



I'd never heard of muck diving until five years ago when I read about it in a few dive magazines and heard the odd diver rave about it. But, crawling around in the muck didn't strike me as being fun back then, even though some divers reported seeing some amazing stuff. It was only when some of my friends decided to take the plunge (so to speak) and returned with some amazing critter shots that I began to think that maybe I was missing out.

Mucking About in Manado

Text and pictures by Jez Tryner



The volcanic landscape of northern Sulawesi results in stunning vistas that greet you as your plane descends at Manado airport. Diving-wise, there's Bunaken's stunning steep walls on one side of the peninsula, and Lembeh Strait on the other side, with its fine black sand bottom. Currents bearing rich nutrients support the enormous diversity of marine life in this area — it's a winning recipe for a muck diving destination.

Our first dive in Lembeh Strait was at the famous Nudi Falls. The brief was simple: It's a wall and we'll look for "stuff". Moments after we dropped down at the wall, our dive guide pointed to a bright pink fan and I saw my first pygmy seahorse among the polyps of the sea fan. He was tiny and so cute! I was so excited it took a while for me to slow my breathing down enough to hold the camera steady and take a decent shot.

Nudi Falls was full of nudibranchs in every colour of the rainbow. The dive guide and my partner Andrea were constant pointing out newer and more colourful ones than the one I was already focused on — I just couldn't keep up! We saw over 20 different types and I shot over 200 photos, many of which I had to dump later because I was so

Above: Startling colours are the norm, like this green and black short-fin or dwarf lionfish (*Dendrochirus brachypterus*).

Top: Unusually-coloured *pontohi* pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus pontohi*) trying to hide among *Halimeda* soft corals

overwhelmed with the sheer variety of marine life and went crazy with the camera.

Over dinner, I think I got on everyone's nerves by repeating what a good dive it was and wondering out loud why I hadn't done this "muck diving" thing before. In fact, I hadn't actually seen any muck on this dive — just hundreds of critters.

The next day we were asked for a "wish list" of things we would like to see, and we came up with an embarrassingly long and detailed list. Andrea and I are somewhat the fish nerds and surprisingly, the staff didn't blink an eye. Our dive guide understood our mix of Latin names and "unscientific" descriptions, and proceeded to plan our dives accordingly.

We went to Angel's Window to see the fabled *Rhinopias* — a red weedy one was reported to be hanging out at 30 metres. We dropped into visibility of more than 20 metres, not something I was expecting, and when we



Right: A nudibranch (*Nembrotha cristata*) caught feeding on some ascidians on the beautiful coral-covered wall at Mandolin off Bunaken

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Above: A stunningly-coloured spinecheek anemonefish (*Premnas biaculeatus*) at home in its anemone host

Top: A red weedy scorpionfish (*Rhinopias frondosa*) found at Angel's Window in the Lembeh Strait



Left: Stargazer snake eel (*Brachysomophis cirrocheilos*) buried in the sand, waiting to ambush its prey

Far Left: A flamboyant cuttlefish (*Metasepia pfefferi*) using a combination of walking and gliding while flashing a myriad of colours as it moves over the volcanic sandy bottom in the Lembeh Strait

reached the bottom and looked for direction from our guide, he was 10 metres above us because he was having problems equalising.

Through a series of hand gestures and pantomime, he pointed us to the area where we were to look for the *Rhinopias*. On the way, we saw more pygmy seahorses, nudibranchs mating and laying eggs, beautiful spinecheek anemonefish and two very curious comets. But it was not to be, and we eventually surfaced without finding the elusive fish.

After an hour-long surface interval, we enthusiastically dived at Hairball 2, another site I had heard much about. We moved so slowly, it took us ages to get below the 10-metre mark because I kept encountering critters I've never seen before.

We encountered numerous flying gurnards, a cockatoo and spiny waspfish hanging out together, and a craggy-looking stargazer snake eel — something I'd never even heard of. After 10 years diving virtually every day, I was a little disconcerted that 90% of what we saw was totally new to me. What had I been doing all this time?

Of course, the Lembeh Strait is not the only place to go for muck diving. New sites are discovered regularly — and in the strangest places. One of Manado's newer muck sites is off the new "Mega Mall" in the main part of town. If you get an

understanding boat crew, you might even get to nip into the Mall for a latte after your dive!

Wori, a village north of Manado, also harbour secrets in its shallows. A large estuary here is the perfect environment for critters; leaf fish, robust and ornate ghost pipefish, long nose pipefish, flamboyant cuttlefish, blue ribbon eels, and nudibranchs galore!

There are also many species of juvenile fish — a veritable nursery.

Not to be forgotten is Popo, a site south of Manado. This place is classic muck diving, with common residents like thorny seahorses, *Rhinopias* (of two colours), frogfish and mimic and blue-ring octopus — not to be missed! The northern tip of Sulawesi is also on the map for muck diving action. Paradise Pier, Wazoo, Lihaga, Tanjung Arus, Aer Banua and Busa Bora are some of the more outstanding sites that we visited.

So if you fancy trying something different, I highly recommend that you give muck diving a go. Even if you eventually decide that it's not for you, muck diving will challenge your existing ideas about diving and you'll see some weird and wonderful creatures. 🐙