often invade their world. Moving on down the ledge, always on the lookout for something different, I come across



another patch of rainbow coloured featherstars by which floated a ghostpipe fish ever watchful of my approach but comfortable in his camouflage. As I approach he moves closer to his protective host.

On this dive, I always finish on the top of the pinnacle, which is home to a small colony of colourful nudibranches. This is where my lens set-up comes into its own. There are some beautiful red and orange corals here, but being the Lembeh straits nothing is so easy. Because of the concentration of plankton, the coral is festooned with strands, which makes what we observe rather ugly. One technique here is to use the limited depth of field to my advantage. Even at f22, focusing on the head of the nudibranch and again locking focus and using the rocking technique, the background although only 3 inches behind is blurred enough to give just a hint of the colour that although real is not what it seems.

These are some of the reasons that I have for the moment settled on this lens set-up and nowadays very rarely enter the water without it. To me, it gives that extra edge to creating macro shots which capture the magic of a world of two extremes.

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