

Diving with the Pros: NAD Resort Lembeh

by Tony Myshlyaev

Rarely does anyone come to Lembeh without a camera in tow. Before Larry Smith's discovery a quarter of a century ago, divers had no interest in diving sandy slopes and bottoms. Yet the unveiling of nutrient rich volcanic sands and nourishing substrate has turned this remote channel of water into an underwater macro mecca. Since then this style of diving has spread throughout the world and inevitably coined Larry as the King of the Muck.

Although it is known for its endless array of macro subjects there are also most of the large culprits passing through as well. If lucky enough to have brought a close focus wide-angle kit (mini domes with glass such as the super wide Tokina 10-17mm f/2.8 for crop frame DSLR's or fisheyes with 1.4x teleconverters for full frame cameras), it is possible to add the occasional whale shark, manta ray, pilot whale and the like into compositions. Although Lembeh is one of the unique places where the wide-angle kit should only be brought if baggage allowance will permit because macro lenses such as the

60mm, 105mm and 150mm will be the bread and butter.

The 60mm and 150mm lenses should be used for specific occasions. On one end of the spectrum the 60mm lens allows one to stay close to larger critters giving more versatility in creating good lighting. Shooting the same subject with a 105mm could often mean moving back and increasing the water column also potentially removing the opportunity for side-lighting and back-lighting - the strobe arm may not cover the distance from the camera to the subject. This often leads to the subjects being lit from head on and having a flat appearance. Shadows are necessary to aid the viewer's imagination in translating a two-dimensional image into a three dimensional reality.

Rare critters like blue ringed octopus or perhaps scorpionfish from the *Rhinopias* genus deserve proper lighting and the 60mm lens will lend itself well to that. Although the 60mm lens has this benefit, it is less effective with small subjects. Despite having the same level of magnification as a



Aerial perspective of NAD Resort. (Photograph courtesy of Simon Buxton)



Interior of the sea view bungalows. (Photograph courtesy of NAD Resort)

105mm, it requires the photographer to get a lot closer to the small critters in order to fill the frame in the same manner. This often leads to missed opportunities, as the skittish subjects will dart for cover when approached too close.

On the other hand the 150mm



One of a number of individual spaces in the camera room under 24-hour surveillance. (Photograph courtesy of NAD Resort)

is useful for the extra small critters and is more often in the arsenal of full frame photographers. On a crop frame, the 105mm is roughly equivalent to the magnification of a 150mm on the full frame. A problem



Blue-ringed octopus (Hapalochlaena spp.). Nikon D700 with Subal housing. Nikkor 105mm f/2.8D. 1xInon Z240 and Glow Dome diffuser.

with 105's on full frame bodies is tiny subjects like the hairy shrimp may still leave too much negative space (even with a +10 SubSee or even the SMC.)

Be warned, with such extreme magnification, photographers should be prepared to have their patience tested. Prescription lenses in the mask will be necessary if there are any issues with vision because the field of focus will now be at a minimum. After a successful photograph, zoom in as much as possible on the LCD. It is imperative triple check that everything is in focus. If not careful, it

could lead to extreme disappointments when brought up on a big monitor only to find the focal point before or after the eyes.

Therefore the 105mm is often seen as the happy medium for both crop frame and full frame shooters. It can allow for the greatest versatility and the least amount of missed opportunities. However full framers will sometimes need a diopter in order to avoid empty negative space.

For the bokeh-holics, a reverse ring macro set up will be a tempting choice. With no focus control or zoom the photographer is stuck with a



Hairy frogfish (Antennarius striatus) - due to its larger size, my 55mm lent itself well to getting up close and having better control of the lighting. Nikon D700 with Subal housing. Nikkor 55mm f/2.8AF. 1xInon Z240 and LSD Retra snoot.

working distance of 2-5cm and must find a subject that fits perfectly for this set up. That is best saved for shallow house reef dives that are available at any point as it is a unique high-risk high-reward technique that may take a large portion of air supply to get a single decent frame.

With an opportunity to join the group of professional underwater photographer Alex Tyrrell in Lembeh, only the finest would do. Thus NAD Lembeh Resort was chosen for the retreat. Owned and run by camera pros Simon Buxton

and Serge Abourjeily there was no shortage of expertise for technical and photographic assistance. Whether it was an inquiry about biology or camera issues, their knowledge and experience had everything sorted before the next dive. Along with much of what is explained in this article came from the daily on-board knowledge of Alex himself who made sure everyone on his team had a thorough understanding of their gear and its full potential. If not for all Lembeh has to offer, the level of accelerated experience gained by

the proximity to such professionals was worth the money alone.

Meanwhile Simon and Serge spared no expense in setting up the finest dive operation. Following the guidelines of Lembah diving – only 15 divers total per dive site - a none issue for all NAD guides since there are well over one hundred sites they are thoroughly trained to choose based on a remarkable understanding of the strait's ever changing conditions. At the farthest, travelling to the other side of the island will take at most thirty minutes on their two 4 stroke engine custom made boats (8 guests per boat maximum.) For that reason it is best to have everything set up in the camera room prior to the dive as most dive sites are rather 5 to 10 minutes away and will leave just enough time to get the wetsuits zipped up and do some final checks.

The local dive guides live and breathe their occupation, often sitting in the village at night talking about all of their finds and comparing notes of the critters' whereabouts. And despite all of that they are still trained for a year before they are even allowed to start doing trial guiding. Even then they may not even make the cut. Despite their extensive training, some of the best photographers come through the resort and will not accept anything less than true expertise of the local sites. It takes up to three years for the select few to start officially taking guests out on their own. Then it is taken a step further by offering the best ratio in Lembah - every guide can be dedicated to a maximum of two divers, ensuring no shortage of subjects throughout the dive. To boot, Paulus Naumang, one of the original seven guides trained by the late pioneer and King of the Muck, is a guide for NAD Resort. The knowledge he shares with the guides is his alone.



Peacock mantis shrimp with eggs (Odontodactylus scyllarus). Nikon D700 with Subal housing. Nikkor 105mm f/2.8D. 1xInon Z240 & Glow Dome diffuser.

Only three of the original seven are still diving today and while that is the case now, the other two are considering retirement in the next few years. Their knowledge is indispensable and it is likely he will soon remain as the last original guide in Lembah.



Thecacera picta nudibranch . Nikon D700 with Subal housing. Nikkor 105mm f/2.8D and +10 SubSee. 1xInon Z240 and LSD Retra snoot.

The same level of quality can be expected of the accommodation. Three meals a day are provided along with variable daily snacks. Rooms and bungalows are all situated on the water, overlooking the strait and Sulawesi Island. The resort is surrounded by jungle with no neighbors



Fuzzy dwarf lionfish (Dendrochirus brachypterus). Nikon D700 with Subal housing. Nikkor 105mm f/2.8D. 1xInon Z240 and Glow Dome diffuser.

in nearby. The lobby and rooms are an ideal place to spend the evenings, sorting through hundreds of images taken during the day. For how remote the resort is situated, the guests will be happy to take advantage of all the high-end western comforts. The unbelievably warm high-pressure showers and air conditioning were a personal favorite.

Given the reputation of NAD's operation, individual and more so, group bookings need to take place well in advance. Especially during high season which begins in August

and runs through to November when the water temperature drops to 25 degrees and triggers the largest abundance of critters to enter the strait. Depending on what the preferred subjects are or what behaviors are sought after, it is best to arrive during specific times, which they have fine-tuned, to a tee.

Specific requests such as the mandarin fish, fluorescent and the newly founded black water dives (using one or two 20,000 lumen Seawolf lights) can be arranged as well. Along with the technical



An unexpected find – a weedy scorpionfish (Rhinopias frondosa). To minimize working distance, a 105mm was unsuitable for an image of the entire scorpionfish so to compromise an up close portrait was a better option. The 60mm would have been more appropriate. Nikon D700 with Subal housing. Nikkor 105mm f/2.8D. 1xInon Z240 and Glow Dome diffuser.

divers having their place too - Simon provides three CCR systems for rent as well as having helium and oxygen at the resort to make all requested blends. House reef dives are complimentary and best suited for the early evenings - lots of the critters come out after sunset. This is a good opportunity to play around with more complicated techniques before taking them to the field on the following day. After a ten-day trip with the team,

there was no shortage of content for every level camera enthusiasts – enough to last until the next trip. But they will be forgiven if they return before having processed all of their original shots.

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