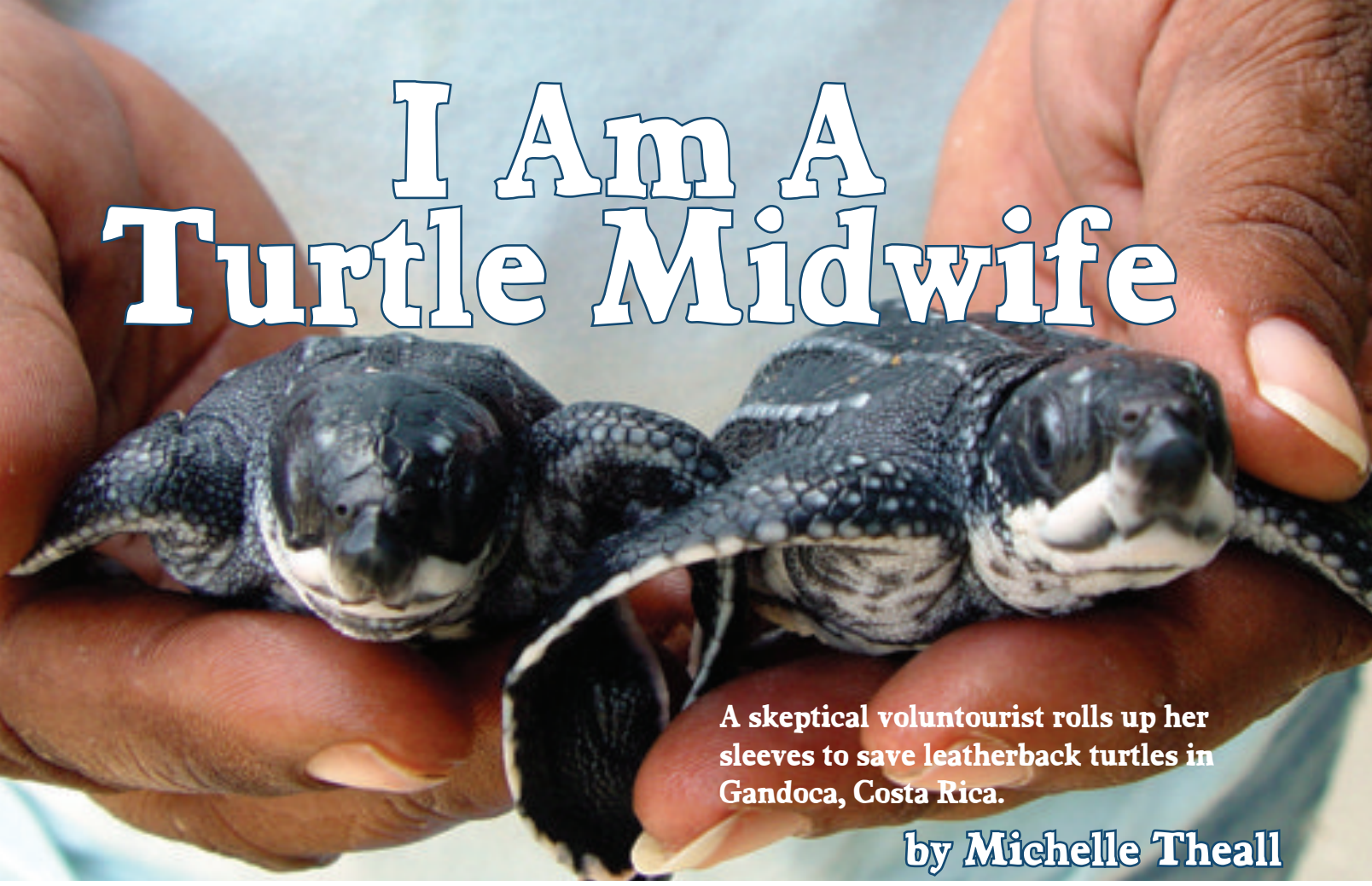

I Am A Turtle Midwife

A skeptical voluntourist rolls up her sleeves to save leatherback turtles in Gandoca, Costa Rica.

by Michelle Theall

NIGHT 1: SECTOR A

We walk the beach. Foam percolates at the edges of the busy ocean. The whitecaps, and the fireflies gliding over the black-sand *playa*, are all we can see. Didher Chacon-Chaverri, our Widecast Turtle Conservation Project guide, is our eyes. After 20 years working this beach, he sees like a Costa Rican bat. "*Aqui*," he says and points to a leatherback turtle's tracks. But she is no longer here. She's returned to the water, but not before leaving behind her flipper prints—an embossed invitation to her baby shower.

For three hours, our group of volunteers bobs and weaves in step behind Didiher, hoping to find the sea turtle laying her eggs—and trying to stay upright. "*Ahora*, we rest *aqui por veinte minutos*, and la *esperamos*." When we pass the other night patrol, we hear, "*No veo nada*." Six hours on a bus from San Jose has brought us to Gandoca, and we are weary travelers. I am here to write a piece on the burgeoning trend of voluntourism, but like the others, I've yet to get a full night's sleep. So during every 20-minute break, our virgin crew nods off—like guilty apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane. Didiher has pity on us. He lets us go back to our cabins at the homestay, where we try to fall asleep on the Caribbean coast, beneath mosquito-net canopies and to the fiesta of howler monkeys just outside the doors. Our cabins, were they a few miles down the pot-holed main road, would be in Panama.

The next morning, lathered in bug spray and sunscreen, I head to the beach to sit in the rain. I am completely alone, except for a machete-wielding local man whacking the tops off of coconuts. I'm unarmed, but worry isn't necessary. Gandoca is a safe place where everyone knows one another, and the population is 178. One bar. One "store." One restaurant. But Gandoca was born from blood—from 15th-century turtle hunters who set up the first camps here, dried the turtle's flesh for meat, carved her tortoise shell for jewelry, and stole her eggs for aphrodisiacs. And well before the banana plantations and road improvements came, the killing was probably done at sustainable levels. After all, in the 17th and 18th centuries, thousands of sea turtles cruised the oceans of Central America in flotillas so dense they altered the movement of ships. But by the late 20th century, the turtle armadas had all but disappeared.

NIGHT 2: SECTOR B

Our group of eight volunteers plus two biologists and two guides march the beach from 8 p.m. to midnight. It looks and feels like military boot camp or prison—and we were lucky enough to get the early shift. The guides rattle off phrases in Spanish, their forms barely visible against the *negra* sand and sky. We wear dark clothing and headlamps with red lights, but we are not allowed to use them unless it is an emergency—and tripping over downed trees and uneven sand does not constitute one. And because the turtles are sensitive to smell, as well as to light, we're banned from using bug spray on patrol. Our lightly salted, sweaty skin draws mosquitoes like vultures to roadkill—making it more difficult to appreciate that access to this protected beach from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. is a privilege

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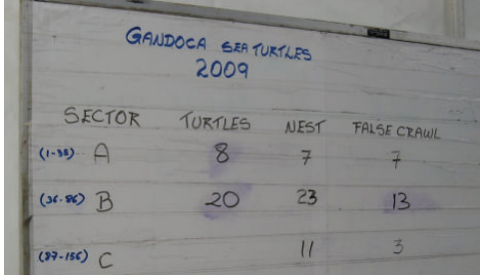

reserved for people who work for the turtle project.

Despite the risks of malaria and dengue fever, night patrols provide one of the few opportunities to see the endangered leatherback turtle as she nests and lays her eggs. Volunteers pay money to come here to do just this. They are part of a staggering number of people opting into voluntourism—which at the moment seems like senseless torture to me.

In four hours, we see nothing. No tracks. No turtles. It's a bust. Finding polar bears in Canada in the summertime had been easier. Two nights of traipsing all over the shore, stumbling and swearing in the dark have me wondering, *Why do I even care if the leatherback goes extinct?* Because it's becoming abundantly clear that, without human intervention, that will be her fate.

The Widecast Turtle Conservation Project started in 1984 after the leatherback population had declined from thousands to just a few hundred. Modern-day problems of beach erosion, light pollution, commercial development, and rising water levels due to climate change, combined with centuries of poaching, had all but decimated the ocean giants. With hatch rates a dismal 10 percent, Widecast's chief goals were to inspire the people of Gandoca to become passionate about saving turtles—despite a culture in which killing them was accepted— and to atone (by way of intercession) for man's part in destroying the leatherback's natural habitat.

Images Clockwise:
Fresh coconut from Gerrardo; Turtle stats after night patrol; Andrey, a fourth-generation turtle guide; Family is first in Gandoca

YEUGEN POKIN; MICHELLE THEALL

"It takes a female leatherback 15 to 20 years to reach maturity and return to the beach to lay her eggs," Andrey Castillo, a 24-year-old fourth generation Gandocan, explains to our group as we gather beneath a tent, lifting our feet so the cutter ants don't bite us or try to carry us away along with our folding chairs. "A lot can happen in two decades. So even if the turtle lives that long, she may come back to find that her nesting grounds have been razed for seaside condos. She also navigates by the whitecaps of the waves, so porch lights or signs from nearby cantinas can disorient her. She'll walk in circles for hours and then abort her eggs into the ocean." Having walked every sector of the 5.5-mile protected stretch of beach, I know firsthand that there are no oceanfront resorts or throngs of tourists. It's refreshing and sobering to see the difference this makes—and not just for the turtles.

Volunteers stay with families who are compensated by tourism companies. These families have never heard of Facebook or iPods or *American Idol*. They do not have Internet access or cell phones or television. Instead they engage with the environment around them—their land, their village, one another, and of course the leatherbacks. There is no indoor dining, no windows to separate people from the sound of the Caribbean Sea or the sweet smell of the jungle. We take a break from our electronic gadgets and the media and politics. We eat freshly prepared authentic Latin American food, including sopapilla-like breads served

If I squint, I can make out a dark blob 40 feet away. It could be

warm and dipped in melting peanut butter, and bananas and coconuts straight from the trees. Our guides, including Andrey, also live a simple existence in what amounts to no more than a tree house: boards up on stilts, no electricity or hot water, and holes for windows—a rough-hewn home called the turtle station. Their yard never needs to be mowed. And their alarm clocks, screeching monkeys and toucans, hover above them in a rainforest canopy that I count to be nine different shades of green.

"It's *muy importante*," Andrey explains, using the photo album in his lap as a visual aid, "that we get as many eggs to hatch as possible, because only one out of every thousand will live long enough to come back and reproduce." We learn from Andrey that baby turtles have their own host of enemies. Newly hatched turtles must get to the sea quickly before feral dogs, crabs, and birds pick them off. And like their moms, they use the white foam of the ocean—or anything white for that matter, including headlamps, porch lights, even white "I'm With Stupid" tourist T-shirts—to guide them to safety. Once in the ocean, as they grow in size, many are snagged by long line or trawling fishermen or suffocate by swallowing plastic bags and other *basura* that finds its way into the sea. Turtles eat jellyfish, and nothing looks more like a jellyfish than a floating plastic bag (the kind nearby banana plantations use by the thousands). As for defense against ocean predators, sea turtles don't retract their heads, and the leatherback's shell is soft and vulnerable; the only thing she has going for her is her immense size—if she manages to reach adulthood.

NIGHT 3: SECTOR B

We walk again. Our patrol stops short. Eric, our guide, moves ahead while we wait. Nicki Wheeler, a British expat who also works to save sharks (which, she emphasizes, are very misunderstood), points toward the ocean. If I squint, I can make out a dark blob 40 feet away. It could be a mound of kelp or a log, I can't be sure. I'm told it's a turtle. Eric has spotted her digging her nest and the hole keeps filling up with water. Still she keeps digging too close to the ocean, oblivious as the waves crash over her and break against her shell. Even though there are no lights to disorient the turtles and plenty of viable places for them to build nests, over 70 percent of the turtles, like this one, choose to lay their eggs in places where—without volunteers to relocate them—the ocean will swallow them up and kill them. "Turtles aren't the cleverest things," Nicki tells me. We wait to see what the leatherback does. An hour later,

Images Clockwise:
The Turtle Station dorm; Local banana plantation utilizing plastic bags to ripen fruit; The author/voluntourist clearing the beach for turtle nests; Howler monkey heaven; Purse made from trash; Local woman weaving (go to womensadventuremagazine.com to watch a video and learn how the bags are made.)

YEUGEN POKIN; MICHELLE THEALL



she disappears back into the ocean without finishing her nest.

I am searching for some evolutionary purpose for this animal, some reason why we should care if the leatherback continues to exist. Because it seems a Herculean task—stopping just short of trying to reproduce them in a lab—to save them.

I ask Nicki about the value of the leatherback; surely they are an irreplaceable link in the delicate chain of our ecosystem. She explains that the turtles save coral reefs by feeding on a certain type of bacteria, and they keep the jellyfish population in check, which protects tourism and commercial fishing. It's not the answer I'd hoped for, because I already know that whales, sunfish, and blue rockfish do a good job stripping the same type of bacteria off coral reefs, and tourism and commercial fishing are two of the primary factors causing the leatherback's extinction in the first place. While I'm not insensitive to the turtle's plight, it seems as if the course of evolution has made itself quite clear. So, I have to ask myself, do turtles deserve extinction if they are as dumb as a bag of rocks and *seemingly* without purpose? And further, if jellyfish were going extinct, would we go to such great lengths to save them?

In the morning, we gather beneath the turtle-station tent, smelling of sunscreen, sweat, and DEET. I admit that I am starting to feel like a cast member of *Lost*, pressing in a code over and over again at the hatch, because someone told me it would save the world. Now Nicki stands in front of the group with three local women next to her. There are piles of plastic bags on the table next to them. "Years ago, the people living in and around this area made money from the death of turtles," Nicki says. "Now the community makes money from turtles a different way—by saving them."

One of the women holds up a colorful purse while another displays a small sculpture of a whale. Nicki explains how the women collect trash from the beaches, roads, and land surrounding the banana plantations. They salvage the plastic bags, cut the tops and bottoms off, scrub them with Chlorox, sort them by color, and then weave them into purses or melt them into hard molds to carve into animal shapes. Widecast purchases these finished items for around

a mound of kelp or a log, I can't be sure. I'm told it's a turtle.



$15 apiece and then resells them to turtle-station visitors for $20. It takes a woman three days to finish a single purse. But each plastic bag recycled and sold is one less choking or killing a sea turtle. And of equal importance, this practice feeds and employs the women of Gandoca. Saving the leatherback turtle takes a village, but saving Gandoca takes the leatherback turtle.

NIGHT 4: SECTOR C

After spending the afternoon clearing logs and debris from a recent flood (to give the leatherback more high-and-dry places to dig her nest), we form two lines and walk the beach again. I have yet to see a turtle up close or laying her eggs, although at breakfast other patrol members wax poetic about their experiences with the turtles on other shifts. Some actually cry.

But, I'm more relaxed than I've been in months, away from the office, and traffic, and taking care of the many "things" I've accumulated. I'm finding instead that night patrols provide plenty of time to think, pray, and contemplate the complexities of profound life and death issues—especially during our breaks. In the dark, sitting and resting with the others in the sand, I see the building waves and my eyes play tricks on me. I can't make out the horizon. Just a black wall rising. It makes my heart race. I think about my beautiful friend Kelly Hillgrove, who died five years ago when a tsunami hit Sri Lanka. She was eating breakfast with her fiancé and was swept away. When they found her, she was holding the hand of a small child. It would be like Kelly to have tried to save the little boy, or to have simply comforted him if that were all she had left to offer.

I wonder how anyone here in Gandoca would ever know if an earthquake had hit somewhere far away and caused a wave that swallowed up everything in its path, turtle eggs and all. It seems to me that, like Kelly, they would have spent their last days trying to save a living thing and interacting with the people they love, instead of being caught, like me, playing marathon games of Scrabble on my iPhone or watching *30 Rock*. I have a 3-year-old son back home, missing me—it is my choice to be so far away for this moment, to take a break from being a parent. I close my eyes, and when I open them, the haze of clouds above evaporates and I see every star in the sky. Along the horizon, fireflies mirror the Milky Way blinking across the sand. At once I understand how turtles can become disoriented by artificial lights and lose their way. I think that even if I do not see a turtle, I am still one of the luckiest people on the planet.

NIGHT 5: SECTOR B

It is our last night of patrol. Volunteers from Sector A radio Eric, our turtle—whisperer guide, that they passed a leatherback on their way through our area. We all but run, blind and in formation, about a mile. No turtle. We rest. And it is okay. I get lost in the drumming of the waves and the repetitive din of cicadas and frogs. The rainforest and the ocean say to me, "We are alive." And I respond, "Yes, it is a powerful and important thing we share, this being alive." I rise to my feet.

And then, we find her. A Volkswagen of a leatherback, robotically digging a nest too close to the ocean. Eric hands me gloves and a plastic bag, and just like that, I am a turtle midwife. I lie flat, position the bag beneath her tail, and let her back flippers press in rhythm against my hands. White eggs the size of cue balls drop from her in clumps of two or three. Eric measures the depth and width of the nest, as well as the length of her flipper, so that he can recreate the nest for her in a safer place. She lays 118 viable eggs, then eight randomly sized unfertile eggs on top for insulation. I take the bag away as she begins to cover the nest with sand. While she camouflages her now empty nest, we measure her and examine her for scars and injuries. Her shell is medieval, a spiky armor of nondescript color. At no point do we shine a white light or walk in front of her. The whole process takes at least an hour. When we leave her to finish our shift, all I really want to do is stay and watch her until she disappears into the sea.

In 60 days, my turtles will hatch and try to make their way to the surf. Were I to return to Gandoca in 2029, I might see one of them again, coming in from the ocean to lay her eggs. But the odds are against it. I go home. I hug my son. Talk to him about my turtle. Tell him that she was almost eight feet long. Watch his eyes grow wide at the thought of her.

Saving these reptiles seems a futile and tedious task. They are dinosaurs, vestiges of some forgotten time, and they will exist for only as long as we deem the work of saving them important. By the time I leave Gandoca, I get it. We save the leatherback simply because we can. To have that ability and not use it would kill not only the turtles but the heart and soul of a village that depends on her. With a 90 percent hatch rate, and the first groups of tagged turtles returning from their 20 years at sea, the leatherbacks and the community of Gandoca remain committed to the invaluable work of saving and healing each other.

Images left to right: Entrance to the Turtle Station; Uninhabited black sand beach where night patrols take place; At last, a leatherback laying her eggs

YEUGEN POKIN; BOB DANNENHOLD

What is voluntourism?

An organized trip paid for by the traveler, usually to a foreign country, to aid conservation, teaching, building, humanitarian, health-care, or community-development efforts.

Is voluntourism for you?

If you're flexible, hard working, big hearted, and open to immersing yourself in foreign communities—with a certain amount of structure and safety provided—you may never come down from the high that such an authentic and culturally rich sabbatical provides. However, if you're looking for a catered vacation, the kind with down pillows, Western plumbing, and gourmet food, coupled with rest and relaxation, head to the Four Seasons instead.

How do I know which trip and provider are right for me?

Resources like www.voluntourismguru.com can help arrange the perfect fit for you. *Volunteer: A Traveler's Guide to Making a Difference Around the World* (Lonely Planet, 2007, $20) and *Mapping Your Volunteer Vacation* (Where Is She Heading, 2009, $20), a workbook by Jane Stanfield, can help you plan your excursion and prepare for it with confidence.

Intrepid Travel

Intrepid Travel offers many different types of trips, including 24 voluntourism options, rated for you by level of culture shock and physical abilities. All 24 are centered on teaching and building homes, schools, and other infrastructure in rural areas for two to six weeks.
Cost: Trips start around $1,200

A few of our favorites:
• Join a Peruvian village at the base of the Andes to teach local children and build homes and schools for their community. Take time to see Incan ruins and pathways.
• Work alongside local Nadi builders and become an essential part of a rural Fijian community. Explore lush, tropical surroundings on your days off.
• Head to Tanzania, Africa, and contribute to projects in impoverished sections of Moshi, the gateway city to Mount Kilimanjaro. Stay extra days to enjoy a safari or rest on a beach in Zanzibar.

www.intrepidtravel.com

i-to-i

Founded over 15 years ago, i-to-i has sent over 20,000 volunteers abroad on projects ranging from saving the leatherback turtles in Latin America to working with children in orphanages in Mombasa, Kenya. Most trips range from two to four weeks; the longer ones include a bit more adventure. Climbing Kilimanjaro, anyone?
Cost: Trips start around $1,000

A few of our favorites:
• Work with white lions and other large predators at a lion education center in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The trip ends with a safari.
• Hop atop an elephant and camp in the jungle on game drives to monitor populations of Bengal tigers in Arunachai Pradesh, India.
• Enjoy dramatic scenery and the cultural warmth of a homestay family as you build schools and houses in La Esperanza, Honduras.
• Care for orphaned children living at a shelter in Samrong Village, Cambodia. Teach English, life skills, and the joy of play.

www.i-to-i.com

Global Volunteers

With over 25 years of experience connecting volunteers with foreign community projects, Global Volunteers is one of the pioneers of the voluntourism movement. The organization assists over 100 host communities in 19 countries on five continents.
Cost: Trips start around $800

A few of our favorites:
• Bring English–teaching skills to middle and high school students in the Puglia region of Italy. Enjoy views of the rocky cliffs over the Adriatic Sea, along with the people, food, and spirit of the community.
• Teach reading to Maori youth in Rarotonga in the Cook Islands of the South Pacific, and join conservation efforts at the Whale Center and Takitumu Conservation Area.
• Stay put. Global Volunteers hosts projects in the U.S., including work on the Blackfeet Nation in Montana. Near Glacier National Park, it's a breathtaking backdrop for volunteering and learning more about day-to-day life on the reservation.

www.globalvolunteers.org

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