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Off the North East tip of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi lies the Lembeh strait. Fierce currents coupled with a barren, black sand landscape have made the strait a virtual underwater desert. With little shelter for predator or prey, the residents of this black sand sahara have had to adapt to their surroundings, becoming masters of the art of deception and camouflage. A perfect subject for Nick Baker to investigate in the second season of his Animal Planet series *Nick Baker's Weird Creatures*, the mimic octopus has been championed as the king of this art.

The mimic octopus (*Thaumoctopus mimicus*) was discovered by Cephalopod expert Mark Norman in the Lembeh strait around the late nineties. He attributed to it the ability to mimic other animals that share its environment. Mimicry is not uncommon in nature, but until the mimic octopus, no animal had been credited with the ability to impersonate several different species at will. The most widely recognised and photographed mimics are the banded sea krait, flounder and crinoid.

Hundreds of thousands of dive magazines and several documentaries have been sold off the back of the mimic octopus's talented impersonations. To get an idea of the kind of accolades this octopus has garnered, the trusted web resource that is Wikipedia goes so far as to suggest that the mimic wasn't discovered until 1998 because divers mistakenly thought they were seeing the animals the mimic was impersonating – an impressive pedigree indeed. Making a documentary on an animal as intriguing and elusive as the mimic octopus is a real privilege, so we at Scubazoo were delighted when production company, Icon, decided to go with the mimic as one of their target creatures.

NATURE
The Mimic Myth
BEHIND THE SCENES OF DOCUMENTARY SHOOT

▲ Mimic octopus,
Thaumoctopus mimicus.

► Nick Baker on camera
with a mimic octopus.

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During the first few days of the shoot Nick had some amazing encounters with frogfish, pigmy seahorses the size of a grain of rice, ghost pipefish and a myriad of other camouflaged critters. Probably the highlight of these encounters was a rare and beautiful flamboyant cuttlefish captured on film feeding on a goby right in front of Nick. One of the three main groups of Cephalopods, cuttlefish are closely related to octopus. They share the octopus's ability to not only change the colour of their skin but to also change the texture by using a layer of muscles connected to its dermis. After swallowing the goby, our flamboyant cuttlefish put on a spectacular display, rearing up on its modified tentacles with bands of yellow and red strobing over its mantle – almost as if in a celebration dance.

Halfway through the shoot, just as we were starting to get edgy with the lack of mimic action, our “lead actor” finally arrived during an evening dive. Nick was finally face to face with the mimic octopus – the alleged master of disguise. Sitting motionless on the substrate, its skin colour perfectly matched the colour of the sand – it was only when it began to move that it became visible.

Doing its impression of the flounder, the mimic began to move across the volcanic sand with our presenter following



▲ (From left) Simon Enderby passes the high-definition video camera up to the support boat; The striped frogfish (*Antennarius striatus*), seen waving its worm-like lure, is one of Lembeh Strait's many bizarre critters; Aerial shot of Lembeh Strait.

▼ Flamboyant cuttlefish (*Metasepia pfefferi*) on a reef.

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closely behind. As Nick continued his pursuit, the octopus changed its motion to a more typical octopus style with its head first and tentacles streaming behind, finally releasing ink and shooting up into the mid-water. Initially a tangled mess of tentacles, the mimic descended through the water column, forming a more regular shape – its head at the lowest point, tentacles wrapped around and trailing towards the surface, mimicking a crinoid perfectly.

Right there and then, we witnessed the best example of mimicry – as demonstrated by the *Thaumoctopus mimicus*. Its mimicry was extremely convincing, and from a distance would be indistinguishable from the real thing. Nick again discussed the motives here for this disguise: why would a creature want to be mistaken for a crinoid? The fair assumption would be that they are fairly unpalatable and have very few predators, so these could be as good reasons as any. Yet on the flip side, were you to construct an inert lifelike model of a long-armed octopus and drop it through the water column you would undoubtedly find that it formed the same shape, which is also the most efficient way to reach the sea floor in a short space of time.

Upon reaching the safety of the sand, our mimic immediately sought the shelter of the nearest hole to escape the attentions of the film crew. By nestling into the hole and retracting its tentacles a few at a time it passed through two more disguises: the “sea snake” consists of a single striped tentacle remaining outside the hole, moving in a wriggling fashion; once this tentacle is retracted and only the eyes remain above ground, there is a passing resemblance to a jawfish.

So in true documentary style, Nick and the film crew had more questions than answers by the end of the shoot on the mimic's authenticity as a true animal impersonator. It is fairly easy to be sceptical and assert that the mimic is just moving around minding its own business in the most efficient and streamlined way it knows how. However, with so little real understanding of the biology and behaviour of these fascinating and intelligent creatures, there will always be an argument for the believer. And let's face it: it is always more fun to believe. ■

How to Get There

Silk Air has four direct flights every week from Singapore to Manado (Mon/Wed/Fri/Sat), where one-hour overland transfers are available to Kungkungan Bay Resort. Visitors can also connect through Bali or Jakarta.

Best Time to Travel

All year round as visibility is not a factor in muck diving.

Attractions

Lembeh is famous for what is known as exotic muck diving. The plain black sand sites make the area famous with their profusion of strange and beautiful attractions. Visitors can expect crazy underwater macro critters including the mimic octopus, cuttlefish, pigmy seahorses and much more.

Accommodation

Built on a former coconut plantation on the Lembeh straight, Kungkungan Bay Resort offers a variety of accommodation from cottage suites to traditional houses, all recently refurbished.

Currency

Indonesian Rupiah is the local currency but US Dollars are accepted in the resort.

Food

Breakfast and lunch are buffet-style to allow divers more time between dives. Evening dining is *a la carte*. Meals are a mix of local Indonesian dishes and western favourites.



ROGER MUNNS is a natural history cameraman and photographer. He has been a member of the Scubazoo team based in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo since 2001. Rogers film credits include *Great Ocean Adventures*, *The Really Wild Show*, *Edge of Existence*, and David Attenborough's recently aired series *Life in Cold Blood*.

JASON ISLEY, ROGER MUNNS and **SIMON ENDERBY** are all based out of Scubazoo's headquarters in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. The combination of styles and individual photographer's passions gives Scubazoo a great diversity of images.

