

Dive into Taiwan

Kenting

Part 4: The Deep South

Text by Simon Pridmore
Photos by Kyo Liu





In the southernmost district of Taiwan lies the Taiwanese Riviera, located in Hengchun Township (also known as Kenting), where divers enjoy the warm waters and plentiful marine life of the sheltered bay of Nan Wan, with its coral cliffs, reefs and pinnacles. Simon Pridmore has the story.

Taiwan is a group of Pacific islands surrounded by warm tropical seas. It is easy to get to and get around and it is a first-world society with outgoing, friendly, laid-back people. Taiwan has some very good scuba diving and a network of dive centres and resorts with first-class professional staff, equipment and services. They offer scuba experiences, basic training courses and fun diving for a

young, enthusiastic first generation of Taiwanese divers.

Yet, when divers elsewhere in the world think about diving destinations, Taiwan is unlikely even to be a blip on their radar screen. Very few people outside Taiwan have ever thought to enquire about the diving there, and very few people inside Taiwan have ever thought to tell anyone about it. Until a couple of years ago, that is, when some far-sighted folks asked me and Taiwanese underwater photographer Kyo Liu to write a book.

The book is called *Dive into Taiwan*, and this is the fourth in a series of six articles, each covering one of Taiwan's diving regions, designed to give you a flavour of what to expect from a Taiwan dive trip. The book covers much more than diving. It talks about the people, countryside, cities, food and lifestyle to give readers a fully immersive experience—



SOFIE HOSTYN

diving into Taiwan in every way. But in this series, I will just focus on the underwater attractions, with the help of Kyo's amazing photographs.

Juvenile batfish (above); Pygmy seahorse (top left); Clown frogfish (previous page)





Kenting



Independent Reef (above); Dive boat at Houbihu (left); School of batfish on reef (top left)

operators offer year-round diving. Boats heading for the sites in Nan Wan leave from Houbihu port. Probably the best dive in Nan Wan is the enormous pinnacle they call Independent Reef, although it is hardly independent. It is just the biggest of a whole bunch of pinnacles rising from the seabed at 36m (120ft). (The site's English name is just a direct translation of the Chinese term for "pinnacle.")

The topography here is glorious, as are the water clarity and visibility. To really appreciate this site to the fullest, swim out a little distance into the blue, away from pinnacles, then turn to look back and gaze at the "mountain view." It is quite spectacular. Glance down at the seabed below and you will notice some extremely long sea whips stretching out

ern section of the peninsula and all its coastal waters comprise the Kenting National Park. This is the ancestral land of the indigenous Paiwan people. Today, they number 100,000 and are the second largest indigenous group, after the Amis in the eastern coast.

Key dive sites

Independent Reef. It never gets really cold in tropical Taiwan and

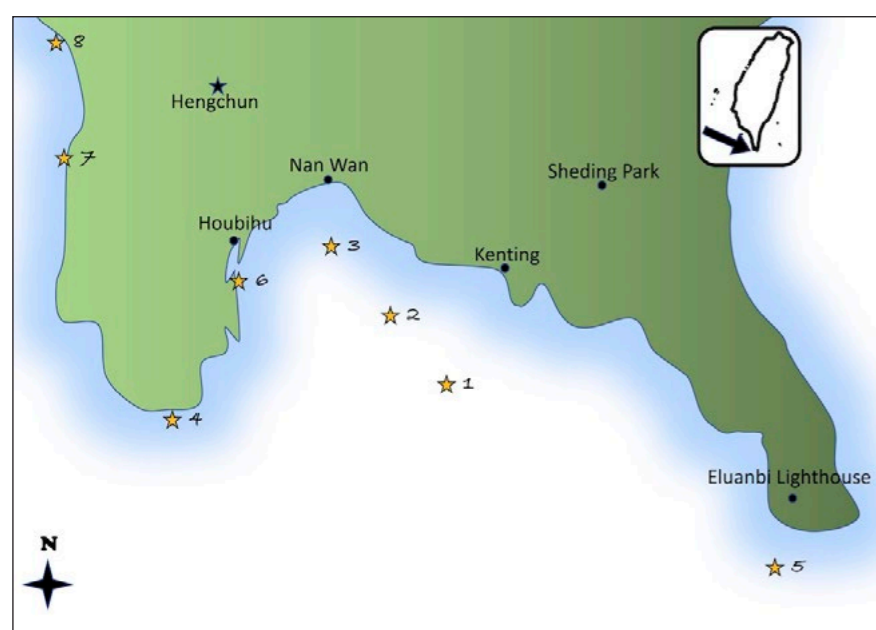
Hengchun

The southernmost district in Taiwan is Hengchun Township in Pingtung County. This is the Taiwanese Riviera, a land of long white beaches, rolling green hills and summer vacations. The Pacific coastline to the east, with its wide, wild empty strands, belongs to surfers, while the central coast around the town of Kenting, with its beach umbrellas, water sports and weekend night markets, is for holiday-making families and honeymooning couples.

But the waters around the small western peninsula in the south-

west, with its coral cliffs, and the reefs and pinnacles in the large, sheltered bay known as Nan Wan, are for divers and snorkelers. Nan Wan gives on to the Luzon Strait, the body of water that separates Taiwan from northern Philippines. During the summer months, a branch of the Kuroshio Current passes through the strait, bringing warm water and plenty of marine life to this part of the island.

Hengchun is often referred to as Kenting, because the entire south-



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Map of Hengchun in Taiwan



School of goatfish (left) and barracuda (above); Nembrotha nudibranch (right); Schooling baitfish (bottom left)



many metres into the ocean.

With clear water like this, you may think that there is no reason to go deep, as everything is visible from the shallows, but there are some cool critters down in the depths. At around 27m (90ft), Bargibanti pygmy seahorses can be found on purple gorgonian fans and sharp-eyed divers may be able to spot green giant frogfish. Other common sightings here are big sweetlips, taking advantage of the many cleaning stations around the pinnacles, schools of red-tailed humpback snappers, trevally and fusiliers and the occasional big, curious barracuda.

A typical two-tank boat dive out of Houbihu will take you first to either Independent Reef or one of several other deeper dives in the middle of the bay, and then to a shallower site in the coral gardens closer to shore.

Xiao Lao Gu. Another excellent deep dive is Xiao (Mandarin word for "small") Lao Gu. Lao Gu is Taiwanese Hokkien (rather than Mandarin) for "coral." The highlights here are gorgonian fans with multiple pygmy seahorses and a series of large bommies completely covered in soft and hard corals. There are enormous fields of leather coral and a profusion of tubastraea everywhere.

Get down in among the gullies between the boulders and you will find yourself surrounded by fish. As well as substantial schools of yellow goatfish, you will come upon blue-striped snapper, sweetlips, rabbitfish, trevalies, glassfish, bigeyes, squirrelfish and emperor angelfish, among others.

Nan Hai Dong. When the sea conditions are right, boats will head off

to the southern tip of the Houbihu peninsula and dive Nan Hai Dong (South Sea Cave), where the fractured reefscape offers divers a maze of holes, caverns and canyons to explore. Stalactite-like coral formations hang from overhead and it is a lot of fun. There are plenty of fish around, including a large school of bumphead parrotfish. Big gorgonian fans and long sea whips sprout from the reef as evidence of the kind of current action you can get here.



Wei Yu Qu. Hengchun is a very popular place for people to try scuba diving and take a beginner's course and Wei Yu Qu, south of Houbihu Harbour, is the most popular shore dive site. You might expect not to find much here at all, beyond the clouds of sergeant majors and small wrasse, which are fed by divemasters as an easy way to impress their customers. However, there is quite a lot to see once you swim out beyond the shallows. Expect to see big-eyes, parrotfish, squirrelfish, blue-striped snappers and yellow goatfish. The centrepiece of a dive here is an impressively large stand of potato coral. Spend some time around here to look for scorpionfish, moray eels and nudibranchs.

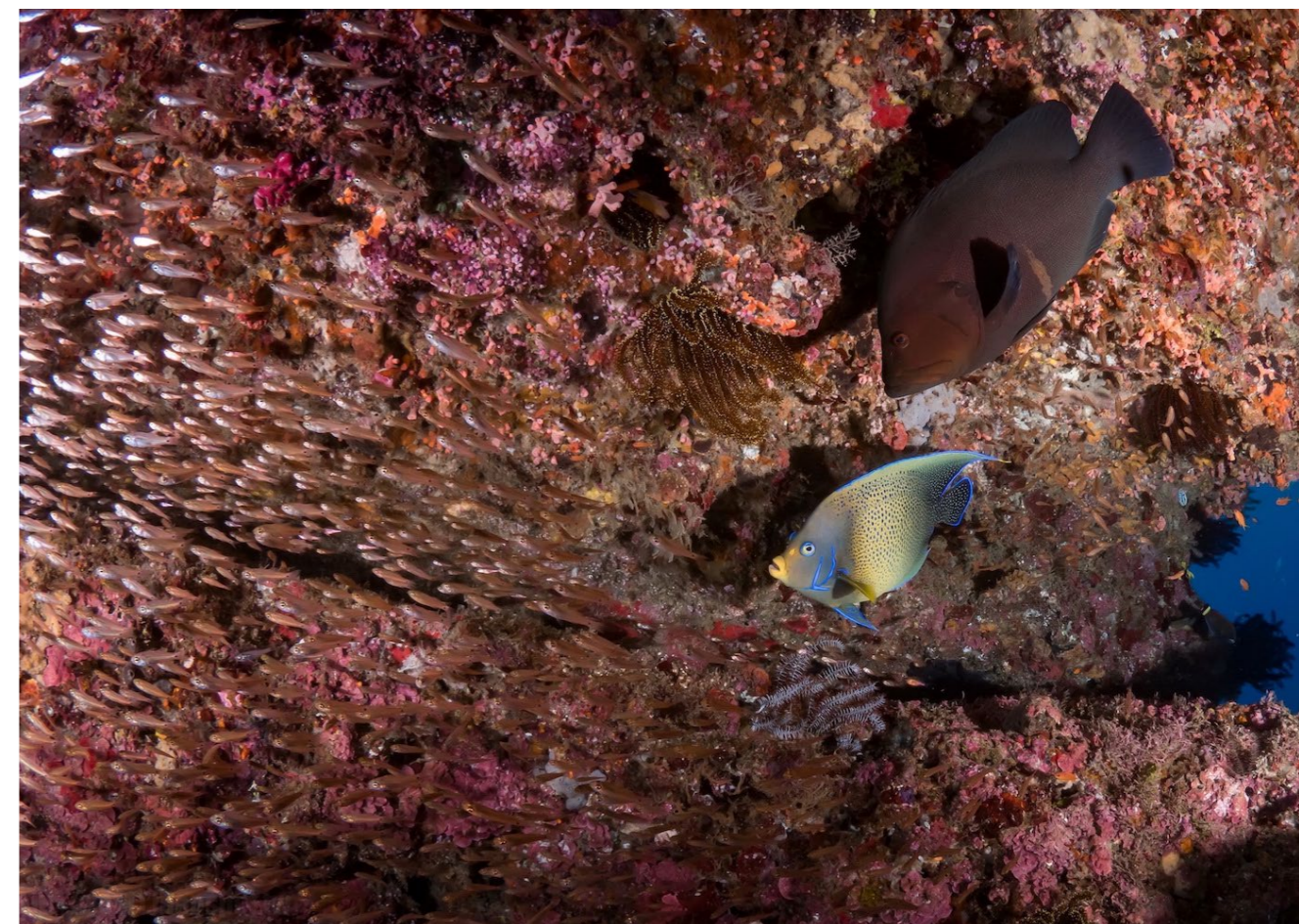
He Jie. On the other side of the Houbihu peninsula, the side that faces west across the Taiwan Strait, there is also plenty of very good shore diving.

The site they call He Jie is a 15-minute drive from Houbihu, then a stroll down a narrow track and a short rocky stagger to the water's edge. Or you can get there in 40 minutes by boat from Houbihu. The dive operators will usually come round to this side of the peninsula in winter and spring, when the northeastern wind can make Nan Wan too rough for diving. This is when conditions at He Jie and neighbouring sites are at their best.

Most of these western coast dives feature overhangs and swim-throughs, a profusion of hard corals, plenty of colourful soft corals, schools of blue-lined snappers and blue-spotted rays. At He Jie, scattered boat wreckage on the seabed at 20m (66ft) beyond the reef provides something of an oasis for marine life, with many chromis, anthias and ring-tailed cardinalfish, plus a nice big school of 20 to 30 silver sweetlips usually in attendance.

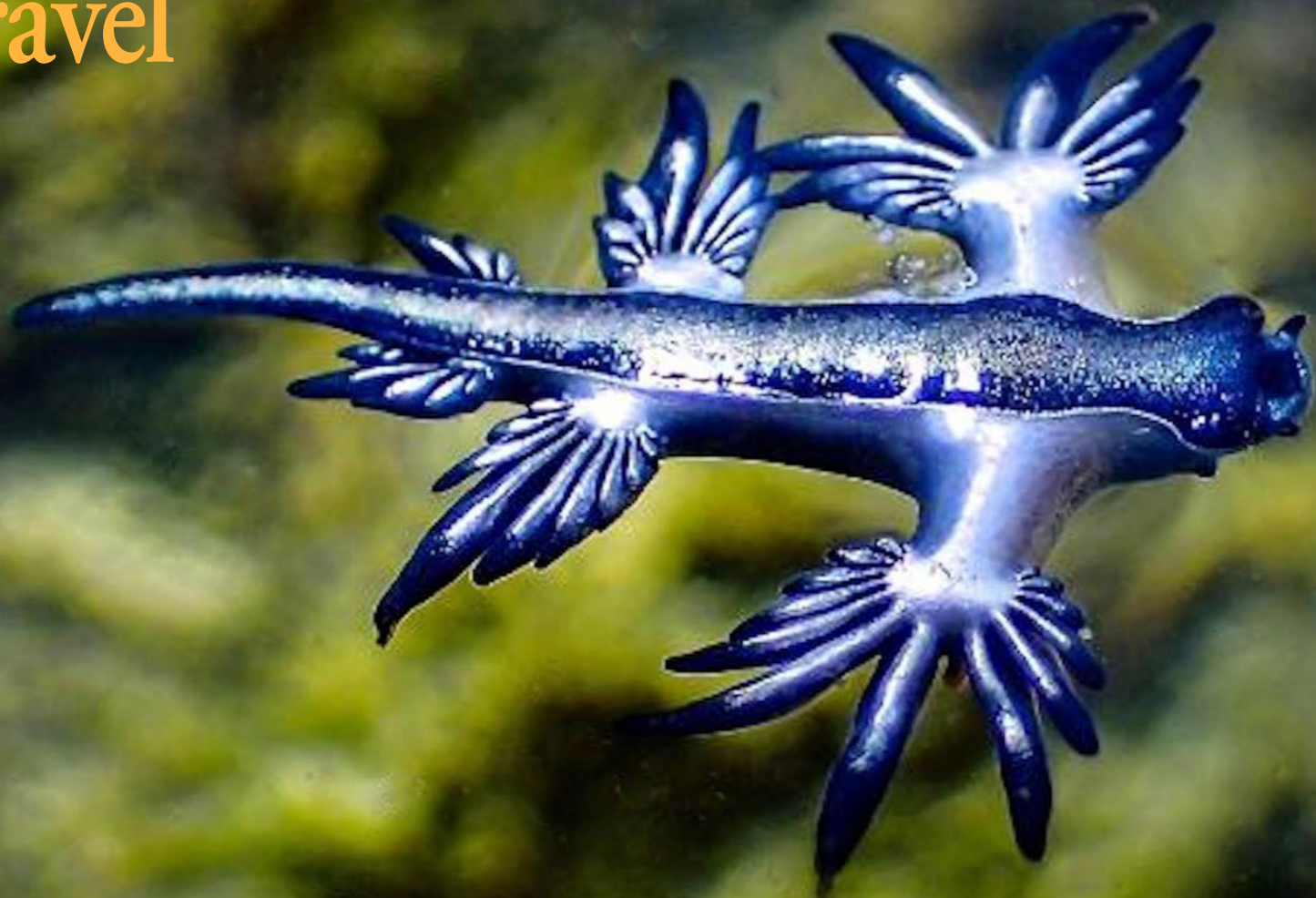


There is plenty to find on the sand and among the debris: nudibranchs (including the famous Pikachu or *Thecacera pacifica*), frogfish, sea-horses, leaf scorpionfish and juvenile emperor angelfish. On the reef itself, look for semicircle angelfish, banded sea kraits, octopus and green turtles.



Semi-circle angelfish (above); Divers in the deep blue waters of Kenting (top right); Diver in canyons at He Jie (top left); Shaun the sheep sap-sucking slug (centre)





He Jie is said to have the best hard corals of any site along this coast but, for marine life, Yan Guang Jiao and Shan Hai, both north of He Jie, are equally good. The photograph of the sargassum frogfish (*Histrio histrio*) was taken at Yan Guang Jiao.

A rare visitor

On 20 April 2017, after a late morning flood tide, over one hundred *Glaucus marginatus* (ed. —commonly known as a blue slug or blue dragon), pelagic nudibranchs that float upside down on the surface of the ocean, were left behind by the retreating sea in tide pools on the shore at He Jie, along with dozens of blue buttons (*Porpita pacifica*), jellyfish-like marine organisms that *Glaucus marginatus* love to feed on. The next day, they were all gone, washed back out into the ocean at high tide.

This was enough time, however, for the Hengchun diving community and their cameras and mobile phones to make this beautiful, rarely-seen nudibranch famous. It is now a Hengchun icon and its image adorns tourist brochures and advertising billboards. It is tiny, only 3 to 8mm long, and very cute, which is, of course, why it has been adopted as a symbol to attract snorkelers and divers to the area.

Appearances can be deceptive, however, and, in this case, they certainly are. The *Glaucus marginatus* may look sweet and innocent but it is a vicious predator. It has an effective defence system too so, if you see one, no matter how tempted you may be, never fiddle with it or pick it up. It ingests the poison from its toxic jellyfish prey and transmits it in a sting that is even more powerful and concentrated than the sting the jellyfish delivers.

Dive operators

Taiwan Dive Center (TDC) is the original dive operator in the area. It is a father-and-son business that began in 1980 as a commercial diving company. The father now drives the TDC dive boat and the son, Platinum Course Director Dylan Chen, has developed a dive resort that sets the standard for others to follow, with a large team of experienced, multilingual instructors, low staff-to-guest ratios and a passionate commitment to the environment. TDC also has smaller dive operations in Taipei and Green Island. Find out more at taiwan-diving.com.

Other dive operators in the area include CT Diver, a smaller dive resort with a focus on conservation and quality education (en.ctdiver.com), and DivePro, a dive centre with its own boat and a boat diving schedule (en.divepro.tw). ■

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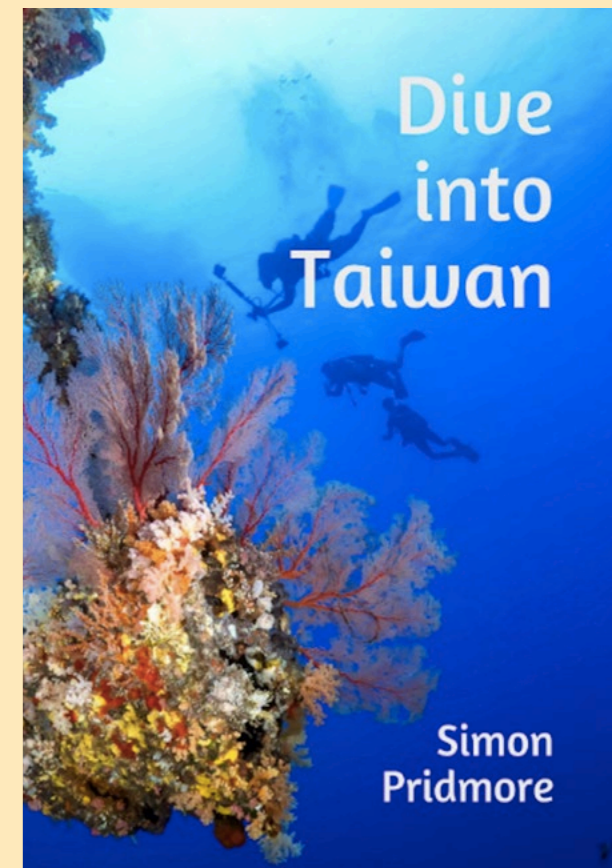
by Simon Pridmore

“In this book, Simon Pridmore takes the reader beyond the beaches and into the waters of six regions of excellent and exciting diving and snorkelling that the Taiwanese have enjoyed for some time—while the rest of the world has not had much of a clue. The beauty of this book is that the author intends it to be an immersive experience in more ways than one. He really wants you to dive not only into the waters, but the people, the food, the lifestyle... the entire Taiwan experience.”

— Lonely Planet author Tim Rock

“This is the first comprehensive guide to scuba diving in Taiwan ever published, and it has the feel of an instant classic. Huge praise goes to photographer Kyo Liu. Almost all the underwater photos are his, and they’re invariably superb.”

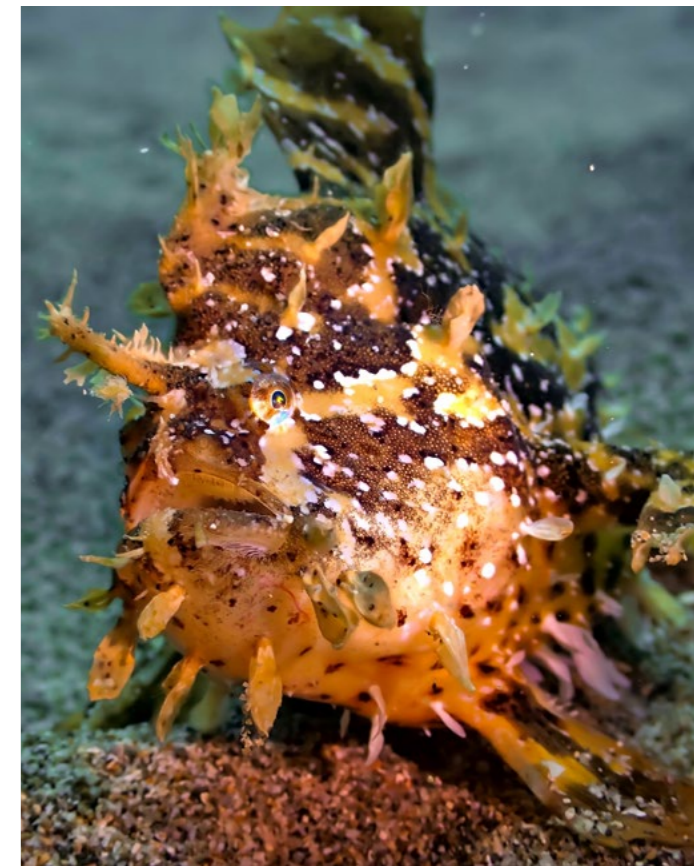
— Taipei Times



Dive into Taiwan is available via Amazon, Apple, Kobo and other online bookshops worldwide.

Glaucus marginatus, or blue dragon (left)

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers *Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way*, *Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*, *Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be*, and *Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*, which are now available in a compendium. He is also the co-author of the *Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali* and the *Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia*. His recent published books include *The Diver Who Fell From The Sky*, *Dive into Taiwan*, *Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again!* and the *Dining with Divers* series of cookbooks. For more information, please see his website at: SimonPridmore.com.



Sargassum frogfish (*Histrio histrio*) at Yan Guang Jiao