



Life's a beach

One NIGHT encountering nesting *TURTLES* at Mon Repos BEACH is all it takes to transform *HOLIDAYMAKERS* into awestruck witnesses of MARINE conservation in action, writes Liz Bond.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Mon Repos* supports the largest concentration of nesting marine turtles on the eastern Australian mainland; *Mon Repos Conservation Park*; A hatchling makes its way across the sand; Inside *Turtle Sands'* ultra-comfortable Beach House.

EVENING UNFOLDS QUIETLY at the world-renowned Mon Repos Turtle Centre near Bundaberg. Rangers carefully guide 60 of us along the moonless beach, after locating the night's first nesting female loggerhead turtle.

Guided by an extraordinary internal compass, she has returned to the exact beach where she hatched three decades ago – a remarkable and puzzling navigational feat. Every sandy plod we take is calculated to ensure we don't disrupt the turtle's delicate egg-laying ritual.

We have dubbed her Roxanne (inspired more by The Police than Cyrano de Bergerac). She has instinctually and methodically powered her furiously flicking flippers to sculpt a sanctuary for her 114 ping-pong-ball-sized coloured eggs. Our rangers closely monitor Roxanne, recording her measurements and marking the nest's location. As the kids grow restless, Roxanne may or may not be flicking sand their way.

A new ecotourism benchmark, NRMA Parks and Resorts' Turtle Sands fits neatly behind the dunes – front row to the wonder of nesting and, weeks later, hatching loggerhead, flatback and green turtles. This stretch of the Southern Great Barrier Reef has long been a holiday playground. And now this former caravan park has been

transformed, leading the way in wildlife-friendly design with environmental sustainability and accessibility at its core.

When we arrived earlier, we let out a sigh of relief as we spotted a bank of EV chargers. Our new Omoda E5 loaner needs a top-up, and charging spots on the road from Brisbane/ Meanjin have been scarce, unreliable or out of action. It's the first of many sustainability features that set the resort apart. We've officially left the everyday and much less eco-friendly world behind.

A 100kwh solar system allows Turtle Sands to be almost off-grid but with enough grunt to power energy-efficient, motion-sensor air conditioning and lighting. At check-in, we take the Turtle Protection Promise, pledging to minimise impact and to only walk on the beach between 6am and 6pm.

Accommodation includes powered caravan sites, accessible studio rooms, glamping tents, three-bedroom villas and the Beach House – a reimagined 1917 schoolhouse. We're among the first to put the latter through its paces.

Designed for two with an ultra-comfortable king bed, the full kitchen makes self-catering a snap. Like the outdoor kitchen, we don't get to →





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Spot hatchlings on a Turtle Encounter Tour; End the day with a soak in the Beach House's tub; NRMA Parks and Resorts' new Turtle Sands with its turtle-shaped pool; The Garden Mill Cafe in nearby Bargara; Enjoy the beach year-round.



give it a test run because Bundaberg's restaurants are too good to miss. Cleverly, the mud room entrance doubles as a butler's pantry with a pod coffee machine and wardrobe.

I get first dibs on the tempting tub in the oversized and luxurious bathroom. A ceiling fan makes an excellent backup or alternative to the air-con in the combined living and bedroom space that opens through floor-to-ceiling glass to a party-sized deck. It's the ideal spot for an early morning cuppa to listen to the ocean continually reacquainting itself with the sand.

Late afternoon, Turtle Sands transforms. Around the pool, families toast to the good life with unfiltered happiness. Plastic glasses gently thud stubby holder-dressed beers. Everyone, it seems, has left their everyday world behind. "Marco!" echoes from one end of the turtle-shaped pool, met with thunderous "Polo!" responses.

Sprawling teenagers scroll phones while still-dripping kids dart about smelling of sunscreen. Sizzling sausages mingle with the aroma of fresh pizza from the food truck. The sheer joy is infectious. This is more than a holiday – it's a celebration of family and nature.

With only a million-star sky and sliver of silver moon to light the way, our Omoda E5 seems at home as we return later from dinner at the outstanding Water St Kitchen. Turtle Sands is dark except for motion-sensor lights. Still, except for the occasional blood-curdling scream of eastern curlews, it's another moment to breathe in the briny air and just be. **AT**



A traveller's checklist

Getting there

Fly into Brisbane/Meanjin and hire an EV for the leisurely four-hour eco route to **MON REPOS**, a 15-minute drive from Bundaberg. Download the Charge@Large app to avoid range anxiety.

Staying there

TURTLE SANDS is located on Mon Repos Beach. It has a range of accommodation including powered sites from \$63 per night, studio rooms from \$216 per night, glamping tents from \$267 per night and villas from \$370 per night (based on mid-season rates). Accessible studios and villas are also available. turtlesands.com.au

Playing there

TURTLE ENCOUNTER TOURS run every evening between November and March from Mon Repos Turtle Centre.

MONSOON AQUATICS is leading the way in reef conservation – propagating and spawning coral for replanting.

Eating there

Take Elliott Heads Road to **TINABERRIES** for the best strawberries you'll ever eat. Enjoy breakfast at **ONE LITTLE FARM** among sweet-smelling flowers and relish a delicious lunch at local favourite **THE GARDEN MILL CAFE**, which is edging towards zero food waste.

WATER ST KITCHEN has exquisite food, a stellar wine list and service to match.

Family-owned **KALKI MOON DISTILLERY** is Bundaberg's best artisan distillery known for gin rather than rum.

Quench your thirst on a **BUNDABERG DRINKS** tour. For more information, visit bundabergregion.org

