

A sea-traversing trek ends on Florida's beaches

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4-5 minutes

It's one of Mother Nature's most intimate moments, a solitary ritual that's been going on under cover of darkness for millions of years -- and tonight it was being shared by 40 or so complete strangers.

We were gathered in a loose semicircle on a moonless night in Melbourne Beach, marveling at the sight of a massive Atlantic loggerhead sea turtle dropping golfball-size eggs into a pit she'd dug in the sand.

Lit from behind by a red-tinted flashlight, the massive reptile squeezed out one glistening globe after another, unaffected by our prying eyes. Her body shuddered under her dark shell with each contraction, but she didn't make a sound. She was in the throes of pure instinct. And she'd come a long way to be here, crossing hundreds of miles of ocean to a spot very near her own birthplace to continue the cycle.

She might return to this beach three or four nights over the next two months to lay about 400 eggs at a time. It's the only time in her life that she'll spend on dry land, and we had come to cheer her on.

SCOUTING AND SPYING

The scene felt a bit voyeuristic, but in a wide-eyed, Discovery Channel sort of way. We were interlopers with a cause -- understanding -- guided by volunteers from the Sea Turtle Preservation Society on a turtle walk. And the sight they showed us was truly amazing.

In addition to rescue and stewardship duties, the Indialantic nonprofit organization hosts four to five guided walks per week during prime nesting season in June and July.

Participants meet at a designated beach park for a brief orientation and slide presentation while scouts comb the beach in search of nesting turtles. Then it's off to see the show.

The community-based group is grassroots to the core, so don't expect a flashy multimedia experience. Members' collective enthusiasm, however, more than makes up for the program's rough edges.

A sighting can't be guaranteed every night, but Brevard County is one of the most popular nesting sites on the East Coast, so the odds are definitely in your favor. And since it's illegal to in any way disturb a

nesting turtle, this is one of the only safe ways to enjoy this rare "true Florida" experience. Spots fill quickly, so reservations are a must.

During our walk, the good word came from the beach before volunteer Dave Hochberg had finished his spiel. There were three turtles nesting close by. Excitement grew within the group, which ranged from seniors to pre-teens, and we quickly mobilized.

Walking on the beach at night is a treat to begin with; having a mission made it all the more fun.

A CROWD-PLEASER

When she'd filled the pit, our gal rested for a few minutes, seemingly exhausted from a half-hour of labor. She then inched forward to bury her eggs, flinging sand methodically with her hind flippers until the pit was covered before patting it down with her rump.

Then she paused again, as if to say goodbye, and began crawling for the surf. A round of applause erupted, maybe a way of saying thanks, as she disappeared into the dark Atlantic.

I'm told that sea turtles excrete a liquid from their eyes during labor that resembles tears. Although it was too dark to see it that night, I would bet that they were tears of hope that a few of the hundreds of her offspring would survive and make it back to this beach someday.

A HOLIDAY FOR THE 'SURFIN' USA'

International Surfing Day debuts Tuesday, on the first day of summer. The new event, organized by Surfing Magazine in conjunction with environmental watchdogs the Surfrider Foundation, was created to celebrate the wave-riding lifestyle while raising awareness of the health of our oceans and beaches. For the day, billed as an "unofficial surfers' holiday," events are planned around the nation, from Hawaii to California and the East Coast. Locally, the Surfrider Foundation Sebastian Inlet Chapter is hosting a day of fun in Cocoa Beach on the sand in front of the Comfort Inn, two blocks south of State Road 520. Festivities start at 10 a.m. with soft-top surfboards provided by Next Generation Surf School, a beach cleanup at noon and a prize raffle for participants at 1 p.m. The chance for good waves is slim this time of year, but any day at the beach is better than none. Do you really need any more of an excuse? For information, visit surfrider.org/sebastianinlet.