

## The Other Lembeh by Rod Klein

*I work my way through customs and immigration in the relatively modern Manado Airport. After 17 hours from LA to Singapore and another 3+ hours to Manado, the main city of North Sulawesi, you might say I'm pretty fried. But as I exit the busy baggage claim area, I'm met by the smiling face of my old friend Ali, senior diveguide at Lembeh's newest and finest resort, Kasawari-Lembeh. He greets me with a big hug, and a "Hi Mr. Rod, glad to see you". I've known Ali since the first of my many trips to Lembeh Strait when he worked at Lembeh's original dive resort and learned his trade from the late Larry Smith. Always smiling, always ready to help, he was just the person I needed to see to remind me that I was in for a great trip.*



*The View of Lembeh Strait and Lembeh Island in the distance from the road on the way to Kasawari Lembeh Resort*

*I had arranged to stay at Kasawari-Lembeh and, Ali is not the only person I've been looking forward to seeing again. The manager of Kasawari-Lembeh Resort is my old friend Nuswanto Lobbu, known to everyone as Nus. Nus was the senior diveguide at Lembeh Strait's first resort and, along with Ali, has the reputation of being able to find even the most obscure and tiny animals that inhabit the waters of Lembeh Strait. Nus is also one of the only non-expats managing a major resort in this area for which he is very he is very proud.*



*During the customary wild 90 minute ride from the Manado Airport through the heart of North Sulawesi to the eastern part of the island, we encounter numerous motorbike taxis, oxen driven carts hauling wood, and a variety of colorful villagers. As we pass through the large seaport town of Bitung and on to the road that overlooks the picturesque Lembeh Strait and view of Lembeh Island, I am reminded why I have come back to this area 15 times during the past 9 years.*

### **My Hosts**

Even though this was just one of my many trips to Lembeh Strait, I knew I was in for a treat as soon as we drove into Kasawari 's main entrance. Although there are now a variety of dive resorts to choose from, Kasawari-Lembeh Resort was the first choice for my return one of my favorite dive areas in Indonesia. It was not only the close relationship with Nus and Ali that brought me to Kasawari, but its reputation as a boutique dive resort with a great camera facility ( totally necessary for all the photo crap that I have to carry with me), comfortable boats, great rooms, food, and the best diveguides in the area.



Left: My old friend and senior diveguide Ali. Right: View of Kasawari Resort and Lembah Strait from the restaurant – lounge.

What impressed me most about Kasawari was that it is a “boutique lifestyle dive resort”, meaning that has been designed with complete facilities and services for divers looking for a touch of luxury and personalized, safe and hassle-free diving. The compact layout of the resort and its facilities specifically caters for divers and serious photographers. If you want backpacker level of accommodations there are other resorts to choose from.



I was given room #4 which is one of ten luxurious villas, all with both indoor and outdoor shower facilities, a huge main room and separate bath area with loads windows and light. But what really impressed me were the profusion of electrical outlets with international plugs,so adapters were unnecessary, and the large desk area which made it easy to spend comfortable hours reviewing images on my laptop.



Having the opportunity to find a blue ring octopus with eggs is just one of the reasons that Lembeh is one of my favorite dive destinations.

For relaxation the resort also features a beachfront infinity-edge swimming pool with its built-in jacuzzi, great food served at the upper level restaurant, a beachfront dive center with hyper-filtration filling system (including full Nitrox of course ) all supported by the services of Kasawari's friendly and hospitable staff. This was the beginning of a great 16 days of diving!

### **A Different Culture**

In 1994 the first dive resort opened in what was then the totally unknown area of Lembeh Strait. Located on the north eastern side of the Indonesian Island of North Sulawesi, Lembeh Strait is a 10 mile long stretch of water separating Lembeh Island and the mainland and was mainly known as home for North Sulawesi's major seaport in the adjacent town of Bitung.



North Sulawesi is primarily a Christian Province and this Bitung church is a common site

In those days, if the local dive resort had 5 or 6 guests it was considered a good week and, for most, the idea of traveling to this remote area of Indonesia for a dive vacation was a little intimidating. As a matter of fact, most people didn't even know this area existed since there was virtually no advertising of any kind and American dive publications were, as usual, totally focused on the Caribbean.

In these early days, it was primarily crews from National Geographic and other similar publications that came to this area to research and photograph the myriad of unusual and rare underwater animals that are common to these waters, and for which Lembeh Strait ultimately gained fame.



Local Bitung fisherman bring in the previous night's catch



The local Bitung Market is a colorful and friendly place to visit., and here it is clear that the various cultures coexist in harmony

For the ensuing 5 or 6 years things in Lembeh Strait stayed pretty much the same with only a handful of dive tourists daring to visit the heavily Muslim country of Indonesia. This situation was made worse with the events of September 11, 2001 and it looked for a while like the dive tourist industry in this area would stop altogether. Many were afraid of traveling to country that was perceived to have a terrorist lurking around every corner. Of course this was a ridiculous fear and ironically, North Sulawesi is a primarily Christian province, with much inter-faith marriage, and a local population that is very tourist friendly. In Manado, Bitung, and other areas of North Sulawesi one can see an occasional Mosque, while Christian Churches are everywhere. One small village in Lembeh Strait, Makawede, has 5 churches which one can see when passing by on the way to adjacent divesites.

One of my favorite things to do when I'm in North Sulawesi, is to visit the local fish market in Bitung. This is a morning person's adventure since things start hopping about 5am with the fishermen arriving with their catch from the night before. This is the place to rub shoulders with the locals and get a real feel for the local culture and a good understanding why North Sulawesi, Bitung, and Lembeh Strait are colorful and safe places to visit.



The wonderpus (above ) and the hairy frogfish (below) are occupants of the Lembeh Strait eco-system



### **The Minahasans : A Breed Apart**

North Sulawesi, with its Minahasa Culture, is unlike most other areas of Indonesia and has always been fiercely independent from the rest of Indonesian culture. North Sulawesi and the

Minahasa people there never developed any large empire, and were converted early on to Christianity by the Dutch.

They seemed to gain a special role in the Dutch scheme of things and their loyalty to the Dutch as soldiers, their Christian religion and their geographic isolation from the rest of Indonesia, all led to a sense of being 'different' from the other ethnic groups of the archipelago. Well-educated in mission and government schools, Minahasans were among the first of the area to seek employment and prestige abroad.

North Sulawesi is one of the 32 provinces in the Republic of Indonesia, with its capital city being Manado. Like other regions in Indonesia, North Sulawesi has a typical equatorial climate with two seasons: rainy and dry. Starting in September, cool Northwesterly winds pick up moisture while crossing the South China Sea and arrive in the Sulawesi Sea, about November. Historically, Indonesia came under the influence of a mighty Indian civilization through the gradual influx of Indian traders in the first century A.D., when great Hindu and Buddhist empires were beginning to emerge. By the seventh century, the powerful Buddhist Kingdom of Sriwijaya was expanding and it is thought that during this period a spectacular Buddhist sanctuary was built in Central Java.

Moslem merchants began visiting Indonesia in the 13th Century and established trade links between Indonesia, India and Persia. Along with trade, they propagated Islam among the Indonesian people, particularly along the coastal areas of Java. At a later stage they even influenced and converted Hindu kings to Islam, the first being the Sultan of Demak. This Moslem Sultan later spread Islam westward, and eastward along the northern coast of Java to the kingdom of Gresik. By the 16th century, a powerful Muslim empire had developed on the Malay Peninsula, with its center at Malacca.

In their search for spices, the Portuguese arrived in Indonesia in 1511, after their conquest of the Islamic Empire of Malacca. They were followed by the Spaniards. Both began to propagate Christianity and were most successful in Minahasa / North Sulawesi. However, it wasn't until the arrival of the Dutch that Christianity became the predominant religion of North Sulawesi. The Dutch influence flourished as the Minahasans embraced the European goods and Christian religion. The wholesale conversion of the Minahasans was almost complete by 1860. Western education in Minahasa started much earlier than in other parts of Indonesia. The Dutch government eventually took over some of these schools and also set up others. Because the schools taught in Dutch, the Minahasans had an early advantage in the competition for government jobs and places in the colonial army. This sense of cultural independence continues to this day giving North Sulawesi its own uniqueness among the provinces of Indonesia.

The Indonesian constitution allows freedom of religion in a predominantly Muslim country and the state's "Unity in Diversity" motto is a symbol of the co-existence of the many cultures unified in one nation. These diverse cultures have given Indonesia a rich heritage of traditions and art resulting in festivities throughout the year in different parts of the country.

### **What Is A Lembeh?**

Lembeh Strait has become renowned for what is now known as "muck diving." Unfortunately, the term muck diving has been very misunderstood by the diving community. It implies that one is going to be diving in some sort of gooey substance and that you might come back from your dive in severe need of an antiseptic bath.



There are 7 species of pygmy seahorse, with four of those relatively common. On this trip I saw more seafans populated with pygmys than on any previous trip. The number and variety of species in Lembeh Strait vary with the season.

Of course, muck diving really means you'll be diving in an area usually close to shore, sometimes near a local village, under an old pier, or even in shallow water mangroves. These areas are home to small animals, often with unusual colorations and behaviors. The terrain in some parts of Lembeh is black sand usually devoid of safe habitats for animals simply due to the movement of the water in the strait. Consequently, the incoming debris (read: trash), and whatever else can grow in this seeming desert, creates underwater homes for Lembeh's residents. Finding a pufferfish sharing a paint can with a frogfish is not uncommon.



Various types of debris provide homes to various critters. Here a pufferfish and a giant frogfish share a paint can.

Look closely, though, and you'll find that Lembeh is the paragon of a diverse, rich underwater environment, and precisely why this tiny area supports such a magnificent roster of species like the hairy frogfish, pygmy seahorses, stargazers, cockatoo flounders, ghost pipefish, mimic octopus, Banggai cardinal fish, wonderpus, and more. Unfortunately, labeling a place as a muck destination – given to places like Lembeh, Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea, or Anilao, Philippines – sometimes sells it short. Divers go to Lembeh, for example, eyes firmly set on seeing the small wonders, while ignoring the other possibilities.



Above left: A weedy scorpionfish, the holy grail for some divers are often found in Lembeh. Right: A beautiful juvenile batfish hides in the coral until it is old enough to join adult schools



From left: a squat lobster in a crinoid; a tiny filefish using a lightbulb as a hiding place; an emperor shrimp on the underside of a sea cucumber; a bright orange deveil scorpionfish

To quote David Doubilet from his eloquent National Geographic Article:

*“At dusk the Lembeh Strait seems lit by fireflies as fishermen in outriggers use kerosene lanterns to attract baitfish for the tuna fishery far offshore. Sulawesi sits in the middle of the greatest concentration of coral reefs on the planet—a virtual coral Eden—so diving in Lembeh Strait can seem an ironic contrast. But this little-studied world between the reefs and the rain forests is also a rich environment. A deepwater upwelling in the Molucca Sea pushes a vital plankton broth south into the ten-mile-long strait, and rivers running down through Sulawesi’s forests also add nutrients. Whale sharks and manta rays once cruised here, but they were fished out. With those attractions gone, divers and then scientists turned their attention to the bottom, and were astounded by the profusion of life. Yet the strait can’t be called pristine. The port of Bitung has nearly 145,000 people, and the heavily traveled waters gather trash. Paradoxically, this has benefits: On the strait’s otherwise featureless bottom, tires, bottles, cans, and old shoes all become some creature’s habitat.”*

Yes whales, dolphins, and mantas were, at one time, seen to cruise through the strait, passing through its deep channel in their normal migration path. But with Taiwanese fishing vessels waiting just inside international waters, many of the animals were easy prey for their industrial fishing boats, ready to grind up their catch at a moments notice. So, ironically this insignificant looking stretch of water is widely considered to be the critter-diving capital of the world.

North Sulawesi is located within the ‘Coral Triangle’, a territory that spreads from western Thailand all the way through eastern Indonesia. This is where many scientists believe life began in the ocean and it is widely thought that it holds the most bio-diverse marine habitat on earth.



Left: A giant Smasher Mantis Shrimp peeks from its burrow in the sand; Right: A peacock mantis shrimp with a clutch of eggs

For this reason diving in Indonesia has been held in high regard within the diving community and North Sulawesi is its crown jewel. To the east of Borneo and below the Philippines, Sulawesi is an oddly shaped island in the Celebes Sea. Just a few hundred meters offshore the continental shelf plunges towards the deep oceanic trenches that offers nutrient rich waters. The fact that evolution here has been uninterrupted for millions of year means that the marine life in this particular part of the Coral Triangle is extremely diverse. On the western side of North Sulawesi near Manado lies Bunaken Island. Just a few kilometers offshore, a plateau extends from the island before reaching the drop off which descends to hundreds of meters. Coral life on the wall is extremely dense and different species both hard and soft compete for space.

These particular walls have helped make diving in Indonesia what it is today and draw traveling divers from all over the world. Large pelagics like Black and White Tip Sharks, Trevally and Napoleon Wrasse work their way up the reef, while Green Sea Turtles lodge themselves into the wall to rest. If you've got a skillful guide you might be able to see finger nail size Pygmy Seahorses latched onto Gorgonian Fans, not a common site even when you are diving in Indonesia. But, while Bunaken has the walls, it is Lembeh Strait that has the critters. However, if one goes to Lembeh only for its small animals, they would be missing "The Other Lembeh".

### **The Other Lembeh**

It is Lembeh's macro reputation that brings divers to this area. I have a good friend who, when he comes to Lembeh, shoots only a 70-180mm zoom macro. Nothing else will do. He never looks up. He just doesn't consider the other options, but I've dived Lembeh at least twice a year for the last eight years, and I can say it's possible to leave your macro lens at home and still come away with incredible photographs. Although this area doesn't have the deep walls and coral bommies found in other areas of Asia or the Caribbean, and visibility in Lembeh can vary significantly, there are still incredible wide-angle opportunities that many who dive Lembeh never even see.



While many divers only seek out the small critters of Lembeh, beautiful wide angle opportunities are everywhere. Here a diver photographs a school of snappers at Angel's Window; below a resident school of golden sweepers provides a great photo opportunity at California Dreaming



Contrary to general perception, the Lembeh Strait also offers excellent wall, reef, pinnacle and even wreck diving (There are three World War II wrecks in the Strait) with good visibility – in fact all within just a few minutes of Kasawari Lembeh Resort. Densely overgrown reefs and boulders, giant sea fans and soft coral, colorful sponges, schools of jacks, snappers, humphead parrotfish, purple dartfish, leaf scorpionfish, pink squat lobsters and even the remarkable boxer crabs await your discovery. During dusk dives, you will also be able to observe the fascinating mating rituals of mandarinfish.

The more than 30 dive sites of the Lembeh Strait are within easy reach of the centrally located Kasawari Lembeh Resort. The nearest dive site being just a stone throw's away from our jetty and the furthest 20 minutes. After each dive, guests are whisked back to the resort for a quick shower, a hot drink and cookies, an image down-load or a change of lens and relax comfortably during the surface interval.

Diving in the Lembeh Strait is year round. The Strait and its dive sites is protected by the mountains of North Sulawesi and by the 6 mile long Lembeh Island. Conditions for good diving are favorable throughout the year, with water and topside temperatures being cooler between July and September.

Sites like California Dreaming and Angel's Window, and Dante's Wall are as beautiful and coral rich as any dive site in Komodo or Raja Ampat, and one of Lembeh's other famous dive sites, Batu Angus, best known for its mating Mandarin fish dusk dive, provides one of the most beautiful and unusual wide angle vistas in Lembeh.



Primarily known for its dusk Mandarin fish dive, Batu Angus is profuse with huge fields of lettuce coral, a sight not often seen in Lembeh

Unlike anything else in the area, Batu Angus is located in a small inlet near the northern end of the strait. In addition to the usual suspects such as giant frogfish, crocodile fish, leaf scorpionfish, peacock mantis shrimp, and of course the mandarinfish, it features a field of a huge lettuce corals, which stretches as far as you can see. These corals are in pristine condition, and because the area is quite shallow, the combination of sunlight and corals allows for breathtaking images.

## Getting The Most Out Of A Diverse Area

In order to get the most out of a diverse area like Lembeh, I come prepared...both in mind and equipment. If I don't have my wide-angle lenses I can't take advantage of the Other Lembeh. If I'm not open to a new way of seeing, I will never look up from the sand or rubble areas.



There are many opportunities for great shots in places not often dived. Here, right under the Kasawari jetty I found this beautiful seafan, coral, and light.

The very first thing I'm looking for is light. Light coming through the blue water; light kissing a seafan; light backlighting a transparent sponge. Without light we cannot make our images and the position and character of the light can make the difference between a great image and an average one.

Since I shoot a Nikon D300, my gear bag always has at least four lenses: Macro: 60mm & 105mm; Wide-Angle: 10.5mm & 12-24mm. For medium range subjects I sometimes use a 17-55mm. I really love the 10.5mm as it has a 180 degree angle of coverage and an infinite depth of field allowing for very dramatic coverage.

For those using compact digital cameras (compact digital cameras do not use interchangeable lenses), purchasing a screw-on wide-angle adapter for your camera's housing is essential. In various workshops I have conducted over the years, compact camera users are always asking why they can't get the dramatic wide angle shot of the seafan, diver, and the sun all in the same shot.

This is because they do not have the right optical tool...a wide-angle lens...to get the image that they see in their mind but can't get the camera to see. One of the advantages of these wide adapters is that they are usually wet lenses. This means that they can be taken on a dive and put on the front of the camera housing while underwater. This gives the advantage of being able to shoot both wide angle and medium close up shots on the same dive.

What made me aware of the other Lembeh? I started looking more carefully at each divesite and I realized that there was so much more that this area has to offer. Along with Batu Angus, probably the two most under appreciated sites in Lembeh are Nudi Retreat and Pulau Putas.

Nudi Retreat, a five-minute boat ride from most local resorts, Nudi Retreat is a wide-angle and macro dive rolled into one. Normally divers descend directly under the boat and proceed down the sandy slope looking for the small animals. Commonly seen is the weird Pegasus Sea Month and giant frogfish can be found in the coral mounds that are near the shore. However, if divers take a slightly different route moving to their right instead of following the sandy area under the boat, they'll come upon a large rock wall covered in coral.



Left: A pair of white giant frogfish at Nudi Retreat; Right: a warty frogfish does a mouth stretch

Following along the wall at 20m there's a small saddle, a coral garden as rich as any in Indonesia. In the morning light it appears as if the corals bloom like flowers. Because the divesite is directly against the shore, leaves from the over hanging tress drop into the water. If you look carefully you may find juvenile batfish floating within the drifting vegetation, blending in seamlessly by changing their coloration to match their habitat.



Don't forget to look up. These juvenile batfish were floating among the leaves that had fallen from the vegetation above the divesite



A resident school of batfish use a pearl farm hut as cover at Pulau Putas

By far my favorite dive site in Lembeh is Pulau Putas. Here, dive boats tie up right at the edge of the shore, adjacent to a local village, which is involved in pearl farming. Close to the boat in the middle of the bay is a makeshift hut used by the pearl farmers. The small hut provides an artificial reef and shelter for many species of fish, and you're guaranteed to find a resident school of batfish living in its shadow. Sheltered by the bay, everything comes together here as The Other Lembeh. This area, generally free of current, often with great visibility, shallow water, and interesting surface objects can have incredible light and provides fantastic wide-angle opportunities.

Most who have dived the clear waters and deep walls found in the Caribbean, Asia, and the

Pacific love the distinctly different aspect of diving in Lembeh. It is easy to get seduced by the incredible diversity of life and unique animal behavior, but there is another side to Lembeh, which can rival the best and most interesting diving in the world. When you go there look closely for the small animals, but take that wide-angle lens too, and don't forget to look carefully for the other Lembeh. You won't be disappointed you did.