

IT'S TIME FOR TURTLES

All along the East African coast turtles are hatching and Rupi Mangat visits one such site in Lamu.

"The turtles are hatching today" announces an excited Famau Shukri of Lamu Marine Conservation Trust (LaMCoT) over the phone. With exciting news like this first thing in the morning, I organise the rest of my group for a sudden trip to Shela, the village next to Shamu Stone Town, to meet up with Shukri.

Things look a little grey as the skies over Lamu Stone Town open up and pour. Would the little turtles really want to hatch in the rain? I ponder. Meanwhile, as we wait for the rain to stop, the silversmith's shop looks enticing – and we go in and take a look. Just as suddenly as the rain began, out pops a blue sky and we were on our way in a small motorboat named Lamu Uber.

Meeting up with Shukri at the Shela seafront, we then sail across the Lamu channel that divides the two islands of Lamu and Manda. A dhow laden with coral bricks sails past at full mast.

Spangled roots of the mangrove pattern the narrow maze of creeks along the beach at low tide on the beautiful afternoon. We climb up the narrow path through a glade of acacias to reach the homesteads of the Orma. Several of them now work for LaMCoT as guardians of the turtle nests. In the past, these same men happily raided the nests for turtle eggs for food.

We follow Shukri and the turtle guardians down the dune and the most magical view comes into sight – a vast open ocean meeting the sky. Above the high water mark, the Orma ranger and Shukri begin unearthing the turtle nest, wearing surgical gloves so as not to imprint their human mark on the newly hatched.

Out pop the little turtles and with their little flippers cross the sandy beach and then vanish into the crashing waters of the Indian Ocean with a rainbow arched across the sky. It's surreal.

Marine turtles are critically endangered across the globe. This ancient mariner of the oceans has outlived the dinosaur but now faces increasingly more challenges. Out of every 1,000 hatched, only one makes it to adulthood. Their life is fraught with predators including snakes and monitor lizards raiding the nests, birds and crabs waiting to swallow the little babes, fishing nets, poachers, big ships and clearing mangrove forests and beaches for building ports and the proposed coal-fired power plant.

But with groups like LaMCoT, life for the turtle is better as it patrols the turtle nests on Shela and Manda Island.

"Since the project began in 1997, our turtles' survival rate is 10 out of 1,000," says Shukri. "This year we have had six nests in Shela and 10 on Manda."

Over 4,500 turtles that were caught accidentally in fishing nets have been tagged and released back into the ocean. "Our tagged turtles have been sighted in Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa and even up to Asia," says Shukri.

FACT FILE

Interesting facts about turtles of Lamu and Manda islands

- The Green Turtle is the most common turtle species in Lamu, followed by the Hawksbill and Olive Ridley species. Rarely seen are the Leatherback and Loggerhead.
- Green Turtles live up to 80 – 100 years. The mother/females will return to the beach they were laid on to lay their nests.
- Statuettes made from coral bricks are produced on Manda Island.
- Keep updated on LaMCoT's turtle project: www.lamcot.org

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Rupi Mangat has kindly supplied a video of turtle hatchlings dashing for the surf, which you will be able to view on the BCG website.



Turtle nesting beach on Manda Island, Indian Ocean. *Photo by Rupi Mangat*
Green turtles hatching on Manda Island, Lamu, Kenya. *Photo by Maya Mangat*

