

encounters with the monstrous and the marvellous

Hiding away in the nooks and crannies of the reef are some of the most bizarre creatures the sea has to offer, unimaginable little monsters that even the most creative of us couldn't dream up.



PHOTO ROGER MUNNIS

Until a few years ago, most divers were only interested in seeing big animals. Sightings of turtles, manta rays and sharks were all that kept divers happy. However, with more and more divers taking an active interest in underwater photography, the number of people interested in "muck diving" has simply exploded.

The term "muck diving" refers to the conditions under which macro photography usually takes place, as most of the crazy critters can be found in areas that are very close to the coast, which in turn can be quite murky and silty.

Villages close to these areas add more meaning to this term as most of their rubbish is simply thrown into the sea, adding to the "muck". However, not all macro sites have 3m visibility and silty conditions, although it does seem that many of the best sites are indeed like this. There are many locations now within the Indo-Pacific region that provide great macro sites:

Mabul and Kapalai in Malaysia; Bali, Ambon, Komodo and North Sulawesi in Indonesia; Anilao in the Philippines and Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea. Of particular interest is the Lembeh Strait in North Sulawesi, which is one of our favourite macro sites, due to the abundance of crazy critters there.

Despite its small size, the nudibranch or sea slug is, by far, one of the showiest and most interesting creatures among the crazy critters. I have heard many a vocal diver scream with excitement through his or her regulator upon finding a species of nudibranch they had not seen before.

Nudibranchs are essentially underwater slugs, with a pair of protrusions on top of their heads acting as a pair of sense organs, and a tuft of gills on the dorsal surface. Nudibranchs are able to absorb and store noxious chemicals from their prey, mostly hydroids, sponges and ascidians. They are also hermaphrodites, meaning that a single creature possesses both male and female sexual organs. ▶



PHOTO ROGER MUNNIS



PHOTO JASON ISLEY

clockwise, from top:
A selection of multicoloured nudibranchs — *Halgerda malleo*, Mabul Island, Sabah, Malaysia; *Phyllodesmium briarium*, Lembeh Strait, Indonesia; a pair of mating *Risbecia tryoni*, Kapalai Island, Sabah, Malaysia; *Glossodoris rufomarginatus*, also mating, Lembeh Strait, Indonesia; *Nembrotha kubaryana*, Kapalai Island, Sabah, Malaysia.

opposite:
A pair of *Mexichromis macropus* nudibranchs seem to like each other, Mabul Island, Sabah, Malaysia.



PHOTO SEOK WUN AU SONG



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IT'S A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL

Small crustaceans may not be on the same level as nudibranchs when it comes to variety of colours, but there are a few species that stand out from the pack. These have evolved with colourful liveries and interesting shapes, which are particularly noticeable when interacting with other

species. The symbiotic relationships between many shrimps and their hosts are some of the reef's most fascinating phenomena. Finding a good, active cleaning station can keep an underwater photographer busy for an entire dive trying to capture, for example, the moment the shrimp enters the grouper's mouth to begin his chore of cleaning away debris. ▶

top: **Imperial shrimp (*Periclimenes imperator*) getting a free ride on a nudibranch (*Ceratosoma tenue*), Lembeh Strait, Indonesia.**

opposite, from top: **The Zebra crab (*Zebrida adamsii*) living among the spines of an urchin, Lembeh Strait, Indonesia; the harlequin shrimp (*Hymenocera elegans*) with its oversized claws, Lembeh Strait, Indonesia.**

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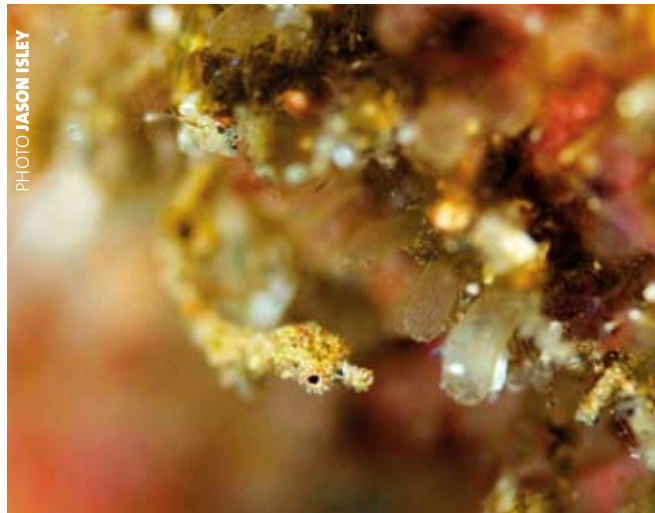


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MIGHTY MITES

Seahorses and pipefish are some of the underwater world's more fascinating families of creatures, numbering more than 50 genera. For critters that mostly sit in one spot, they can be the most frustrating to photograph, as they always seem to turn away from the camera at the last moment. The first pygmy seahorse was only discovered a few years ago, but now it is believed that there are around seven different species in the world, making them a popular subject for many macro photographers. ▶



PHOTO ROGER MUNNIS

clockwise, from top:
Winged pipefish (*Halicampus macrorhynchus*), Lembeh Strait, Indonesia;
a variation of the Denise pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus denise* variant), Raja Ampat Islands, West Papua, Indonesia;
pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibantii*), Mabul Island, Sabah, Malaysia;
still to be classified species of pygmy pipehorse, Lembeh Strait, Indonesia;
a Harlequin ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus paradoxus*) hiding among the arms of a crinoid, Mabul Island, Sabah, Malaysia;
thorny seahorse (*Hippocampus histrix*), Lembeh Strait, Indonesia.



PHOTOS JASON ISLEY



WEIRD AND WACKY

At the top of the list of weird and wacky critters is the Ambon scorpionfish. With two large “tendrils” growing like antlers over their eyes, these fish rock backwards and forwards as they slowly move across the seabed. Scorpionfish have always been a popular photographic subject, especially for amateurs, as the creatures remain fairly static and move extremely slowly, allowing the photographer plenty of time for framing and creating dramatic angles. The most colourful scorpionfish are the members of the *Rhinopias* family. The paddle-flap, weedy and lacy all come in various colours and are much sought after by all underwater photographers. ▶

clockwise, from above:
A leaf scorpionfish (*Taenianotus triacanthus*), Mabul Island, Sabah, Malaysia; the faintly purple form of the weedy scorpionfish, Lembeh Strait, Indonesia; the yellow form of the weedy scorpionfish (*Rhinopias frondosa*), Lembeh Strait, Indonesia; a pair of Ambon scorpionfish (*Pteroidichthys amboinensis*) move slowly over the black sand of Lembeh Strait, Indonesia; a close-up of this Ambon scorpionfish shows just how weird and wacky it looks, Lembeh Strait, Indonesia.

Frogfish are quite capable of swallowing prey the same size as themselves, thanks to their large mouths and expandable stomach cavities.



PHOTO JASON ISLEY

RAZZLE DAZZLE

Frogfish, also known as anglerfish, come in a dazzling array of sizes, shapes and colours. The name “anglerfish” is derived from the creature’s lure apparatus located above the eyes, which is periodically wriggled in front of its mouth to attract prey. Being ambush predators, they have one of the fastest strikes in the animal kingdom and are quite capable of swallowing prey the same size as themselves, thanks to their large mouths and expandable stomach cavities. We once filmed a hairy frogfish in Lembeh Strait stalking and catching a flounder larger than itself. After 20 minutes of frustrating repositioning, it finally gave up and left the half-dead flounder on the sandy bottom.

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PHOTO SEOK WUN AU SONG

From top:
This frogfish (*Antennarius striatus*) has eyes bigger than his belly! Lembeh Strait, Indonesia; juvenile clown frogfish (*Antennarius maculatus*), Kapalai Island, Sabah, Malaysia.

opposite page:
Portrait of a painted frogfish (*Antennarius pictus*), Mabul Island, Sabah, Malaysia.



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