

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

September 2004

Vol. 19, No. 9

## *Lembeh Resort, North Sulawesi, Indonesia*

*the best critter diving in the world?*

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Dear Fellow Diver,

Lembeh Straits, off the tip of Northern Sulawesi, is known for the critters living in muck or rubble. But there are walls, beautiful corals, plenty of fish on the reef or in big schools, and, as I reported in the last issue, you can do ten days or more for well under \$3000. As an example of the thrills, there's Retak Larry, literally Larry's crack (Larry Smith, who is not a plumber), where I made a couple dives among Kodipungi lionfish (each pectoral ray is like a soft feather), pygmy pipehorses, Pegasus seamoths (a tiny winged dragon-like fish), nudibranch galore, warty and painted frogfish, and decorator crabs scuttling across the reef with fire urchins glued to their carapaces. Unless you come to this part of the world, where else will you see such weird and wonderful stuff?

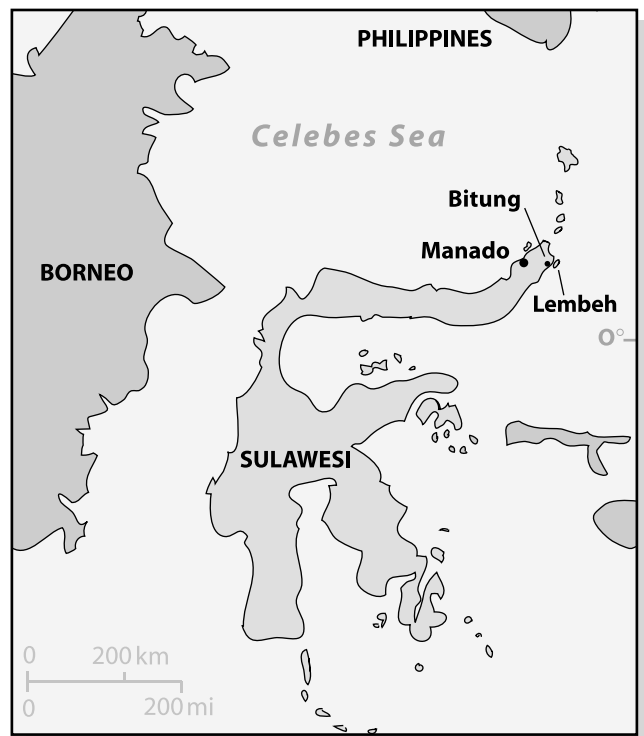
On one dive here, a banded sea krait, a.k.a. sea snake, appeared. Our guide Ronald created a tunnel by putting his hands together and the krait swam through it, up to his mask, to examine either its reflection or Ronald's nose hair, then it nosed through his head hair. We finned off to see a Moyer's dragonet, ocellated and cockatoo flounders, and flasher and devil scorpionfish, while fringelip mullets fed on the bottom. Then he found a flamboyant cuttlefish -- I've seen photographers doing back-flips underwater so excited to see one -- as well as yellow painted and white painted frogfish, and black-finned snake eels. Then we were off to a cleaning station manned by a red hump-backed cleaner shrimp that cleaned Ronald's cuticles and even his teeth, after he removed his regulator. All this and, as it turned out, my dive buddy's 6,000th dive.

After traveling by boat across the Lembeh Strait (the captain using a flashlight to look for unlighted vessels), I arrived at the picturesque Lembeh Resort, open little more than a year. A uniformed employee directed me along

well-lit pathways through the beautiful grounds of a classy resort. In the lobby, I was handed a tropical fruit smoothie, a damp towel to cool my face, and a registration form, then was directed to my bungalow. From my verandah, I could see Lembeh Strait and Kungkungan Bay Resort in the distance. The large parlor had an overhead fan, two couches and two chairs, a bottled water dispenser, and a small refrigerator stocked with sodas and beer. The separate bedroom had a huge, comfortable bed and remote controlled air-conditioning. Two walls were curtained windows, one looking over Lembeh Strait and the other looking through jungle growth. The regal bathroom had a conventional inside shower and an outside Balinese-styled shower for showering under the stars.

The first morning, I introduced myself to another diver who, like myself, was traveling alone. She too was spending four weeks diving Indonesia, far from her Las Vegas home, where she had once danced in reviews with Jack Benny and Sammy Davis. Breakfast was American fair, with fresh juice, eggs, pancakes, French toast, bacon -- you create the combos. Later, we joined two San Diego divers (one had won a trip to Lembeh from an underwater photo contest) and it was a table for four thereafter. (No more than 20 people were at the resort at any one time).

I put my gear on my porch and it was at the dive center when I arrived for the 8 a.m. briefing and the first of three boat dives. The dive complex includes the dive shop (stocked with serious gear, like computers), two bathrooms with showers, the photography center, a large room with cubicles just for camera users, and the dive center, with closet-sized dive gear storage areas for each room in the resort. A chalkboard spelled out the sites, guides and the departure times (which slipped as the day progressed, often because some inconsiderate divers were poky getting dressed for the briefings).



The roofed, 30-foot-long boats, powered by three 40 hp outboards, hold twelve divers, but we never had more than six. I set up my gear for the first dive and the staff took care of it after that. (Tanks are aluminum 80's, filled to 3000 psi). All in all, a dive operation worthy of a top-of-the line resort.

The sharp-eyed divemasters would find critter after critter I might pass right by. I occasionally lingered to get photos, but with 30-40 ft. vis, if I lingered too long I temporarily lost the group and missed the next animal. Most dives we

worked our way down a slope to 80 feet, then worked back up the gently sloping sandy-silty bottoms with little or no coral. A few dive sites, that are not really critter sites, offer great coral and nice walls where I dropped to 120 feet.

Kapal Indah (literally, boat pretty) is an upright wreck on a sandy bottom at 90 feet, where ornate ghost pipefish hung in soft coral growing from the hull. Scorpionfish hid inside, where reef fish swam, notably half a dozen six-bar angels, double-bar soapfish and harlequin sweetlips. Between dives, the boat usually returned to the hotel. I often jumped into the fresh water pool about ten paces from the dive center to wash off the salt.

I took a guided twilight tour of the house reef to seek the psychedelic mandarin fish. It's a long and relatively uninteresting swim to get to a 20-foot bottom and some coral outcroppings. In the dim light I saw several mandarin fish crawling on coral rubble. Any movement, including shining a light on them, sent them scampering. But, our guide illuminated several pairs of males in a fight for mating rights, or mating pairs floating a couple of feet above the broken coral, usually for just few seconds. Of course I saw plenty of other critters off the front porch, including a basketball-sized reef octopus waiting for us to leave so he could go hunting.



### *Thumbs Down: Plaza Resort Bonaire*

Last March, Bruce Weiner's room was burglarized while he and his companions were sleeping. The perps made off with \$7500 worth of cameras, scuba equipment, and other belongings. When he reported the theft, resort manager Marc van Breen first asked why Weiner didn't have travel insurance, hardly an empathetic response. Insurance wouldn't help Weiner salvage his dive trip, with his camera and regulator missing, nor relieve that gnawing sensation we get when our space is violated.

Van Breen assured Weiner that the losses would be submitted to the hotel's insurance company in the Netherlands, and that the resort would reimburse for losses not covered. A maintenance man upgraded the villa's inadequate sliding door security. (The villa next door had been broken into the previous night, but occupants scared off the intruders).

Upon returning home to Goshen, NY, Weiner sent a letter itemizing the missing items, but got no response. He made several unsuccessful attempts to reach Van Breen, so he wrote to *Undercurrent*. Our calls and e-mails to Van Breen also went unanswered, but not ignored. In August we heard from Bous Scholts, the resort's Director of Sales & Marketing, who claimed he was awaiting word from the Dutch insurance company, five months after the incident.

Once Weiner was promised full reimbursement, it's our belief that the Plaza – a very large corporation – should have reimbursed the burgled guest, and settled with the insurance company itself. It's bad policy and lousy public relations to hold Weiner hostage to bureaucratic relations between a hotel and its insurance carrier – if, indeed, that is the reason the Plaza is dragging its feet. Could it be they are really just waiting for Weiner to go away?

Bonaire's sterling underwater reputation is tarnished by its other reputation – crimes against tourists. "This would have been one of the nicest dive vacations I've had," Weiner told us, but now says he'll never go back: "There are too many other places to spend my money."

PS: Crime seems related to Bonaire's proximity to South America and drug drops on the island. Bonaire expanded its airport so it could handle international flights, and now it's paying. In July, five drug couriers were arrested at Flamingo Airport, at least three locals were arrested for crimes against diving tourists, and several burglars, including two addicts, were arrested for break-ins. Holland has appropriated money to supplement Bonaire's police force, which now has an international airport to guard, but it's tied up in bureaucratic wrangling with the inefficient government in Curacao. The Bonaire jail has been closed since mid-July for repairs, but Curacao has yet to release the allocated funds, so many people arrested are not being incarcerated.

I dived with three dive guides: Ronald, Abner and Hengki, all wiry English-speaking Indonesians. Ronald was the most talented, but lost interest if the site didn't have enough critters. Abner was concerned that his guests found everything they were looking for. Hengki upset me with his willingness to disturb the animals to help a rude photographer get his images, once using his rod to drive a pregnant mantis shrimp from its burrow, causing it to lose many eggs. When we told Bruce, the Canadian dive manager, he said that he would talk to Hengki.

At Police Pier, one diver wanted an image of the juvenile pinnate batfish, which is perfectly black with a gold outline around the body. Working past ghost pipefish, yellow and orange painted frogfish, helmet gurnards, juvenile Banggai cardinalfish living in sea urchins and weirdly shaped sand anemones, we found the batfish. (Originally, the striking Banggai cardinalfish was only found east of central Sulawesi, but apparently someone brought a few to Lembeh and they are at many sites). On a dive at T.K.3, I found a very hairy juvenile frogfish sitting next to an adult with only scattered hairs on its body, perhaps a bald old man. A night dive at Jahir found lots of cuttlefish, warty frogfish, a juvenile crocodile flathead in black phase, and a green mantis shrimp loaded with a huge red egg mass under its body. Nudy Falls and Nudy Retreat have lots of hard and soft corals -- you have to go to

## *Divers Drift 45 Miles and 14 Hours in the Red Sea*

A dozen European divers lost in the Red Sea for nearly 14 hours in August roped themselves together, told jokes and sang Christmas carols as they drifted further and further from the *MV Oyster*, their live-aboard boat. Suffering from exhaustion, dehydration and sunburn, they were rescued after a huge air and sea search spotted them 45 miles from where they dived.

During their dive, they saw a hammerhead and two reef sharks, but surfaced early and positioned a surface marker buoy to alert the *Oyster* crew, though they had already drifted. But, the crew didn't spot the buoy in the bright sunlight and the divers continued to drift. Early on the divers saw a container ship and another live-aboard, but the vessels passed by. After six hours they rejoiced at the site of a spotter plane. Brit Bruce de Courcy, 48, said, "Then it didn't dip its wings, nothing happened and it appeared it hadn't seen us. From a real high, we were down to a real low."

They talked about their backgrounds and numbered themselves one to 12. Every few minutes – especially when it got dark – they called out their numbers in sequence to make sure all were there. Though the water was warm and they were wearing wetsuits, they were losing body heat and forced themselves to keep moving. Two divers did not seem to be coping well with the cold. "I would say those two would not have made it overnight," said the divemaster, Richard Hallam, 28. As it grew dark, each tried to suppress panic. "When you are on the surface, you can't help wondering what's going to happen to your legs. ... you can't help but wonder what is down there."

They spotted mountains in the dusk, tied themselves together and began swimming toward them slowly, on their backs. Navigating by compass and two stars, they estimated they could reach the shore 30 miles away.

Then at 8.30pm they sighted the *Thunderbird*, another live-aboard boat, and their dive light signals were seen. On board, all celebrated the British way with a cigarette – even the nonsmokers. After an examination by a doctor, then opted to continue their dive holiday aboard the *Oyster* and several went diving the next day.

Hallam said, "After we were rescued, the guys on the boat said there were dolphins jumping across the prow in the direction we were actually in. We heard dolphins when we were in the water, we could hear their echo location. I think those dolphins drew attention to us. There are stories about dolphins helping humans in distress. I think those dolphins helped us."

From the *London Daily Telegraph* and other reports

Indonesia to understand what "lots of coral" means -- and strange critters. The diversity includes crinoids, worms, anemones, oysters, clams, barnacles, basket stars, urchins, sea cucumbers, and tunicates.

California Dreaming is one of the farther boat rides, with beautiful walls of coral and often pelagics. In the 70 ft. visibility, twenty dogtooth tuna swam around us, followed shortly by rainbow runners. During two dives here, there was a big Batavian batfish, a mellow cuttlefish, a female Napoleon wrasse, lots of nudys, and beautiful soft coral. The guide took us against the current, so we worked harder than we wanted. After the dive, I passed up my gear and effortlessly climbed the portable metal ladder.

At lunch and dinner I joined my newfound friends for very good food served by attentive waiters. A two-page menu lists varieties of appetizers, salads, soups and entrees. One night, for example, I had chicken spring rolls, cream of pumpkin soup, a tossed salad with vinaigrette dressing (short on vinegar), and an excellent spaghetti Bolognese. For dessert, I had two fried bananas wrapped in a spring roll cover. I found the Indonesian specialties excellent. One appetizer, a deep-fried pastry stuffed with ground meat, eggs and minced onions, was an Indonesian specialty that could make a complete meal. And their coffee rivals, maybe beats, Starbucks.

More diving: At Hairball, named after the hairy striped frogfish, our guide swept off the face of a white margin stargazer, which sat for quite awhile, face fully exposed, before digging deeper into the sand. We went to T.K.1 to see yellow and black weedy scorpionfish, and also spotted devil and band-tail scorpionfish. There were both green and yellow mantis shrimp and lots of nudys. For my last day, Bruce suggested Angel's Window, perhaps Lembeh's most beautiful site. It's a colorful seamount with a swim-through at 90 feet. Black-lip butterflyfish and moon wrasses were harvesting the eggs and the distressed sergeants couldn't do much about it. A big reef octopus watched all the activity, occasionally changing colors as he noticed us watching him.

Northern Sulawesi is one degree north of the equator so it's a uniform 85°F all year. Storms are mild and usually short year round so it is rare that you don't get some sunshine every day. With year round good diving, one can plan based on bargain airfares. For United Frequent Flyers, here's a way to use miles.

-- J.J.

## Lembeh Resort

Diving (experienced)	★★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Service	★★★★★
Food	★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

*Worldwide Scale*



**Divers Compass:** Airfare round trip from San Francisco to Manado was around \$1100. ... Double occupancy rack rate, with three dives a day and all food, runs about \$150/day/person. ... Nitrox is \$10 a tank, \$250 for unlimited nitrox. ... boats have oxygen kits and the drivers all have cell phones. The nearest chamber is in Manado, a couple hours by boat. ... I overnight at the Ambassador Transit Hotel in the Singapore Airport (you rent your room in six hour blocks); some people will go through immigration for a few hour tour or to go clubbing. ... I set up my trip through Reef and Rainforest Dive and Adventure Travel in Sausalito, CA: 800-794-9767, 415-289-1760, [www.reefrainforest.com](http://www.reefrainforest.com).