

The Underwater Serengeti: Lionfish (Pterois)
Text and images copyright Stewart L. Sy, all rights reserved

The scene in *Naked Gun* where Leslie Nielsen drops a pen into a tank of "deadly poisonous lionfish" makes me cringe! Hollywood's portrayal of animals can often be described as creative, especially so for critters living beneath the water's surface, my favorite place to photograph! If we were to subscribe to the tales told by movies, every shark would be a man-eating monster and every lionfish out to poison each swimmer to cross its path.



The poisonous spines of the Clearfin Lionfish extend nearly the length of their body! Notice how the spines extend backwards, providing the lionfish with an excellent defense against predators in pursuit.



Lionfish and their cousins do have poisonous spines, which can cause extreme pain when venom is injected into a swimmer's body. However, the spines are used primarily for defense. The defense mechanism of a lionfish is immediately to jam its head into a convenient nook or cranny in the reef immediately when the animal deems it is in danger. It flares its spines, which all point backwards, at the perceived threat. I can't even count the photos I've taken and tossed of a hind-end view of a lionfish, buried in the reef. The ratio of throwaways to keeper images can be fairly low for this species despite the fact they are a slow swimming fish.

Lionfish are active hunters, typically found under reef ledges during the day or out on the reef at night. Lionfish feed by suddenly sucking a large quantity of water into their mouths and expelling it out their gill slits. Some species actually use their fins to direct prey against the reef while hunting. It all happens in the blink of an eye, and the suction will pull in any fish unlucky enough to be within roughly an inch.

Lionfish range in size anywhere from four inches (10 cm) to about fifteen inches (38 cm). Some, such as the Clearfin Lionfish, have spines nearly as long as their body! Conversely, the fins are shorter for the aptly named Shortfin Lionfish.

Lionfish are a joy to shoot for the underwater photographer and are a beautiful creature for all others to admire.

Photo, left: Lionfish are active hunters. This Spottfin was prowling around the walls of Balicasag Island during a night dive.

Photo, right: This lionfish was photographed at a dive site called the Drydock in Puerto Galera. The site lies in 90 feet of water and is an artificial reef, an old dry dock that was sunk in the 1990's. This site offers fantastic fish life; however, the dive is relatively short due to the depth.



Stewart Sy has been diving for over ten years and has been deeply involved in underwater photography for the past six years. For more images (underwater and others), please visit his website at www.final-frame.com.

Feel free to send your comments on this review to the [editors](#) at NatureScapes.Net.

[COVER](#) [HOME](#) [GUIDELINES](#) [FORUMS](#) [MEMBERSHIP](#) [WORKSHOPS](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [LINKS](#)

All content on this site is copyrighted material as indicated. Unauthorized use or reproduction is prohibited.