

DESTINATION

Shell shock

Eating sea turtle eggs with a clear conscience? It's all part of conservation efforts in Costa Rica, finds **Cameron Dueck**.

She takes an eternity to crawl up the beach, flippers and beak clawing at the black volcanic sand, her gasps audible over the roar of crashing waves.

When, finally, the female olive ridley turtle has crawled 20 metres from the sea, she begins digging. Slowly, one flipper-full at a time, she flings sand to the side, settling deeper into the sandy nest with each excavation. Black turkey vultures flap and fight over eggs tossed aside with the sand as the turtle disturbs the nest of another.

When the hole is about half a metre deep, she stops, scales occasionally blinking over her eyes. Her shell quivers as she shifts her bulk. Then, job done, she begins shoveling sand back into the hole, covering a clutch of about 100 eggs.

The turtle is not alone. Thousands of fellow olive ridleys are following the same ancient ritual along the length of the eight-kilometre Playa Ostional beach, on Costa Rica's Pacific coast.

Playa Ostional is a small, sleepy village on the Nicoya Peninsula, which is better known for its long, sandy beaches than for its interior, most of which is mountainous and heavily forested. Ostional is accessible only by a drive of several hours down a rough and rutted dirt road that snakes along the coast.

Turtles and surfing are the village's main attractions, with a row of simple and economical guest houses catering to the few souls who find their way here.

On the beach, under the shade of a coconut palm, a Tico, as the native Costa Ricans like to call themselves, is digging in the sand with his hands, scooping up freshly laid turtle eggs. Each about the size of a table tennis ball, they are white and have leathery, soft skin.

When the nest is empty he slowly walks across the beach, barefoot, testing the sand with the ball of his foot. Where the sand is soft and gives way, he stops and begins digging again, revealing another clutch of eggs. Some were laid only moments earlier.

He tears open one of the shells to give me a look. The bright yellow yolk and clear egg-white quiver in his hand. Then, with a broad smile, he tilts back his head and tosses the egg into his mouth, laughing. "They're good for you, they'll make you strong," Ronal says. "Try one." He is already peeling open a second egg.

Soon I am holding a turtle egg, runny and sticky, in my palm. I swirl it in my hand once, then throw back my head and slam it, swallowing hard. It has a rich, slightly salty taste to it.

Now, I know what you are thinking -



but Ronal and I are not poaching, even though Costa Rica outlawed the taking of marine turtle eggs in 1966. My culinary experience is allowed under an exemption enacted to stabilise the population of olive ridley turtles in Ostional, and accommodate local egg-harvesting traditions.

Olive ridleys are the smallest and most numerous of the sea turtles, and the only ones observed in a reproductive rite little understood by scientists, called *arribadas*

("arrivals", in Spanish). Most marine turtles nest individually; ridleys congregate en masse at sea and then swarm the beaches like an army, sometimes numbering in the thousands. As many as 200,000 ridleys may swarm onto a beach in any one season, many having little option but to dig up the nests of others as they make their own.

Over the course of the nesting season females may leave as many as 10 million