

I was caught in a tropical storm,
more like a typhoon, a tornado underwater.
The dark enormous cloud is one huge mass,
bigger than the Beijing Olympic stadium!
At times it moved rhythmically to the surface
swell, and so often it engulfed the reef top
in its entirety. This storm is unique,
the colossal cloud comprised of fish,
Nine million sardine-like baitfish!

CHRISTINE A. LEE

*Nine
million
fishes at Pescador*

Well, it depends on who is counting and the number of fingers and toes you can commandeer for the task in this surrealistic seascape. I was on a ride, sailing in and out of the ebb and flow of fish, wary of sharks, but surreptitiously hoping to bump into the 11 meter whale sharks that are known to dwell in these waters. I was not drunk, as it was only 8am but will happily indulge in a glass of champagne or two to celebrate the experience.

Engulfed in a liquid universe, I was swimming within a milky way of fishes off Pescador Island. Located in Moalboal, on the southwestern coast of Cebu, Philippines, it's official website describes it as "the diving paradise of Cebu". Indeed, it is one of the oldest dive destinations in South East Asia and is the best kept secret of the Philippines. With an irresistible tip from the intrepid underwater photographer, Michael AW, I was directed to this location and Swedish dive instructor Michael Petterson, who operates the Kasai Village Beach Resort

was my host and guide. Pescador Island, 20 minutes from the Kasai Village beach, harbours one of the most spectacular marine environments in the world; the reef is a meadow of lush coral outcrops, soft corals, sponges, worms and millions of anemones that live on the branches that inhabit the steep reef walls – it is truly a sight to behold. But what makes the island an amazing experience are the sardines. They come by the millions, the Filipino version of South Africa's famed Sardine Run but without the feeding frenzy. It is a spellbinding display of Nature's marvellous synchronicity as sardines in astounding numbers swim in perfect grace and harmony. The endless visibility of a never ending trail of sardines is hypnotic awe that left me stupefied till my dive computer read 42m!

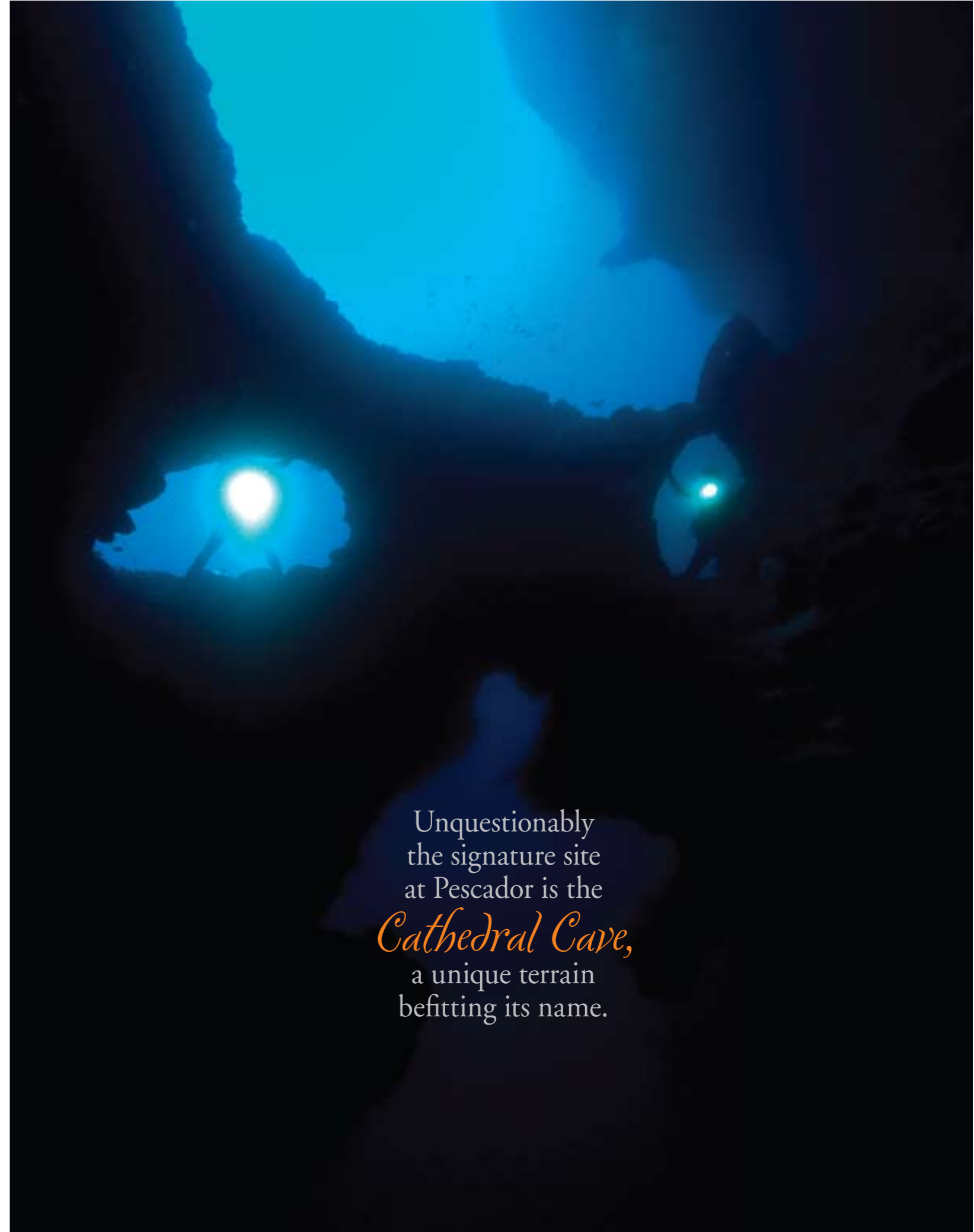
The steep walls and sheer cliffs that plunge to depths beyond 300m in these Pescadorian waters are a treat for aficionados who love the smaller animals: pygmy scorpionfishes and seahorses with nudibranchs aplenty and 12 inched Spanish dancers and frogfishes, not forgetting the

schools of sweetlips, snappers and groupers that add to the sight. From February to May, destiny may well grant the company of eleven metre whale sharks.

Unquestionably the signature site at Pescador is the Cathedral Cave, a unique terrain befitting its name. Descending one afternoon into its chamber through a chimney three metres from the surface, I touched bottom at 38m. Looking up towards the surface, two hollows like the eyes on a skeleton defined the light from the sky. It was privileged moment of solitude bathed in an indigo blue light that only few will experience. A divine aura filled me as I ascended, humbly breathing in the presence of the ocean's quiet immensity. Swimming through the right eye of the skull, I collided into a school of Midnight snappers, which marked the shift to a different reality. In this transitory state I hovered to expel excessive nitrogen and Tata my dive guide poignantly affirmed nature's beauty and mystery as he pointed out two light blue Giant Anglerfish blending in seamlessly on similarly colored tube sponges which I nearly missed.

Right:
THE REEF IS A MEADOW OF LUSH CORAL OUTCROPS, soft corals, sponges, worms and millions of anemones that live on the branches that inhabit the steep reef walls – it is truly a sight to behold.

Opp. page:
LOOKING UP TOWARDS THE SURFACE, two hollows like the eyes on a skeleton defined the light from the sky.



Unquestionably the signature site at Pescador is the *Cathedral Cave*, a unique terrain befitting its name.



Left: **THE RESIDENT POPULATION** of Green Sea turtles at the wall off Kasai Village.
Opp. page: **THE SEA FAN** forest in all its colourful glory in Savedra.

Near the end of my five-day sojourn at Pescador, Michael Peterson enticed me to explore other locations, one of them, called the Savedra, the first marine sanctuary in the area. It's dense jungle of gorgonian red, orange, and yellow sea fans and whip corals hence aptly named the Sea Fan forest. These ubiquitous tree-like animals are everywhere, from 10m below the surface to 30m, blossoming on rocks and outcrops on the steep reef slope. Schools of jacks and surgeonfish live here in abundance with the occasional appearance of an Napoleon wrasse

(*Chelonia undulata*) attesting the success of this marine protected area.

Of course Michael also impressed upon me to explore the wall off Kasai Village resort, which is particularly known for its resident population of green sea turtles. Its close proximity to the resort makes this site a popular sampling ground for biologists conducting marine research on the Cebu reef's population densities and diversities. Marine scientists have often described the Philippines as the Apex of the Coral Triangle. During

this season, whale sharks are known to make regular appearances right along the Kasai Wall. Sighting of the biggest fish in the ocean is now a norm for the locals at Moalboal. Of course, I was told by the local staff the all so often heard cliché, "you should have been here last week!" Perhaps it is ordained that I must return not just for the whale shark, but my addiction to Pescador's enchanting nine million fishes! ○

For more information on Pescador visit: www.KasaiVillage.com



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