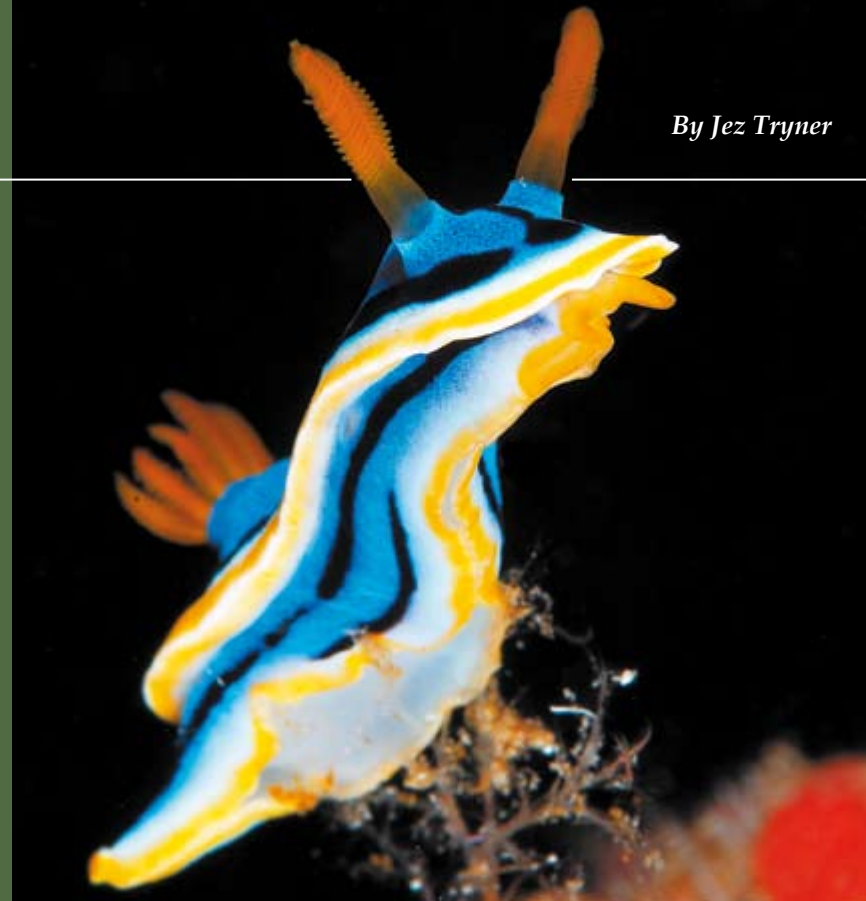




Critters on Parade at Lembeh

By Jez Tryner



Headed for the birthplace of muck diving, we were ready to feast our eyes on some of the most bizarre marine life ever seen.

After all, the critters at the Lembeh Strait are no ordinary marine creatures. These critters astound the imagination and baffle the logic of Darwinian progression.

Not to mention that they are out and about, parading for your camera — unlike their shy counterparts at other dive spots.

Make no mistake. It truly is dream diving for macro-loving

photographers. Bring extra digital storage space and batteries, because you're going to be busy.

The Strange Strait

I'd wanted to dive the Lembeh Strait for the longest time, so when my friends Nigel and Tina invited me to their new resort on Lembeh Island, Two Fish Divers, I jumped at the chance.

The Lembeh Strait must be one of the strangest dive areas in the

Top: A hairy frogfish (*Antennarius striatus*), just one of the curious critters found in the Strait

Left: Anna's *Chromodoris* nudibranch (*Chromodoris annae*) reaching for the sky

world. In essence, it's an area of shelter between the coast of northeast Sulawesi and a separate island that is no more than three kilometres from the peninsula mainland. The Strait lays amid a gentle current that carries a veritable buffet of nutrients to all the denizens of the deep that call it home.

Travelling over from the Bunaken National Park near Manado, it took me 90 minutes to arrive at the port town of Bitung, then a 10-minute crossing by boat to Lembeh Island, where Two Fish Divers occupies a prime spot — it sits on a peaceful and secluded bay, and is only minutes away from all the key diving areas.

The resort promotes flexible dive planning and focuses on small groups — dives are organised for groups of only three or less per dive guide. The resort takes a maximum of six divers at any one time.

Nudi Falls

On the day we arrived, Nigel planned a late-afternoon dive for us at a site called Nudi Falls. It's exactly what its name suggests — a small wall covered in numerous species of nudibranchs of all shapes, sizes and colours! I'd never seen so many varieties in one place.

At one point, a minuscule yellow nudibranch



Relaxing between dives on the shores of Lembeh Island

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resembling a tiny bunch of bananas floated past my mask and dropped onto the sandy bottom below, only to commence climbing up the wall again.

On this dive alone I counted 15 species of these colourful critters, many of which I had never seen before, and many species that I did recognize displayed different colours. If you're a nudibranch lover, this place is definitely for you.

If you somehow tire of nudibranchs, just drop down and inspect the sea fans — you'll find plenty of pygmy seahorses. We saw at least six on one fan alone. Further down on the seabed, pairs of pegasus fish, or sea moths, take turns following one another round the sandy bottom in search of food. If you get a chance to see this

Top Left: This little chap should be called a miniscule seahorse! Denise's pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus denise*) at Angel's Window

Bottom Left: A quite large by comparison pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*) on a *Muricella* sp. sea fan at Nudi Falls

Bottom: This Pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus pontohi*) was eight mm tall



strange ritual, try and figure out who the leader is — we certainly couldn't!

Divers are usually drawn to the Lembeh Strait for the small stuff, but there's a lot more! The entrance to the Strait boasts some really good wall diving that should not be ruled out. On the whole, visibility here is better than in the shallows, and you encounter reef sharks and turtles quite regularly.

Pampering Photographers

Two Fish Divers focuses on being cameraman friendly, something I'm always grateful for. Large rinse tanks on the boat, friendly staff trained in handling cameras and a designated charging and setup area — all these provisions mean that when you get back on the boat, you can leave your camera in the staff's capable hands, and join in the excited chatter about who saw what, where, and whose was the largest!

Much like going on an African safari, I had a "must-see" list, though my animals were slightly smaller than the average lion. The friendly eagle-eyed guides made it appear all too easy to find my personal Big Five.

Our guide led us along the volcanic sandy bottom to the bizarre-looking hairy frogfish awaiting its prey, fishing with its built-in lure. The beautiful Ambon scorpionfish was next, all but indistinguishable from the surrounding weeds and sea grass it inhabits, followed by tiny and rambunctious pygmy seahorses (we saw three different species).

The flamboyant cuttlefish were a little harder — they're always on the move, but watching the flashing light display along their bodies when we did find them was well worth the hunt.

As for my own grand finale — the dream find for many photographers — we found the rare, beautifully ugly and cleverly camouflaged weedy and lacy *Rhinopias*, in red, yellow and brown flavours no less.

The Lembeh Strait is now firmly entrenched in my top five favourite diving destinations, and with its ability to surprise and astound, it's not difficult to see why it's hard to beat. 🐠

Top Right: Lacey scorpionfish (*Rhinopias aphanes*) on the volcanic sandy bottom



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