



Critter Central
Lembeh Strait

Text and photos by
Andrea & Antonella Ferrari

— *Fantastic Muck Diving in Indonesia*



Large paddle-flap scorpionfish shows its unmistakable gargoyle-like profile



PREVIOUS PAGE: Cuttlefish in defensive posture. Kungkungan Bay Resort (above)

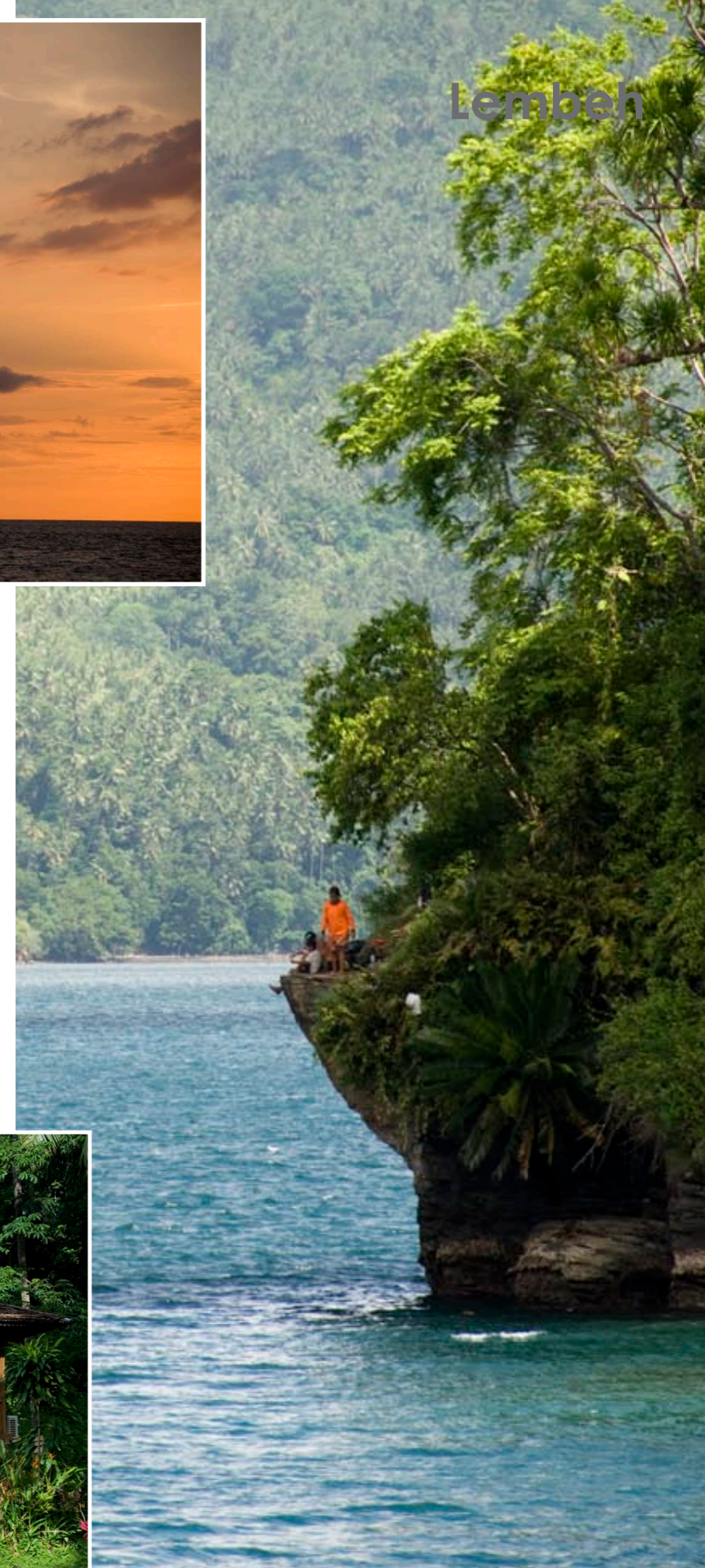
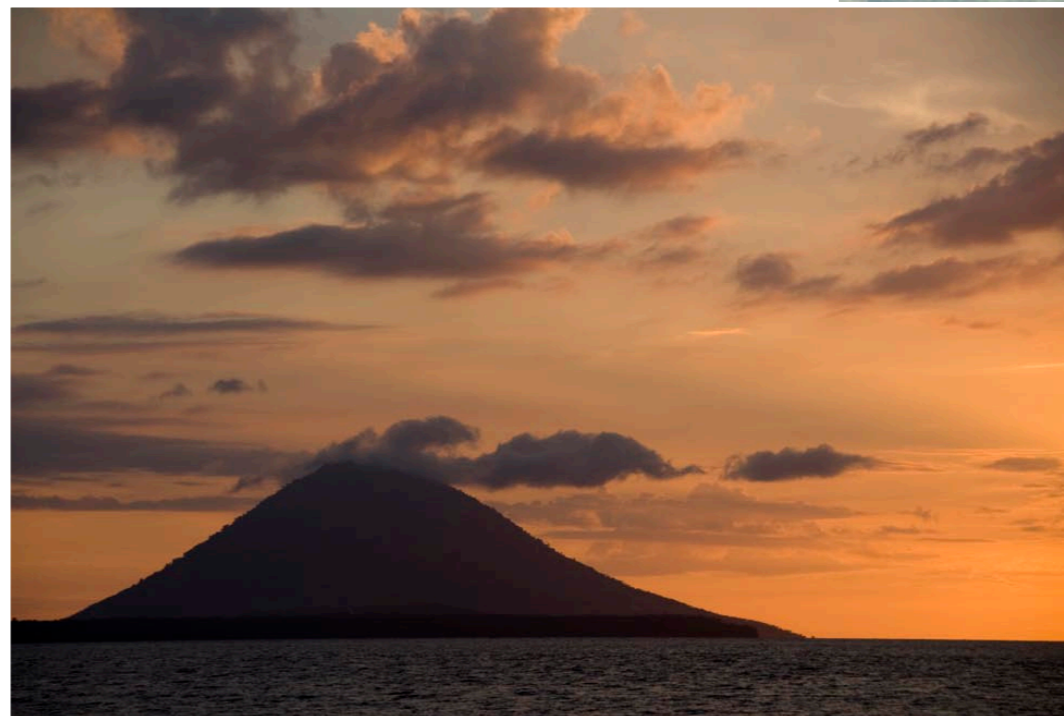
The world's full of triangles. There's the Love Triangle, the Golden Triangle, the Bermuda Triangle... and then of course, most relevant of all to us divers, there's the Macrolife Triangle, that blissful figure made up by the Malaysian islands of Lankayan and Kapalai and—at the northern tip of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi—the Strait of Lembeh. Everybody today knows about muck diving—the concept of looking for strange and grotesque macro critters in coral-poor areas with medium or downright bad viz—but not everybody knows this is where it all began, circa 15 years ago.

A young American diver and entrepreneur just happened to discover the then-unknown place—a sea channel less than 40 meters at its deepest and less than one mile at its widest, leading from the harbor town of Bitung to the open sea on the eastern coast of

Northern Sulawesi—at the same time falling in love with a plantation set in an idyllic little bay between a rugged, jungle-covered rocky slope at its back and the black volcanic sand beach on its front. Ditto, the legendary Kungkungan Bay Resort (KBR) was born!



Giant frogfish nestled in sponge



professional DSLR underwater photographers, a new price policy put in place has given KBR

covered in thick greenery, sea eagles soaring above and colorful local fishing boats passing by.

But it's the diving which makes Lembeh so unique. Being close to a very deep water area 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 everywhere else.

Even common species here come in dazzling and unique color phases, this fact being due both to the dark volcanic sand on which they live and some other undiscovered factor. The weird, the grotesque, the rare

a new lease of life. People are flocking to the place and its lovely bungalows by the sea, and a beautiful swimming pool has been added to the grounds.

With several more top level dive resorts now springing up close by and the Lembeh Strait soon to be declared a Marine National Park by the Indonesian authorities, the future of this very special dive destination seems at last truly assured.

A unique location

What is so special about the place? Well, everything. KBR, being the first dive resort, was able to pick the best location, and its setting is truly idyllic. The surrounding panorama above water is simply enchanting, with steep, rocky slopes



It soon became a famed destination all over the world for unusual, spectacular species, especially for those in the most affluent areas of the United States—but the catch was

in its very high price policy, which put it outside the range of common mortals.

Now, luckily for both the crowds of point-and-shoot users and the more

THIS PAGE: Scenes from Kungkungan Bay Resort



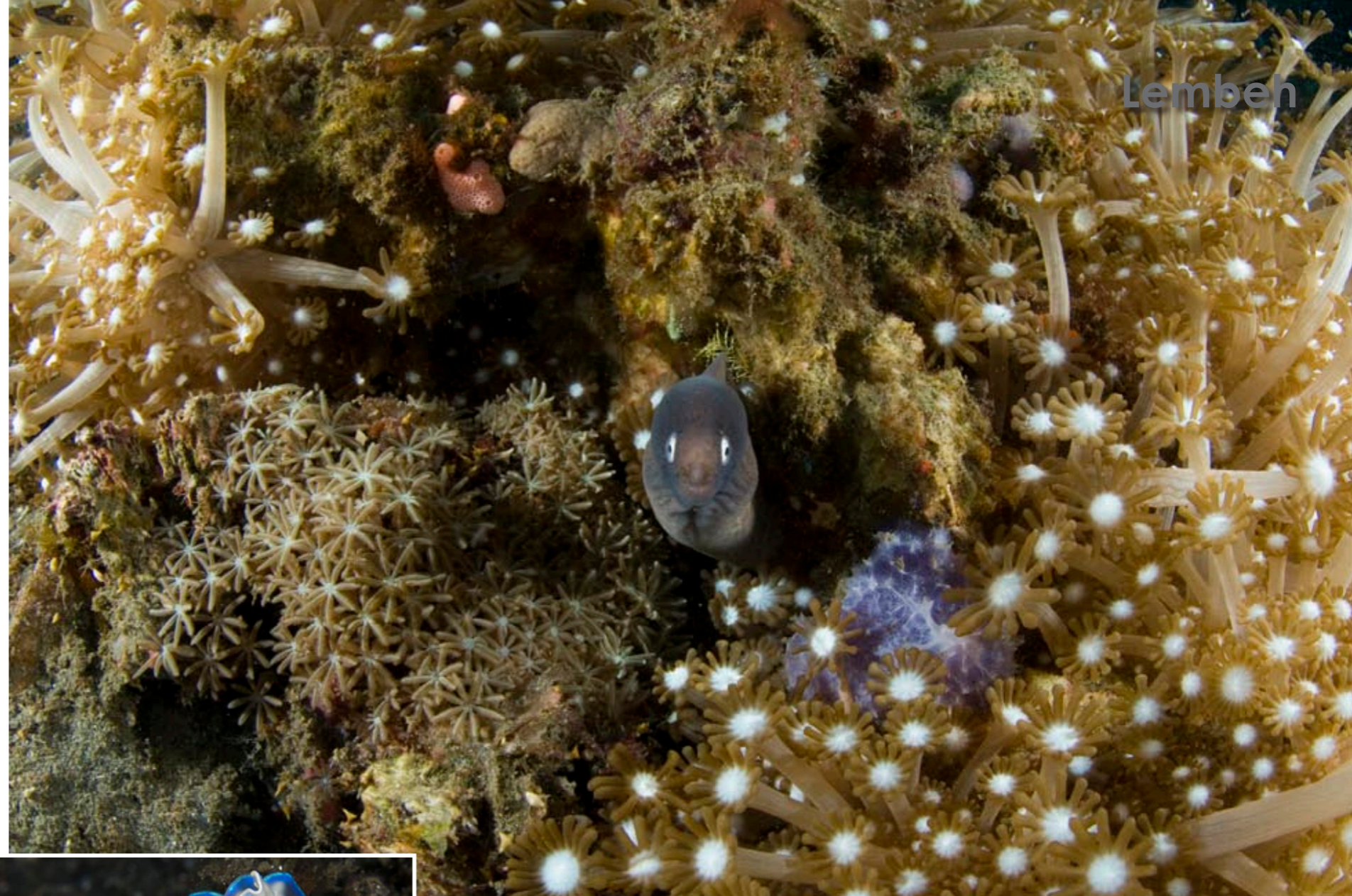


Lemon yellow leaffish (left); Moray eel peers out of its lair in the reef (right); A bubble shell sea snail prowling at night (center inset); Hairy frogfish on Lembeh's dark volcanic seabed (lower left)

and the downright absurd are a daily occurrence at its dive sites.

This is a destination where it's not uncommon to find holy grails like 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 a daily or weekly basis—it's a place where after a few days, it's easy to become so spoiled that you'll just give a passing glance and no more to uncommon species like painted and clown frogfish, thorny seahorse, cockatoo waspfish or mandarinfish.

But that is not all, as the Lembeh Strait, which has become so famous for its world-class muck diving, offers in fact first-rate coral reef dives on quite a few spots, such as Angel's Window or California Dreaming. We know. We've been able to photograph there



some very rare species of butterflyfish and wrasse we'd never seen anywhere else!

In any case, and whatever you're looking for (well, except for big sharks—but in fact we have seen large eagle rays there!) the Lembeh Strait offers unsurpassed photographic opportunities.

The diving is very, very easy—shallow water, no currents, unbelievably good and very experienced dive guides. Most dive sites are just a few minutes away by KBR's speedboats—and after



Angry devil scorpionfish in defensive display to intimidate intruders





Orange mantis shrimp hiding in volcanic substrate (above); Orang-utan crab (top center); Tiny coin-size wonderpus in display to intimidate intruders (right)

night dives (something you do not want to miss here!) you'll always find a warm, dry towel and a mug of hot chocolate waiting for you back on the boat.

KBR and the other resorts normally offer three daily dives—two in the morning and one in the early afternoon, plus night dives and unlimited house reef diving. Groups are kept to a mini-

mum—no more than four divers for each guide (in some resorts no more than three), for maximum freedom and photo opportunities.

Given the tight dive schedules (and the longer than usual dives you'll be enjoying, even if the official limit is 45 minutes) being on time at dive boat departure time is of paramount importance for everybody, so be punctual.

One last recommendation: the fascinating array of Lembeh mari-

ne species requests some reading beforehand to be fully understood and appreciated, so be good and do your homework. There's plenty of great guidebooks out there to prepare you for this bit of underwater paradise!

A fragile ecosystem

The Lembeh Strait is an almost unique ecosystem, and as such it deserves all the protection we can give it. While most resorts

Lembeh



Richly populated reef garden with blue seastar

Halgerda nudibranch



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Giant frogfish; Zebra crab sitting well protected among the highly venomous spines of a fire urchin; Thorn-back cowfish; Snout of a blue ribbon eel



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—risk being overdived, provoking the disappearance of those same rare species people are coming to see. Declaring the area to be a National Park soon is very good news indeed, but at the same time 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 dive guides with obsessive requests (which will lead to excessive disturbance of the environment to satisfy their gluttony) and a firm rotation on the most frequently visited dive sites like Hairball, Jahir or Nudi Falls must be enforced as soon as possible.

Lembah is a fragile masterpiece, and none of us wants to see it broken to pieces by visiting, uneducated divers or overenthusiastic dive operators.



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 ridiculous request when in the Lembah

Brilliant in Black.



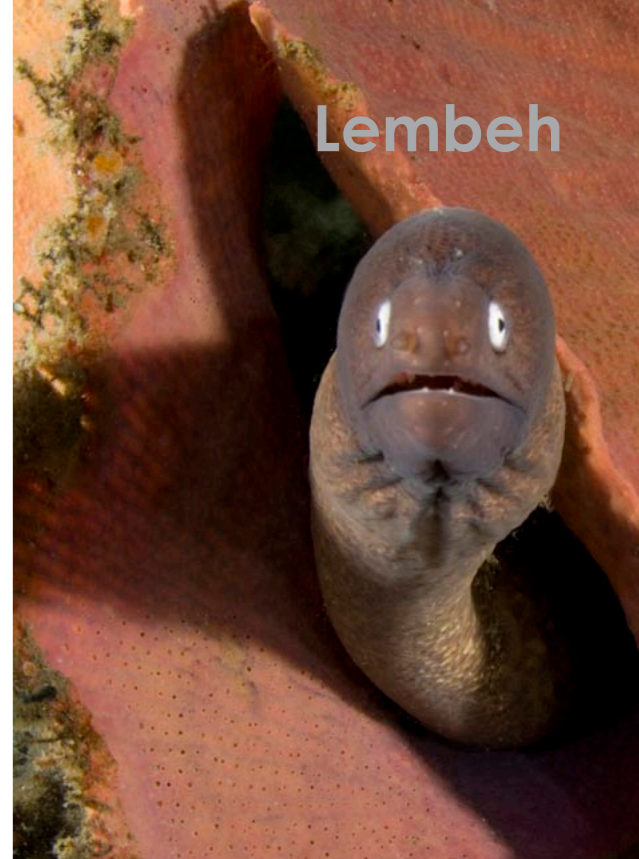
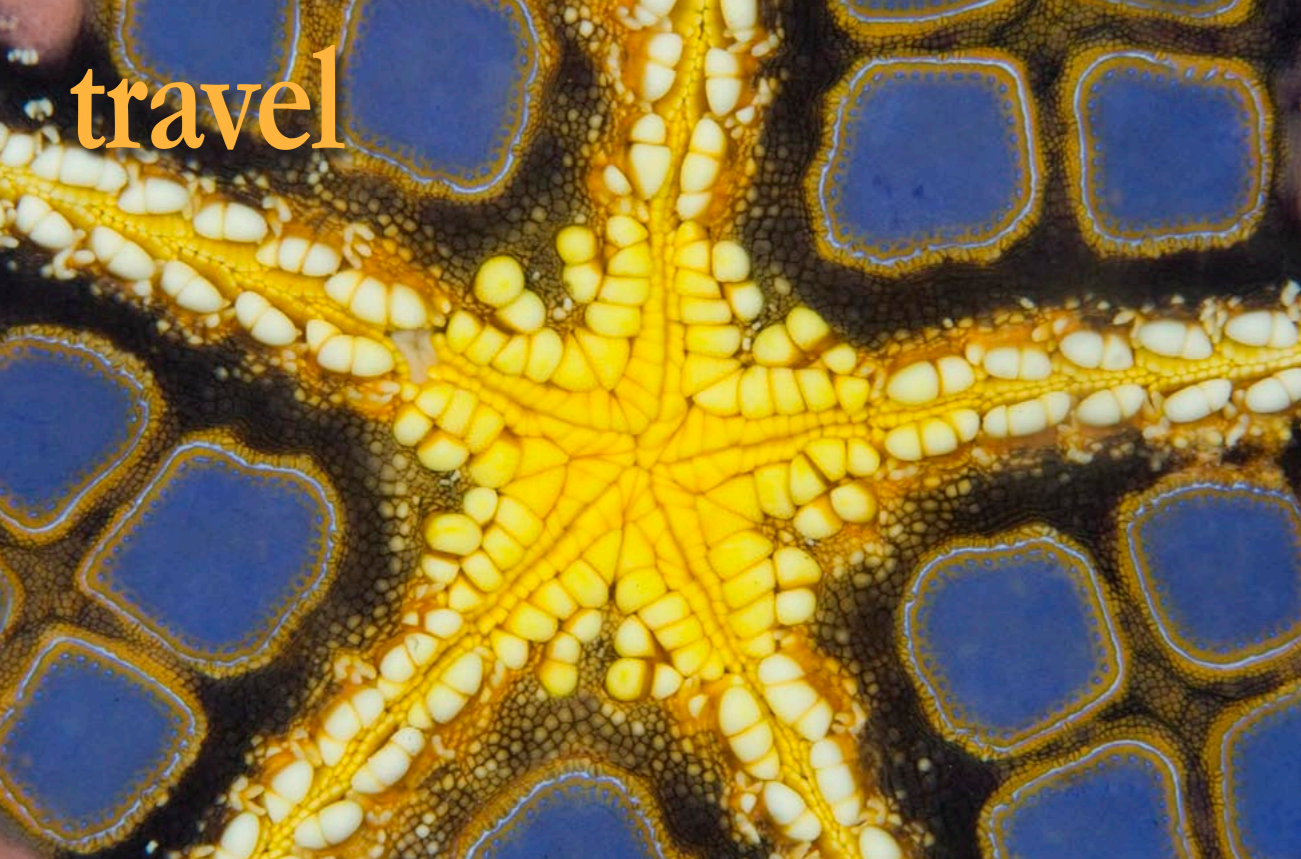
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MERIDIAN

The styling of a luxury wristwatch with the soul of our most advanced dive computer; now with exclusive, rugged Black Tech PVD finish. Find out more about Meridian's features like heart rate integration at: scubapro.com or your local authorized SCUBAPRO retailer.

SWISS DESIGN
ENGINEERING

SCUBAPRO



Zebra batfish juvenile



General information

Kungkungan Bay Resort (www.kungkungan.com) and several other dive resorts on the Lembeh Strait can be easily reached with a couple of hours drive from Manado. Your travel operator will arrange everything from you.

One word of advice: water temperature in the Lembeh Strait is appreciably lower on average than the rest of Indonesia (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 water.

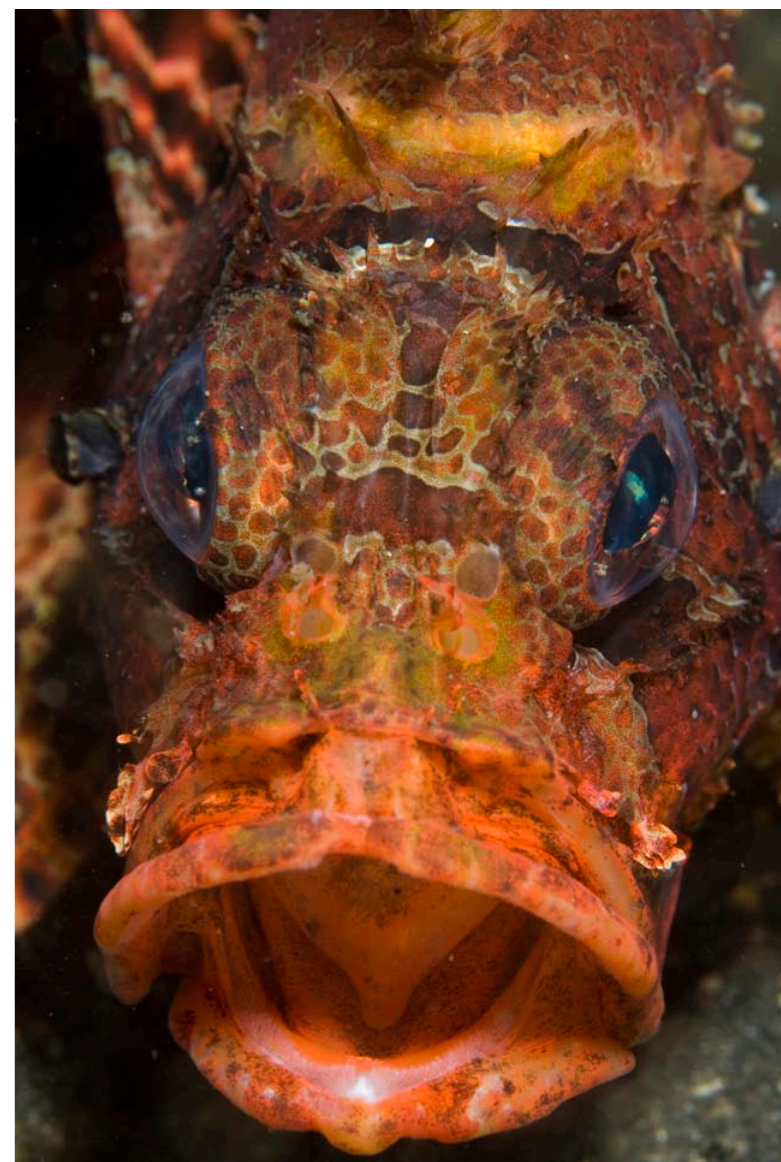
camera room by the dive center where shutterbugs can leave their equipment overnight to dry and re-load batteries. Power is on 24 hours a day; 220 and 110 volts are both available.

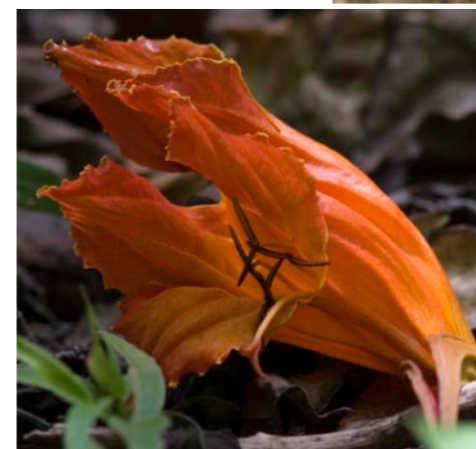
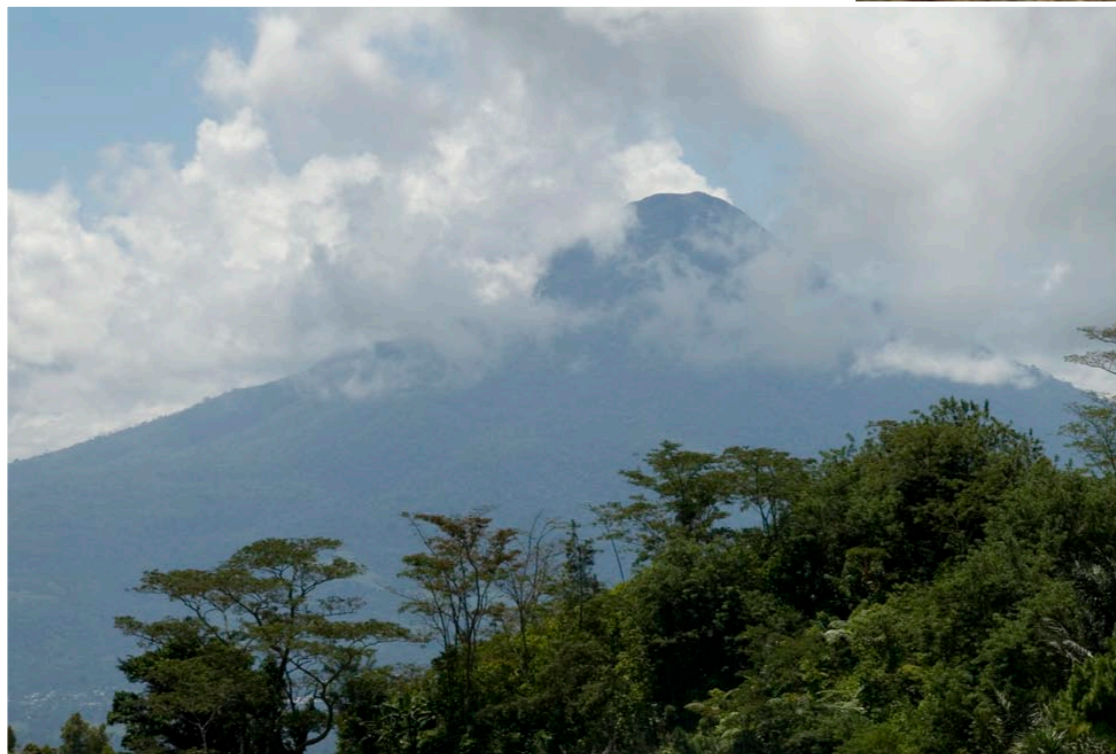
Dive guides—especially the younger guys—are generally eagle-eyed

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Close-up of the tiled bottom face of the pincushion seastar; Close-up of wonderpus in full display; The mad-doctor glare of a white-eyed moray eel; The ominous yawn of a small dwarf lionfish; The nocturnal Napoleon snake eel; Pair of cockatoo waspfish on dark volcanic substrate

and highly motivated, being very proud of working here. This is a place where a good tip is mandatory.

No visas are needed upon entry in Indonesia, but nationals of several western countries have to pay a hefty fee in Manado Sam Ratulangi Airport's immigration office both when entering and exiting the country.





THIS PAGE: Scenes from Tangkoko National Park including the highly social black or crested Sulawesi macaque (far left) and the strictly nocturnal Sulawesi tarsier (right)

Land excursions

Northern Sulawesi encompasses a large area of exceptional natural beauty, with breathtaking landscapes and unique fauna. Divers have the bad habit of seldom looking around when on holiday, but on this occasion, it would really be a pity not to engage in some hiking or car touring, especially since most dive resorts readily offer affordably-priced excursions with excellent English-speaking guides and

extremely comfortable transportation. Two destinations the discriminating traveller cannot afford to miss while in the are Tangkoko National Park and the Minahasan highlands. The first can be reached by a one- or two- hour scenic drive from most resorts in the Lembeh Strait and then can easily be visited on foot.

The coastal lowland deciduous forest is the home of at least three large troops of the endemic and highly

sociable black or Sulawesi macaque (*Macaca nigra*) and the haunt of several family groups of the fascinating Sulawesi tarsier (*Tarsium spectrum*), the smallest primate in the world, which lives inside the hollow trunks of strangling figs and which can be reliably observed at several locations inside the park at twilight. Longer (from three to five hours) hikes in the forest will also result in sightings of shy but spectacular hornbills, reptiles and insects.

The second trip lasts all day and will take you to the cool and beautiful Minahasan highlands, rich in local culture and scenic landscapes. One of the highlights of the excursion is the midday visit to the colorful and noisy local market at Tomohon, which offers many interesting opportunities to photographers.

Just make sure to avoid the



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“meat” section of the market, where unaware visitors will be faced by the gruesome and heart-rending spectacle of desperately yelping dog puppies being slaughtered for the table, together with roadside stands offering kebabs of freshly grilled jungle rats and half-roasted, scorched fruit bats. Telling your guide in advance will guarantee you’ll be spared most of these shocking sights if you—like us—would rather avoid facing them.

Besides the market, you’ll also enjoy spectacular sights of rice paddies,

terraced cultivations and jade-green volcanic lakes. The local Minahasans inhabiting this verdant, fertile area are very active in farming, pottery making and wood-working. They are also quite good looking, exceptionally friendly and said by other Indonesians to be of Cambodian origin. ■



THIS PAGE: Scenes from the colorful local market at Tomohon

