

Lembah Strait

Indulgence and Muck

by Mark Webster

They say that time passes more quickly as you get older. There may be something in this as I was surprised to realise that when I returned to the Lembah Strait recently more than ten years had passed since my very first visit. In those early days Lembah Strait was just emerging as a unique habitat and a must visit location particularly for underwater photographers. Accommodation choices were limited to either one resort on the shores of the strait or choosing one in Manado, or a basic hotel in Bitung, and making a daily transfer for your diving. Whatever your choice the diving and range of strange critters was stunning and we all began to enthuse about muck diving.

Things have changed since then of course and now we have between ten and twelve resorts on or close to Lembah Strait, but because these are widely scattered along the shores of the mainland or Lembah Island they are well separated and the area still has a remote feel to it. Despite the new resorts the strait is not crowded with divers and with more than forty dive sites to choose from you will rarely find yourself sharing a site with another boat.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the newest resort to open on Lembah Strait which aims to offer a more indulgent topside experience between the dives each day. Lembah Hills resort lies on the mainland side of the straight north of Bitung and has been carefully designed to blend with the natural surroundings. The architect who designed the resort has been previously involved in



(Top left) All the rooms at Lembah Hills have different features and are furnished to a high standard with all the facilities you would expect at an up market hotel. Nikon Coolpix S3000, programme mode.

(Top right) The views from the resort across the Lembah Strait towards Lembah Island are spectacular.

(Above left) The resort boasts an enormous camera room with individual preparation bays and power supply to each, all next door to the dive centre.

(Above right) This small hermit crab marched down the reef slope and seemed fascinated with the reflection in my dome port. Eventually it tried to climb onto it after intent investigation with his feelers. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom plus 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/30.



(Above left) Thorny seahorse - these seahorses are quite large, perhaps up to 100mm, and are often seen swimming vertically across the seabed. If you follow patiently your subject will find a perch and pose gracefully for the camera. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom plus 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/30.

(Above centre) Sharp nose snake eel - these snake eels are quite common and often seen with attendant cleaner shrimp. Using a CFWM technique gives a different perspective to the usual macro image of these fish, showing the seabed topography in the background. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom plus 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/30.

(Above right) Imperial shrimp - this species is often found in pairs on sea cucumbers, but may also be seen with larger species of nudibranch hitch hiking in search of a shared meal. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f16 1/250.

other resort projects in the strait, but has striven to produce something a little different from the others with this design. Instead of a complex which fringes the shoreline, the rooms at Lembah Hills have been built into the hillside giving each one spectacular views across the strait and towards Lembah Island. The construction has preserved the existing mature trees and topography so that each room is surrounded by foliage.

The rooms are of a boutique style with individual styling and decoration features in each design providing very spacious and comfortable living areas and well appointed bathrooms with the additional choice both inside and outside showers.

The clever positioning of the external showers means you can also enjoy al fresco bathing in complete privacy with a wonderful view over the strait. A small feature perhaps, but my wife loved it!

Dining is in a central restaurant complex which enjoys the same views along with an adjacent infinity swimming pool. There is also a spa so non diving partners are well catered for and enjoy the Lembah sunshine during the dives. Just below the restaurant and closer to the water level is a well equipped dive centre and an enormous camera room with separate work stations and individual power outlets.

The aim of the resort is to provide a full service

approach, which means that you don't carry any of your diving kit and your cameras will also be loaded and offloaded (and rinsed) for each dive. There are even golf carts to whisk you too your room if you are feeling lazy and small touches like a hot flannel, fresh towel and small fruit box after each dive. The hot flannel sounded like overkill to begin with in the warm climate, but it is really very pleasant and refreshing and we found ourselves looking forward to it! The dive centre has plenty of good quality equipment for hire if you want to just bring the basics and can provide nitrox and 15lt bottles if you need them. The overall impression in the resort and dive centre is of attention to detail and the staff

work hard to ensure all the guests are comfortable.

Although I have dived in the Lembeh Strait many times I never tire of the unusual habitat and denizens to be found here. On your first visit you may be concerned initially at the dark and seemingly lifeless nature of some of the dives sites. Despite the black sand and lower visibility you will quickly discover that there are numerous critters to be found with the help of your guide. A good guide with sharp eyes and an understanding of the critters and their habitats is essential. The guides at Lembeh Hills all have many years experience working with the original and older resorts and they will amaze you with what can be found during each dive. If you have a particular critter request then they will be delighted to try and fulfil your wish list, but of course the critters do change with the seasons.

Black sand is not the only habitat here and there are several sites which have good coral reefs, walls and also a mixtures of low lying reef, rubble and muck. During our recent visit we were spoilt with some of the best visibility I have ever seen in the strait, produced by a combination of very neap tides and calm conditions outside the strait, which gave us quite a different view of familiar sites. At the end of the strait there are some wall dives with vibrant soft corals if you need a wide

angle fix, or you can take a day trip offshore to Bangka island for a more traditional reef dive.

The usual (well for Lembeh anyway) macro subjects were seen in abundance, but because the visibility was unusually good I found myself concentrating on wide macro subjects for many of the dives in an effort to capture some habitat and blueish water behind unusual subjects. So we focussed on some of the larger macro subjects - frog fish, wasp fish, sea horses, scorpion fish, crabs etc. which would be suitable for a wide and close approach. I use a 2X teleconverter with my 10-17mm fish eye zoom which provides a slightly narrower view at the wide end of the lens, but also means you can shoot a true macro subject at the long end which makes for a very flexible catch all lens.

The good visibility does not make this technique any easier as you are often working on a silty or sandy seabed which is easily disturbed and there is still plenty of plankton in suspension so careful lighting and some post processing is required for the best results. Many of the dive sites are on a gentle slope which is a bonus when you can find a suitable critter as you can collect more light and possibly open water behind the subject. Shooting down the slopes is more of a challenge to capture the natural light and although you may



(Left) Nudibranch - there are many species of colourful nudibranch to be found here and if you are patient with your subject you can capture a slightly different image to the usual portrait shot. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f16 1/250.



(Right) Juvenile Wunderpus octopus - although we saw more 'normal' sized adult Wunderpus, there seemed to be numerous juveniles on this trip which I had not seen before. Smaller than your hand, they were the perfect size for a 105mm macro lens. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/60

record the habitat in the background the image will lack impact. Flash positioning is also important and it is best to experiment with each subject to find the optimum. For me the best position is often close to the port and slightly above (say 1 o'clock and 11

o'clock) to use the beam edge when the subject is very close to the port and avoid hotspots in the foreground. Fortunately most of these critters are quite patient with the persistent photographer or at least they move very slowly!



Striated or hairy frog fish - these frog fish do move from day to day over quite a large area to select a better fishing position. This one was waddling purposefully across the seabed towards a clump of weed and simply skirted around me as he got closer. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom plus 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/30.

You also need to be careful of what else may be on the seabed when you have chosen a subject. A good critter stick (stainless steel prod) is essential and you can often use this to just hold yourself off the seabed. However some subjects may require lying on the sand, so look carefully for any marine life you might harm or unwanted venomous denizens! Also be aware that your prolonged activity may attract the interest of

creatures with unpleasant stings - I was concentrating hard on a wasp fish through the viewfinder, when my wife kindly pointed out an inimicus scorpion fish inches from my hand which had left a trail in the sand from perhaps three metres away as it trekked across to see what I was up to!

The guides are always keen to try and find new, smaller and ever more obscure species for their guests and often it takes a few moments to realise



Bearded scorpion fish - you can vary the lighting technique you use on a common subject to produce a different style of image. Here the scorpion fish is lit with a fibre optic snoot to create a moody and threatening atmosphere. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom plus 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash gun and fibre optic snoot, ISO 200, f11 1/250.

just what you are being shown. Hairy shrimps are popular at the moment, but these are incredibly small (even more so than a pygmy seahorse) and although I had a wet lens to give me 2:1 with my 105mm macro lens it was not nearly enough for these tiny critters. For my next visit I will come armed with additional stackable wet lens firepower, although you can consider other combinations to reach say 4:1. These tiny subjects need

manual focus or you can lock your AF and then rock focus although you need to be pretty steady for the whisker thin depth of field.

If you need a fix of pygmy seahorse there are three types commonly seen here - the Bargibanti (in pink and yellow), Denise and Ponto hi - all of which need patience and extra magnification to photograph well. First of course you need your guide to show you the subject and



Commensal shrimp on sea whip - almost every sea whip in the straight will be host to one or more species of goby or shrimp. They are small and take patience to capture a shark shot as the sea whip is often vibrating in the current. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f16 1/250.

and it is surprising just how a small amount of motion will upset your focus at high magnification.

The Pontohi are best taken in profile as they are wafer thin, although one example we were shown was a pregnant male which had a much stouter body. There is also the pygmy pipe horse which seems to be a cross between a pipefish and a true seahorse and these are very small and thin and being bottom dwellers are difficult to photograph with any separation from the background.

Mimic and Wonderpus octopuses are another must see critter particularly if you are visiting Lembeh for the first time. It is not many years ago that seeing this species was considered rare, but now most of the guides know exactly what to look for and they are seen on most black sand dives. During our visit there seemed to be an abundance of juvenile Wonderpus smaller than my hand

which could be photographed with a 105mm lens but still performed all the behavioural and display repertoire they are so renowned for.

So our trip was a success photographically and we enjoyed the sense of coming home to Lembeh Strait and its familiar denizens, even though I was ill equipped to capture the smallest discoveries on offer. Lembeh Hills resort offers a quite different experience top side between dives with a balanced blend of indulgence and subtle attention to detail which made our stay very relaxing and enjoyable. So between

now and the next visit I need to gather equipment and hone my super macro technique to capture those hairy shrimp in detail!

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk

www.lembehills.com
www.manadosafaris.com

you can then be left to work on the perfect image. However, be careful to keep one eye on the location of your seahorse in the fan when checking your images as they are exceedingly difficult to spot again without help! The Bargibanti don't like torch light on them, so manual focussing is the best approach. The Pontohi seahorses are generally found in shallow water amongst halimeda weed, hydroids, or green sea squirts. So you may also have some surge to deal with as well

**Underwater Photography Workshops
with Mark Webster in 2012**



**Red Sea 14-21 October 2012
Lembeh Strait 1-8 December 2012**

Details:
www.photec.co.uk markwebster@photec.co.uk
www.oonasdivers.co.uk info@oonasdivers.co.uk
www.lembehills.com