

WEIRD WONDERS OF THE LEMBEH STRAIT
THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Dive with us to discover unexpected beauty among the monstrous denizens of an unappealing murky underwater universe

Close-up portrait of a Cockatoo Waspfish *Ablabys taenianotus*. Facing page, a Hairy Frogfish *Antennarius striatus*. On the previous page, a Painted Frogfish *Antennarius pictus* masquerades as an orange sponge.



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The Twilight Zone - a dark limbo where dream and reality meet, a shadowy world suspended in a perennial dusk where stunning beauty and nightmarish horror uneasily share a foggy, horizonless netherworld. Suspended in a ghostly silence, mysterious, graceful shapes briefly shimmer and rapidly vanish in the murky distance. Others, horrid and perennially hungry, sit like motionless deformed gargoyles on the bare sand, patiently waiting to pounce and feed on the unsuspecting passer-by. Danger lurks everywhere for its inhabitants - especially at night, when darkness falls and the weirdest, strangest and most fantastic denizens of



instantly devoured. Night - the pitiless time for the piercing sting, the slimy tentacle, the poisoned barb, the gaping, gulping mouth spasmodically swallowing down armored and flaccid prey alike. Anything is possible here - for this limbo of ravishing beauty and nightmarish sights is the fabled Strait of Lembeh. For the uninitiated, it just looks like a dark, unappealing sea channel on the eastern coast of Northern Sulawesi, less than forty meters at its deepest and less than three kilometers at its widest, walled in along its black sand shores by steep volcanic cliffs, its inky waters leading from the dingy harbor town of Bitung to the open sea and with a bit too much garbage of very dubious origin

floating around. For muck diving connoisseurs, however, it's pure unadulterated heaven, a dream destination to be visited at least once in a lifetime. Muck diving - the concept of searching for rare, strange, grotesque and usually very small marine tropical species in areas with little coral and in medium or downright bad visibility - was in fact born right

trying to escape their destiny, only to be



A Hairy Frogfish —
Antennarius striatus is luring prey close to its cavernous mouth by waving its worm-shaped esca (or lure), a fleshy appendage positioned at the tip of its fishing-rod like illicium. The shape of the esca - mimicking that of a living creature - is often the only clue to the actual Frogfish species being observed.

A 15 cm-long Ambon Scorpionfish *Pteroidichthys amboinensis* sits in the open, mimicking to stunning perfection a lump of seaweed lying on the silty substrate of the Lembeh Strait.



here, in the Lembeh Strait, Indonesia, almost twenty years ago.

A TRULY UNIQUE HABITAT

What is so special about the place? Well...everything. Despite the atmospheric (and admittedly somewhat over-dramatized) description above, the setting is really idyllic. The topside panorama is truly enchanting - steep rocky slopes covered in thick tropical greenery, sea eagles soaring high in the sky, colorful local fishing boats passing by. But it's the diving which makes Lembeh so unique. Being close to a very deep underwater trench featuring daily cold-water upwellings, the sandy and silty sea bottoms of the Strait of Lembeh host an enormous variety of rare species which are common here but almost unheard of anywhere else. Even several of the more common species found here display dazzling and often unique color phases, this being due both to the dark volcanic sand they are living on and some other undiscovered factor. The weird, the grotesque, the rare and the downright absurd are a daily occurrence on its dive sites. This is a destination where it's not uncommon for the observant and experienced underwater photographer to encounter "holy grails" such as Weedy and Paddle-flap *Rhinopias*, Ambon Scorpionfish, Mimic Octopus and Wonderpus, Pygmy seahorses, Blue-ring octopus, Hairy octopus, Flamboyant cuttlefish, Boxer crab and tiny orange-rimmed baby Batfish on

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The demonic, sculpted features of a Devil Scorpionfish *Inimicus didactylus* often remind one of a Samurai mask.

Usually half-submerged in the soft substrate, this species features a disarrayed clump of highly venomous and very sharp dorsal spines.

It can be occasionally observed as it drags itself on the bottom using the free finger-like rays of its pectoral fins.

■ A tiny Yellow Pygmy Goby - *Lubricogobius exiguus* - guarding the entrance of its lair, a discarded glass bottle. The bottom of the Lembah Strait abounds with such man-made, colonized artifacts, which offer refuge to an exceptional number of species.



a daily or weekly basis: a place where after a few days it is easy to become so complacent that most divers just give a passing glance and nothing more to quite uncommon and strikingly beautiful species such as Painted and Clown rogfish, Thorny seahorse, Cockatoo waspfish or Mandarinfish. To underwater photographers looking for unusual (and usually stunning) subjects, the Lembah Strait offers unsurpassed opportunities.

EXPERIMENTS IN WIDE-MACRO

The apparently contradictory choice of adding teleconverters to fish-eye lenses in order to obtain arresting "wide-macro" images has long been adopted by many rainforest and insect specialists - notably Frans Lanting, the grand master of them all - while several Japanese authors have pioneered its use in underwater photography since the last two decades. This unusual combination allows an extremely close approach to small subjects, offering at the same time the opportunity to keep a

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■ A Weedy Scorpionfish *Rhinopias frondosa* in its bright orange color phase - one of the most bizarre and sought-after species of Lembeh. Its richly ornamented livery makes it all but invisible among the coral rubble of the bottom.

A bizarre living tapestry of unusual colors and shapes defying imagination



The strange sight offered by an Urchin Crab *Dorippe frascione*, carrying on its back a Fire Urchin *Astropyga radiata* to keep predators at bay.



large area of surrounding environment or background in the image frame - with little or no peripheral distortion and with the added bonus of a spectacular depth of field. This technique allows the photographer to obtain truly unique and very personal images which deeply contextualize the subject in its natural habitat - something most macro lenses rarely do. We absolutely love the effect, and we often use this combination whenever the opportunity arises in our topside wildlife photography, especially with reptiles, amphibians and large insects and arthropods. The same effect, or a very similar one, may be obtained today - I hasten to add - with several of the new close-focusing wide angle zooms, such as the 10-20mm Sigma and several others, which have become widely available today. I had long been intrigued by this visionary technique since admiring many close-up and truly arresting rainforest reptile and insect images taken by Lanting more than fifteen years ago, but the long years of work undertaken to put together all the images necessary to publish our books *A Diver's Guide to Underwater Malaysia Macrolife* and *A Diver's Guide to Reef Life* had restricted us to documentary-style profile shots to be strictly used for identification purposes by other divers and photographers - an enjoyable job which however prevented us experimenting with more creative options. The right opportunity to try this technique underwater presented itself

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Close-up portrait of a Fingered Dragonet *Dactylopus dactylopus*, a rather active bottom forager which is often spotted in pairs. Notice the finger-like, free first rays of the pectoral fins, used for locomotion.





The Lembeh Strait abounds with cephalopod species, some of which are still undescribed. The small species illustrated - perfectly camouflaged on the silty bottom - probably belongs to the horridus complex. At the far right, a large Ceratosoma trilobatum nudibranch feeding on a sponge colony.

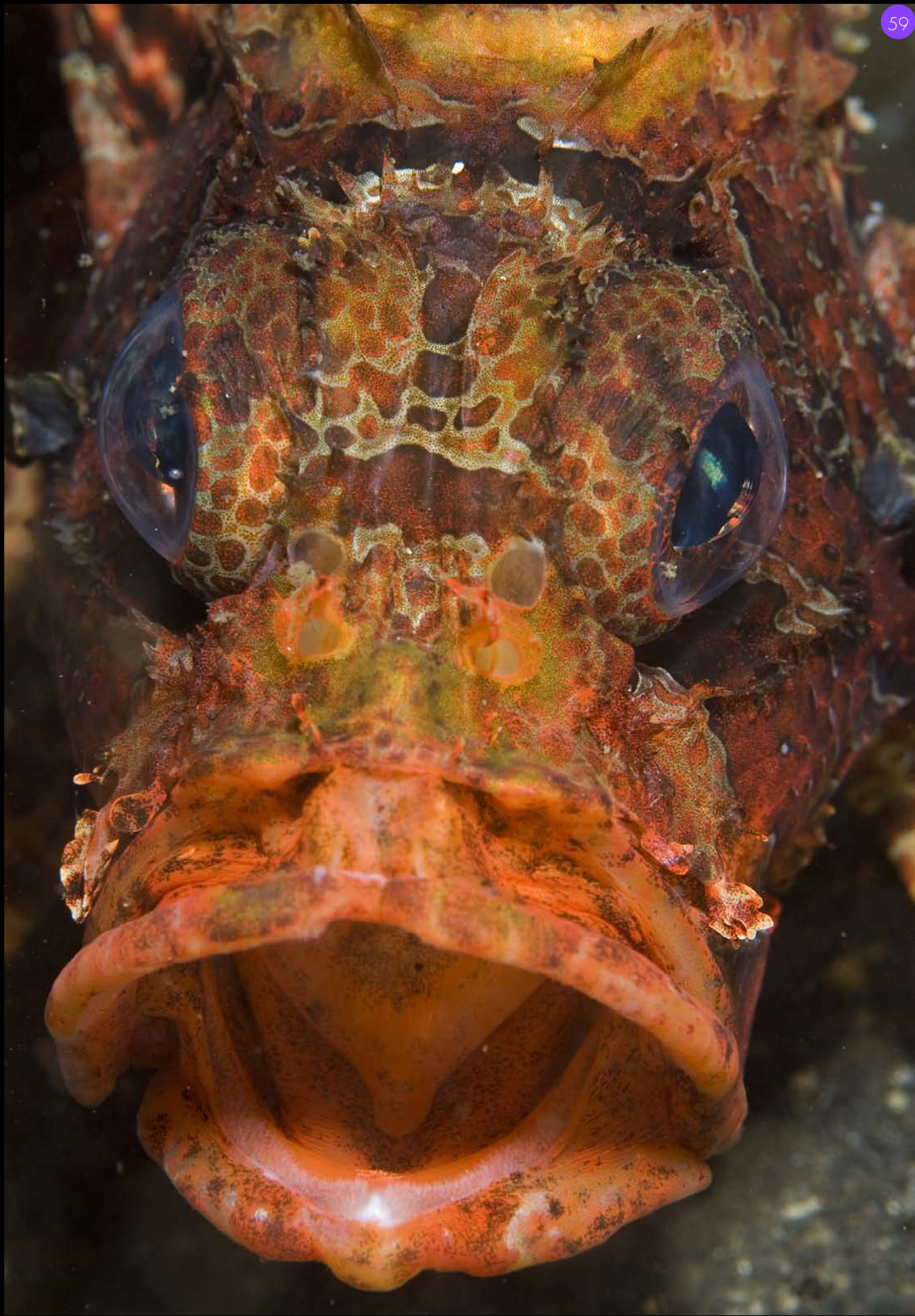


during our fourth visit to the Lembeh Strait. Having just completed our latest book, *A Diver's Guide to the Art of Underwater Photography*, I suddenly found myself strangely dissatisfied by my 105mm, a lens which for many years past had been a "must" for me. Macro portraits seemed all of a sudden to have lost visual power - creative apathy had set in. Fiddling in frustration, I suddenly realized that going "wide-macro" as I already had done on land could offer the solution to the impasse - even if by definition this technique might prove restrictive in the choice of subjects and could create severe backscatter problems in the notoriously murky depths of the Lembeh Strait.

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Diving in Lembeh offers unparalleled opportunities to the lovers of the weird, the strange and the grotesque, as these two portraits show. Left, the boar-like snout of a Paddle-flap Scorpionfish *Rhinopias eschmeyeri* in its gaudy bright-pink color phase; right, the ominous yawn of a small Dwarf Lionfish *Dendrochirus brachypterus*, a very colorful but equally cryptic species which is often observed in small aggregations. Both species belong to the Scorpaenidae family and are gifted with a highly protrusible mouth.



A *Cerianthus* sp. sea anemone displays its Gorgon-like mass of floating, highly urticating tentacles, waving in a mild current. The actual body of the animal is hidden in a mucus-coated tube emerging from the silty substrate.

The Gorgon's head, its deadly hair softly waving in the current



Anyway, there seemed to be no real choice - so I set up my Nikon 10.5mm plus a 1.5 Kenko teleconverter and had it mounted on my D300 behind the smallish polycarbonate fish-eye dome of my Sea & Sea housing. I find the results intriguing, and I like using this combination, as most species do not associate the approaching, reflective dome with an impending danger, and do not perceive it as the gaping mouth of a looming predator as it always happens instead with the 105mm tubular port. A slight peripheral distortion of the image becomes quite noticeable at extremely short focusing distances, so framing becomes an enjoyable challenge - a few degrees above or under the horizontal will generate dramatic differences in the final composition. Since most subjects in the Lembeh Strait are generally found lying camouflaged on the sand, silt or rubble bottom - and not perched on coral heads or walls as it would happen on pristine reefs elsewhere - one has to literally dig the lower third of the dome in the soft substrate to frame them more or less horizontally and not from above. This is where a smallish polycarbonate fish-eye or wide-angle dome proves to be more practical than a bigger and much more expensive glass one - there's little risk of scratching it while rubbing it against the coarse sand (or even small sharp pieces of coral rubble), and even in this eventuality the optical effects are quite negligible since small surface

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■ A tiny, less than 1 cm-long Fingered Dragonet *Dactylopus dactylopus* juvenile in its post-larval stage. Notice the already highly developed flag-like first dorsal fin, typical of this very showy species.



A Zebra Crab *Zebrida adamsii* sits well protected among the highly venomous spines of a Fire Urchin *Astropyga radiata*. The tiny crab is securely attached to its host by specially-evolved hooks on its rear legs.



scratches can easily be erased later on (a glass dome would be ruined for good). This technique however requests a delicate hand and some nerve, since sand, muck and grit rapidly collect around the main O-ring grooves - a dangerous proposition. The remarkably short focusing distances involved also present the very real risk of actually bumping the dome into corals or rocks with serious risks of damage. My suggestion regarding the positioning of strobes while doing "wide-macro" is to use them as they would be in normal fish-eye photography - widely spread and positioned as far behind the actual dome as the length of the strobe arms allows. Even when burdened with a teleconverter, fish-eyes allow perfectly exposed images at low light levels, ensuring razor-sharp focusing and exceptional depth of field. This is another wonderful side effect of this technique - shooting in macro mode without having to worry too much about losing sharpness and correct focus. If used correctly and creatively, the fish-eye + teleconverter combination can successfully handle any stationary subject ranging in size from a couple of inches to more than two feet in length, ie anything from a reasonably large nudibranch to a Crocodilefish. It gives its most striking results in the middle range - permitting stunning shots of frogfish, lionfish, scorpionfish, sea snakes and octopus, all spectacularly contextualized in a wide expanse of their natural habitat. Stationary or semi-

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— An unidentified scorpionfish - possibly *Scorpaenopsis possi* with unusually developed frontal "tendrils" - sits by a *Goniopora* coral head. In the barren expanse of the Lembeh sea bottom all sorts of hide-outs and shelters are promptly exploited by predator and prey alike.





Two more exercises in the nightmarish and the grotesque. Left, the sculptured, almost abstract features of an unusually garish but nonetheless perfectly camouflaged Reef Stonefish *Synanceia verrucosa*, one of the most dangerous inhabitants of rubble seabottoms. Its dorsal spines can inflict exceptionally painful wounds, injecting a venom which can prove deadly to humans. Right, the ghastly, skull-like countenance of a Whitemargin Stargazer *Uranoscopus sulphureus*, whose box-like body lies buried in the substrate.





Looking like a miniature creature of ancient mythology, a small Cockatoo Waspfish *Ablabys taenianotus* lies camouflaged among the drably colored sponges which have colonized the coral rubble. Its long dorsal fin rays can inflict very painful wounds.

Two of the most unusual and striking encounters one can make in the dark waters of Lembeh - an eel-like Snake Blenny *Xiphasia setifer* surprised out of its burrow and a striking Zebra Batfish *Platax batavianus* juvenile, whose striped livery helps it camouflage among crinoids.

A dark, cold realm where only the most cunning survive another night



stationary subjects offer the best opportunities obviously, but one is free to experiment given the broad latitude in the focused area. To be truly successful with this technique, however, the photographer has to combine the "macro frame of mind" (visually focusing on the main subject) with the "fish-eye one" (ie giving much importance to the background) - an interesting and engaging exercise in creative flexibility which often leads to compelling visual results.

A FRAGILE ECOSYSTEM

The Lembeh Strait is an almost unique ecosystem, and as such it deserves all the protection visitors and supporters can give it. While most resorts are today enforcing a strict no-gloves dive policy (something we actually do not agree with, as we believe fingertip control can actually avoid damage by clumsy divers - it also seems a rather ridicu-

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A study in flexible, boneless grace - a tiny, coin-sized *Wonderpus wonderpus* strikes a pose trying to intimidate the observer. Lembeh is an excellent location to encounter and photograph both this species and the equally interesting Mimic Octopus *Thaumoctopus mimicus*.



■ A pair of Horned Flatheads
Thysanophrys carbunculus - strictly related
to the more commonly observed
Crocodilefish - sit side by side on the sea
bottom, half-submerged in the soft silt
and perfectly camouflaged. These two
individuals are probably courting,
as this is normally a solitary species.



— A Weedy Scorpionfish *Rhinopias frondosa* sits among the rubble. Its gaudy bright-orange livery hides it well in this textured environment, as red is one of the first colors of the spectrum to disappear at depth in natural light.

lous request when in the Lembeh Strait one mostly dives in, well...garbage), it is a fact that the success of the place has led to an exponential increase in the numbers of resorts and consequentially visiting divers. Some dive sites - especially the most famous ones - currently risk being severely overdived on a daily basis, provoking the disappearance of those same rare and often timid species people are coming to see from all over the world. The area is supposed to become a National Park soon, but in the meantime it is imperative for all the dive operators in the area to agree on common, strict rules: divers - especially photographers - must learn not to pester their guides with obsessive requests, and a firm rotation on the most frequently visited dive sites like Hairball, Jahir or Nudi Falls must be enforced as soon as possible. Lembeh is a fragile masterpiece, and none of us wants to see it hopelessly shattered by uneducated divers or overenthusiastic, greedy dive operators.

TRAVEL TIPS

Most dive resorts on the Lembeh Strait are just a couple of hours drive from Manado: your travel operator will arrange everything for you. Water temperature in the Lembeh Strait is appreciably lower than could be expected (think 24/27 C°), so a 5mm wetsuit or a vest under a 3mm wetsuit will be handy. A full hood will also help in avoiding head- and neck-aches in the cold

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— A male Peacock Flounder *Bothus mancus* displays its greatly elongated pectoral fin rays. In natural light its highly ornamented livery makes it invisible on the textured seabottom of the Lembeh Strait.



A close-up of the eyes of the common Crocodilefish *Cymbacephalus beauforti* clearly show its complex, maze-like color patterns. The resulting camouflage is highly effective and hides the animal well. Notice the tiny branched skin flaps effectively dissimulating the pupil.



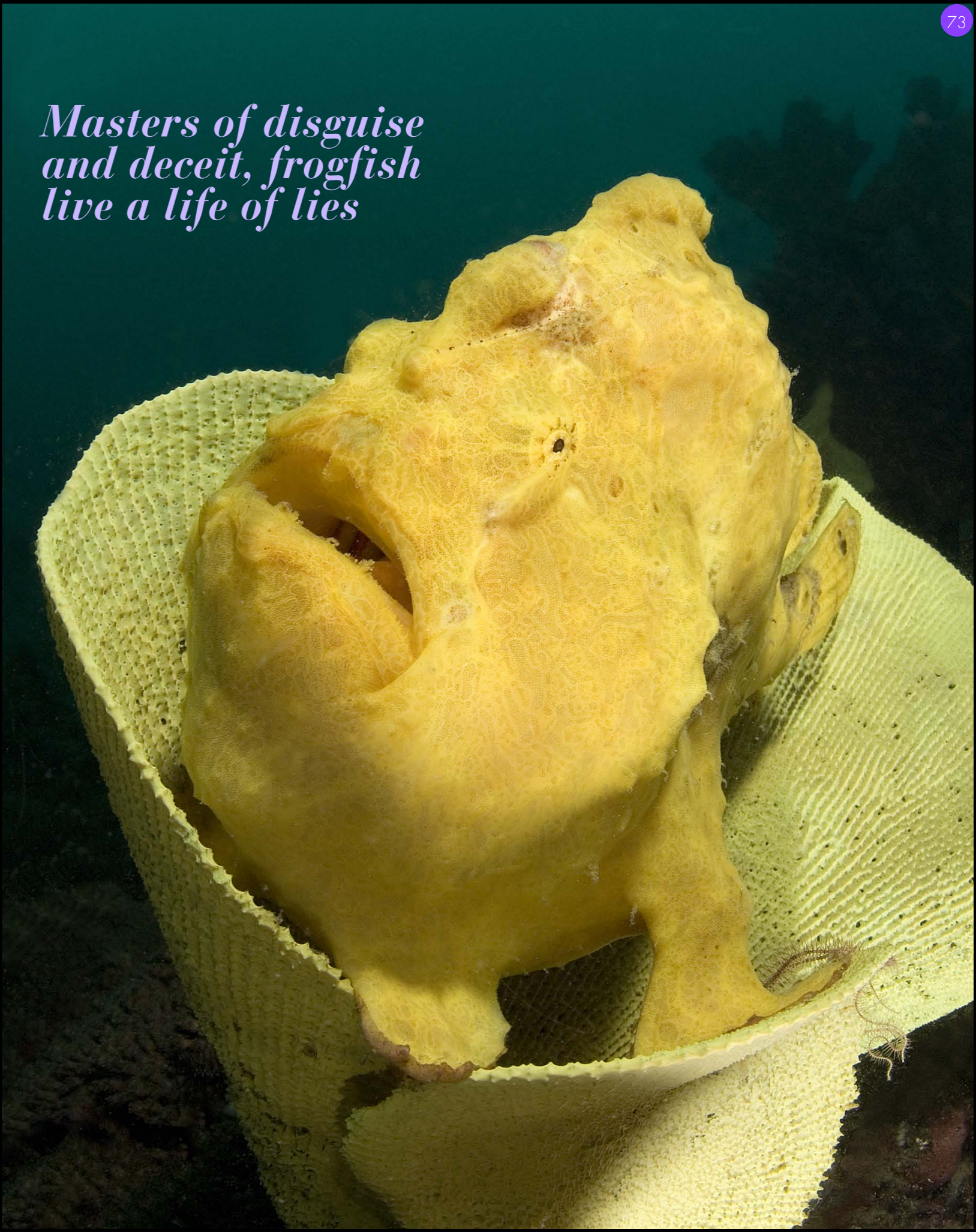
A common sight on the mucky sea bottoms of Lembeh, as a Black-saddled Snake Eel *Ophichthus cephalozona* emerges like a miniature periscope from the slime-coated substrate. If approached too rapidly this species will immediately retreat into its vertical burrow.



water. Stinging hydroids are also prevalent on several dive sites, so be prepared to get stung and avoid touching anything underwater. The diving is very easy, mostly taking place in shallow water, with little or no currents and in the company of experienced dive guides. In fact many dive guides - especially the younger ones - are not only eagle-eyed and highly motivated, but also maybe a bit too eager to please their clients in the hope of getting a good tip. Regardless of the resort one is staying at, most dive sites are just a few minutes away by speedboat - and after night dives (not to be missed here!) one will usually find a warm, dry towel and a mug of hot chocolate waiting back on the boat. Most resorts normally offer three dives a day - two in the morning and one in the early afternoon - plus night dives and unlimited house reef diving: groups are kept to a minimum, with no more than four divers for each guide (in some resorts no more than three), allowing maximum freedom and optimizing photo opportunities. Most dive resorts also offer mosquito-screened camera rooms by the dive center, where photographers and videographers can leave their equipment overnight to dry and reload batteries: 220 and 110 volts are both available. No visas are needed upon entry in Indonesia, but nationals of several western countries have to pay an hefty fee in Manado Sam Ratulangi Airport's immigration office both when entering and exiting the country.

*Masters of disguise
and deceit, frogfish
live a life of lies*

Two Giant Frogfish *Antennarius commersoni* individuals, perching on widely different microhabitats, demonstrate the great latitude in coloration and the exceptional camouflage this relatively large species can achieve. Coloration and possibly pattern on several frogfish species is dependant on the chosen perch and habitat, and it can accordingly change in the course of several days or weeks.



— This is how an angry Devil Scorpionfish *Inimicus didactylus* looks when flushed from the substrate under which it lied - its beautifully marked fins now widely spread in warning and its erect dorsal spines ready to impale the disturber, injecting a large dose of very painful venom. One of the many good reasons never to lie or sit on the seabottom in the Lembeh Strait.





The unmistakable front view offered by a Paddle-flap Scorpionfish *Rhinopias eschmeyeri* - a very uncommon and much sought-after species.

Barren, stretching in all directions, often murky, the Lembeh underwater landscapes transform even relatively mundane subjects like this Spotfin Lionfish *Pterois antennata* in magical encounters.





■ Lembeh - by its own murky, dark nature - is an environment ideally suited to macrophotography. Left, a partially backlit Cockatoo Waspfish *Ablabys taenianotus*; right, a more conventional portrait of a Bicolor blenny *Ecsenius bicolor* emerging from its abandoned tubeworm lair.





An aptly-named White-eyed Moray eel *Sidera thyrsoidea* glares madly from its lair among clumps of *Goniopora* corals, their flower-like polyps fully expanded in the current.


For some unexplained reason - possibly its black volcanic sand bottoms - the Lembeh environment seems to intensify the colors of its inhabitants, as this normally blandly colored species - the Zebra Lionfish *Dendrochirus zebra* - clearly shows.

Sudden flashes of bright colors in a landscape of utter drabness



In an underwater world of deceit and illusion nothing is ever as it seems - can you spot the Painted Frogfish Antennarius pictus hiding in silent ambush among the sponges, debris and algal growth on the bottom?



A large Paddle-flap Scorpionfish (Rhinopias eschmeyeri) is the central focus of the image. It has a distinctive, flattened, gargoyle-like body with a large, prominent eye and a wide, flat, paddle-like flap extending from its back. The fish is a vibrant pinkish-purple color and is resting on a diverse coral reef. The reef is covered in various types of coral, including a large, light green, brain-like coral to the left of the fish, and many smaller, yellowish, branching corals. The background is dark, suggesting a deep-water environment.

A large Paddle-flap Scorpionfish *Rhinopias eschmeyeri* shows its unmistakable gargoyle-like profile. Notice the algal growth on its body, which will be shed together with its skin at the next molting.

Most adult Clown Frogfish *Antennarius maculatus* found in Lembeh show a bright yellow livery rather than the more customary white observed elsewhere.



■ A lonely Seahorse - probably *Hippocampus taeniopterus* - hangs tenaciously to its little perch in the endless, gloomy waste of the Lembeh seabottom.





A cornucopia of patterns and colors - clockwise, from left top: Weedy Scorpionfish *Rhinopias frondosa* in a rare golden phase; close-up of a Wonderpus *Wonderpus photogenicus* in full display; close-up of the suction feet of the highly venomous Flower Urchin *Toxopneustes pileolus*; and the "tiled" bottom face of a Pincushion Seastar, *Halityle regularis*.



A stunning example of exceptional camouflage is offered by this large Crocodilefish *Cymbacephalus beauforti*, brazenly sitting in the open. Its maze-like reticulations create a surprisingly effective disruptive pattern, disguising completely its body shape. The marine environment of the Lembeh Strait is the ultimate field laboratory for those interested in camouflage, mimicry and general survival strategies of benthic marine species.



More interesting patterns, colors and body shapes. From left, a Harlequin Shrimp *Hymenocera elegans* feeding on a seastar, the razor-thin front profile of a Leaf Fish *Taenianotus triacanthus* and lastly the flowing, indiscernible shape of a still undescribed Hairy Octopus slinking among a clump of fire-red *Dendronephthya* soft corals.



Another uncommon sight as a Napoleon Snake eel *Ophichthys bonaparti* emerges from its burrow in the silt, showing its colorfully banded but usually hidden body. Snake eels are nocturnal predators which feed on small fish, crustaceans and cephalopods.





More Lembeh faces and profiles - sometimes elegant, often horrid, always stunning. Clockwise, from left top: the mad-doctor glare of a White-eyed Moray *Siderea thyrsoidea*, the monstrous looks of a Devil Scorpionfish *Inimicus didactylus* hiding in the sand, the technicolored display offered by a Dwarf Lionfish *Dendrochirus brachypterus* and the dead-leaf profile of a Cockatoo or Spiny Waspfish *Ablabys* sp.



A large Tasselled Scorpionfish *Scorpaenopsis oxycephala* lies in ambush on a sea anemone, apparently unaffected by the latter's stinging cells.

A living laboratory to study and admire the fine art of camouflage



■ A face-on portrait of a rare golden Weedy Scorpionfish *Rhinopias frondosa* shows to good effect its grotesque features - notice the upturned snout, the leaf-like tassels above the eyes and around the mouth and the transparent "windows" in the huge lattice-like pectoral fins.



A coin-sized
Flying Gurnard
*Dactyloptena
orientalis* juvenile
flares its huge
pectoral fins,
which will be
the salient,
unmistakable
feature of the 30
cm-long adult.
The peacock-like
colors are atypical
for the species
and are observed
almost exclusively
in the Lembeh
populations.



Variations in blue: clockwise from left top, a male Thorn-back Cowfish *Lactoria fornasini*, a Bubble Shell *Bullina lineata* prowling at night, the snout of a Blue-spotted Sand Diver *Trichonotus setigerus* emerging from the substrate and the unmistakable dragon-like features of an adult Blue Ribbon Eel *Rhinomuraena quaesita*.

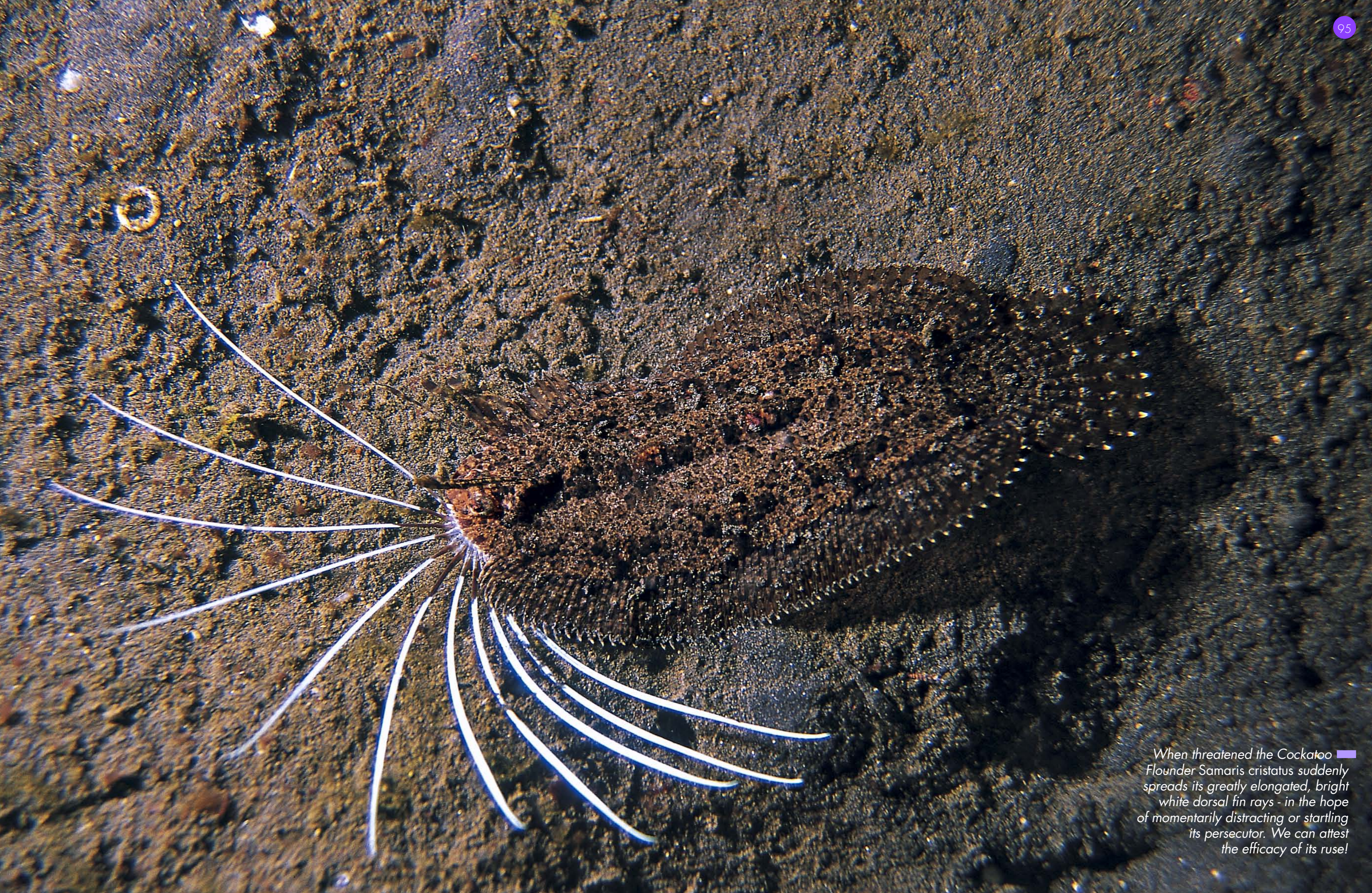


— The deadly elf of the underwater world - a tiny Blue-ring Octopus *Hapalochlaena lunulata*, whose fluorescent markings warn of a deadly bite. Its neurotoxic venom has proven fatal to humans in several instances - beware its aposematic (ie warning) livery and never try to handle it if you are lucky enough to find one.





Benthic, static and exquisitely camouflaged sit-and-wait predators form the majority of Lembeh's most interesting denizens - from a scientific but also from a photographic point of view. The unusual "hairy" local morph of the Striped Frogfish *Antennarius striatus* (left) and the bright yellow and purple Clown Frogfish *Antennarius maculatus* (right) are only two of many fascinating subjects.



When threatened the Cockatoo Flounder *Samaris cristatus* suddenly spreads its greatly elongated, bright white dorsal fin rays - in the hope of momentarily distracting or startling its persecutor. We can attest the efficacy of its ruse!

A tiny, post-larval sized Zebra Crab *Zebrida adamsii* stands out on the hellish, lava-hot red background of its protecting host, a Fire Urchin *Astropyga radiata*.

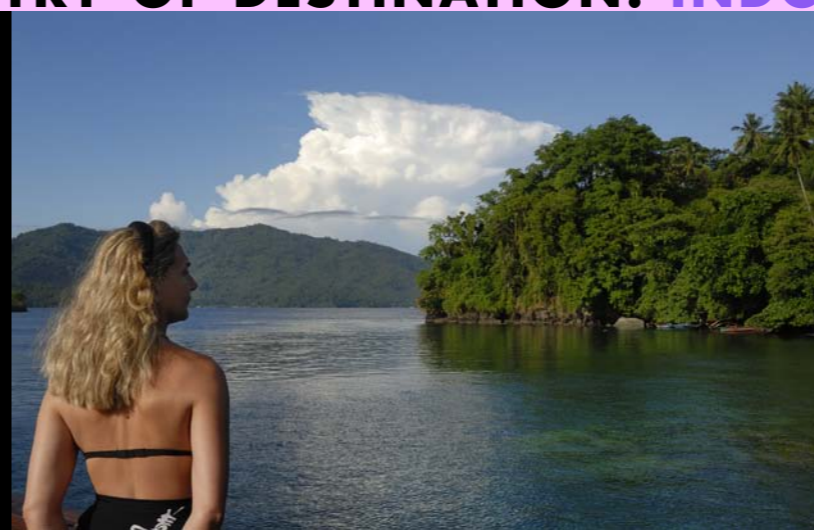


The purest essence of the Lembeh Strait's gloomy underwater universe - the skull-like, bone-white stark features of a Devil Scorpionfish *Inimicus didactylus* half-buried in the silt, silently ambushing its prey.

The art of disappearing - or looking like something else - is the essence of Lembeh

At-a-glance travel guide

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: INDONESIA



USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

Some simple, common sense, field-tested advice and information to make the best out of your trip and avoid hassles, worries and problems

ROUTE: Your flight connection (presumably from Singapore, Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur) will land at Sam Ratulangi International Airport in Manado, North Sulawesi. Visitors from several Western countries are expected to pay a hefty entrance tax at Immigration. From Manado it's a two-hour long car drive to the Lembeh Strait, where you'll find your dive lodge of choice – they'll be waiting at the passengers' exit to pick you up with the resort minibus.

MEANS OF TRANSPORT: None since you won't be doing much except diving. If you want to visit Tangkoko National Park or the Minahasan Highlands your dive resort concierge will be glad to

organize a car rental with driver/guide for you at a very reasonable price.

CURRENCY: Trips are usually paid in advance, but extras can usually be settled in Euros or US currency. The local currency is the Indonesian Rupiah.

ACCOMODATION: Since the old days - when the legendary (and now rather run-down) Kungkungan Bay Resort was the only choice in town, amounting to an exclusive and expensive country club – things have changed radically. Now the Lembeh Strait is replete with a wide variety of dive resorts, from rather expensive and relatively

luxurious ones to more affordable options. We can safely recommend Jim and Cary Yanny's **Eco Divers** as one of the most serious and dependable operators, otherwise some dive Forum sleuthing on www.wetpixel.com or www.divephotoguide.com will help you in choosing the right one for your needs and pockets.

FOOD: Depends on where you are staying – despite the many wonders and mouth-watering flavours of Indonesian traditional cuisine, most dive resorts in the Lembeh Strait opt to offer westernized, sanitized, unappetizing menus as the great majority of US and European visitors seem totally unable to

Unique diving, stunning natural landscapes and exotic wildlife



deal with the spicy, fiery condiments of Manadoese food. Don't worry however – you'll have overcooked pasta, concrete-like burritos, flavorless nasi goreng and other watered-down, bastardized international dishes but at least you'll be spared the roasted rats and barbecued dog of the traditional local cuisine.

LANGUAGE: English and Bahasa Indonesia.

WORRIES: The waters of the Lembeh Strait certainly aren't the cleanest in the world (it's basically a filthy garbage dump in front of a big dirty industrial harbour) so it's better to avoid diving with open cuts. More importantly, always refrain from touching marine species or kneeling on the sea bottom – this is the preferred habitat of a great

number of highly venomous and perfectly camouflaged species. Hydroids can also cause severe rashes, painful sores and maddening itching in several dive sites (notably Nudie Falls). Be very careful if walking barefoot or with flip-flops at night and when sleeping in ground-level wooden bungalows – large tropical centipedes (*Scolopendra* sp.) are exceedingly common in rainy weather, and they have the unpleasant habit of inflicting horrendously painful bites when brushing against naked flesh at night. You have been warned!

HEALTH: Apart from the above, no worries worth mentioning even if dengue is present.

CLIMATE: Strictly tropical and exceedingly humid,

often stifling. Rain showers are an almost daily occurrence. The water of the Strait is surprisingly cold however – which explains the presence of so many unusual and uncommon species.

BESIDES: Besides its fascinating sealife and stunning natural landscapes, the area offers interesting trips to the colorful Minahasan Highlands and Tangkoko National Park – both offering exceptional photo opportunities. An evening stroll or dinner in nearby Manado – a colorful, noisy, smelly town - will also provide glimpses into the lives of the locals. Sadly, most visitors to the Lembeh Strait seem to be exclusively interested in the diving – a trait shared by most of the scuba community worldwide. ●