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It Came from the Muck: Indonesia's Lembeh Strait

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The bottom was a grey, featureless expanse of sand and silt, punctuated by occasional islands of debris and detritus. Looking across this apparent desert, our thoughts drifted to the surface of the moon - lifeless, dreary, and mysterious. This is what we traveled halfway around the planet to see?

Article and photos by Eco-Photo Explorers



GLOOMY TAMBIA (TAMBIA MOROSE)

Suddenly, our eyes spotted something - a pair of eyes poking out of the silt. We approached warily: what monster lurked below? Using a slight wave of our hand, we cleared some of the silt to reveal the horrible creature below. With a fearsome grimace, a Stargazer stared towards the surface, its jagged, toothy frown of a mouth waiting for its next meal to drift by.

Now, our senses adjusting to this unique type of diving, we began to spot other frightful and amazing creatures: a Devilfish crawling like a demon across the mucky ocean floor, a venomous Stonefish lying in wait alongside a small log, a Pygmy Frogfish resting alongside a Hairy Frogfish - and a Snake Eel, its head poking skyward from the mud.

Slowly, Indonesia's Lembeh Strait, located in North Sulawesi, began to reveal its secrets - and the reasons why divers travel to this distant location.

Muck diving in Lembeh is unparalleled as a unique dive destination. Here, divers can encounter any number of beautiful and strange creatures - most of them existing on a tiny scale. Macro photography is predominant here as underwater photographers attempt to photograph Pygmy Sea Horses, Dwarf Cuttlefish, Mimic Octopus, and so many varieties of nudibranchs that it is difficult to keep track of them all.

Our base of operations in Lembeh was the renowned Kungkungan Bay Resort & Spa (KBR), which is located so close to some of the most spectacular dive sites that boat rides are often as short as 3-4 minutes!

Muck diving here consists of descending to 60 feet (18m) or so and searching these otherwise uninteresting stretches for the tiniest of nature's marvels. The dive guides at KBR are experts at finding these extremely small creatures. You can even dive with Liberty, the local dive guide who discovered a previously undescribed species of Pipe Seahorse.

Indeed, divers at Lembeh tend to turn into amateur biologists, with post-dive conversations escalating into animated discussions conducted while poring over illustrated marine life guides!

Our dives in Lembeh never failed to amaze and inspire, and our eyes quickly became attuned to the tiny world. Before long, we were spotting the tiniest of creatures even without the aid of our guides. Brilliantly colored crabs, fascinating species of shrimp and myriad types of invertebrates occupied our photographic attention constantly.

One special night was spent watching and waiting atop a pile of coral rubble for the shy and elusive Mandarinfish mating dance. We descended to about 10 feet (3m) and waited motionless for well over an hour until, finally, we glimpsed the gaudy fish as they furtively peeked out of their protective crevices. Suddenly, in a flash of color in our dive lights, a pair raced together 1 foot (.3m) above the bottom, mated for 2-3 seconds and disappeared. The dive was over, the image captured and a new memory created forever.

Other dives were spent photographing Mimic Octopus, and their almost identical relation the Wonderpus. Telling them apart is a challenge - hint: pay attention to the coloring...there's a subtle difference. In addition, we spotted Porcelain Crabs, Orangutan Crabs, Sea Spiders, Ghost Pipefish, and Flamboyant Cuttlefish. Black, blue and yellow colored Ribbon Eels were frequently encountered as well. In fact, in this one excursion, we were able to check off many of the species that had long been on our own "bucket lists"!

Indonesia's Lembeh Strait is a small stretch of water between the islands of North Sulawesi and Pulau Lembeh. It is, in fact, a busy waterway and yet it is home to an unbelievable assortment of creatures, many of which are endemic to this area alone and some of which are still undescribed scientifically.

As beautiful as the creatures are, the diving here can be challenging. Strong currents are frequent and it is best to heed the advice of the dive guides and dive where there is slack water. And divers who come here expecting ravishing coral reefs will be disappointed. Although there are some colorful outcroppings of coral, the beauty of Lembeh lies in the muck.

For shipwreck enthusiasts, the Mawali wreck offers a terrific diversion. The most commonly dived wreck in the Strait, this Japanese freighter from WWII is lying on its port side and has a length of 90 meters (270 feet). It sits in 90 FSW (30 feet) and makes for an interesting dive for those who are comfortable diving on shipwrecks. Other wrecks in the area include the Bimoli, Indah and Kapal Ikan.

Lembeh deserves protection so that future generations can enjoy this special place and the wonderful collection of weird and beautiful creatures that reside here. The best way to ensure this is for divers to continue to come here. Divers experience, photograph and share stories with others, who will in turn marvel at the plethora of amazing animals to be found here.

At first, it feels like a horror movie with a cheesy title. But soon, it becomes a beautiful symphony of multi-varied macro marine life. It came from the muck...and we couldn't be happier!

Getting There

The best way to reach Lembeh is via Silk Air into the city of Manado.

A valid passport is required for entry, with enough blank pages for the mandatory tourist visa, which is purchased on arrival, and must be valid for 6 months after arrival.

Immunizations and Medicine

Make sure all your vaccinations are up to date! All travelers should visit their personal physician or a travel health clinic to discuss what vaccinations (Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Malaria, Typhoid, and Tetanus-diphtheria) and travel medicine are recommended. All medicine should be packed in their original, clearly labeled containers. Having a signed and dated letter from a physician describing your medical conditions and medications is suggested.

Note: Travel health clinics usually provide more detailed health protection measures since they specialize in travel medicine. Beware of travelers' diarrhea, which is the most common travel-related ailment. Insect protection is a must and essential!

Baggage

Baggage allowances vary for each international carrier so check before you leave.

Weather

Indonesia has an equatorial tropical climate. October through April is the wet season. May through September is the hottest time of the year, with temperatures in the 80s (27°C) and 90s (32°C) Fahrenheit each day. Tropical downpours are common, although severe storms such as pacific typhoons are very rare.

Currency

The local currency is the Rupiah (Rp) but US Dollars are often accepted at all resorts.

Electricity

Power voltage used in Indonesia is 220 Volts (50 Hz). Be sure to double-check your appliance's compatibility before plugging them in. Converters / adaptors are usually available upon request at your hotel front desk.

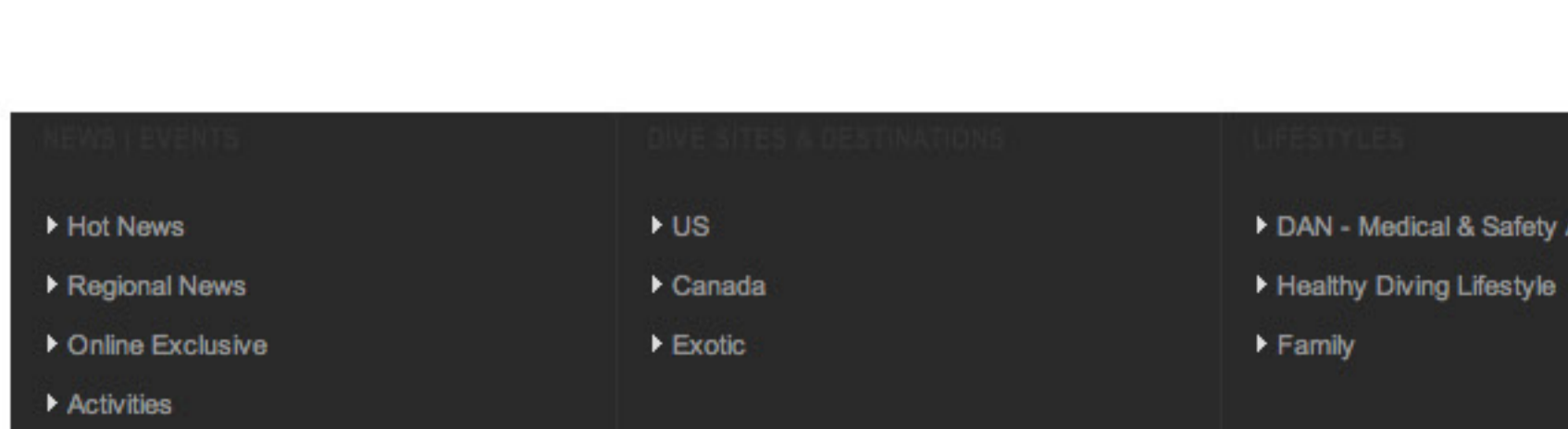
Customs

There are a number of different religions that are practiced in Indonesia, Muslim being the most predominate at about 87 percent. Although Christianity is a minority religion in Indonesia, it is not evenly spread throughout the region. It is important to note, Indonesia is a conservative nation and appropriate attire, and cultural sensitivities are important. Check with guidebooks for specific tips on how best to avoid offending the local population.

Eco-Photo Explorers, a New York based organization, was formed in 1994 by Christopher Weaver and Michael Salvarezza to help promote interest in protecting our oceans by creating awareness through the use of their underwater photography.

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