

# Yap's Critter Hunt

## Bonanza for Macro Photographers

Story and Photos by Tim Rock

Four week's worth of "critter hunting" in Yap produced some fascinating creatures and a look at some varied and special marine habitants for those participating in the search for new and unusual marine critters.

Manta Ray Bay Hotel and Yap Divers, based in Colonia, Yap, in the Federated States of Micronesia, hosted the unique month of exploration. Led by Larry Smith, one of diving's most famed "muck diving" experts, and MRBH founder Bill Acker, daily dives to find the out-of-the-ordinary on the reef were both fun and productive.

Acker dived with Smith in Smith's backyard of Komodo and western Papua in Indonesia and was amazed at the amazing "muck" creatures Larry consistently found there. So he decided to bring Smith's talents to Yap.

"I knew we must have ornate ghost pipefish, pygmy seahorses and other unique critters," Acker said. "We just needed some trained eyes like Larry's to help us find them."

Yap has large inner lagoons and deep channels leading to open ocean.

There are more than 1500 fish species in the Micronesia area and most are found in Yap. Add to this an even larger number of invertebrates that make Yap prime ground for this sort of diving.

Among the finds, a pipefish with markings similar to that of a Janss pipefish but as yet unidentified. It is a beautiful little golden and blue creature known only by a common name of Barrier Reef pipefish. A capped razor coral shrimp, robust and ornate ghost pipefish and mating mandarinfish.

"What a wonderful, unique, diverse, thrill-a-minute experience here in Yap!" Smith reflected. "I had my nose in the reef looking for strange and beautiful small critters and a squadron of 5 or more manta rays were flapping all around overhead!! It was tough duty here in Yap."

There can be a problem, a good one, for photographers. Diving in places like Miil and Gufnuw Channels, where big mantas and cruising sharks are common, means there are both wide angle and macro opportunities. Personally, I decided



*Aerial of Yap with Miil channel to the right. Nikon D1 Camera, 17-35mm lens, Polarizer. F4.5 at 1,000<sup>th</sup> shutter. Shot from rear cargo hatch of small plane. Height 4,000 feet.*



*This pipefish is an unidentified species known only by the common name Great Barrier Reef pipefish. Shot with a D100 in Aquatica housing, Twin Ike 125s and Sigma 50mm macro lens at F9 at 180th. Depth 60 feet (we also found one in only 15 feet!).*



*A cryptic nudibranch on a leaf at 80 feet. Angled Single Ikelite SB-125 strobe at 1/4 power, 50mm Sigma Macro lens, D100, F18 and 180, Aquatica housing.*

to “think macro” and not let the mantas distract me, at least for a few days. I went five days using just a macro rig and then dedicated about 4 more dive days to wide angle in the mornings and macro in the afternoon. I finished up my two week stint leaning mostly to macro again.

Since we never knew what we would find, except during the mandarinfish dives, I mainly



*A commensal shrimp living on a crown-of-thorns starfish. Angled Single Ikelite SB-125 strobe at 1/4 power, 50mm Sigma Macro lens, D100, F18 and 180, Aquatica housing. Depth 20 feet.*

used my Sigma 50 and Nikon 60mm Micro Nikkor lenses. I had a housed Nikon D100 in an Aquatica housing. I was assisted by Natalia Vanderwyk, who also took photos when she wasn't modeling. She went for the smaller stuff with a D100 in an Aquatica using the 105mm lens. Dual and single Ikelite SB 125 strobes were used.

Muck diving is one of the most popular diving



*Schooling manta rays at Garden Eel Flats, Miil Channel. Twin Ikelite SB-125 strobes at 1/4 power, 10mm Nikkor Full Frame Fish Eye lens, D100, F 5.6 and 60<sup>th</sup> shutter, Aquatica housing. Depth 80 feet.*

activities among underwater photographers and marine life aficionados. It basically means divers look in odd and diverse habitats for unique marine life. This can range anywhere from the muddy bottoms of mangrove swamps, river spillways and under harbor piers. Also, the protected areas of lagoons and outer reefs are prime habitat. Divers are finding such odd habitats hold the most interesting and often colorful of marine creatures and fish.

For the most part, the water was fine and the weather cooperative. The first few days we had lower visibility as a storm had been in the area and the waves were kicking things up a bit. For macro, this isn't a major concern as everything is done so closely. But angling the strobes just right to keep the suspended sand particles from leaving too much scatter was a concern. Some creatures, like flatworms, were also found in areas that had a fine



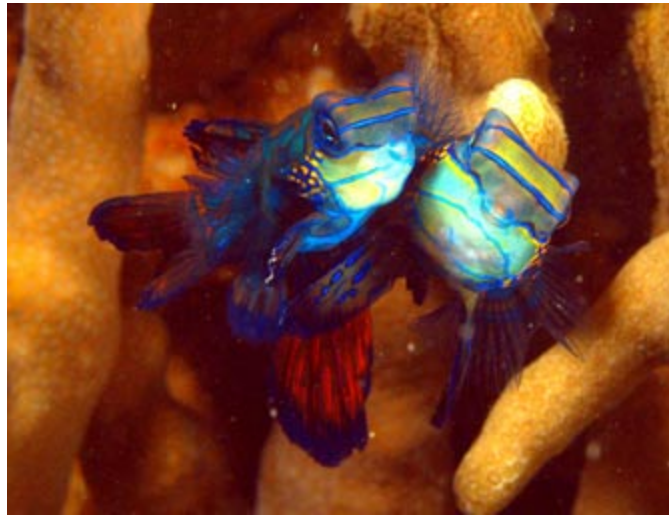


*Cleaning shrimp on a fishing boat wreck in Yap. Twin Ikelite SB-125 strobes at 1/4 power, 105mm Nikkor Macro lens, D100, F22 and 180, Aquatica housing. Depth 60 feet.*

silty bottom. So working slowly to reduce silting was a priority.

Outside the reef visibility averaged easily 100+ feet. This is where we found a majority of the pipefish species. At outgoing tide, visibility in the channels can be lower but was still anywhere from 20 to 80 feet. So the main challenge was framing them up and waiting for the right moment or moments to snap the shutter. In all, the diversity produced over a couple of weeks of diving was very rewarding.

The diving in Yap included surveying some new spots, looking for the unusual in the tried and true spots and also combining some of Yap's famous



*Mating mandarinfish at Rainbow Reef have become a hot item in Yap. Shot at late dusk with the help of DS125 strobe modeling lights and my trusty Hartenberger torch, D100, Nikkor 60mm macro lens, F14 at 1/60th. Depth: 15 feet.*

big animal experiences within a day's schedule.

"We even stumbled across a W.W.II landing craft wreck with some kind of big torpedo or bomb not far away from it," Smith recalls. "This site will be one of the main attractions in the future for Yap macro photographers; but might have to get that bomb thing out of the way first!"

Dozens of "critters" ranging from shelled mollusks and nudibranchs to odd fish and phosphorescent corals have been observed. The list includes a variety of multicolored flat worms, nudibranchs not found in any of the opisthobranch ID books, a variety of ghost pipe fish (one species found in only one book and is unidentified), mantis shrimps, and cleaning shrimps of all shapes and descriptions, an unidentified big crab eating algae from the base of one of the mooring lines, whitecap prawn gobies and active mandarinfish.



*Model Natalia Venderwyk with a striped clownfish at Peelaek Corner. Nikon D100 in Aquatica housing, Sigma 15mm lens, DS125 Ikelite strobes, F22 at 1/20. Depth: 50 feet.*

"We observed them mating on almost every dive there, males fighting and locked in combat for over 20 minutes, and pajama cardinal fish eating the "smoke" that appeared at the spectacular climax of mandarin fish mating," Smith declared.

Yap's Rainbow Reef is an inner lagoon coral reef area near the mangrove forest. This is where the exquisitely colorful, but tiny and reclusive, mandarinfish live and come out at dusk to breed and do mating rituals. Sea grasses, sandy shallow channels, deep main channels, outer hard coral reefs and even the remains of an 1800s copper plated and wooden shipwreck all produced special "critters".

Smith also celebrated a personal milestone during this trip with his 17,000<sup>th</sup> (that's right, three zeros!) logged dive. This was done in the beautiful southern Yap Caverns. Dolphins accompanied the boat to the site. It was a fitting scenario for such an amazing landmark plunge.

The big critters included observing a huge grey



Larry Smith (left) and Bill Acker, Manta Ray Bay Hotel founder

reef shark with mouth wide open being cleaned only a few feet away from divers. And the old shark bottle call produced blacktips, whitetips, gray reefs and the always impressive silvertips rising from the depths. Spotted eagle rays, sea turtles, and, of course, the mantas, were seen on many of the dives.

At day's end, editing was easy. Each room at Manta Ray is equipped with a large desk area with multiple power outlets. It was a simple matter to plug in a laptop, an auxillary drive and download and edit. We used Photoshop CS to work on the keepers that couldn't wait until we got home. That instant gratification of digital is a real plus and also allowed us to get a good look at the rare creatures we photographed that day to help i.d. the inverts and fish.

In all, it was a rewarding

experiment by the Acker-Smith team and Manta Ray guests. The next hunt has a search for lacey scorpionfish and Micronesia's new pygmy seahorse species high on the list. Whatever the outcome, it will be a month of special diving that will certainly allow Micronesia's Yap to reveal a few more of its special treasures.

Critter Hunt runs from Wednesday to Wednesday for four consecutive weeks next June thru July, 2005. Check out the MRBH Website ([www.mantaray.com](http://www.mantaray.com)) for details.

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