



INTO THE WILD

We sent marine artist and illustrator Francesca Page to Cocos Island to experience the high-energy diving of the Eastern Tropical Pacific. Here is her unique report with watercolours and line drawings

Hammerheads by Francesca Page

Cocos Island's underwater world is incredibly diverse, magical, and wild. It is home to historical pirates, schooling hammerheads, bait balls, peculiar-looking fish, and everything in between! Costa Rica's marine biodiversity is intense: there are nearly 7,000 reported marine species inhabiting Costa Rican waters, comprising 3.5 per cent of the world's documented marine species.

To get to Cocos Island is an adventure in itself. You must take a 36-hour boat journey from Puntarenas on the western coast of Costa Rica. Fortunately, when I went, the sea was calm, but it can be a rough crossing. Four hours into the journey you lose phone signal at about the same time as you reach the deeper blue waters beyond the continental shelf – the wild Pacific Ocean. While making the crossing you will come across plenty

of marine life: pods of dolphins playing in the wake of the boat; great frigate birds hunting for their dinner; flying fish and, if you are lucky, whales popping up from nowhere to say hello. The closer we got to Cocos Island, the more the magic began to unfold.

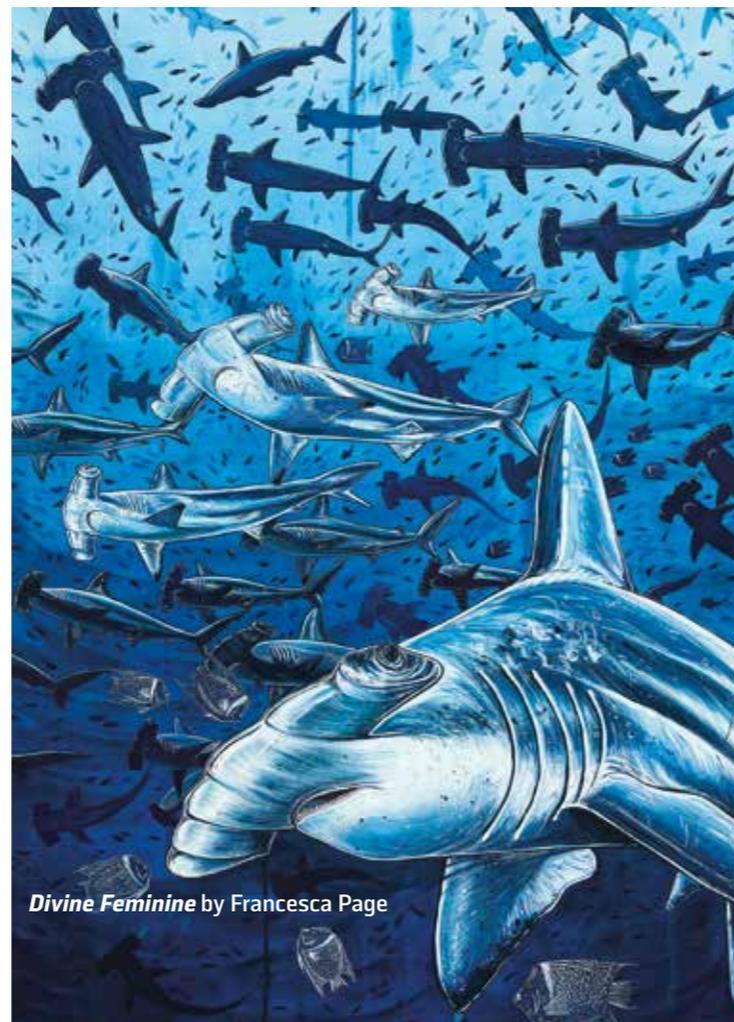
We woke up to find ourselves moored off a strange and slightly spooky island. While sipping a coffee outside on the deck I saw it properly, and it felt as if I had morphed into a character in a pirate movie. Thick jungle covers steep volcanic cliffs. Black sand beaches were dotted with ghostly looking palm trees, and there was a cacophonous hum of birds preparing for the day ahead. It was on this first morning that I saw a tiger shark jump out of the water and catch a brown booby for its breakfast. Chomp! Everybody gasped. All over in a flash. This was the start of an epic week of diving.

The diving is as wild as the island and, as such, not for beginners. If you love a challenge, crazy currents, adventure, and occasionally dipping into tiger shark-infested waters, then Cocos Island is for you. On some dives the currents are so strong we had to descend via a mooring line until we reached the bottom, or to a cleaning station. It's a thrilling experience to slowly make your way down the line with more and more life

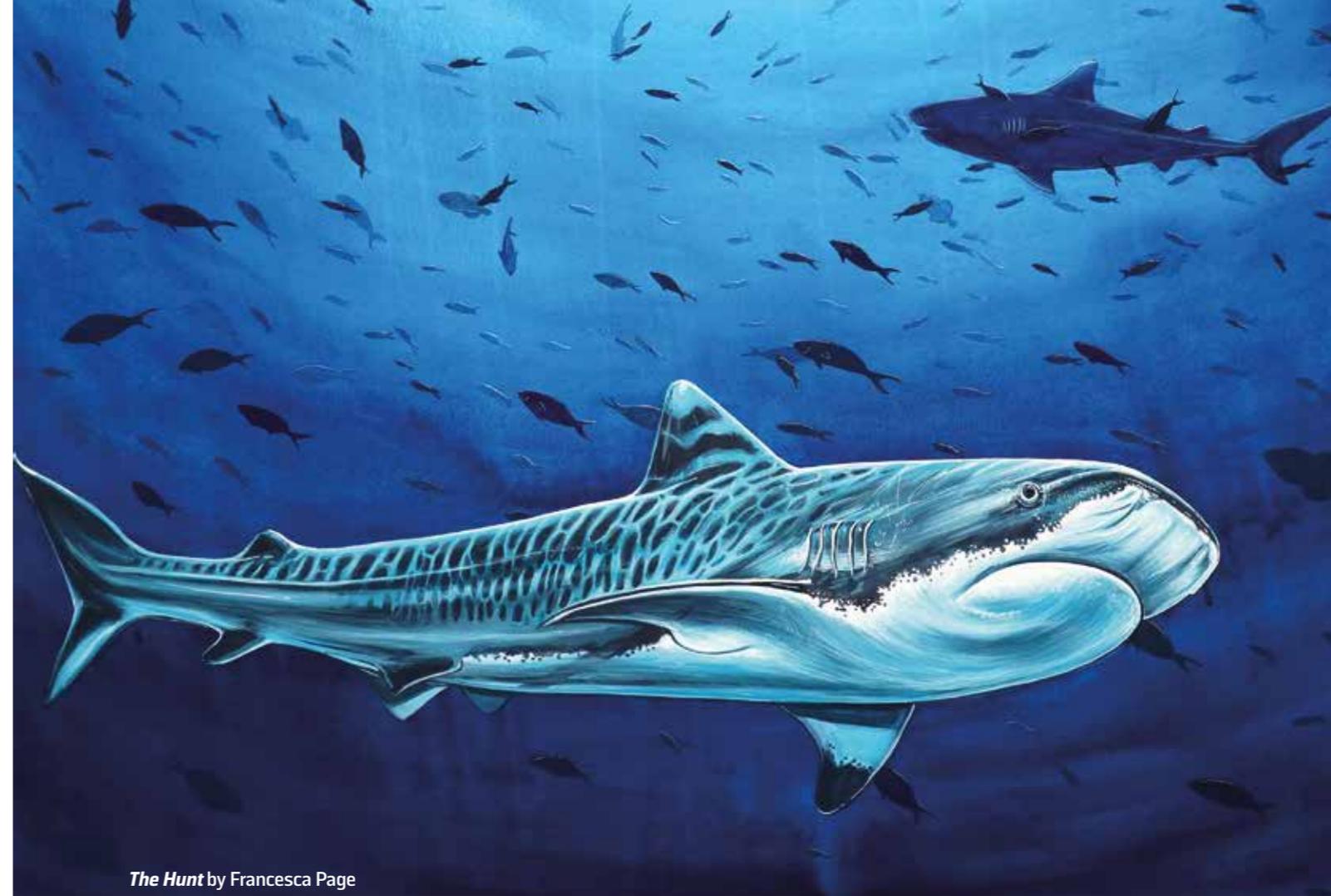


Heading for a dive in Cocos

Gemma Marie Davis



Divine Feminine by Francesca Page



The Hunt by Francesca Page



Out of the murky waters they came, covered in mating scars ... suddenly I was surrounded

appearing from the rocks below the deeper we got. I remember one of my first dives was at 'Manuelita Outside', a site with three very distinct cleaning stations and a near-constant flow of sharks. It is one of the most iconic spots at Cocos Island, and is known for epic, sharky, drift dives. It is one of the best places to observe all kinds of creatures, from spotted eagle rays to Galápagos sharks, oceanic manta rays and whale sharks. It is also a great place to encounter schooling bigeye jacks and scalloped hammerhead sharks. I dived into the murky, blue-grey water in front of a rocky, volcanic wall covered in sea urchins, algae, barnacles and some hard corals. This dive had a crazy surge, the strongest I have experienced, and the swell pushed us up and down by as much as five metres. In Cocos, you tend to find the most extreme conditions bring the most life.

At first the visibility was poor, but as we slowly drifted around the craggy walls to shelter from the surge, the water started to clear and we settled down. I wedged my fins into some rocks to keep stable, and the wait for the hammerheads began. Five minutes later, out of the murky cobalt waters they came, covered in mating scars, and ready for a thorough clean. Before I could blink, three cruised over my head, and suddenly I was



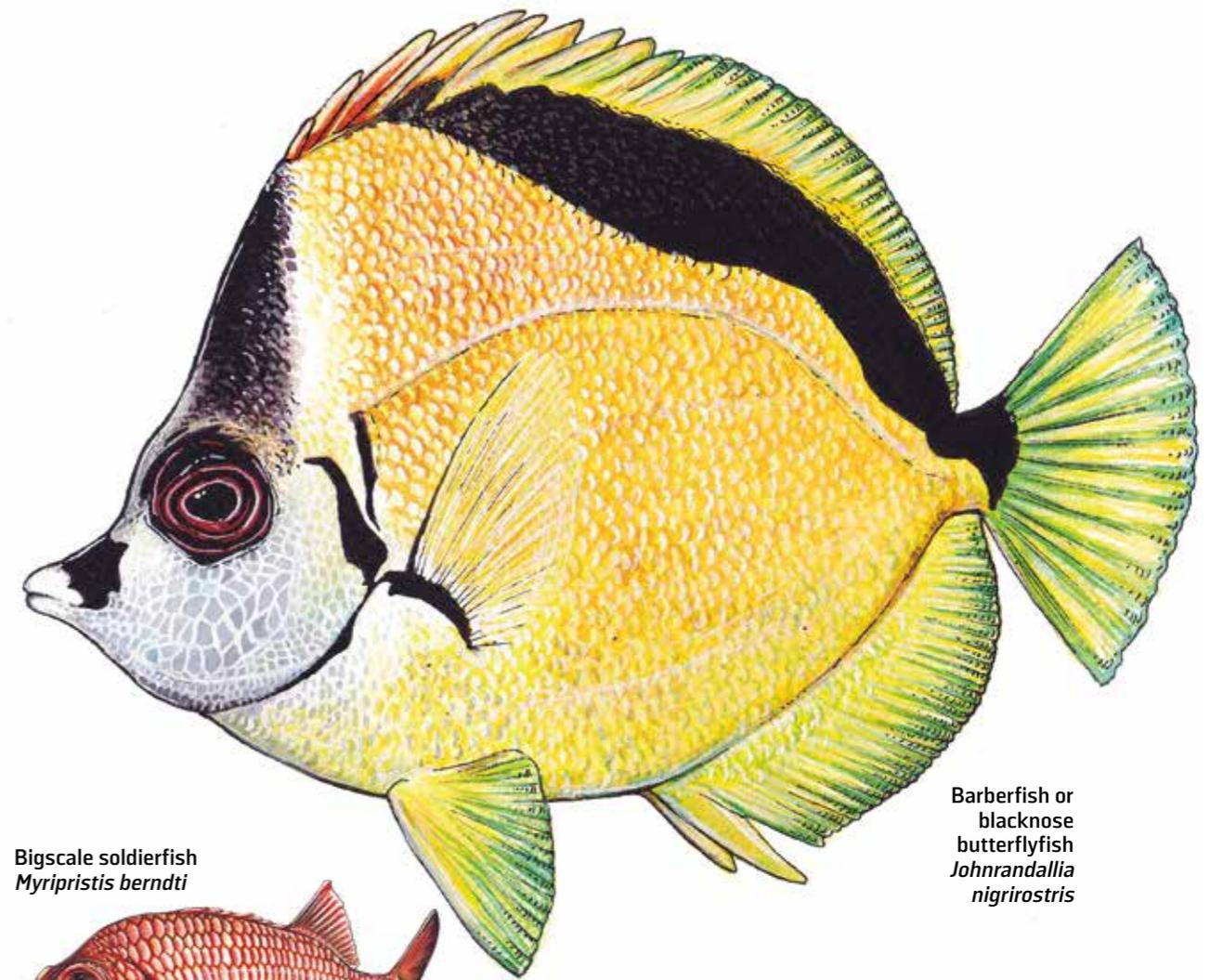
surrounded. The contrast between the yellow and red cleaning fish, the grey of the sharks and the blue water behind was beautiful.

A fascinating recurring theme you will witness in Cocos Island is that of symbiotic relationships. Every dive is centred around cleaning stations situated at 25 to 30 metres of depth. From here you will hide behind the volcanic rocks, staying as quiet as possible to encourage shy sharks to head towards you to where they get cleaned by fish such as wrasses, barberfish, and king angelfish, which congregate on rocky outcrops. The hammerheads slow down and give a very noticeable signal by flashing their bellies at the cleaner fish. The cleaner fish then know it's time to emerge and begin grooming the shark. Suddenly, a monochrome world of blues and greys bursts into life with vibrant colour. These small fish show absolutely no fear of the sharks when the predators are in 'being cleaned' mode. The sharks get rid of parasites and the cleaner fish get a delicious meal. Symbiosis in action.

Cocos Island is best known for the massive schools of scalloped hammerhead sharks that congregate around

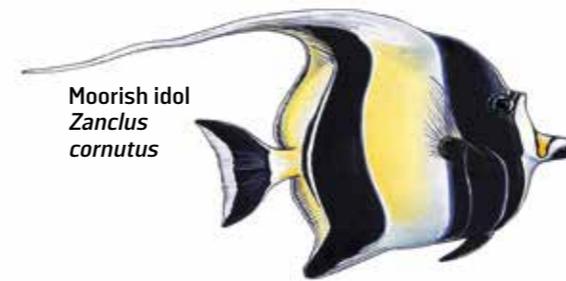
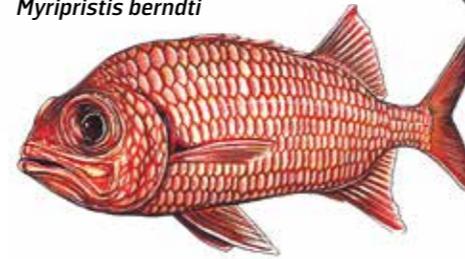


The schools move as if in a dynamic trance; a scene of pure magic and decidedly female energy

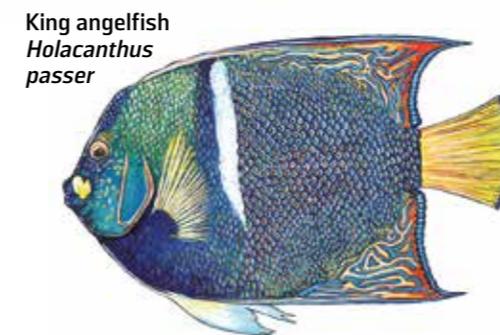


Barberfish or blacknose butterflyfish
Johnrandallia nigrirostris

Bigscale soldierfish
Myripristis berndti



Moorish idol
Zanclus cornutus



King angelfish
Holacanthus passer

the seamounts, all swimming in the same direction (usually against the current). Witnessing hundreds of these powerful bodies moving gracefully and effortlessly in the expanse of the ocean is a transcendent experience. Normally, animals form groups with the goal of finding protection in numbers. However, scalloped hammerheads have very few natural predators (perhaps here just other larger sharks). Therefore, safety in numbers is probably not the school's main purpose. Another twist to this mystery is that male hammerheads are rarely seen schooling. Experts estimate that up to 90 per cent of schooling hammerheads at Cocos Island are female. Scientists believe these schools to be a part of a mating ritual, with the larger, dominant, and more desirable females forming the heart of the school, and a few males swimming alongside trying to woo the largest female. The mating process for sharks is aggressive and brutal, with the male shark biting the female in the process. Mating scars can be seen all over the scalloped hammerheads and are a telltale sign that you are looking at a female. The schools move as if in a dynamic trance; a scene of pure magic and decidedly female energy.



Wild Love by Francesca Page

In addition to schooling hammerheads, there are some other amazing encounters to be had. For instance, hundreds of whitetip reef sharks hunting, Galápagos sharks cruising, and silky sharks meandering out in the blue. You might spot some of the seven species of rays found in Costa Rica, which inhabit both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, as well as Cocos Island. My favourite rays to share the water with were the marble rays and the majestic spotted eagle rays. A marble ray is easily identified by its grey and white mottled skin. They are incredibly graceful, and they love to rest on the corals, rocks, and sandy bottoms. Whether they are travelling solo or in small groups, you are likely to see them soar elegantly through the water. One of my best encounters was when a small group slowly flew by me, some soaring overhead and others gliding either side of me, their wings in a wave-like motion. The diver is suddenly engulfed in a symphony of grey, white and blue. The spotted eagle rays were the biggest I had ever seen, a midnight blue vision illuminated with star-like spots. They would come out of the depths for a fly-by, sometimes in groups, but mostly alone.

I particularly enjoyed the end of the dives, breaking away from the rocky pinnacles, and drifting out into the blue to commence our safety stops. This is where a dive



The diver is suddenly engulfed in a symphony of grey, white and blue



The dramatic volcanic walls of Cocos

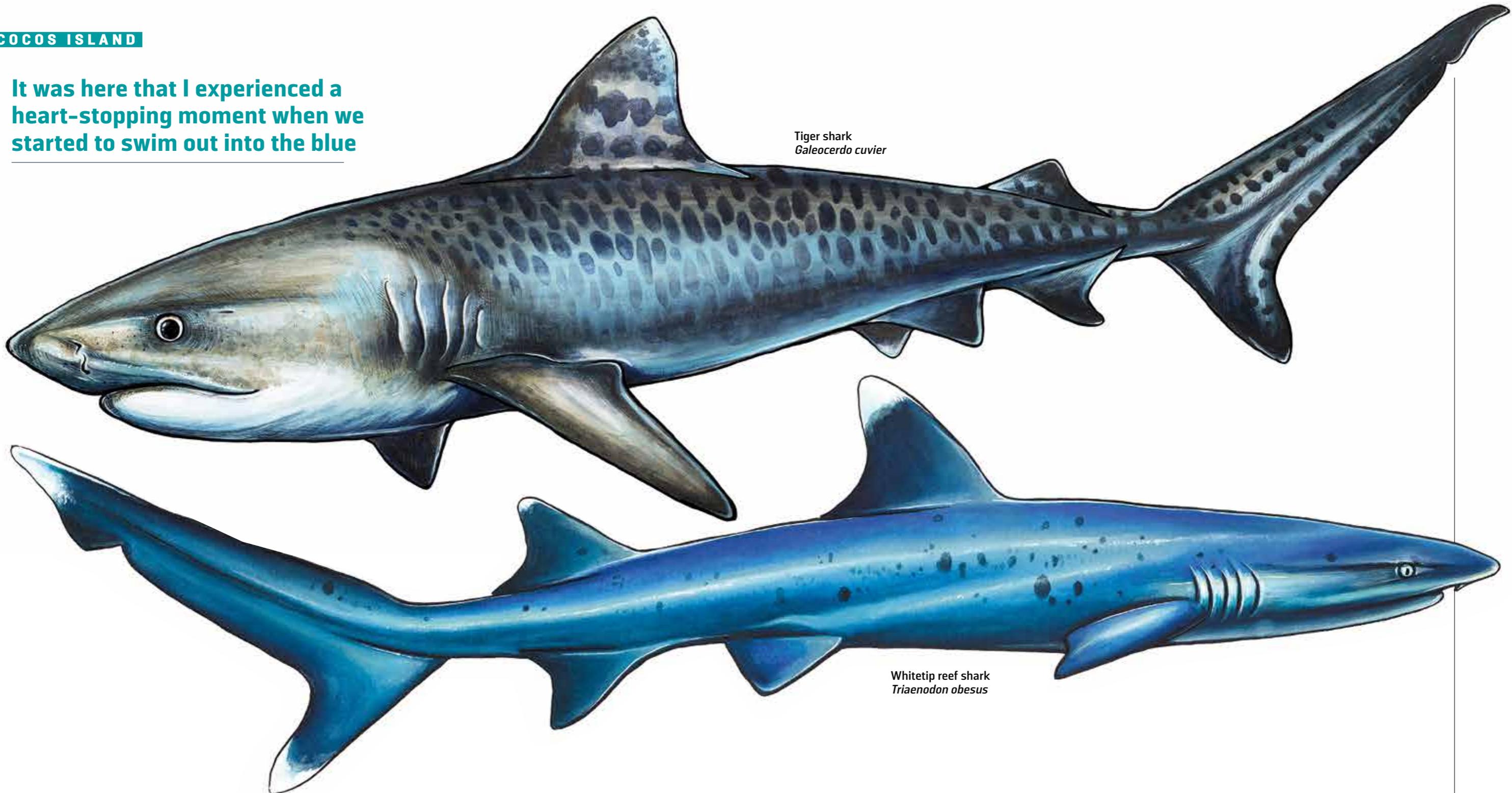


A tiger shark jumped out of the water and caught a brown booby for breakfast. Chomp! Everybody gasped. All over in a flash



Reefs brimming with life

It was here that I experienced a heart-stopping moment when we started to swim out into the blue



Tiger shark
Galeocerdo cuvier

Whitetip reef shark
Triaenodon obesus

can become even more exciting! I remember visiting the dive site 'Dirty Rock', it is world renowned as one of the best places to observe sharks and one of the main reasons avid divers return to Cocos Island again and again. It was here that I experienced a heart-stopping moment when, as we started to swim out into the blue, two, four-metre tiger sharks appeared and started to circle us. As a group we began to huddle together to

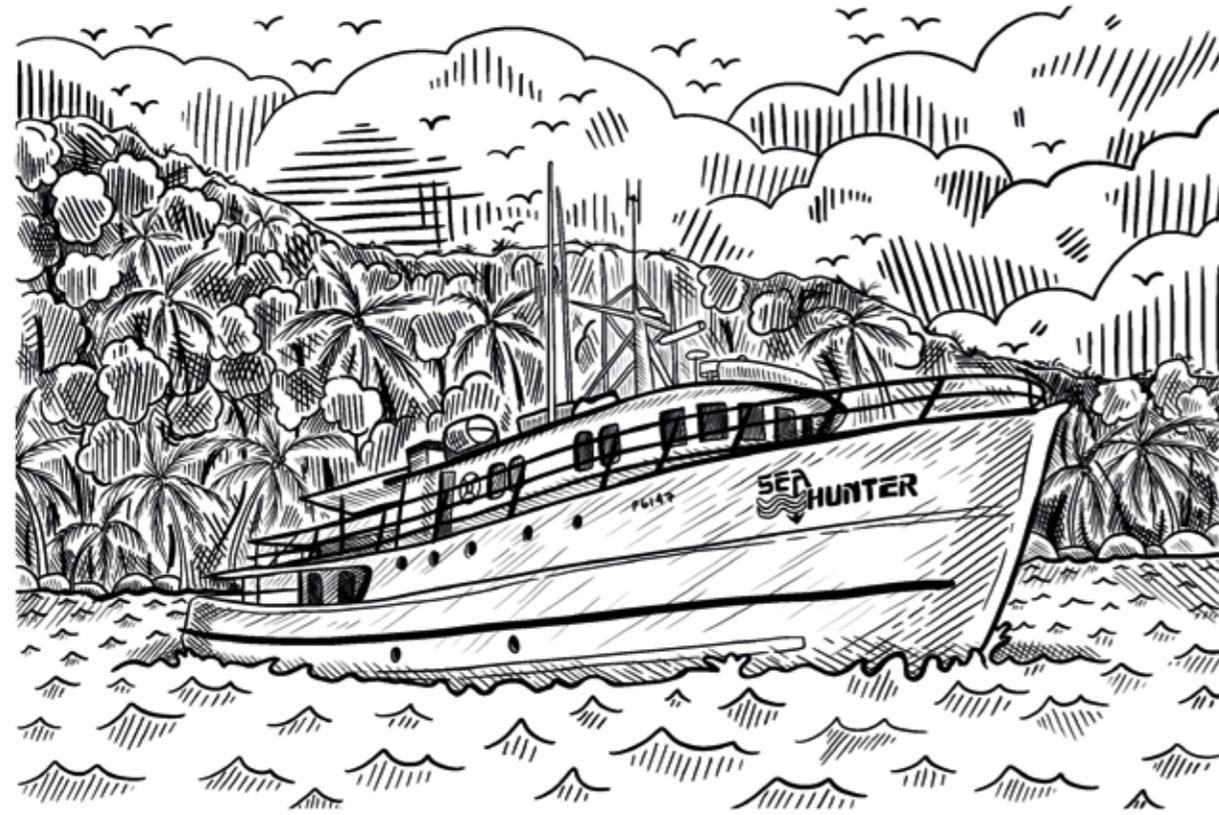
create a bigger mass, to dissuade the Cocos Island's tiger sharks (renowned for their aggressive behaviour) from approaching us. The ominous silhouettes of the tigers would appear out in the blue and then vanish. As we drifted in a huddle completing our safety stop, the visibility grew murkier and every few minutes we would see glimpses of distinct tiger shark markings quickly appear and then vanish, mere metres away. A hunting

tactic of tiger sharks is to exploit bad visibility to their advantage. A safety stop to remember!

Countless times on our safety stops we would spot either a school of hammerheads, or a lone hammerhead swimming into the abyss. I remember during one safety stop a school of 20 hammerheads surrounded us, shepherding us into a human bait ball. If you are lucky you may also encounter a dancing manta through

the dappled sunrays near the surface. But one of my most memorable safety-stop encounters was a massive school of bigeye jacks. I swam into the middle of it and suddenly I was engulfed by a vortex of hundreds of jacks, a hypnotic experience. Their silvery shapes ebbed and flowed as a single unit, and in their eyes were the reflections of thousands of other fish.

At the end of our sometimes quite cold dives, the boat



A vortex of bigeyed jacks. Photo Francesca Page

crew would greet us with warm pastries and fresh fruit before an exciting boat journey back to the 'mother ship'. These rides were sometimes as thrilling as the dives, passing massive rocky pinnacles filled with hundreds of brown booby nests crowded with chicks (which I must say were adorable). Sometimes, we would take a detour to little caves surrounded by intense-turquoise waters with a chance to get a glimpse into the untouched-by-humans habitat on the island. The day would end with us relaying diving stories (some new, some old), editing photos from that day's dive, and being served delicious food. I also got some of the best nights' sleep I have ever had, undisturbed by the pinging sound of phones and the background noise of technology; just a comfy bed and the gentle sway of the waves. The ocean sings you into a deep sleep, and you dream about the dives of that day and the thrill of what is to come tomorrow. Cocos Island is the wildest place I have ever experienced, and has left a fire in my belly to return to see what other treasures await in its rich blue waters. ■



Luna by Francesca Page