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“The beach bristles with hatchlings as tens of thousands of pint-sized turtles make a starlit dash for the sea”

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01 Mon Repos Turtle Centre
02 Tiny turtle hatchling at Mon Repos
03 Turtle Sands Resort.
Images 01 & 02 © Tourism & Events Queensland

Turtle Power

Beneath a star-sprinkled sky, the sands of Mon Repos transform into a bustling highway of turtle hatchlings, each one scrambling to the sea on a journey as old as time, writes Catherine Best.



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A flurry of tiny flippers scurries across my toes, tickling my feet, and I stifle a giddy squeal. My 11-year-old daughter, wonderstruck but hesitant, stands to the side as a cavalcade of hatchlings forms a turtle superhighway down the beach. They scuttle across the sand following a beam of torchlight to the water, where they somersault in the waves before disappearing into the sea.

Hatchling haven

Mon Repos near Bundaberg, on the southern edge of the Great Barrier Reef, is a turtle mecca. This sweep of golden sand is home to the largest sea turtle rookery on the eastern Australian mainland. Every year between November and January, hundreds of endangered loggerhead turtles lumber ashore to lay their eggs in the protected dunes. Then, from January to March, the beach bristles with hatchlings as tens of thousands of pint-sized turtles make a starlit dash for the sea.

When we visit, the sun hasn't even set when the evening's first turtles poke through the sand. Ranger Sonya Allcott shepherds the group onto the beach and we tread carefully

up into the dunes, crouching quietly around a cluster of depressions. A woodchip-flipper parts the sand and a little head and body wriggle free. Then come another and another. The sand wriggles with flippers and Monte Carlo-biscuit shells as the hatchlings scramble free, leaving a growing hole in their wake. After eight weeks of incubation and three days hatching, the turtles are in a hurry to get out. They're corralled in an enclosure for a few minutes while the nest empties (there are an average 127 eggs in a clutch). When the hatchlings are all out, the group forms two lines to the ocean, leaving a wide passage in between where a handful of volunteers – myself included – stand with feet wide apart. Shining a circle of torchlight on the sand, we guide the hatchlings between our feet to the ocean in a magical game of turtle tunnel ball.

When the turtles hit the water, they're in the fight of their lives. Only one in 1,000 will make it to adulthood. If any in tonight's clutch of 82 hatchlings are lucky, they will return to this beach in 30 years to nest, guided by an in-built GPS. With such a dismal survival rate, the loggerheads need all the help they can get. During turtle season, Mon Repos beach is closed between 6pm and 6am, and a 'cut the glow to help turtles go' project implores locals and visitors to switch off their lights (artificial light can disorient the turtles).

Turtle Sands resort

At Turtle Sands resort, a short walk from the Mon Repos Turtle Centre, conservation comes first. Before checking in, we sign a Turtle Protection

Mon Repos

Promise, committing to stay off the beach at night, keep noise and lights low and flatten any turtle-obstructing sandcastles at the end of the day. Opened in September 2024, the NRMA park is nuzzled between the beach and a nature reserve on the doorstep of the most significant loggerhead turtle rookery in the South Pacific Ocean. Solar power, recycled plastic pavers and native plantings keep the park green, and the non-reflective cabins have angled window shades to deflect light away from the beach. Come 7.30pm, the property becomes a 'dark park': the lights go off, sensor lighting is activated and, if you forget, a kindly duty manager will remind you to close your blinds.

The park has 46 villas and glamping tents and 69 caravan and camping sites, including some premium spots on the beachfront. We're staying in a three-bedroom poolside villa. It has a large, covered deck overlooking the lagoon pool, three bedrooms and two bathrooms – with enough room for our family of five and even the grandparents.

Great explorations

When we're not seeking out turtle tracks on the beach, we're exploring the natural and culinary wonders of what is surely the Great Barrier Reef's most underrated coastal region.

We visit Monsoon Aquatics, a coral farm on the banks of the Burnett River that's at the forefront of reef

restoration, and meet with Taribelang Bunda woman Waszanna Reed, who shares creation stories and tells us about the fight to save the critically endangered white-throated snapping turtle (milbi). We tour the quiet hamlet of Bargara and visit popular swim and snorkel spots at The Basin and Barolin Rocks. A cyclone is rumbling further north and the sea is angry, so we save our togs and goggles for the pool.

Our adventures are punctuated with yummy treats. Biscoff milkshakes, pancakes and farm animal encounters at The Garden Mill Cafe, and dragon fruit smoothie bowls beneath a Dutch windmill at the whimsical Windmill Cafe. We cool down with a ginger beer and soft drink tasting at Bundaberg Brewed Drinks (who knew there were 13 flavours?), and slurp on strawberry ice creams in the shade of poinciana trees at Tinaberries farm. Our days end swimming with a giant loggerhead just outside our room at Turtle Sands resort. Yes, the pool is in the shape of a turtle. Of course. ●



04 Ice cream break at Tinaberries farm © Catherine Best 05 Villa at Turtle Sands 06 Taribelang Bunda Cultural Tours 07 Mon Repos Turtle Encounter.



Mon Repos Report Card

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