

Muck and Macro

by Mark Webster

As underwater photographers we are constantly looking for exciting new subjects or perhaps new ways of photographing old and familiar ones. The change to digital for many of us also means revisiting many subjects that we have previously recorded on film and maybe experiment with some different techniques which digital allows.

Anyone who loves macro photography will be familiar with the treasure trove of amazing subjects that the Lembah Straits offers. There is so much variety here that it is impossible to record everything in one visit and it seems that new species are regularly being discovered each year. Amongst this variety are also the 'prized species' which are perhaps rare or extremely difficult to find - these become like the Holy Grail to many photographers and will lure us back in the hope of striking lucky next time.

For my most recent trip to Lembah I had a fairly short hit list of such subjects and also the desire to take digital images of subjects I had shot before. In the past couple of years the choice of diving bases



(Above) Flambouyant cuttle fish feeding - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f11 @ 125

(Top right) Mimic octopus as a starfish - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 60mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f11 @ 30

(Bottom right) Bangai cardinal fish - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 60mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f11 @ 125



has increased in Lembah to include three resorts (with more planned or under construction) and live aboards. My choice for this trip was Lembah Resort, one of the newest and perhaps the most luxurious, on the shores of Lembah Island itself. Individual cottages are cut into the hillside affording spectacular views across the straits and just a few steps away from the dive centre and a small sheltered

bay where the dive boats are moored. One significant requirement that digital imposes upon us is the need to constantly keep batteries on charge for power hungry cameras and strobes, which are now typically exposing a hundred or more images in a dive. The centre here has a large camera room which is well equipped to cope with this - individual camera preparation bays with regulated 110/220v power

and masses of storage room for camera cases etc. The cottages also have plenty of 220v sockets and desks to set up a laptop to down load and back up those valuable pixels. So pre-dive preparation and post processing is easy and relaxed.

The biggest challenge facing us when diving in Lembeh is probably finding the subjects! Some are very obvious, but the majority are well camouflaged and you need the experienced eye of the dive guides to help you spot and identify the critters - even then it may take you more than one look to realize what you are being shown! The guides at the resort have all been working in the straits for many years (in fact they claim more than 18000 dives between them!) and I found I was spoilt, particularly when I began to discuss the chances of fulfilling the wish list.

Your initial impression when you make your first dive here in the straits on a classic muck site such as 'Hairball' may be disappointment - dark grey sand and accumulations of man's rubbish or vegetation from the shoreline litter the seabed with the occasional outcrop of coral. If you have seen pictures from Lembeh before your arrival you will begin to wonder where all those brightly coloured subjects are? Diving here requires a slightly different mind set to coral reef diving, the most amazing subjects are here but camouflage keeps them hidden until you expose them with your strobe - then most light up with stunning colours. You also have to think small here - there are some larger subjects but Lembeh is predominantly a macro destination and many of your subjects will be shot at half or life size magnification - a 60mm macro lens on a digital or film SLR is the workhorse lens.

Your guide will begin pointing at some seemingly lifeless collection of rope and palm frond



Clown crab - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 60mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f11 @ 125

which may lead you to question his sanity. They are patient however and will point several times until you finally see the frog fish or inimicus and realization dawns! After a couple of dives your mind adjusts to the environment and you will begin to spot a few things for yourself - this brings a sense of achievement which is often deflated when your guide points to another 'better' subject right beside the one you have found! The diversity on the sand and rubble alone is seemingly endless, but there are also shallow wall reefs and some classic coral reef areas which provide variety and even more hidden subjects.

High on my wish list for this trip were five subjects - a rhinopias scorpion fish, the mimic and 'worderpus' octopus, the Pontohi pigmy seahorse (Hippocampus pontohi) and a truly hairy frog fish. My earlier searches for the latter subject had turned up several versions of the striated frog fish with short or 'cropped' hair, which would satisfy most desires, but I wanted a truly long haired version - I do admit here to being a bit of a frog fish nut.



Rhinopias scorpion fish - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 60mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f11 @ 125

So on day one my guide Abner says to me "OK, lets do the rhinopias first". How often have we visited prime locations and heard the guides promise a variety of exotic subjects and sightings only to be told after several days "well if only you had been here last week when we saw.....!" So I received this statement with a certain amount of scepticism to temper the potential disappointment. Our dive was at 'TK2' which is volcanic sand slope shelving gently to an large area of broken and dead coral at around 20m depth which had a coating of filamentous purple algae. A short search by Abner was followed by a brief gesticulation with his stainless steel pointer and suddenly I realized that I am gazing at the most gorgeous purple coloured rhinopias scorpion fish, which would probably have remained invisible to me even after hours of searching. I set to work full of excitement and admiration for these guides and exceptionally pleased that I had more than 100 frames to capture this denizen from all angles. Abner of course wanted to show me a variety of



Soft corals on 'California Dreaming' reef - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, 200ASA f8 @ 30

other subjects close by - two giant frog fish, yellow, black and blue stage ribbon eels, scorpion fish and numerous nudibranchs - but I wanted to stay with my rhinopias for fear of losing it if I let it out of my site. I surfaced elated and Abner calmly accepted all my congratulations without emotion - all in a day's work for these guys.

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Juvenile file fish - - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f16 @ 125

Cut to day two and dive at Angel's Window which is a pretty coral reef at the mouth of the Lembbeh Straits. Today's promised subject was the Ponto hi pigmy seahorse which is a relatively recent discovery in Indonesia and had only been found in the Lembbeh Straits a few months before my visit. The classic Bargibanti pigmy seahorse is found



View from Lembbeh Resort to Sulawesi

Camera preparation room at Lembbeh Resort



on particular species of seafans, but this species is found amongst the colonies of tiny green sea squirts (cnidarians) that pepper the reef in shallow water. This search took a little longer and when the subject was pointed out to me I really could not see it - these critters are incredibly small, wafer thin and blend perfectly with their host. I could only see

this tiny subject initially by looking through the viewfinder of my D100 which was armed with a 105mm micro lens locked at full magnification and an Inon 2X wet lens on the port. Now I could see it! The next challenge was to keep it in focus as depth of field is minimal and these tiny seahorses are very active constantly twisting, turning and swimming from one sea squirt to another whilst they gulp microscopic plankton. Shooting with a ring flash made life a little easier as I did not need to consider flash position or angle, but from more than 100 exposures I was only really happy with a few, but delighted to have ticked another target from the list.

A change of guide from Abner to Ronald was made for the hairy frogfish hunt. Ronald is something of a frogfish expert and had recently found a species of hairy frogfish that was new to Lembeh. He took me on a longer boat journey to the south of the port of Bitung where we moored in just 3m just above a gentle dark sand slope. The plan was to go to a small reef outcrop at the bottom of the slope where the 'new' mated pair had been seen a few weeks before. Well, we were truly blessed that day - within 5m of commencing our swim from the mooring, way before the slope commenced, Ronald grabbed my hand and pointed frantically at a clump of stringy seaweed. I thought, rather smugly, that I could see the source of his excitement - there was an almost pure white short haired striated frogfish, but it took more than a few seconds to realize that half of the clump of seaweed was a very hairy larger and obviously pregnant female - Yowza! How lucky can you get I thought as I settled in to shoot and would have been happy to have spent the entire dive there. Ronald was having none of it (these were not actually our quarry although I was more than happy!) and marked the location with a stick in the



Whip coral shrimp - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f22 @ 125

sand and an old tyre, then led me firmly down the slope in search of the other pair. We reached the target reef patch only to find that the other species had moved on - 'ordinary' frogfish and other gripping subjects were ignored in my anxiety to get back to the other pair which we eventually did and Ronald left me to my own devices.



Warty frog fish - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 60mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f11 @ 125

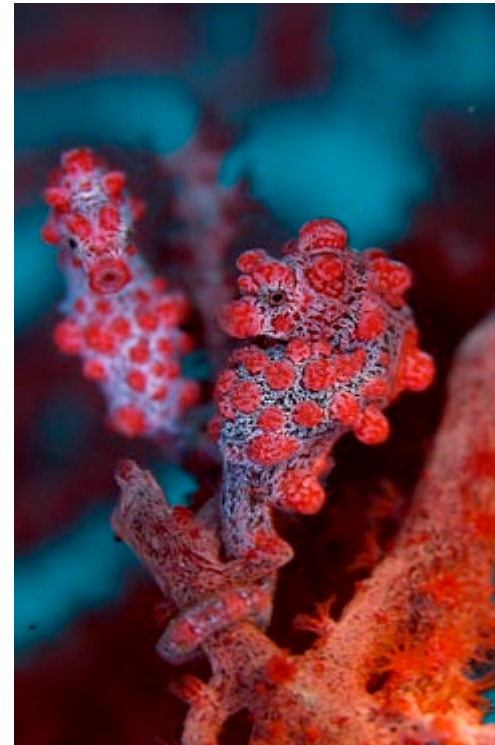
As luck would have it I did not have to wait very long for the next subject on the wish list to appear. Ronald had obviously got bored with watching yet another obsessive photographer shooting a hairy frogfish from every conceivable angle and had wandered off to see what else was about. He returned in a renewed state of excitement



Ambon scorpion fish - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 60mm macro, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f11 @ 125

some while later, fortunately before I had used all the space on my compact flash card. I was reluctant to leave my prize but he was very insistent and led me a 100m or so away to a location he had marked with a 2m steel rod that he carries on every dive. He then motioned me firmly to stay behind him and then began to tap the seabed gently with the rod - I had been wondering what this was for and all was about to be revealed. This tapping went on for several minutes in an area about 1m square - he then stopped suddenly and laid the rod on the seabed. At the far end of the rod

two eyes appeared from the grey sand followed by a spindly zebra striped body and eight arms - this was none other than the 'wonderpus' octopus - I could not believe my luck! The octopus ignored us initially whilst it searched the seabed for the source of the vibration poking its slender arms into every opening in the seabed. I moved in slowly to get some shots and eventually the octopus took an interest in the camera, posing nicely but not really indulging in any significant mimicry. I blatted away until the card was full and then we just enjoyed watching this amazing



Two Bargibanti pygmy seahorses - Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm macro, Inon wet lens, Inon quad flash, 200ASA f22 @ 125

creature go about its business of hunting for food - subject number four in the bag!

Our group was larger for the next day and we were spoilt by having the dynamic duo of both Ronald and Abner to spot for us. I stuck with Ronald and the dive went well with a number of interesting subjects including flamboyant cuttle fish, spiny sea horses and a coconut octopus using a jar as a home and a piece of coconut shell as a front door. Towards the end of the dive we could hear a distant tapping from Abner on his tank, indicating he had found a subject

worth our attention. We followed the sound and eventually found the group who seemed at first to be looking at a starfish, but just as I was mentally questioning this, the starfish moved off in the shape of a flat fish - this was actually the infamous mimic octopus which completed my list to perfection. As with the wonderpus, the mimic did not seem concerned by our presence as we formed a loose circle on the seabed - in fact it seemed to be making a visit to each of us to check us out. A great interest was shown in my camera housing which allowed me to get some good close up portrait shots of this amazing creature at it rapidly changed colour and pattern.

All this was achieved in the first few days of my trip which I found astonishing. However, it did also allow me to relax and enjoy the host of other wonderful critters on offer each dive. Every site offers something slightly different and it really is impossible to get bored. You can of course always decide to return to one of your subjects again to improve your shots as most are relatively sessile and only move around a relatively small area. So, yes I returned to perhaps my favourite find of the trip, the purple

rhinopias who had moved a mere 2m from his previous perch, although I would not have found him without my trusty guide - sometimes you cannot get enough of a good thing.

On the flight home at the end of the week I reflected on the success of the visit in terms of the sheer numbers of critters photographed and the astounding luck I had in completing most of my wish list. However, you can never hope to shoot everything you wish for - hmmm, I still need some good images of harlequin shrimps for example.....so I will be back!

Mark Webster

Mark is the author of "The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography" and leads regular overseas workshops.

Mark will be returning to the Lembbeh Straits to host a photo workshop in March 2007 - see his website for details:

www.photec.co.uk

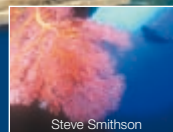
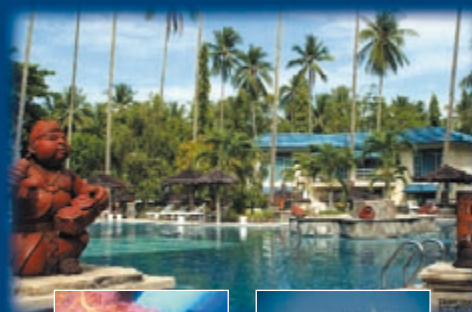


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