

Indonesia's North Sulawesi

—*Buyat Bay & Lembeh Strait*

Text by Kelly LaClaire. Photos by Kate Clark





Panorama of Buyat Bay. PREVIOUS PAGE: *Hypselodoris* sea slug at The End

—*X-Ray* dive team Kelly LaClaire and Kate Clark explore the waters of North Sulawesi, Indonesia, visiting the undiscovered and unspoiled reefs of Buyat Bay and enjoying muck diving in Lembeh Strait.

There are very few places in the world that remain unknown to the dive community. Let's face it, scuba enthusiasts are nothing if not resourceful when it comes to finding new and uncharted waters to dive in. But chances are excellent that when you read the title of this article you asked yourself, "Buyat Bay? Where the heck is that?"

That was exactly my reaction when I was first told about

this vibrant and breathtaking stretch of sea three hours south of the Lembeh Strait just off the Sulawesi mainland in Indonesia. Of course, like nearly every diver, I had heard of Lembeh and the wondrous creatures that call that famous sliver of water home, but Buyat Bay? Nope. That was a name I was totally unfamiliar with.

So, when *X-RAY MAG* was invited to dive in this still unspoiled and undiscovered part of the world, well, we jumped at the chance.

Endless coral

Kate, my cousin and photographer on this trip, was the first of our little group to roll off the dive boat, and as she was waiting for me to pass over her camera I saw her take a peek under the surface. "Oh my God!" she laughed, "Wait till you see this!"

The water was so clear in Buyat that it looked almost colorless through our masks, and as we drifted down, endless fields of staghorn coral



Purple soft corals at Pulau Rancun



Author, Kelly LaClaire, diving the coral gardens at Pulau Rancun



Glass sweepers at cleaning station, Pulau Tulang (above); Tricky-to-find tiny pigmy seahorse on muricella gorgonian (top center) can measure only 2cm; Banded pipefish at The End (right); Robe hem *Hypselodoris nudibranch* on green algae at The End (far right)

spread out below us, giving way to thriving meadows of dark green hard corals dotted with pink and yellow anemones. Colossal sea fans—deep purple and easily three meters across—scattered themselves across the rocky outcrops around the site. I'd never seen coral growth this prevalent or healthy. It was as if some master underwater gardener had sewn the purest and richest seeds in the most fertile seabeds on Earth and said, "Let there be coral!"

We levelled off a meter or two above the seafloor where a family of false

clownfish rushed at us, chomping and snapping at our masks, relentlessly defending their territory with heated vigor. Shifting schools of blue and yellow wrasse darted through our bubbles, while groups of triggerfish foraged for food and played tag below us.

Several moray eels were wavering sinusously back and forth in their rocky dens, and a blue-spotted stingray wriggled out of one of the rare sandy spots, giving us a menacing glance before quickly fluttering off. Kate put her first two fingers to her head and pulled an imaginary trigger

—"This is blowing my mind!"

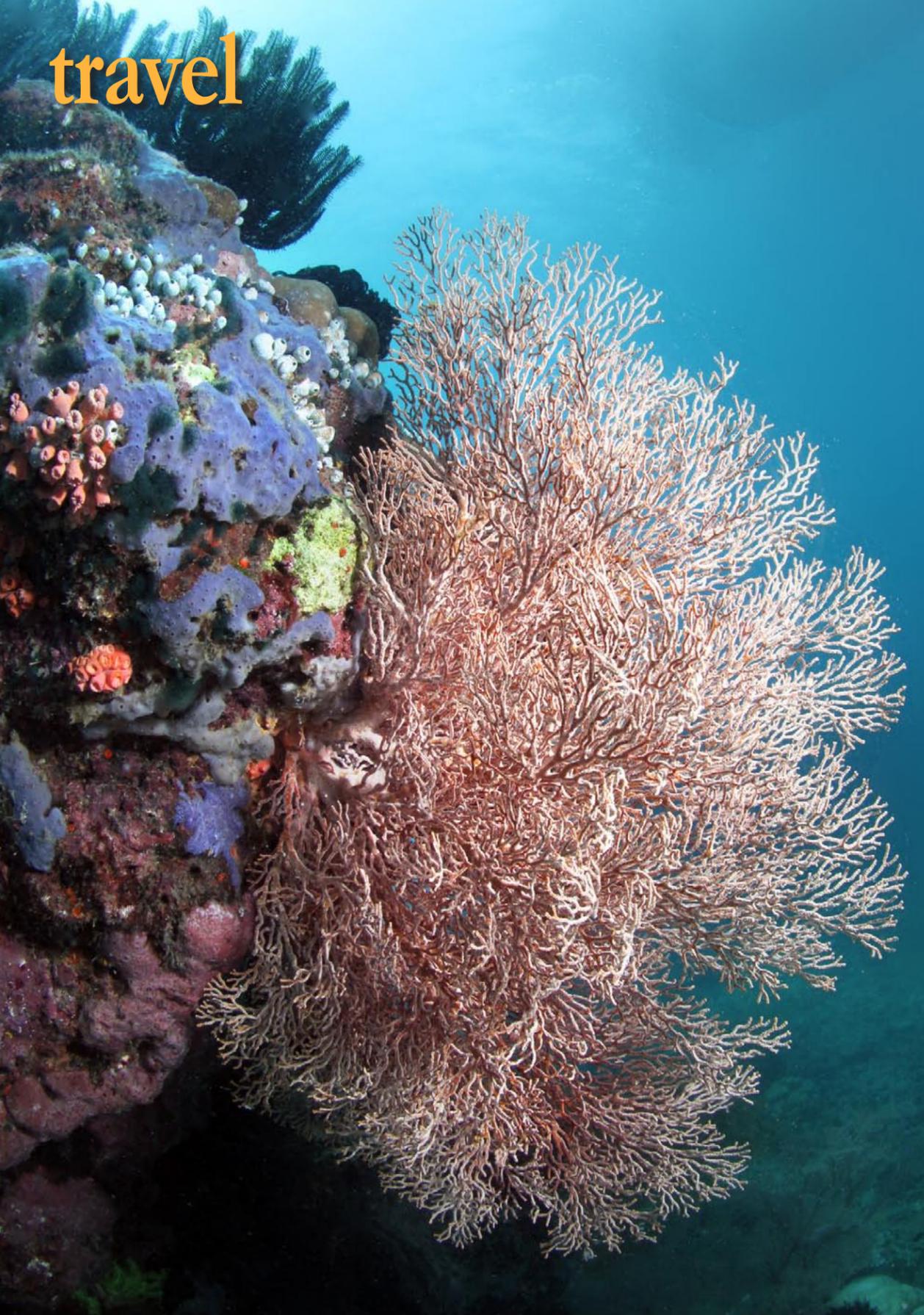
Our guide, one of several diving virtuosos from Critters at Lembeh dive center, shook a noise maker and pointed to a small pink mass of coral while flashing the "pygmy seahorse" sign. I got close, strained my eyes and shrugged, unable to see anything. He pulled out a long metal stick and pointed to a formless mass about the size of an apple seed. Still seeing nothing, I gave it up and swam off a bit, giving Kate the chance to capture it with her macro lens.

While she was setting up her shot, I

spotted a curious but timid cuttlefish a few meters away, and my body instantly responded with playful butterflies and lively, pulsing heart beats. I'd never seen a cuttlefish in the open ocean, but it

had been at the top of my bucket list for quite some time. He seemed to sense my excitement and obligingly began flashing colors like the world's most enthusiastic quick-change artist.





Kate moved in next to me, and I could hear her giggle behind her regulator. The timid cephalopod, unsure and wary,

turned a translucent white and raised two tentacles, but soon realized we were no threat and resumed showing off for the

camera after only a few moments.

Kate got a shot she was happy with and flashed me a wide grin I couldn't help but return. It was obvious we were both falling in love with Buyat.

Newmont Mining Camp

Our hosts, Miguel Ribeiro and Ana Fonseca, transplants from Portugal who manage Lembeh Resort to the north, joined us for our three-day stay at Buyat Bay and gave us a little history of our lodgings, as we headed to shore.

The area was originally an old mining camp for the Newmont Company that shut down operations in 2004. Now the small rustic cabins are used by Critters at Lembeh for short two- and three-day stays for customers who want a break from muck diving and the larger groups that fill the sites in the strait. We were the only boat in the area and the only guests on the trip, so we had the place all to ourselves.

The bungalows were small and aged but serviceable. Each came with a private bathroom and air conditioning but, honestly, this setting is not for everyone, and if a more refined, spacious resort is what you like when vacationing, then Buyat may not be the best choice. But if you're willing to rough it a bit—think sparse, summer camp living—then unspoiled water, endlessly rich coral and an open ocean devoid of tourists and other divers awaits you.

We spent the remainder of the evening getting to know the rest of our small group; three friends who belong to a dive club had gathered here to start an Asian diving tour of sorts, and they were just as excited as we were. Kate and I like them immediately, and we swapped cameras, *oohing*

Cuttlefish on reef (above); Pink gorgonian fan coral (left) and *Sarcophyton sp.* mushroom leather coral (top right) at Pulau Rancun



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Community sack race; Kelly enters sack race; Fish farm harvest; Community bench at Buyat Bay; Girls playing together and piggyback race at community festival

their babies to pose with. Packs of teenagers shouted, "Hello!" and then ran off in fits of giggles. Little kids were hanging on our legs and asking us to swim with them. We spent an hour snapping photos, shaking hands and hugging total strangers who treated us like old friends come home from a long

swapping stories and culture over cold Bintang beer and exotic new foods is just about the best thing a person can do if they want to broaden their own viewpoint of the world—and I never tire of it.

New found fame

A yearly festival was taking place on the beach near the mining

camp. Local villagers were playing volleyball and soccer, while their children swam and splashed in the shallow waters of the bay. Kate and I wanted a few pictures, but we tried to keep our distance, cautious about intruding and becoming the bumbling, obnoxious tourists that make everyone cringe. Turns out, our fears were groundless.

As soon as we stepped on the beach, a crowd of people surrounded us as if we were members of a famous rock band. Nearly every person there wanted our picture, and mothers were passing us



and *ahhing* over the images we saw on the various displays.

It's these moments that define the scuba experience for me, not just the diving alone. I know it sounds trite, but sitting down with folks from half a world away,

journey.

Being a Caucasian male residing in the United States, I've never been a novelty or an object of any real interest, but suddenly our light skin was captivating and awe-inspiring. Dozens of

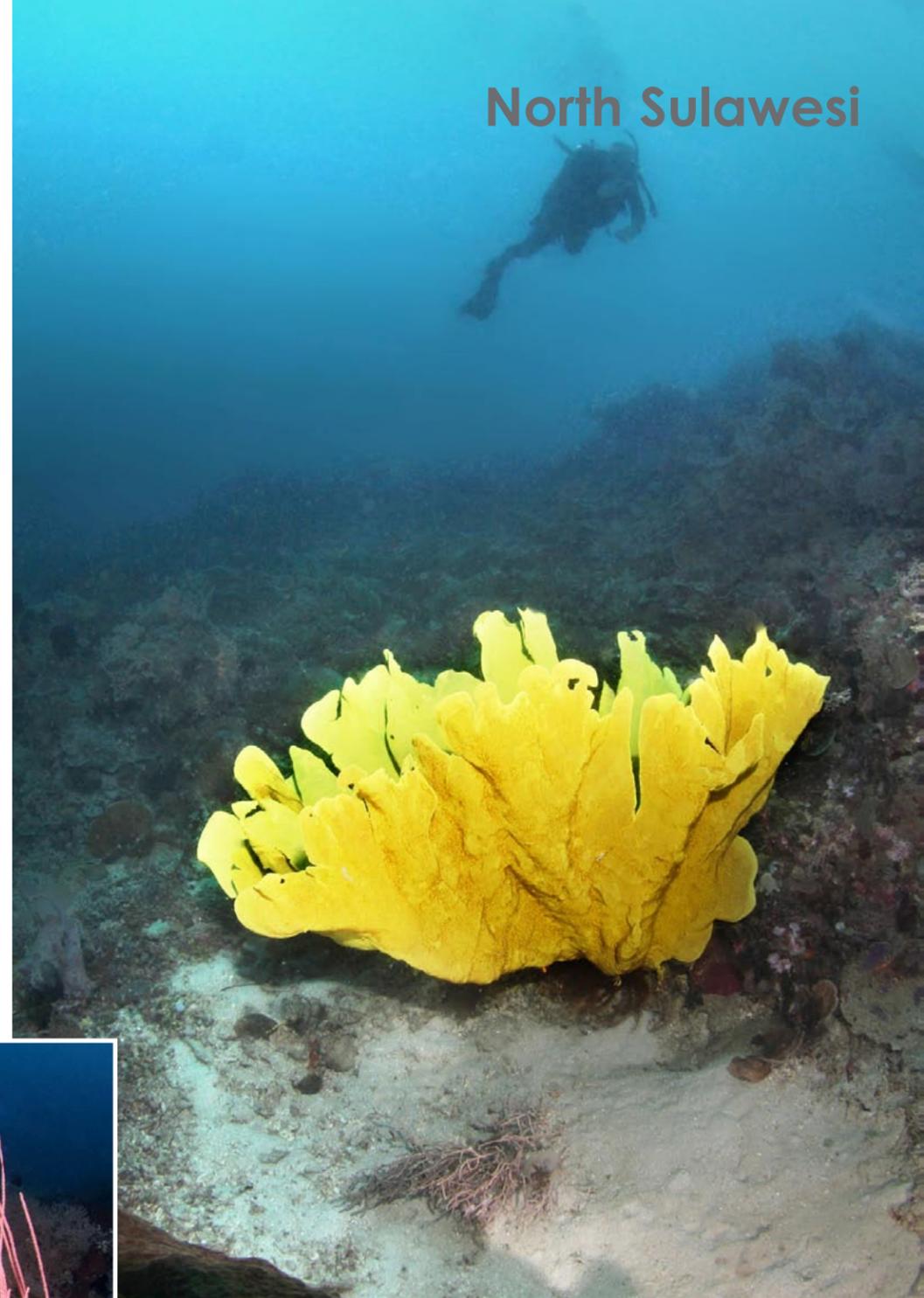
women were reaching out to touch Kate's blonde hair, and one older grandmother, who quite possibly had never seen a white girl before, actually began petting Kate's face and following her around wherever she went. It was surreal—no other word describes it.

The group insisted we participate in their piggy back contest (which we won) and the potato sack race (which we lost miserably) followed by more photos and quick touches on the back or shoulders from the villagers. We left in the highest of spirits, and I can't remember being





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Coral garden with tomato anemonefish at Pulau Racun; Chamberlain's nudibranch, The End; Diver with yellow elephant ear sponge on reef at Pulau Haglow; Pink whip coral at Pulau Hogow



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so cordially welcomed and warmly embraced by any group of people before or since.

Unfond farewell

The next morning, Kate and I climbed a few hundred stone stairs to a local temple before one last dive. Later that afternoon, we were heading to Lembeh Resort for three more days of muck diving in the strait. It was early, but the sun was

already high, and a light breeze rustled through the large banana groves covering the hillsides. The waters of the bay sparkled, and the dappled greens and blues of the reefs were calling to us. We enjoyed fresh eggs and local fish for breakfast and soon were headed out with our three new friends and gracious hosts.

Our boat twisted through the lush, deserted islands that dot the coastline until we reached a hid-

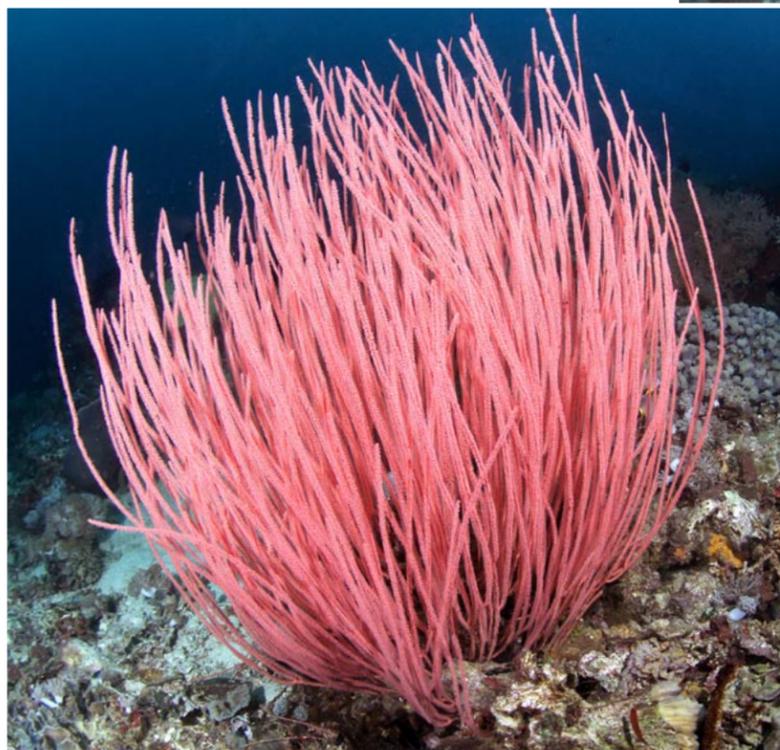
den cove where we shut off the motor and began gearing up. Under the surface, we descended into a maze of towering granite boulders covered in soft yellow and pink corals. Our guide pointed out a school of glass sweepers hiding in a rock fissure. The tiny, gleaming fish numbered in the thousands, and they pressed back into the small cave in one fluid motion.

We let the slight current take us through the giant rocks and found a large yellow-spotted moray eel peering at us from his home in a giant tube sponge. Kate tried to entice him out, but the grumpy eel was obviously in no mood for photos.

I looked down and saw a good-sized mantis shrimp peeking out of his sandy home. The colorful little guy didn't seem

to have any reservations about the camera and crawled out of his hole, posing and dancing energetically.

We scanned the deeper drop-offs around the site hoping to find a few white tip sharks, but we didn't see any. I had supposed that these remote waters would be full of sharks, but Indonesia,



it seems, has been stripped of many of their various shark species. Of course, like most Asian seas, they are fished relentlessly, and the toll is evident. In almost a dozen dives we didn't spot a single shark. My heart is still sad about that; ten years ago, these waters

were teeming with them. As we ascended, a large group of giant trevally swam by. They were big and confident—about a meter each—and they reminded me of a small town street gang arrogantly assessing their territory. They owned that area, and they knew it. They got close enough to give us a few dismissive glances, and then they headed to deeper waters; apparently we weren't





Divers and swirls of scroll coral on reef at Pulau Tulang (above); Wire coral with diver at Pink Point (left)



While we chatted and exchanged stories, I looked out across the bay and realized we only had a little while longer before our captain turned north and set sail for Lembeh Resort in the straight. Kate and I wanted to spend every last moment in the water, so we put on our snorkels and fins and rolled off the side for more.

An hour later, our time had come to an end, and our friends had to physically pull us out of the water. We grumbled and said a sad goodbye to the crystal waters and unblemished beaches. Three days wasn't enough, and I secretly wished our motor would seize, stranding us for another week or so.

Buyat captivated me and leaving was tough. I knew that just to the north some of the most exotic and rare creatures on Earth were waiting, but the remote and

unspoiled dive sites of Buyat Bay had mesmerized me, and I wanted to explore the rest of the area before moving on.

Kate patted my shoulder sympathetically and offered me more taffy. "Here," she smiled. "Maybe this will make you feel better." It did of course—candy always does.

But as we left the bay, I promised myself I'd come back at least once before my diving days were done. I knew that the memories of the dramatic corals and playful villagers would tug at me.

Moreover, my pride had been damaged, and I had a burning desire to redeem myself from the crushing defeat in the potato sack challenge.

Lembeh Resort

—*Indonesian splendor*

We drifted slowly into the natural cove of Lembeh Resort, our little



boat pushing into the fine black sand and towering palms lining the property. Several smiling faces waved to us, as the staff began gathering our gear, taking it to personalized lockers situated next to the boat landing. Kate and I tried carrying our own bags, but the staff would have none of it.

Ana and Miguel showed us to our five-star bungalow perched on a small cliff overlooking the property. The area was shaded by swaying palms and flowering bushes, and our bags were already placed on the large, covered deck. I sipped on a cocktail that had been set out for our arrival, as Kate gushed over the ceiling-less bathroom that would allow for late night soaks with a



Inside-outside bath (above) and view outside room (top) at Lembeh Resort



Lembeh Resort twin bed room

important enough to be concerned with.

Back on the boat, Ana and Miguel passed out fruit wedges, hard candy and taffy, as Kate and I laughed and shared pictures with the rest of our little dive group.



Decorator crab (left);
Pygmy cuttlefish on
coral at Nudi Falls
(right)

could hear Kate gasp through her regulator, as she smiled at me, flashing our hand signal for "Holy crap, that's awesome!"

Anyone who knows me will tell you, I am a certified octopus lover. I find them intensely fascinating and wondrously intriguing. It's hard to explain, but I somehow lose myself in their weirdly beautiful movements and the primeval intelligence that flashes in their eyes. Usually blue-rings are timid and hide once spotted, but this one was guarding a bundle of eggs under her arms and remained out in the open for several minutes.

This brief moment was all it took—I was hooked. Muck diving took hold of me and hasn't let go since.

We kept on finning slowly, and now I was eagerly searching the



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view of the stars and trees.

Lembeh Resort has been ranked as the best resort in North Sulawesi by *Trip Advisor*, and it was obvious why. I can't recall more relaxing and inviting accommodations on any dive trip I have ever been on, and Kate, having spent the better part of two years living in Asia, was absolutely captivated as she sunk into her soft, puffy bed.

To muck dive or not to muck dive

—That's not even a question
The next morning, we headed out early into the famous straight. I

I had never experienced muck diving before, and I wasn't sure what to expect. Honestly, hunting around for infinitesimal creatures hiding in the sand didn't sound all that attractive to me (I am much more of a mega-pelagic, giant killer shark kind of a guy). In fact, I was worried I might find myself bored with the whole affair rather quickly. Our first dive thoroughly disabused me of that idea.

Only ten meters down we hit the black sand bottom and within seconds our guide, with eyes like high powered microscopes, had spotted a blue-ringed octopus. I



Blue-ringed octopus



Flamboyant cuttlefish eggs



Coconut octopus (left); Mandarinfish at Bianca (above); Bald hairy frogfish (right)

sands for signs of movement. After only a few meters, I spied a long-armed octopus peeking out of his hole. "It's scuba Christmas!" I thought to myself, and our guide began brushing a thin metal pointer in the sand trying to coax the chary creature out.

A curious arm, thin and delicate, wiggled from the hole, followed by another. The arms grasped the pointer, and a light game of tug o' war ensued, as our guide pulled the octopus gently out of his hiding place. Obviously feeling exposed, the little guy puffed up in a show of aggression, his long arms contracted and thickened before shooting off backwards like a miniature rocket.

I spent the next hour wide-eyed and giggling. I know that sounds ridiculous, but I did; I felt like a child left overnight in an ice cream store. Everywhere we turned there were more absurdly fascinating and wonderfully bizarre creatures scurrying along the sand or hiding behind the few anemones and soft corals that grew out of the dark seabed.

When we surfaced, all I wanted was a fresh tank and another two hours to explore. The boat crew said that was fine, but they were required to feed us first.

A photographer's paradise Critters at Lembeh, the dive center attached to Lembeh Resort, knows that nearly every diver coming to stay will be bringing a camera, and most of those will not be your average underwater point-and-shoot but seriously technical and seriously expensive equipment. For this reason, they provide visitors with an entire bungalow dedicated to you

and your camera.

Over 20 stations—all replete with charging racks, storage shelves, extra plug-ins and a work area—are prepared for any guest to use at anytime. Most divers left their gear disassembled overnight to dry, and every plug seemed to be full with some apparatus recharging for the next dive. Kate wasn't just impressed, she was downright flabbergasted at the extensive set-up.

The resort also boasts a photo center where high quality prints can be made, cameras and equipment can be rented, strobes can be borrowed, etc. And if something should go really wrong, a piece of your housing breaks for example, the dive center also has—get this—a 3D printer that can actually make custom pieces for your camera for any needed repairs!

Sascha Janson, a camera guru who runs the shop, gave us a close look at the remarkable printer and showed us how it worked. After only



Peacock mantis shrimp



Juvenile barramundi, House Reef



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Golden spearing mantis shrimp; Bus stop chromodoris nudibranch; Critters At Lembeh dive shop; Orange painted frogfish at Bianca; Juvenile ghost pipefish at Goby-A-Crab



Muck madness

By the third day, I was a diver possessed. Muck diving had become my new passion, and I wanted more. The guides saw that I got it.

We were diving four times a day, and the critters kept coming out in droves to fuel my new

addiction. Cuttlefish became commonplace, as did mantis shrimp, candy crabs, seahorses, juvenile barramundi and hairy frogfish. Lembeh Straight, if you have never been, is a wonderland of the odd and astonishing.

Each dive revealed new and exciting creatures I hardly knew existed and more than a few I had never even heard of—eels of every size, color and shape, various scorpionfish and stonefish, Rhinopias, seamoths—fish so queer and peculiar I can't even begin to name them.

On our last dive of the afternoon,



a few key strokes and quick set-up, he made a plastic octopus out of thin air. I still don't know how he did it, but believe me, it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. He has made focus rings, housing buttons and a plethora of other camera parts for guests. Honestly,

it's a modern miracle out in the middle of the Indonesian jungle.

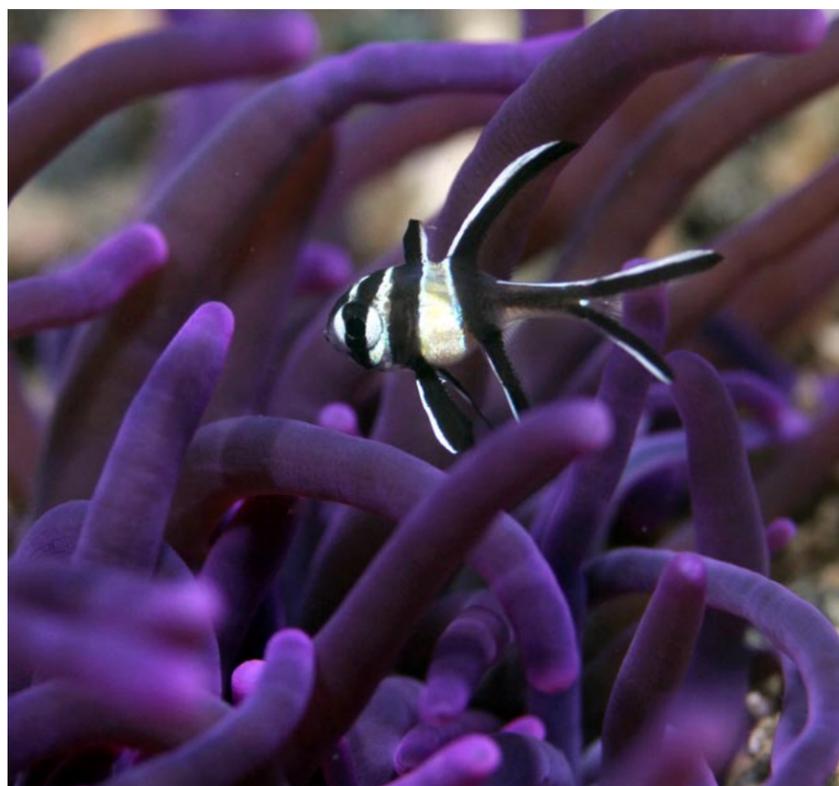
Janson also offers all kinds of photography and video courses, and I can't think of a better place to hone your craft than with the great folks at Lembeh Resort and Critters at Lembeh.

Kate got a nice close encounter with a wonder puss, a creature she was dying to see. I just missed it, as I had—shocker—run out of air and was on the boat when it slipped out of its hole and showcased its long, banded arms and spotted mantle.

We ended the day, as one

does each night at Lembeh, in the refined but comfortable dining room, sipping top-shelf spirits and eating remarkably well prepared satays (and asking for second helpings of the unbelievable chocolate-avacado pudding) surrounded by excited conversation from the day's finds.





One group boasted that they had seen five flamboyant cuttlefish and seven octopi on one dive. We raised a glass and toasted their luck with laughter and good cheer.

Here again, I was reminded why I love traveling and diving as much as I do. I don't think any other activity brings so many people from around the world together in such a pleasing fashion. As we ate and talked about our underwater adventures, I could actually feel the life in each of the guests expand out and fill the

room with happiness and contentment. I know that comes across as a bit cheesy, possibly a trifle sappy and maudlin, but it also happens to be true. And if you haven't had that wave of joy after a day of diving wash over you in a while, I suggest you get out there and get back in your gear as soon as you can.

The water is waiting, and I'm quite sure you have earned it. ■

Editor Kelly LaClaire and underwater photographer Kate Clark are cousins based in Portland, Oregon, USA. They share a passion for worldwide travel, experiencing new peoples and cultures, as well as hacking one another's social media accounts.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Chromodoris magnifica* nudibranch; Candy crab on soft coral; Flying gurnard; Lembeh Resort restaurant; Yellow-edged moray eel in sponge; Cardinalfish in anemone

fact file



North Sulawesi, Indonesia



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, NORTH-SULAWESI.ORG, D. SILCOCK

History Moslem merchants from Persia began visiting Indonesia in the 13th century and established trade links between this country and India and Persia. Along with trade, they propagated Islam among the Indonesian people, particularly along the coastal areas of Java. In 1511, the Portuguese arrived in search of spices 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 and Maluku, also known as the Moluccas. However, it wasn't until the arrival of the Dutch in the early 17th century that Christianity became the predominant religion of North Sulawesi. From 1942 to 1945, Japan occupied Indonesia. Shortly before Japan's surrender in WWII, Indonesia declared its independence. However, it took four years of often brutal fighting, sporadic negotiations, and mediation by the United Nations before the Netherlands finally agreed in 1949 to transfer sovereignty. Strife continued in Indonesia's unstable parliamentary democracy until President Soekarno declared martial law in 1957. Soekarno was removed from power following a fruitless coup in 1965 by alleged Communist sympathizers.

President Suharto ruled Indonesia from 1966 until 1988. Suharto was toppled in 1998 following a round of riots, and in 1999, free and fair legislative elections took place. Indonesia is the world's third most populous democracy, Government: Republic. Capital: Jakarta.

Geography

Located in Southeastern Asia, Indonesia is an archipelago situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Coastline: 54,716km. Terrain consists primarily of coastal lowlands, with interior mountains on larger islands.

Climate Tropical, hot and humid, with more moderate climate in the highlands. The water temperature is normally 28-29°C (84-86°F) year round, with an occasional "chilly" 27°C (82°F) spot. Most divers use 1mm neoprene suits. However, some people prefer 3mm.

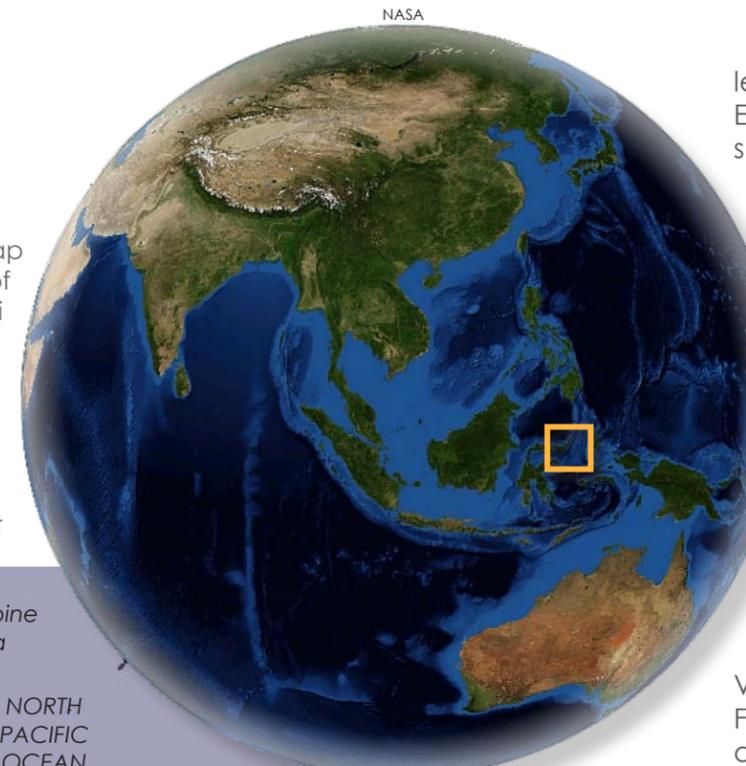
Environmental issues Challenges include industrial

waste water pollution, sewage, urban air pollution, deforestation, smoke and haze due to forest fires. Logging—the rainforests within the combined West Papua/Papua New Guinea land mass are second in size only to those of the Amazon, making it 'the lungs of Asia'. In 2001, there were 57 forest concession-holders in operation around the country and untold other forest ventures operating illegally. Mining—tailings from copper, nickel, and gold mining are real threats.

Economy A vast polyglot nation, Indonesia has experienced modest economic growth

in recent years. Economic advances were made with significant financial reforms. In 2009, when the global financial crisis hit, Indonesia fared well compared to its regional neighbors. It was one of the only G20 members posting growth in 2009, alongside China and India. However, the government still faces ongoing challenges of improving the country's insufficient infrastructure, labor unrest over wages, and high oil prices affecting fuel subsidy programs.

Currency Indonesian Rupiah (IDR). Visa cards, Euros and U.S. Dollars (large bills issued after



RIGHT: Global map with location of North Sulawesi
BELOW: Location of North Sulawesi on map of Indonesia
BOTTOM RIGHT: Lance blennie makes its home in a bottle at Lembeh Strait



1999) are widely accepted. ATM machines in tourist areas offer the best exchange rates, Travellers cheques are becoming quite difficult to use except at banks. Exchange rates: 1EUR=12,723IDR; 1USD= 9,737IDR; 1GBP=15,127IDR; 1AUD= 9,972IDR; 1SGD= 7,908IDR

Population 251,160,124 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: Javanese 40.6%, Sundanese 15%, Madurese 3.3%, Minangkabau 2.7%, Betawi 2.4%, Bugis 2.4%, Banten 2%, Banjar 1.7% (2000 census). Religions: Muslim 86.1%, Protestant 5.7%, Roman Catholic 3%, Hindu 1.8% (2000 census). Note: Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Visitors are encouraged to respect local traditions and dress modestly. Internet users: 20 million (2009)

Language Bahasa Indonesian is the official language, plus English, Dutch and local dia-

lects are spoken. In tourist areas, English, Spanish and German are spoken.

Health There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever, as well as vectorborne diseases such as chikungunya, dengue fever and malaria. Check with WHO or your dive operator for prophylaxis recommendations. Larium is not effective. Bring insect repellents containing DEET. International Certificate of Vaccination required for Yellow Fever if arriving from infected area within five days.

Decompression chamber

Manado: Malalayang Hospital tel: +62 0811 430913
Makassar: Rumah Sakit Umum Wahidin Sudirohusodo tel: +62 0411 (584677) or 584675

Travel/Visa/Security

Passport valid for six months beyond intended stay is required. There is a Visa-On-Arrival for 35 countries including USA, UK, most European and Asian countries. It is US\$25 for a stay of up to 30 days. Although there is an active independence movement in Papua, tourists have not been impacted.

Web sites

Indonesia Travel
www.indonesia.travel/en

