



A guide to: *The Great Turtle Project*



# The Great Turtle Project

**Focus:** Turtles

**Location:** Sri Lanka

**Start Date:** Every Sunday

**Arrival & Starting Point:** Colombo

In the south of Sri Lanka sits the small coastal town of Kosgoda. Once a sleepy town of humble origins, Kosgoda has become something of a popular tourist destination, owing to an abundance of turtles which can be found on its shores – but while turtles are a significant draw for visitors to the region, their prevalence and survival has relied heavily on conservation efforts.

The Great Turtle Project was founded over three decades ago by a local family who had noted the struggles faced by their country's turtle populations. Species such as green, hawksbill and olive ridley turtles had been threatened by poachers on Kosgoda's coast, who would steal young hatchlings or turtle eggs in order to sell them on the black market. Dudley Perera – the family's patriarch – decided to spend his life's savings on the construction of a turtle sanctuary in order to combat these issues, and so the project was born.

For many years the project had grown steadily, though tragedy struck in 2004 when a major tsunami hit Sri Lanka, destroying much of the south coast and causing the sanctuary to fall into a state of disrepair. Desperate to continue providing care for Kosgoda's turtle populations, Dudley turned to the internet in the hopes of inviting volunteers from around the globe to not only aid the reconstruction of the sanctuary, but to support the local area in the wake of the disaster. Many years on, the sanctuary has been rebuilt, and The Great Turtle Project is going stronger than ever before.

The support of volunteers from around the world has allowed The Great Turtle Project to provide care for thousands of turtles over the years, as well as helping a large amount to make their way into the ocean without the threat of being poached. By joining this project, you will contribute to these continued efforts by taking part in a range of important activities both at the sanctuary and beyond.



Whilst at the sanctuary, you will assist with the ongoing care of the project's resident turtles, some of which are too disabled or injured to ever be released into the wild. Similarly, there are a small number of turtles which are held back at the sanctuary as part of the 'head-starter' programme, an idea devised by the project team to improve survival rates from each clutch of turtles hatched. These turtles will be given extra time to gain their strength before eventually making their way into the ocean and, should you volunteer at the project when this does happen, you will be invited to take part in their release.

At other points during the project, you will be asked to lead tours of the sanctuary and may even visit the local area in order to teach English to members of the local community. Your involvement with the community is meaningful in more ways than one, as not only will you contribute to the wider understanding of turtle conservation as a whole, but you will equip Kosgoda's people with a valuable skill which may benefit them in other areas of life.

The Great Turtle Project is a worthy cause for many reasons, but can only continue to exist with the continued support of people like you – so why not get involved today?





## Turtle Care

The turtles at the sanctuary require a constant level of care if they're to be released into the ocean and, in some instances, injured or disabled turtles will rely on the project for the rest their lives. The project has implemented a feeding schedule which sees the turtles fed every other day, and you will help to provide the animals with portions of their favourite fish: tuna! Additionally, you will help to keep the turtles' shells clean, using a soft brush or sand to gently scrub away any algae or debris.

## Turtle Release

This is often the best part of the project for many of our volunteers, as releasing a turtle into the ocean marks the end of the volunteer-controlled part of its life and the beginning of its independence. With the odds stacked against them, it is important that the turtles' journey towards the ocean is made as easy as possible, so you will help to ensure that the group's path remains clear of predators. Many releases take place at dusk (the safest time for a turtle to make its way into the ocean, as it's harder for birds, fish and crustaceans to see them), so be prepared for some evening activity whilst on this project!



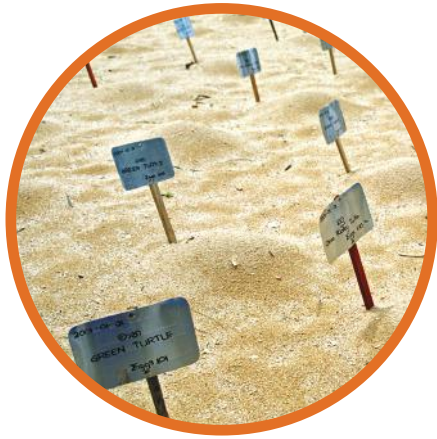
## Burying Turtle Eggs

Turtle eggs have long been considered a delicacy in Sri Lanka; notably, turtle egg soup is a favourite dish of many throughout the country. The use of turtle eggs in cuisine has had a negative impact on the nation's turtle populations, which is why the project devised a plan to obtain as many of these eggs as possible. Instead of allowing fishermen to sell any found eggs to restaurants, the team began to offer a higher price and therefore the fishmen would bring the eggs to the sanctuary instead. As a volunteer, you will help to carefully rebury the eggs in the sand so that they have the best chance of hatching.

## Tank Cleaning

A clean, safe environment is essential if the project hopes to keep the turtles as healthy as possible, and you will support their efforts by helping to maintain the turtles' tanks. This will be done by running a water pump and hose from the sea into the tanks, where saltwater will be used to rinse off any debris. You and your fellow volunteers will then be required to remove any grime that you see, using brushes, squeegees and even coconuts to clean the inside of the tanks. After rinsing the tanks once more, a stopper will be placed into the tank and it will be refilled with water.





## Cleaning & Constructing Hatcheries

Due to an increased number of turtle eggs being brought to the project (and as a result of previous damage to the site, including 2004's tsunami), previous volunteers have contributed to the construction of new hatcheries. While construction is not a guaranteed part of all volunteer experiences, you may help to clean the hatcheries themselves, to ensure that they are suitable for eggs to be buried in and for the turtles to hatch into a healthy environment.

## Beach Clean-Ups

The project aims to keep the beach as clean as possible, both to provide safe passage for the turtles as they make their way to the sea, and to set an example for the local people. You will help the project team to remove all litter, wood, coconuts and organic matter from the beach, putting everything that you collect into garbage bags for the council to take away. You will also collect plastic, glass, weeds and vines, which will be gathered up and disposed of correctly or recycled.



## Sanctuary Tours

Tours are a crucial part of the project, as they are used as a way to educate the locals about turtle populations and the threats they're facing. You will help to lead tours of the sanctuary as you aim to educate visitors on issues such as beach pollution and the trade of turtles and their eggs. It is important that these tours are informative and effective, as the money raised by paying guests can help to keep the project's conservation efforts going strong.

## Teaching English

You may visit local schools, villages or temples throughout your time on the project in order to help teach members of the community. While educating the locals on issues such as conservation and the environment is important, it is similarly valuable to teach them English, which you will do in a variety of ways such as playing, singing, or through more traditional classroom methods. The age of your 'students' may vary, as may the topics that you speak to them about, but this is sure to be a fun and worthwhile element of your time on the project! Please note that this activity is not a guaranteed part of your itinerary.





# The 'Head Starter' Programme

The team at The Great Turtle Project have implemented a programme which is designed to give the best rate of survival to the turtles hatched from any clutch, whilst also serving a secondary pedagogic (or educational) purpose.

Out of roughly 1000 hatchlings, it is estimated that only one will survive until adulthood. The risks faced by today's turtle populations are greater than ever before, with issues such as ocean or beach pollution, light pollution and the poaching crisis each contributing to these struggles. When baby turtles hatch, they are born into a sandy nest from which they may take 3-7 days to climb out. These turtles are weak, which is why they must struggle to leave their nests, but due to predatory animals in the region or even poachers (who wish to steal the turtles or the eggs to sell later on), the survival rate at this early stage stands at only around 25%.

Ideally, all turtle nests would remain safe from poachers and predators, but the project knows that this is simply not the case and therefore the eggs are moved from where they are initially laid into a safer hatchery area where they can then be monitored. A majority of these turtles will hatch from their eggs and, under safe conditions, will begin their return to sea under the watchful eye of our volunteers, but a small number of turtles from each clutch are held back so that they have even more time to grow and gain strength.



The 'head-starter' programme sees this small number of turtles moved from the hatchery at an appropriate stage, into 'baby tanks' where they can continue to grow. They will gain their strength by swimming around the tanks, and their progress is carefully monitored by members of the project team. If any issues do arise during their growth, these turtles can be safely kept at the sanctuary for the remainder of their lives – indeed, the project is home to a small number of turtles which have certain difficulties; some were born with physical defects, whilst others were brought to the sanctuary after having been found to be struggling on their own in the wild. Of course, the main hope for the baby turtles is that they will someday find their way to the sea, and once they are strong enough to be released (having had more time to develop their swimming skills than their fellow hatchlings), they too shall make their way from the beach to the ocean.

The main reason for this programme is to ensure that as many turtles as possible will make it to maturity; at best, it is hoped that all released turtles will have long and healthy lifespans. While the turtles are at the sanctuary (both the hatchlings that have been kept behind, and those too injured or disabled to be released), they can act as an informative element of the tours that do take place at the sanctuary. Those who do visit the project site as daytime guests will be shown around by you and your fellow volunteers, and you will be encouraged to chat to them about the importance of turtle conservation, why some of the turtles are temporarily held back, and what the future holds for all turtles at the sanctuary.

# Itinerary

## Day 1

Upon your arrival into Colombo Airport, you will be met by a project representative and transferred to the sanctuary. You will have the remainder of the day to rest and recover from the journey, and you may even wish to explore the area. Later on, you will receive an introduction to the project.

## Days 2 - 14

These are your project days, and after a briefing of the morning's activities you will get straight to work! You will take part in a range of the activities shown earlier in this guide and will follow an itinerary similar to the one listed below, though Fridays are half-days and may see you taking part in a beach clean with your group. Your weekends are free to spend at leisure.

## Day 15

This is your final day, so after saying goodbye to your fellow volunteers and the project team, you will be transferred back to Colombo Airport in order to catch your flight home or to continue with your independent travel plans.

## A Typical Day On The Great Turtle Project

Activities on this project will vary from day to day, depending on the needs of the turtles and the sanctuary. The below itinerary is only an example of what a day on this project might look like, so please be prepared to be flexible!

**7:30am**

Breakfast takes place bright and early, so head to the communal area to enjoy a morning meal with your group.

**8:30am**

Your activities for the day shall begin now, with your first job being to collect any hatched baby turtles from the hatcheries and to move them into the baby tanks. If any fishermen have brought more eggs to the sanctuary, these eggs must be buried as soon as possible, and their nests marked with their count and type. Next, you will help to feed the turtles!

**10:30am**

You will stop for a brief morning break before moving onto your next task, which will either involve tidying up at the sanctuary or taking a walk along the beach to clear rubbish.

**12:30pm**

It's now time to break for lunch, and you will have time to rest up a little ahead of the afternoon's activities!

**2:00pm**

You'll leave the sanctuary in the afternoon as you head out to a local school, temple or village to help teach the locals English! Please make sure that you dress respectfully, with cultural considerations in the forefront of your mind.

**6:00pm**

After arriving back at the sanctuary, you will head out onto the beach to help with a turtle release (should one go ahead)!

**6:30pm**

You will head back to the volunteer house for dinner, and will be free to spend the rest of your evening at leisure.



## Accommodation

During your time on the project, you will stay in a designated volunteer house, which is located next door to the turtle sanctuary. Rooms are shared on a same-sex basis, with either two or three people to a room (couples and families will be accommodated together). All rooms are air conditioned. The volunteer house also has bathrooms which are equipped with western toilets and hot showers.

The volunteer house has a swimming pool, which you are welcome to use during your downtime. Additionally, the house is located in close proximity to the beach, which is ideal both for free time and for witnessing any turtle releases which may take place during your time on the project!



## Food & Drink

Whilst on the project, you will be provided with three meals per day. Breakfast may consist of fresh fruit, bread, jam and eggs, while lunch can be selected from a menu consisting of items such as sandwiches, soup and omelettes, amongst other things. In the evening, you will enjoy a Sri Lankan meal such as curry and rice or a delicious fish dish – however, since dinner is served in a buffet-style, you may help yourself to whichever dish you please! Vegetarian options are available, but we do ask that you let us know of any dietary requirements in advance of your time on the project so that we can best cater for you.

Snacks and alcoholic beverages can be purchased at a local shop close by to the project site, though do please note that these will be at your own expense.





## What's Included

- Accommodation
- Three meals per day
- Transfers to and from Colombo Airport
- English-speaking project leader
- A donation to the project

## Not Included

- Flights
- Vaccinations
- Visas
- Travel insurance

## Volunteer Reviews

### Wiep

"We watched newborn turtles emerge from the sand. It was absolutely overwhelming!"



### Sabrina

"It was an incredible experience from beginning to end. I highly recommend this trip."



### Jack

"It would take the entire plane journey home to describe every breathtaking moment of this trip!"







## What Next?

Becoming a volunteer on The Great Turtle Project is simple, and you can help make a difference to turtle conservation efforts in just a few simple steps...



Visit the website to select your start date and how long you would like to volunteer for.



Secure your place online by paying a deposit of £195. You'll have up to 60 days before your start date to pay your remaining balance.



Prepare for your trip and ask your dedicated travel expert any questions before packing your bags and heading off to Sri Lanka!



Finally, have an incredible time and don't forget to send in or tag us in your photos!

**#thegreatprojects**



[www.thegreatprojects.com](http://www.thegreatprojects.com)

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