

## THE JEWELS OF THE OCEAN: NUDIBRANCH SEA SLUGS

Your first reaction to the heading above is almost certainly one of doubt. How can slugs be the jewels of the ocean? Are they not slimy, colorless, and elemental animals? That may be the case for the slugs seen on land, but underwater they are exotic, colorful, and complex. In fact, from a diver's perspective, they are some of the most fascinating and intriguing life forms under the ocean's surface. It is because of their peculiar behaviors and mating rituals, their sumptuous colors and hues, their intricate makeup and shapes, their vast varieties and distinctive defensive mechanisms, and their sharp survival instincts.

This section features slugs referred to as nudibranchs, or as my divers call them "nudis". The word nudibranch means naked gills, and is pronounced "new-dih-bronk". Nudibranchs are tricky to find despite their bright color. They can be as small as six millimeters (0.25 in.) and can only be found by looking attentively on the reef, or on the rocky sandy bottom. More than likely, if you look for their favorite snacks, you may find one. Once you do find a nudibranch, you want to spend the rest of your dive hovering near it. You want to study its intriguing detail and astonishing color combinations, observe its behavior, and etch that moment in your mind for later discussion with your dive buddies.

Most nudibranchs are hermaphrodites, meaning they carry both eggs and sperm and cross fertilize each other. They are carnivores, grazing on sponges, anemones, algae, coral, and sometimes even other nudibranchs. There are more than 3,000 known species worldwide, in different shapes, sizes, and color [24]. That number grows each day as new nudibranchs are discovered and identified. This section features fourteen species of nudibranchs. I hope you will agree that they are magically exquisite and true jewels of the underwater world. A dive with nudis is a perfect dive.

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**HERON ARDEADORIS** (*Ardeadoris Egretta*) / **SIZE: 10 cm (4 in.)**

**INSTINCTS ALERTING OF DANGER** All nudibranchs breathe through their exposed gills (the feathery end) and use their two highly sensitive receptors to detect danger. Their receptors, located on top of their head, are called rhinophores which means nose and carrier in Greek.

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