

The Other Lembeh

When most people think of Lembeh Strait, they think of small animals, black sand, and muck diving. But if you're an underwater photographer, you may want to reconsider what lenses to bring. When you dive Lembeh and other traditional macro destinations, approach these areas with a different perspective, to see just what the other side has to offer

By Rod Klein

Labelling a place – like Lembeh, Milne Bay, or Anilao – as solely a muck diving destination often sells it short. Don't ignore the other possibilities these detinations may have to offer

WORLD-FAMOUS LEMBEH STRAIT is located in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, about a three-hour flight east of Singapore. Since 1994, Lembeh has become renowned for what is now known as "muck diving." Unfortunately, some divers have misunderstood the term muck diving. They think it means they'll be diving in some sort of gooey substance and that they might come back from the dive in severe need of an antiseptic bath.

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 colourations and behaviours.

The terrain in many 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 what could pass for an underwater desert creates homes for Lembeh's residents. For example, finding a pufferfish sharing a paint can with a frogfish is not uncommon.

Look more 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 cardinalfish, wonderpus, and more. Unfortunately, labelling a place – like Lembeh, Milne Bay in PNG, or Anilao, Philippines – as solely a muck diving destination often sells it short. Divers go to Lembeh, eyes firmly set on seeing the small wonders, while ignoring the other possibilities.

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It is Lembeh's macro reputation that brings divers to this area. I have a good friend who, when he visits Lembeh, shoots only with a 70-180 mm zoom macro lens. 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.

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

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, crocodilefish, leaf scorpionfish, peacock mantis shrimp, and of course the mandarinfish, it features huge fields of a large lettuce corals, which stretch as far as the eye 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.



top: A blue starfish rests on a sea fan underneath the pier at Kungkungan Bay Resort. Even in the shallows there are numerous wide-angle opportunities

above: Huge fields of lettuce corals thrive at Batu Angus, where many divers are brought instead to take photos of the elusive mandarinfish

opposite page: The Other Lembeh provides many opportunities for great fish portraits like this batfish at Nudi Retreat



above: Keep an open mind when brought to "traditional" macro sites, you just might happen upon wide-angle opportunities like these hard corals at Pulau Putas

opposite page, from top: This resident school of batfish at Pulau Putas makes for a fantastic wide-angle image; pink anemonefish in the large coral fields of Nudi Retreat

THE KEY IS LIGHTING

In order to get the most out of a diverse area like Lembeh, I come prepared – both in mind and with equipment. If I don't have my wide-angle lenses then I simply can't take advantage of the other Lembeh present in so many "traditional" macro destinations. If I'm not open to a new way of seeing, I will never look up from the sand or rubble areas.

The very first thing I'm looking for is light. Light coming through the blue water, light kissing a sea fan, 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 an average image and a great one.

Since I shoot a Nikon D2X, my gear bag always has at least four lenses, which include macro (60 mm and 105 mm) and wide-angle (10.5 mm and 12-24 mm). For medium range subjects I sometimes use a 17-55 mm. I really love the 10.5 mm as it has a 180-degree angle of coverage and an infinite depth of field, allowing for very dramatic shots.

For those using compact digital cameras – remember, 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've conducted over the years, compact camera users are always asking why they can't get the dramatic wide-angle shot of the sea fan, diver, and the sun all in the same shot. This is because they don't have the right optical tool: a wide-angle lens.

To get the image they see in their mind but can't get the camera to see, the wide-angle lens is essential. One of the advantages of these wide adapters is they are usually wet lenses. This means 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.

TWO SITES IN ONE

Back to the topic at hand: looking for a different perspective. I became aware of the other Lembeh when I started looking more carefully at each dive site. I soon realised there was so much more this area had to offer.

For example, along with Batu Angus, probably the two most underappreciated sites in Lembeh are Nudi Retreat and Pulau Putas. 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.

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. 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.

By far my favourite site in Lembeh is Pulau Putas. There, 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 pearl farmers. The small hut provides an artificial reef and shelter for many species of fish, and divers are 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 in the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific love the distinctly different aspect of diving in Lembeh. It's easy to be seduced by the diversity of life and unique animal behaviour, but there is another side to Lembeh that can rival the best and most interesting diving in the world. When you go there and to other traditional macro destinations, look closely for the small animals, but take that wide-angle lens too, and don't forget to look carefully for the other side. You won't be disappointed you did. [SD](#)

