

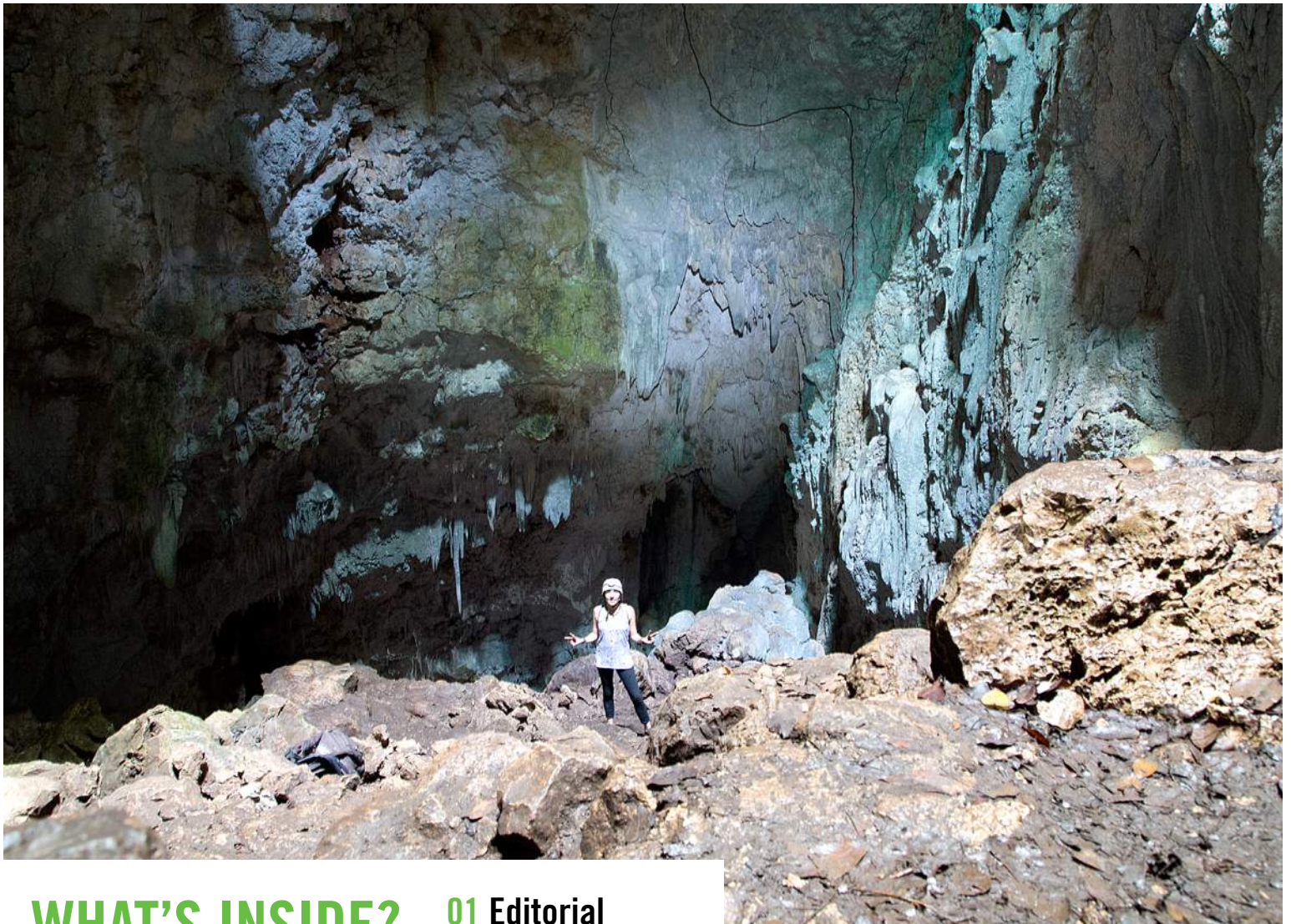
THE OFFICIAL

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# NEWSLETTER

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For Projects Abroad Costa Rica



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# EDITORIAL

## La Arribada: The Arrival of the Olive Ridley's to Playa Ostional



The truck wove through the darkness down the dirt road, bumping over the holes and rocks illuminated by the headlights and splashing through seemingly bottomless puddles. The evening air was heavy with the smell of the ocean mixed with livestock, and the lightning flashing intermittently in the distance was all that remained from the afternoon's storms. I bounced among the backpacks on the backseat for nearly three hours before small cottages began to appear on either side of the road, their porch lights and kitchen lights revealing the life moving about the pueblo on a Friday night. But this Friday was different as the turtles were arriving here in Ostional.

"What do you say we take a spin around the beach?" Dorian asked as we arrived at the headquarters for SINAC (Sistema Nacional de Áreas de Conservación), a sea foam-green coloured building located on the edge of the pueblo in Ostional. "Yes, vamos!" my colleague Tony and I assented. Dorian Méndez, the park manager of Barra Honda National Park, had been sent by SINAC to oversee the arrival of the Olive Ridley sea turtles to the beach in the Ostional Wildlife Refuge and to carry out an evaluation of the local system of tour guides. Tony Ruiz, the conservation manager for Projects Abroad at Barra Honda, had come along to help out Dorian, and I had jumped on board last-minute.

If there is one thing that I have learned from traveling, it is that when an opportunity presents itself, no matter how strange it sounds, you should never say "no." This trip reaffirmed that lesson to me.

The protected area includes 16 kilometres of beach in the South of Guanacaste Province on the Pacific Coast. The turtles nest once a month; however, the months of

September, October, and November have the largest arrivals due to the security provided to the turtles during the rainy season as the ocean is at its peak level and the rain provides the turtles protection from overheating while nesting in the tropical sun.

"When the turtles are born, their instinct is to go towards the brightest light, which is supposed to be the ocean," said Dorian as the three of us walked in the darkness across the sand. "So artificial white lights such as camera flashes, flashlights and lights from the houses along the beach confuse them." After a moment, our eyes adjusted to the darkness, and a large low shadow lurched a few meters from us. Dorian took out his flashlight wrapped in red cellophane, and when he turned it on, a low red light exposed the turtle sliding through the sand in search of a spot to build her nest. "They still see the red, but it doesn't bother them the way that white lights would," he explained.



As we walked on, the number of turtles grew and grew until we were avoiding massive shells with every step. Some turtles were crawling in from the ocean while others were digging holes with their back fins to drop eggs into. Others were already spinning in circles on top of their nests to camouflage them in the sand, and some were locked in a trance-like state as they dropped anywhere between 70-120 eggs into the 40 cm deep holes that they had dug. After the nest had been dug, the eggs laid and the area camouflaged, the turtles returned to the sea where they would spend the next year swimming east in the currents to Asia, Africa or Australia and then return to Ostional two years later to nest again. The three of us walked the three kilometres of beach where nesting is the heaviest, dodging the large dark shadows coming and going between the ocean and beach. It felt like we were on a different planet.

We stopped at a turtle that appeared not to be moving. "She's in a trance," said Dorian as he pulled out his red light, shining it in the black hole beneath the back legs of the turtle. I saw what looked like ping pong balls in the bottom of the hole, and then one fell out of the turtle landing on top of the rest. Not all of the eggs in the nest hatch and of the turtles that do hatch, not all of them make it from the nest to the ocean and of the turtles that make it to the water, not many of them make it through the first few kilometres on their journey across the Pacific. On average, only one egg in each nest might successfully hatch and return to nest here in the following years. Due to the low reproduction rate and the length and difficulty of their journey, the Olive Ridley is an endangered species.

The next day we learned that around 2,000 to 3,000 turtles had nested during the night. As we walked along the beach early in the morning, buzzards and stray dogs perused the area, sniffing out eggs to eat, filling the air with the putrid smell of rotting egg. The egg collectors or "hueveros" were already out digging up nests and collecting eggs to sell at the markets. Served fried, scrambled, or even raw, turtle eggs are a delicacy in Costa Rica, in particular in Ostional.



"It's legal to take the eggs from this section of the beach," explained Dorian, "but only during the first three days of the arrival."

"The arrival lasts for about a week," Tony later explained. "And most of the turtles arrive in this one tiny area." He continued, "so if they all arrive here, there won't be space for the turtles that come later. They're just going to destroy these nests when they arrive so that they can lay their own. So it's a good thing that the hueveros are taking these eggs."

The following day was the last day that eggs could legally be taken from the nests, and police were there to ensure that everyone complied. "This is great to watch," said Dorian as we watched massive sacks of eggs being carried to the ocean to be washed by young locals while others sat on the beach putting the eggs into plastic bags to be sold.



"The eggs can only be sold in an official bag with a ticket indicating that it is legal," he explained. This process shows the importance of community involvement in conservation. It's about teaching people to live in their environment and work within it, not about saying, "no, you can't do this or this." It's about saying, "This is what you can do because this is what will happen."



# Project Update

## Una convivencia: Lessons in care work

When volunteers come to Costa Rica to take part in a care project, they often arrive with the idea that it will only be the day-care centre that will be receiving the benefits from their time and efforts volunteering. Little do they realize that while their help is vital to local care centres, it's an equally valuable experience for the volunteers as they have the opportunity to learn from the children and their teachers. The lessons that come from these experiences are the ones that will stick with volunteers for many years to come.

"The purpose of the centre is to help mothers in extreme poverty," says Ana Valerio, a supervisor at Centro Infantil: Luz Divina, where many of our care volunteers have been helping out since 2012. "Our mission," she states, "is for the mothers and their children to have a higher quality of life."

Care centres in Costa Rica where volunteers are placed are sponsored by the IMAS (Instituto Mixto por la Ayuda Social), meaning that volunteers typically work with children from difficult backgrounds. Upon arriving at a care placement, volunteers are often surprised by just how difficult the situations can be for many of the children. "The majority of the children are here for twelve hours a day," Ana continues. "Here they receive meals—a breakfast, some fruit mid-morning, lunch, and an afternoon snack. This is important as occasionally the children will come here without having had breakfast. The last meal that they had was the snack that we gave them the previous afternoon."



Twelve hours a day are enough time to form a lasting impression on a child's development. "Here, they're given an education," Ana adds. "They're given a sense of discipline, and they learn to respect one another. Strong principles are our focus."

The help from our care volunteers has been an integral part of the education for the children at Luz Divina and similar care centres where Projects Abroad volunteers find themselves. "Volunteers also receive a lesson," says Ana. "They receive the lesson of sharing, of helping, of learning. They learn the lesson of selflessness and love. Many of them come here never having witnessed a person genuinely in need. They come here and see that there are children that don't have shoes or they see us collecting money to buy clothing for the children. So when they have that image; they leave here with that image and the lesson that goes with it."

"This is a home," Ana adds. "It is a home as this is where the children spend their day. It is where they find love, understanding, help, and tolerance. The volunteers have been excellent here, and I hope we can continue this 'convivencia,' or partnership, because it genuinely is a convivencia, among the volunteers, the families, the teachers, and the children."

# Photo Essay

## Mes del Murciélago (Month of the Bat)

Pollinating plants and controlling insect populations, the importance of bats in tropical forests cannot be overstated. To date, 45 species of bats have been identified by researchers with the help of Projects Abroad conservation volunteers carrying out surveys in Barra Honda National Park where an extensive cave system and dry tropical forest provide an ideal habitat for the mammal. October is the “Mes del Murciélago” or bat-appreciation month, and in recognition of this, here are some photos from our bat project.

The *micronyctaris hirsuta* or the “Hairy Large-eared” bat is part of the Leaf-nosed bat family, named for the leaf-shape of its nose. This is the most recent recording of a new species for Barra Honda National Park by volunteers.



A notched membrane connects the ears and is one of the key identifiers of the Hairy Large-eared bat. Only one other, smaller species has this band.



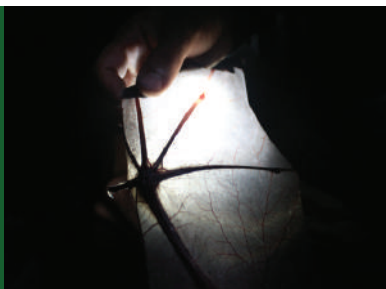
The “nose leaf” is specific to the family Phyllostomidae and aids in broadcasting echolocation signals. Noseleaves vary substantially in size and form among various species.



A bat's ears are well-developed to aid in the use of echolocation which is used for orientation and location of food. By bouncing ultrasounds off their surroundings they receive echos that offer them almost as much information as a visual image, even in total darkness.



The only mammals capable of true flight, the anatomical specializations of bats are most evident in the long, thin bones of the hand and forearm which provide structural support for the membrane of thin, flexible skin making up the wing.



The uropatagium is the membrane found between a bat's legs. Unlike other mammals, the knees bend backwards, permitting insectivorous bats to form a “basket” with this membrane to catch insects in flight.



Family Mormoopidae, or the “Mustached Bat” family, these bats are named for the hair found above their upper lip. They are small to medium-sized bats which can be identified by their thick, flared lips with folds of skin beneath the lower lip.



As insectivores, or insect-eaters, they are fast and agile flyers, possessing long and narrow wings in order to catch flying insects.



\*Source: LaVal, Richard K., Rodríguez-H., Bernal; *Murciélagos de Costa Rica / Costa Rica Bats*; pp. 15-30, 120-125; Editorial Inbio (Jan. 2002)

\*\*Photos: Projects Abroad-Costa Rica, Conservation