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surf heaven in SIARGAO

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surfin' heaven

CLOUD NINE, THAT HELLUVA WAVE SPOT IN SIARGAO ISLAND LOCATED AT THE
EDGE OF THE PHILIPPINES, BRINGS BLISS TO LUCKY SURFERS

text
TOR JOHNSON
photos
JOHN CALLAHAN

I LIVE IN HAWAII, and I come to the Philippines to surf. Sound strange? Not if you love good waves. Let me explain: The Philippines happens to be blessed with some of the best waves in the world. When the waves are good, they can be smoother and more perfectly formed than even the world famous waves of Hawaii. Surfers come from all points of the globe in the months of September to November to ride perfect waves like Cloud Nine on Siargao Island in the Visayas. Local Filipino surfers are into the act now too, riding their home breaks with style and skill.

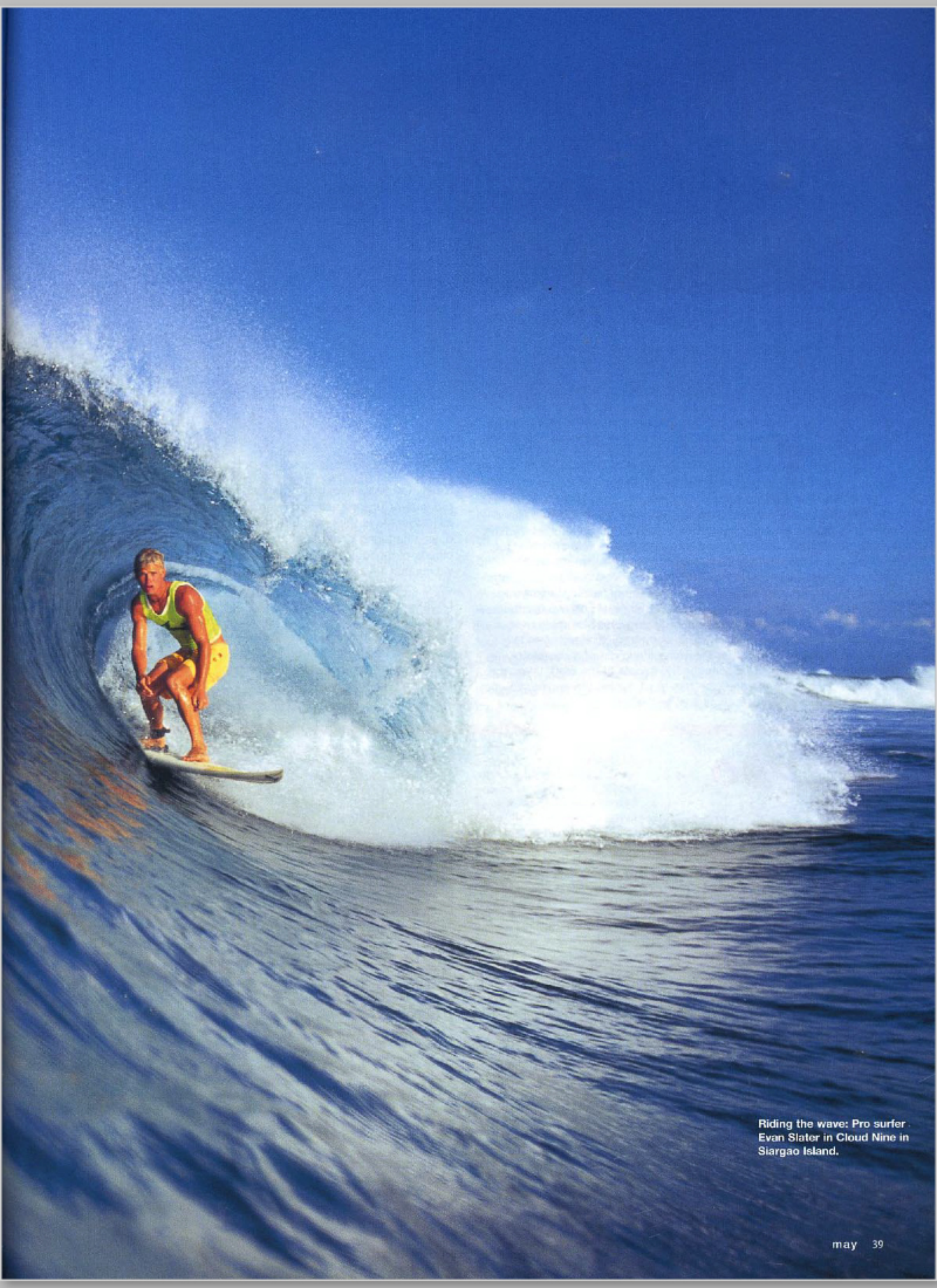
It's not that the waves are as consistently good as those in Hawaii. The swell in the Philippines is driven by the winds of typhoons, which are tremendously strong storms, but also quite small. This makes the swell very unpredictable, because it is dependent on the position and path of these notoriously wandering, compact gyres. In fact, if you talk to 10 surfers about their trip to the Philippines, six might tell you it was the worst surf trip they've ever made. But the other four will have a different story. If they've ridden the waves at their best, if they've leapt onto a powerful undulating typhoon swell as it explodes on the shallow reef, if they've been relentlessly propelled through that glass calm, warm, and clear sea, they'll end up like me, and they'll be back every year.

On a recent trip to Siargao, fellow photographer and Philippines explorer John Callahan and I flew in for the 6th Annual Siargao Surfing Cup. The moment our plane roared over the surf break, a perfect set of overhead waves boomed on the reef below us in water so gin-clear it was actually hard to make out the wave. The spray blasted up toward the aircraft as we raced past. We glimpsed the thatched contest headquarters that had been set up on the reef right next to the break as we banked around the peak.

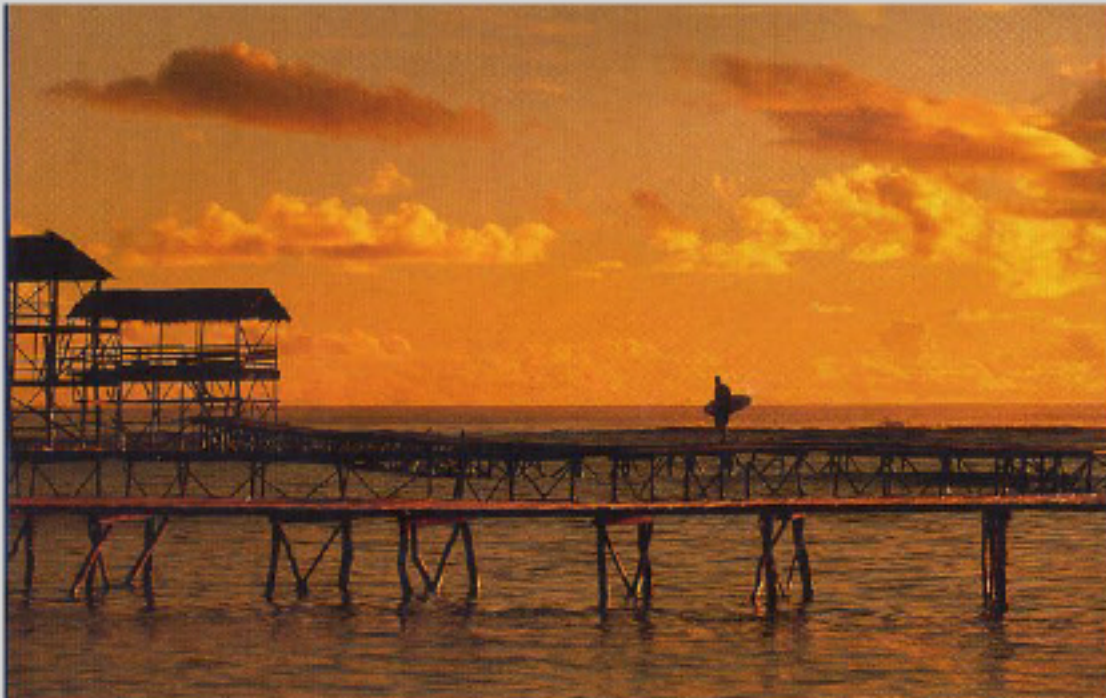
The Philippine Department of Tourism was sponsoring the Siargao Cup in order to promote tourism, as recent troubles in the southern Philippines has had disastrous effects on the industry, and even in the peaceful islands here the fragile economy was feeling the bite. For us surfers, the provinces we've visited in the Visayas seemed to be some of the most peaceful places on earth and we never felt threatened at all.

From the air we could see the sponsors had even built a nice little curving wooden walkway all the way out to the surf, so we wouldn't have to stub our toes walking out to Cloud Nine over the reef. All of this was handy, but the best thing was that by sheer dumb luck, a monster typhoon had taken a swipe at Guam a few days before, and the notoriously fickle surf was already showing signs of a new long period ground swell.

Once we landed, things looked even better than they had from the air. The swell began to show signs of serious power, and Cloud Nine was in rare form. The wave broke just a bit like Pipeline in Hawaii. Nearly every wave was hollow and powerful, focusing onto the shallow, evenly shoaling reef shelf. The first time I rode it years ago, I was just riding along when suddenly I was shocked to be standing inside the tube of the wave.



Riding the wave: Pro surfer
Evan Slater in Cloud Nine in
Siargao Island.



(CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT) A local surfer retiring after the day; a beautiful Japanese beachgoer; and local kids in Dako Island. (OPPOSITE) Tor Johnson mastering the wave in Tuesday Rock and a street scene in Siargao.

THE MARK OF A GOOD WAVE is that the lip, the breaking part of the swell as it hits shallow water and hollows out, is powerful enough to break a surfboard in two pieces. Cloud Nine eats boards for breakfast. Fresh off the plane, I grabbed my brand new board, ran out the boardwalk, jumped into the surf, pulled into a tube, and immediately snapped my board in half on the first wave. Lamenting the waste of a personally hand-shaped magic board, not to mention the cool paint job, I rushed back up the pathway for my back-up. For some reason the old back-up beater stayed in one piece.

But board-eating Cloud Nine isn't the only show in town. For those who like it a bit more relaxed, there are other waves on Siargao Island – long rights perfect for high performance surfing, hollow lefts, everything a surfer could want, as long as there's swell. The vehicle of choice for surf sessions is the pump boat, the Philippine equivalent of mom's station wagon. Quick and shallow of draft to make it over the labyrinth of reefs, these frail craft have only a few inches of freeboard showing above water. A single light, narrow, sleek center hull has two bamboo outriggers lashed on with monofilament fishing line. Skimming over crystal clear lagoons on your way to a warm tropical wave sounds idyllic, and it would be if not for the ear-splitting din of a completely unmuffled gasoline engine blasting in the middle of the craft. If you are unlucky enough to be the one who has to sit behind the engine, you get the fumes blowing in your face as well as the noise.

Surf Explorer

Nearly ten years ago, photographer John Callahan came here with pro surfers Taylor Knox and Evan Slater to look for surf. The area was all just jungle at the time, and they searched for waves for several days, chartering boats from the nearest town, or hiking in through clouds of mosquitoes in ridiculous heat. They found such perfect waves that Taylor and Evan nearly surfed themselves into a coma. John was literally forcing them back into the water to get more photos. At the end of a perfect day of surf, when they thought they were in heaven, they drank warm Coke and ate melted local candy bars called "Cloud 9". John labeled the photos of a certain perfect wave he found on that trip "Cloud 9". The tantalizing images dragged that wave into the limelight of the surfing world. Now the right-breaking reef at Tuason Point is probably the best-known Philippine surf spot.

Siargao Cool Dos

is undeveloped and unspoiled, and that's the charm of it.

BOAT TRIPS / Not to be missed is a full-day boat trip to Sohoton Lagoon. A magical place, overhung by jungle cliffs where you can swim into caves with bats, strange fishes, stalactites and rock oysters, weird corals, pitcher plants, cycads, and wild orchids. Take a flashlight and go during mid-day when the tide is low. The only entrance to the lagoon is a natural cave tunnel, hanging with stalactites and with strong currents. The cost is around 500 pesos per person, but it is well worth it.

Around GL, you should pop across the lagoon to Guyam, the perfect palm-fringed islet, Dako and its white sand beach, coral reefs and friendly villagers. Or visit Pansukian (Naked Island) a white sand spit with corals all around. A day trip to all three should cost around 600 pesos. If you are feeling brave or foolhardy, try rocky, jungled Hanoyoy, and see if all the talk about buried treasures and *wok-woks* (forest spirits) are really true. **SOLO TRIP** / You could rent a motorcycle in GL, for about 600 pesos/day, and get around the island yourself. There are few road signs, so take a compass.

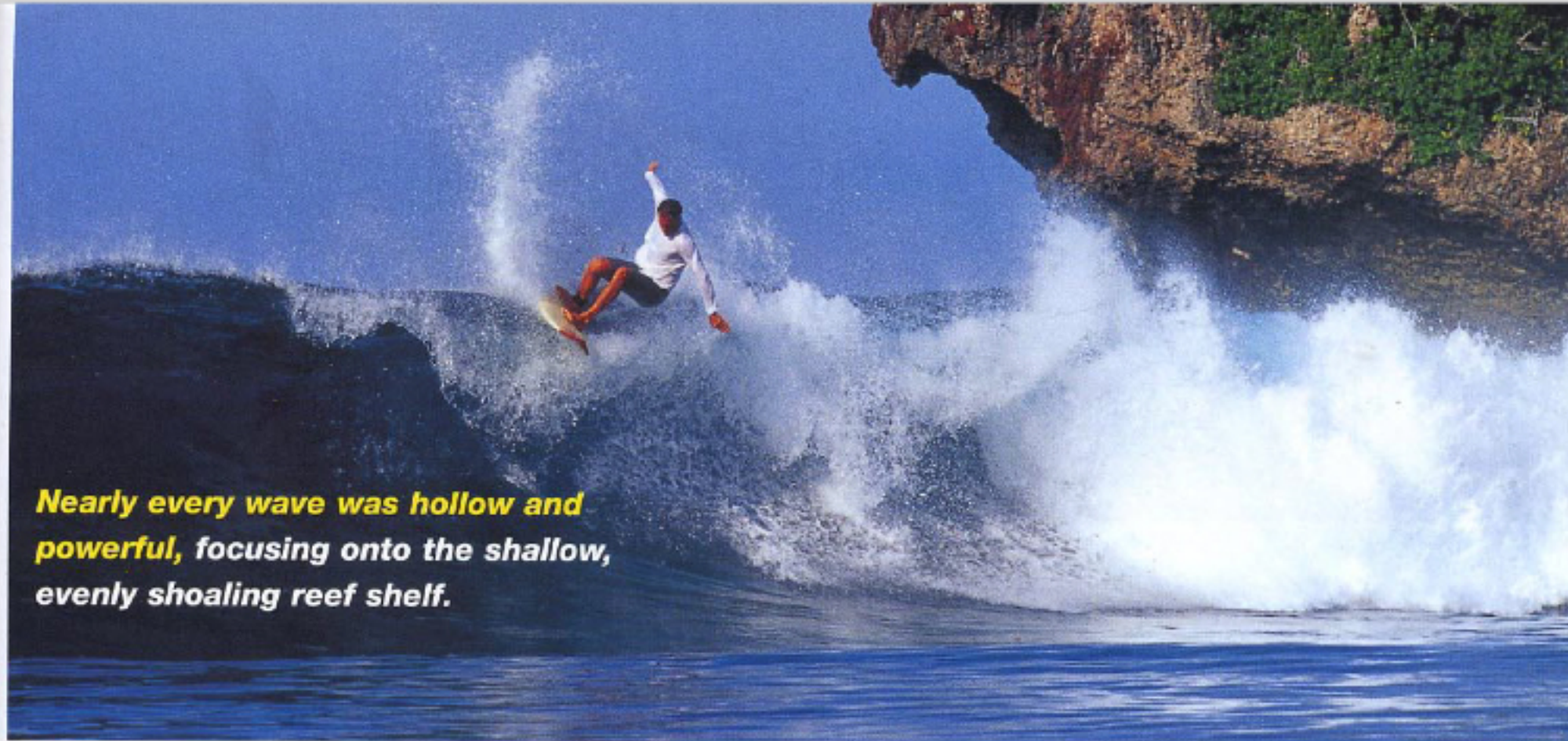
Otherwise, you could get around by the regular jeepneys, but they tend to arrive and depart at strange times. **DIVING AND SNORKELING** / There's plenty to see (fish, corals, sea snakes, etc., but no big sharks) snorkeling on the reefs around Guyam and Dako (you can just drift with the current along the drop-off). Around Pansukian, the coral reefs are great, (even better at nighttime) and you can explore reefs in front of Tuason Point (but please, not under the break itself), and in La Janosa and Mamon. A huge underwater cave with four to five separate entrances was recently discovered under the first rock islands in front of Tuason, and the Blue Cathedral just off Caridad, north of Pilar. Underwater visibility and topography are outstanding.

FISHING / The sailfish and blue marlin season – when the big fish (sailfish up

GENERAL LUNA is just a small town at the edge of the world. It is safe, clean and friendly, the laid-back kind of place where you could stop by for two or three days and not want to leave for a year. It



to 40kg, marlin up to 200kg) cruise the deep water only a mile or two out of GL – really hums from March to early May. But you could fish for coral trout, large snappers and other reef fish anytime, or get a local fisherman to take you out to the Payao, a floating fish attractor about five miles beyond Guyam, and troll for *bolis* (skipjack) or *barilis* (yellow fin tuna). You can catch *tanguigue* (Spanish mackerel), huge Pacific tuna, and *morang* (dolphinfish). In the lagoon, you can get *bayo* (Long Toms) – they're fun to catch but a little too bony to eat. **SAILING** / GL lagoon must be one of the safest, easiest, and most pleasurable places to sail anywhere in the world. See if you can persuade Pirate Pete or Visayan Andrew to take you for a fast sail and a few beers around the lagoon. You could try renting a paddle *barota* (15 minutes to Guyam if you ever get the hang of it).



Nearly every wave was hollow and powerful, focusing onto the shallow, evenly shoaling reef shelf.

Cloud Nine Boys

Surfing at Cloud Nine has been around long enough now that a whole generation of Filipinos have begun to ride it, and like locals at any break, they ride it very well. Cloud Nine is basically a powerful tube ride, and although the visiting surfers from throughout the Philippines were excellent riders (one of them beat me in my heat), they couldn't come close to the specialized wave knowledge, timing, and guts of the local boys. A frequent sight is Aussie shaper and ripper Stuart Cadden who has long been a strong supporter of the local surfers, and many of them were on his boards. Some of the surfers such as Anthony Luebans from La Union in the North, went after long waves to rack up plenty of turns, but it really fell to the Cloud Nine locals to catch the scary, hollow "bombs" from deeper in the peak.

Four Aussie pros, Steve Clements, Drew Courtney, Kurt Nyholm, and Ty Arnold, showed up for the International Division of the contest. There were some worries among their relatives who'd seen more than their share of news coverage that extremists might kidnap them and hold

them for ransom. Fortunately, like us, these guys had braved unfounded fears of hijacking and made an incredibly good call, considering the waves we all got. And despite the Philippine Factor, the contest had two competing contest directors, droves of dignitaries, packs of politicians, and a Hawaiian fashion show, but the waves were so good that none of that mattered and the contest was a huge success.

The Aussies who showed up for the event were far and away the best surfers around, so they basically assumed that they would take the first four places at the Siargao Cup without breaking a sweat. But as everyone knows, in a surf contest, "it ain't necessarily so". The Aussies were shocked when local boy Fernando Alipayo edged one of them out for fourth place in the final. To their discredit, the Aussies began to cry foul and favoritism. They had a point when they complained that the judging wasn't exactly world-class, but regardless of why "Yok-yok" (as he's known locally) won, it was the first time a local had ever placed in the international final, and thus a great boost for local surfing. Besides, the prize money will go a hell of a lot further in the Philippines.

SWIMMING / Well, perhaps swimming in GL at low tide isn't the greatest, but try it at high tide or at dawn or dusk, when the water is freshest, or at night when the moon is out and the water is phosphorescent. You can get to Guyam in about half-an-hour if you are fit. Dako has the nearest very good beach for swimming at any tide. The swimming at Mamon is like being a virgin olive in a very dry martini. **CAVING** / There is a huge cave at Consuelo, with stalactites, stalagmites, rock crystals, piles of bat guano, a million bats, and even a huge python, but you'll have to be fit to get there. There's another at Malinao, on the way to Union. **JUNGLES** / Siargao is one of the few islands in the Philippines where tarsiers (small lemurs or bush babies, extinct almost anywhere else) are still common. See monitor lizards six feet long, hornbills, parrots, yellow and black lorikeets, kingfishers, and other birds nobody yet knows the names of. **MOUNTAIN BIKING** / Ask the PUB for a mountain bike rental, and try some cross-country biking. There is an International Mountain Bike Competition held in March every year, but to tell the truth, it's more like surfing than biking at that time of year, in the wet season. **SITTING AROUND** / Probably the most popular active sport in GL, it's remarkably relaxing, restorative, and healthful. Watch the fishermen at dawn, the clouds and the waves in the day, or the moon at night. It's up to you if you just sit and think, or just sit. **SHOPPING** / At Maridyl's, on the main street, you can get general supplies, fruits, vegetables, snack, etc. Rosita's probably has the best medicines. Marcha's (go down behind Maridyl's and turn one block left) stocks hardware, bamboo hats, stationery, and all sorts. There are many sari-sari stores scattered through the town, which sell odds & sods, fresh fruits in season, tuba (coconut wine), etc., and there are bakeries opposite the church and beside Rosita's which do hamburger rolls and fresh sweet breads. **FOOD, DRINK, NIGHTLIFE** / At Maridyl's or Lalay's in the main street, you can get cheap beer, Filipino food, and take in the street scene or another action video. Ruth has great chicken and pork barbecue, just between the two. Out at Cloud 9, you could try San Miguel's beach bar and restaurant, or 5 Lyns cafe in Katangnan, The Green Room or Jungle Reef and maybe Veneria's Karaoke/disco. In the evening, after nine, try the Melvinbo Disco, for sweaty group-bopping, or Seven-Eleven Karaoke/Restaurant (the

restaurant isn't up to much, but the singers are great and you could even try a song yourself), in town. They are a bit primitive but good fun. Opposite Seven Eleven is El Nino Loco, a bit of an up-market bar. **GETTING TO KNOW PEOPLE** / GL people are very friendly and hospitable, if sometimes a little shy. Smile and you'll get a radiant smile back. The girls are very beautiful and very charming, but well-behaved. There is no hooker scene in GL, and nobody wants one.

Fishermen often picnic by the beach or on Guyam, and may invite you for a shot of Tanduay rum, Kulafu medicinal wine, tuba or pa-oroi (strong nipa wine). Beware, they are more intoxicating than they seem. Try kinilaw, fresh fish steeped in vinegar, lemon juice, ginger, and onions - refreshing and delicious. They might offer you, dog stew, which is worth trying (once), litson (roast pig) or kambing (roast goat), worth trying anytime. Get a lad to climb a tree for fresh butong, coconut juice straight from the nut.

Try halo-halo, a great refresher with ice, condensed milk, fruit, and all sorts of other stuff. Poot-poot, featured as a delicious dish in all the guide books, is actually a tiny fish, salted, rotted down, and fermented, exclusive to GL, and in great demand throughout the Philippines, but perhaps not quite to your taste.



photo TOR JOHNSON

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(CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT) Cool dudes looking for a nice surf, local dude Yok-yok Alipayo, and Pansuklan Tropical Resort. (OPPOSITE) A pro surfer going for a ride.

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Samar's New Locals

Carlos, Jerome, and Abdel, and a few of their friends from the island of Samar showed up at a welcome party for the Siargao Cup. Samar is in the central Philippines, a new and virtually unknown surf zone with some incredible waves. In the past years, John and I have done quite a bit of exploring in that part of the Philippines, and the resulting new spots have appeared in the major international surf magazines. In the past two years, locals like these guys from Samar have started surfing some of the remote areas we'd explored.

"We used your articles to find waves," they said. "We went to villages and asked fishermen if they had seen a boat full of American surfers."

They also searched for landmarks like rocks or points that they'd seen in the background of the photos. We accused them of using "counter intelligence" on us.

We joked that we couldn't tell them any more about the spots we'd found, because if we gave them all our priceless information, we'd "have to kill them." After a few minutes, though, it became clear that these

guys already knew about nearly every wave we'd uncovered anyway. Armed with a few magazines, crucial local knowledge, and only a rough idea of where to go, they had spent days on butt-numbing bus seats, interminable boat rides, and long, sweltering hikes to find these places. They must have been stoked when they finally found some of these world-class breaks, "just like in the magazines."

Late that evening the boys finally pulled out some of their own photos. Grainy and distant, their snapshots still showed what appeared to be some excellent right points, and some obviously long hollow lefts.

"Where's that?!" I asked, amazed at a shot of what looked like a world wave.

"We can't tell you," they laughed, "or we'd have to kill you."

Maybe next time we go exploring, we'll be asking the local fishermen if they've seen a boatload of Filipino surfers.

HOW TO GET THERE: Philippine Airlines flies daily to Cebu where you can take a ferry bound for Surigao and Davao. From Davao, hop on a bus bound for Surigao.



Siargao Quick Facts

GETTING TO GL / The Super Cat leaves CEBU to SURIGAO via Maasin in Leyte most mornings, for a four-hour trip arriving in Surigao

after lunch and departing in the afternoon. Overnight boats leave Cebu in the evening, arriving in Surigao at early morning and returning the following night, except on Mondays.

Buses come and go to Surigao from Davao (for Samar Island resorts), Lake Sebu, Mount Apo, etc. and on to General Santos for a quick 48-hour run to Manado in Sulawesi (Indonesia) and for Butuan and Cagayan de Oro (Camiguin Island).

Fast boats (*Aska Queen*, *Fortune Jet*, *Tropical Queen*) take about 1.5 to 2 hours at 100 pesos. Leave Surigao for Dapa on Siargao Island at about 5:30 AM, or just rest a bit and catch one of them on the second, noon run. In an emergency, or if one or all of them have technical problems, check out the pier at

Bilang-bilang in Surigao for small *tantsas* (pumpboats/outriggers) sailing to Dapa.

STAYING IN GL / Close to the town center is Pisangan, turn right from across the bridge towards Cloud 9. At the other end of town are N&M Resort, Jade Star, and BRC, all a bit quieter and by the beach. Out at Cloud 9, there is Cloud 9 resort itself, the Green Room, the Jungle Reef, Ocean and Earth, etc.

COMMUNICATIONS / You probably came to get away from it all, but just in case you need to reach home, there is an international telephone and post office in the Municipal Hall. Loloy Torres will help you phone from his house after office hours and on weekends. The Cybernet Cafe at the Leomondee Hotel in Surigao is the best, but there are others to choose from if that's offline or crowded. As for banks, you'll have to go to Surigao, to the PCI Bank, RCBC, or Equitable Bank if you need cash. They all have ATM machines where you can use Visa, Cirrus, and local cards. There is a moneychanger opposite Visayan Marketing.

Photographer **JOHN CALLAHAN** has traveled extensively in the Pacific shooting surfing and scenic photographs. John is considered a legend in the country's surf circuit, especially in Siargao Island after naming a superb swell from a chunky local choco bar. You can e-mail him at jscfoto@pacific.net.sg.

Hawaii-based writer-photographer **TOR JOHNSON** truly knows his surf, having lived in a surf country all his enviable life. In the past years, he and John have played Magellan exploring the Philippine coastline looking for that perfect wave. You can e-mail him at toraloha@aol.com.



*For us surfers, the provinces we've visited in the Visayas seemed to be some of **the most peaceful places on earth** and we never felt threatened at all.*

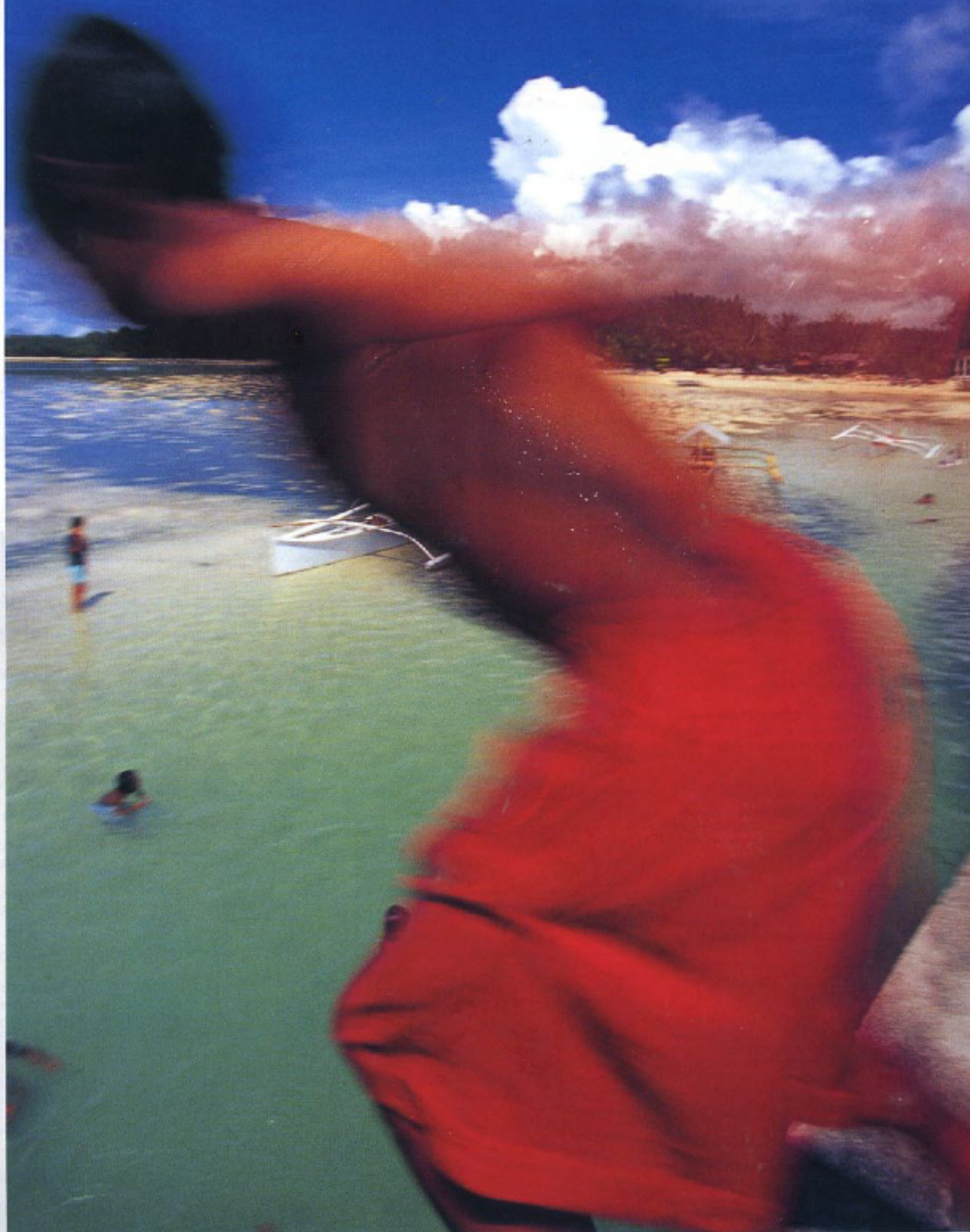


**LAST
FRAME**

Freeze

GENERAL LUNA, SIARGAO
ISLAND, SURIGAO DEL
NORTE
Philippines, September 2001

OR BLUR. Travel writer, photographer, and surfer Tor Johnson captured this kid on the brink of a wild leap towards the sea. Upon invitation from the Tourism department, Tor – together with photographer John Callahan, who was one of the discoverers of Siargao Island as a world-class surfing destination in 1992 – visited the swell called Cloud Nine last year for annual international surfing cup started in 1995. He left us with fresh images, among them this photograph reminiscent of a Henri Cartier Bresson classic with an Impressionistic twist. Cool. – **WALTER C. VILLA**



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