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# NATIONAL POST

## Costa Rica's lure is no great mystery: Playa Grande Beach: Giant turtles gather at one of world's top nesting spots

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When she begins laying her eggs, the giant turtle enters a trance, becoming wholly unaware of her surroundings. She will lay a clutch of some 80 eggs before she begins the arduous process of covering them up. Using her back flippers -- facing ahead, blind to what she is doing -- she refills the hole, sweeping her flippers across the top to erase the evidence. Then she lumbers back into the ocean, drawn toward the moonlight flickering over the water.

Watching a massive reptile -- females can weigh up to 500 kilograms and measure two metres in length -- engaged by pure primordial instinct in so vulnerable and solitary an activity is a moving, almost mystical experience.

The endangered giant leather -back turtles are one of the star attractions at Playa Grande, a tiny beach village on Costa Rica's north Pacific coast.

The beach is considered to be one of the world's top five nesting sites for endangered giant leatherback turtles; they nest on the beach from October to March. The beach is breathtaking in its own right: an expansive curve of white sand pounded by powerful surf, free of seaweed, free of garbage and fringed by flowering greenery.

The town's roads, paved decades ago with sand from the beach, have crumbled back into dirt. You can count the hotels on one hand. Shopping is limited to two small general stores. The nearest town of any size is Santa Cruz, a drive of up to two hours, depending on the road-worthiness of your vehicle.

No one is more happy about this lack of development than Louis Wilson, the owner of Hotel Las Tortugas, the most well-known hotel on this little-known beach.

Originally from Florida, Mr. Wilson is an avid surfer who has been living in Costa Rica for 30 years. Playa Grande does offer spectacular waves, but that is not why he stays. His passion is ecotourism. Despite the fact the beach is theoretically protected as part of a marine park -- Parque Nacional Marino Las Baulas -- the threat of new development is constant.

As the owner of a hotel in an ecologically sensitive area, he has often found himself caught between conservationists and developers. Conservationists do not want tourists tramping through environmentally fragile places. Developers do not want restrictions on what they can build. What Mr. Wilson wants is moderation -- from both sides.

"There's nothing wrong with the conservationists' intentions," he says. "But the spirit of 'fence it off and guard it' leaves no room for sustainable, ecologically friendly tourism."

Mr. Wilson has been instrumental in protecting Playa Grande's twin eco-attractions: the turtles, and the Tamarindo Wildlife Sanctuary, which protects a rare saltwater estuary teeming with wildlife.

Along with ordinary tourists, Hotel Las Tortugas hosts Earthwatch volunteers on working holidays, assisting scientists studying the turtles.

Rare is the visitor who leaves without at least a glimpse of a nesting turtle. However, such glimpses are becoming harder to get as the giant leatherback population diminishes globally. The turtles are extremely sensitive to light and easily disoriented. After nesting, a disoriented turtle may mistakenly turn inland, become trapped in thick shrubbery and die.

In international waters, the huge turtles are often caught in gill nets, where they drown because they are unable to surface for air.

Egg poaching may be the third and final nail in their coffin. Under normal circumstances, just one in every 1,000 female hatchlings makes it to deep ocean without succumbing to predators or natural hazards. Poaching compounds the problem. Before Playa Grande locals switched to earning their living in ecotourism, many gathered turtle eggs and sold them, by the hundreds, to a Costa Rican cookie company, or to San Jose bars, where they were marketed as aphrodisiacs.

During nesting season, turtles approach the beach nightly. Local guides take small groups of tourists out to watch the process. On any given night, there may be as few as two turtles or as many as 100.

Females lumber out of the water, hulking and gleaming in the moonlight, true relics of the dinosaur age. Then they make their way labouriously up the beach, leaving giant tracks that resemble those of a tractor.

The nearby Tamarindo Wildlife Sanctuary is not to be missed, either. The heart of the sanctuary is the saltwater estuary. Snaking through 485 hectares of tropical forest and eerie mangroves, the estuary shelters hundreds of species of birds and animals, including howler monkeys and crocodiles.

The virtuous tourist will feel right at home at Hotel Las Tortugas. While it makes some concessions to comfort -- such as air-conditioning and hot water showers -- it also makes an effort to be environmentally friendly. Lights are dimmed to protect the turtles, who are easily disoriented by artificial light. Waste and water are recycled or reused whenever possible. Many of the hotel's 25 or so staff are former hueveros -- turtle egg gatherers -- who have converted to making their living in ecotourism.

For the hedonist in every ecotourist, a 15-minute stroll north along the beach brings you to Playa Ventanes, a wide, white scallop of sand where tiny tropical fish shimmer through tide pools. A trail continues to Playa Carbon, a stunning black sand beach punctuated by outcroppings of volcanic rock.

Mr. Wilson calls the whole experience "lite ecotourism," and it certainly is an attractive package: pristine beach, a starry night sky, air-conditioning -- and the chance to see a giant leatherback turtle, while they still exist.

#### IF YOU GO:

- Nesting season for the giant leatherbacks is October through March. A double room at Hotel Las Tortugas is about \$45 to \$80 depending on the season; [www.cool.co.cr/usr/turtles/](http://www.cool.co.cr/usr/turtles/)

- For help arranging transportation, try Discovery Costa Rica ([www.discoverycostarica.com](http://www.discoverycostarica.com)), a small, friendly and bilingual San Jose-based travel agency run by siblings Sylvia and Jorge Chaves.

#### Illustration:

- Black & White Photo: The Leatherback Turtle Museum / During nesting season, giant leatherback turtles approach the beach nightly. The relics of the dinosaur age lay as many as 80 eggs before being drawn by the moon back to the sea.
- Map: National Post / A map of Costa Rica.: (See print copy for complete map.) List: If You Go: (Online)

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