

The Lembeh Squint

By Nigel Marsh & Helen Rose

After a week of diving Lembeh we started to develop something we called the 'Lembeh Squint'. This was from having to screw up our eyes time and time again, to stare at all the tiny critters that our guide kept finding us. How he spotted most of these minute creatures was a mystery, as many were only millimetres long and so well camouflaged that they blended in perfect with their habitat. Fortunately, he also found plenty of larger critters for our cameras, so the Lembeh Squint didn't turn into a permanent condition.

Lembeh, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, has been high on our list of places to visit for a very long time, but we never got around to organising a trip as it seemed that every Tom, Dick and Harry had been there. But with the opening of the new Cocotinos Lembeh Dive Resort, and an invitation to check out the new resort, we knew it was finally time to visit this legendary muck diving location. This invitation arrived at the perfect time as Nigel was also completing a book project, a guide to muck diving, and a visit to Lembeh would cap off this huge project. (This guide book, published by New Holland Publishers, will be available early 2017 in the UK, Australia and New Zealand).

A number of warty frogfish sit on the coral rubble at Bianca (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f11)





At night big-fin reef squid are seen at many dive sites at Lembeh (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f11).

We arrived in Lembeh in April, only to discover the resort was a few weeks behind schedule and that we were the only guests. Cocotinos operate wonderful boutique dive resorts at Manado and Lombok, with Lembeh their third resort in Indonesia. The new resort is located in the heart of Lembeh, on the mainland side in the village of Makawide. Most of the famous Lembeh dive sites are only five to ten minutes from the resort. Although work was still being done to finish off the pool and several of the rooms, we didn't find this a problem as our completed room was large,

very comfortable and air-conditioned. Plus the restaurant, bar and dive shop were already operational, so the only thing we missed was a dip in the pool.

The dive operation at Cocotinos is run by Odyssey Divers, and in typical Cocotinos style they have a great camera room, a good range of hire gear, washing and drying areas and a very spacious dive boat. Our guide for the week was Iwan Muhani, one of the most experienced dive guides at Lembeh. Iwan was taught to dive by the legendary Larry Smith in 1995 when the first dive resort opened in Lembeh. He knows every dive site



Finding imperial shrimps is not difficult at Lembeh as they ride many sea cucumbers and nudibranchs (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f13).

in the Lembeh Strait better than the back of his hand, and is a wealth of knowledge about every critter you are likely to see in the area, and also knows where to find them. If Iwan can't find them, they aren't there.

Arriving at the resort mid-morning, we had a choice of lunch or a dive, we naturally choose a dive. We quickly had our cameras and dive gear organised, jumped on the boat and straight into the muck. Our first dive was a great introduction to Lembeh diving at Tanjung Kubur, only a five minute boat ride from the resort on the

island side of the straight. This was also where the Lembeh Squint started.

Before arriving at Lembeh we were under the impression that it was all black sand muck diving. However, Lembeh has a great variety of muck environments and this is one of the reasons this area is so rich with critters. We explored sites with black sand, coral rubble, grey sand, pebbles and a mix of these. Tanjung Kubur was a typical mixed muck site; coral gardens in the shallows, a coral rubble bank and then a grey sand slope. Upon descending I immediately spied a



A rarely seen event, mating greater blue-ringed octopus (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f13).

species I needed for the muck book, a lovely Banggai cardinalfish. After snapping off a dozen images I suddenly realised there were swarms of these fish, and by the end of our week we had seen thousands.

Iwan then proceeded to point out critter after critter - seahorses, pipefish, nudibranchs, mantis shrimps, moray eels, gobies, cuttlefish and many tiny shrimps. Some of the smaller critters had us squinting, but the Lembah Squint didn't start to manifest itself until the end of the dive, when Iwan

pointed out two tiny Pontoh's pygmy seahorses hidden amongst the hydroids.

Our next dive was on black sand, a classic Lembah muck site at TK3. This sandy slope was a bonanza of wonderful species - cockatoo waspfish, burrowing snake eels, boxfish, cowfish, oriental sea robins, shrimpfish, hairy frogfish and a small flamboyant cuttlefish. But we needed to squint to study one tiny stick-like critter that Iwan pointed out. It was either a pygmy pipehorse or maybe just



The terrifying Bobbit worm, it's a good thing they are small (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f11).

a stick.

The afternoon dive was just as productive at Air Pang, another wonderful site with black sand. The highlights were a sawblade shrimp and a crocodile snake eel, but we also photographed a long-arm octopus, hairy frogfish, cockatoo waspfish and several demon ghouls. The squint factor was low on this dive as there was so many nice, regular sized macro critters.



This coconut octopus has made a home out of shells (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f11).

Unfortunately the squint went into full swing on day two as Iwan continued to find tiny, minuscule critters for our cameras. I had to remind Iwan that I was shooting with a 60mm lens and was not setup for super macro, and I really prefer my critters visible to the naked eye! This seemed to do the trick as diving at Aer Bajo 3 we saw Ambon scorpionfish, painted frogfish and a coconut octopus. But Iwan couldn't resist pointing out a minute nudibranch barely a millimetre long.

Over the following days we explored over twenty Lembah dive

sites, and not just muck, as there is a surprising amount of coral in this area and also a shipwreck. It was nice to get the wide angle lens out to photograph the Mamali Wreck. This 90m long cargo ship was one of three ships sunk in the area during World War II, but is the only one regularly dived. Resting in 30m of water, we did a quick circuit of this interesting wreck and were impressed by the fish life, schools of barracuda, batfish, sweetlips and fusiliers.

But returning to the muck, the critters, small, smaller and super tiny, continued to be the main highlight.



A beautiful splendid mandarin fish at Bianca (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f11).

At Aw Shucks it was Pegasus sea moths, pygmy cuttlefish and fingered dragonets. While at Critter Hunt it was a wonderpus, tiger shrimp, blue-ringed octopus and hairy shrimp. And at Nudi Falls it was comets, banded pipefish, moray eels, whiskered pipefish and shrimpfish. No need to squint to see these great critters. Unfortunately the squint returned at several other dive sites as Iwan pointed out minuscule nudibranchs, porcelain crabs, shrimps and a few other critters we still haven't been able to identify.

One of our favourite sites was

a dive in the local harbour at a site called Bianca. This site had it all, groups of Banggai cardinalfish, mantis shrimps, moray eels, ribbon eels, pipefish, blennies, cockatoo flounders and cuttlefish. But the highlights were several painted and warty frogfish, plus a group of splendid mandarin fish. We are use to only seeing these colourful fish at dusk, when they emerge from the coral to mate, but at Bianca they dance among the coral rubble all day long feeding, and were untroubled by us photographing them.

We found that one of the great things about diving with Iwan as a

guide, was that he not only found critters with ease, but also had a great respect for them. There was no prodding or poking the critters into submission like some guides do for photographers. Iwan would show us the critter and expect us to take a few images and leave it in peace, which we were more than happy to do. Iwan also has a great knowledge about every critter we saw, and taught us a thing or two about some species.

Each day at Lembeh we witnessed behaviour we had only read about or seen in documentaries; a longfin snake eel with a commensal shrimp dancing on its head, a coconut octopus walking across the bottom with its shell home, we even saw a pair of greater blue-ringed octopus mating. Some of the best dives we did at Lembeh were at night. After dark a completely different set of critters emerge from the sand and rubble, including stargazers, big-fin reef squid, bobtail squid, fireworms, shrimps, prawns and a variety of octopus and crabs. But the most interesting critters were the Bobbit worms. These tubeworms have rabbit-trap like jaws, and Iwan told us about working with a documentary crew from the BBC that had filmed these scary worms grabbing large fish and dragging them into the sand!

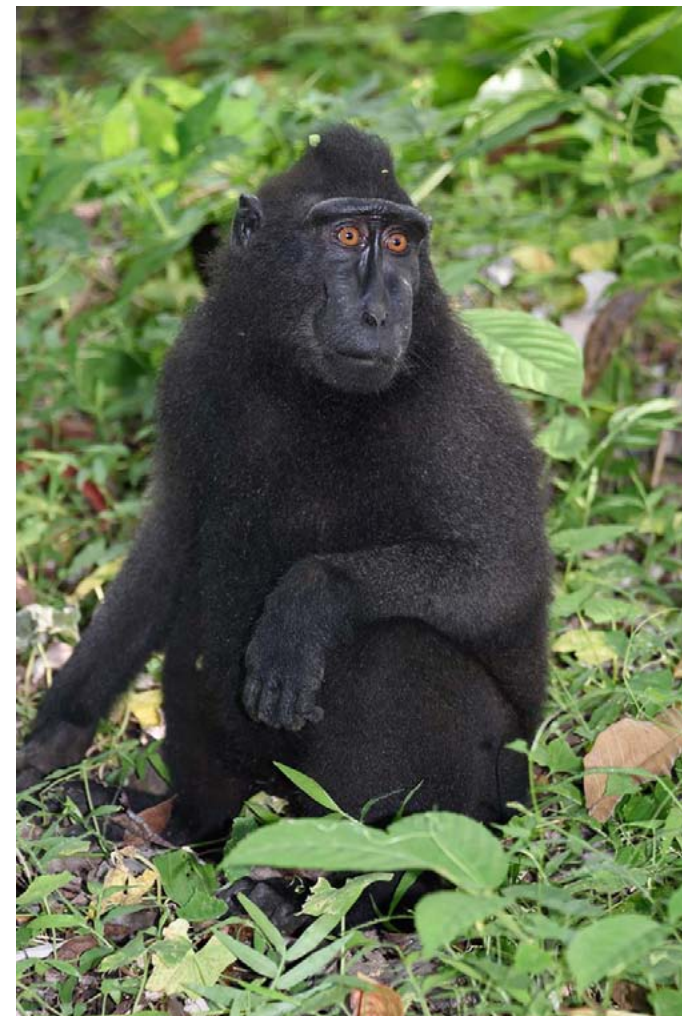
You can spend your entire time at Lembeh underwater, but this part of Sulawesi is worth exploring as you can do volcano tours, trekking and a highland tour. But we would recommend an afternoon trip to the Tangkoko National Park. We did this on our last day, to de-gas and let our eyes return to normal. Following a guide through the jungle we spotted numerous birds and insects, but the highlight was being surrounded by a troop of black crested macaques as they fed. We also saw two tarsiers, the world's smallest primates.



One of the signature species of Lembeh is the Banggai cardinalfish (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f13).

Our week at Lembeh allowed us to observe and photograph many amazing critters, but next time we might think about taking a magnifying glass, so we can see all the tiny critters without developing a Lembeh Squint.

For further information visit



A black crested macaque at the Tangkoko National Park (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 18-300mm, ISO 1000, 1/60, f5.6).

www.cocotinos-manado.com

Nigel Marsh & Helen Rose

www.nigelmarshphotography.com

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White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

www.magic-filters.com

Yucatek Divers

by Phil Rudin

Yucatek Divers is a PADI 5 Star Gold Palm Resort and a 5 Star SDI/TDI Instructor Training Center offering Cenote and ocean diving.

They are located in the Mexican resort town of Playa Del Carmen about an hours drive south of the Cancun airport. At Yucatek the dive instructors also act as dive guides all having an expert knowledge of the Yucatan's many dive sites.

During my recent travels to Mexico I made several Cenote dives with them at a number of the most popular sites for open water certified divers. Mexico's Yucatan peninsula is one of the worlds premier dive destinations for cenote diving having the largest underground river system in the world. The cenotes are the biggest attraction for divers visiting the Yucatan while the island of Cozumel twelve miles by ferry from Playa Del Carmen is more popular with ocean divers.

Cenotes have been formed over thousands of years by rain water pouring through the porous limestone jungle bed on its way to the Caribbean Sea. In many areas large underground caves were formed by the river of rain water flowing through

the limestone. At times these caves were fully submerged and at other times they would sit above the water table allowing for the formation of stalagmites and stalagmites. Many of these large underground caves eventually re-flooded and when the ceiling above them collapsed cenotes and sinkholes were formed.

Cenotes can be found throughout the jungle and populated areas along the eastern coast of the Yucatan all the way into Belize. Yucatan's cenotes are truly magnificent jewels for both cave and cavern divers. Cave divers are trained and equipped to enter areas where no ambient light is present while cavern diving requires a clear source of ambient light so that you can always see the exit point for the dive. Both disciplines require

*Yucatek Divers, Playa Del Carmen
Mexico*

Photographer, Nicté-Ha Cenote, Sony A7R II, Sony 16-35mm zoom at 16 mm, ISO-250, F/5.0, 1/250sec, Ikelite A7R II housing, Ikelite eight inch dome port, Ikelite DS-161 strobes in TTL with dome diffusers.

