

# Conservation at a turtle's pace on Grenada

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It's a sight both adorable and unforgettable. A hatchling sea turtle smaller than a golf ball making its lonely way across a monstrous Caribbean beach in the dead of night -- predators everywhere and no mother to protect it.

Each hatchling has a one-in-1,000 chance of making it to adulthood. But for the moments after birth while scurrying toward the sea, at least these hatchlings have the protection of Ocean Spirits, a volunteer group dedicated to protecting sea turtles on the Caribbean island of Grenada.

Next to Trinidad, Grenada has the second largest population of nesting leatherback sea turtles in the Caribbean.

Every spring from March to June, the females -- some almost 3 metres long -- return from as far away as South Africa to the beach of their birth in Grenada's Levera National Park.

They move slowly out of the surf onto the sand, dig a hole, lay up to 100 eggs, cover them with dirt, then slip at a turtle's pace back into the sea leaving their offspring to hatch and fend for themselves.

At that point, volunteers from Ocean Spirits -- from trained backpackers to marine biologists -- take over. They take note of where these giant mothers have nested, then protect their abandoned eggs from poachers over the six-week gestation period.

## DELICACIES

Why all this protection? Turtle eggs and meat are considered delicacies in some cultures; the eggs also need shielding from other animals, as well as from the simple tramping of feet from beach-goers.

Leatherbacks grow to be the largest of all sea turtles, capable of weighing more than 900 kilos in adulthood. Once born, they swim as far as Canada, Alaska, South Africa and New Zealand.

Ocean Spirits began conservation of these turtles on Grenada's Levera Beach back in 1999, but only recently have opened the turtle-watching experience to tourists. The organization assigns trained guides to accompany small tour groups of kids and adults.

During nesting season, groups meet nightly around 11 at a trailhead in Levera National Park at the remote northern tip of the island. Groups are led in the dark in single file along the beach to spots where the turtles are expected to lay eggs, or to nests where baby turtles are expected to hatch.

Tourists have a 95% chance of spotting these giant sea creatures making nests, or witnessing Ocean Spirits teams guiding tiny hatchlings safely into the pounding sea.

The turtle-watching experience is family worthy, especially for pre-teens and teens. Parents should note it is a late-night experience and Levera National Park is about two hours' driving distance along rough roads from Grand Anse Beach -- Grenada's central resort sector. Tours are offered through Grenada's Mandoo Tours ([grenadatours.com](http://grenadatours.com)).

Both Air Canada and Sunwing Vacations now offer non-stop flights to Grenada; WestJet offers direct flights to Barbados with connections to Grenada.

For more information on Grenada, visit [grenadagrenadines.com](http://grenadagrenadines.com). For more information on Ocean Spirits, including volunteering, visit [oceanspirits.org](http://oceanspirits.org).

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