



Getting there: United Airlines (www.united.com) flies from Hong Kong to Houston via San Francisco, and on to Costa Rica's capital. It's five hours from San Jose by bus to La Cruz town, from where there is one bus bound for Playa Ostional daily. A car and driver can be arranged in Nicoya town, a two-hour drive from Ostional.

Clockwise from main picture: an olive ridley hatchling instinctively heads to sea; young and old crawl through the volcanic Ostional sand; turtle eggs stewing in a spicy broth over a wood fire; a vulture considers having eggs for lunch; a Tico looks for a snack.

by vultures and wild dogs will hatch. The hatchlings dig their way to the surface, smell the breeze and instinctively head for the ocean. Ten to 15 years later, the females will return to the beach of their birth to lay their own eggs.

Scientists say bacteria levels have been reduced at Ostional and more eggs are maturing to hatch. Other Costa Rican beaches are reporting a rise in olive ridley populations. Nonetheless, the programme remains controversial.

"As far as we can tell, a good empirical balance between conservation and benefits has been achieved by this programme," Valverde says. "However, we must remain cautious because many specific studies addressing details regarding the biology of that *arribada* population must still be worked out."

Critics say the programme actually encourages, rather than reduces, poaching, as Ostional's eggs have helped to develop a market. Roadside stands sell turtle eggs by the sackful during nesting season, and not all of them are harvested legally.

It is estimated that poaching destroys more than 80 per cent of olive ridley nests in Costa Rica as a whole.

Although the olive ridley is listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, which says there has been a 50 per cent reduction in the size of the population since the 1960s, it is considered the most abundant sea turtle in the world, and the least endangered of all the species that nest in Costa Rica.

The leatherback, green sea turtle and hawksbill are far more under threat than the olive ridley, and these are the turtles, nesting on remote and pristine beaches, that draw many of Costa Rica's tourists.

AS I WALK THROUGH a backyard on my way back to my hotel, I encounter Thomas, stirring a pot balanced on a wood fire, squinting against the smoke and steam rising from the fire. The pot contains about 50 turtle eggs swimming in a bright sauce containing home-grown oregano, chillis and garlic.

"You can cook them over gas or electric [stoves], but wood fire makes them taste the best," Thomas says. He slowly scoops them out of the broth, explaining that eating them raw will "help me have many children" but that they taste better boiled.

Thomas hands me a piping hot egg, now bright yellow with spices, and I make a small hole in the shell with my teeth before sucking out the contents. The eggs have a slightly chalky texture when cooked, richer tasting than chicken eggs.

I don't feel particularly strong, or virile, but I do feel like I've walked in the shoes of a Tico.



eggs in the black volcanic sand of Playa Ostional. The decomposition of broken eggs contaminates some of the eggs that are not destroyed by marauding mothers-to-be, leading to a successful hatch rate of just 1 to 2 per cent.

Scientific study led the local government to issue an exemption to Costa Rica's ban on harvesting turtle eggs in the early 1980s, and permits were issued to between 250 and 300 Ostional residents,

who are allowed to dig up nests and consume or sell the eggs, which are also served in bars, mixed in a glass with salsa and lemon and consumed as an aphrodisiac.

Roldan Valverde, an associate professor at Southeastern Louisiana University, in the United States, and a scientist with the Sea Turtle Conservancy, says residents are allowed to collect as many eggs as they can over the first 2½

days of an *arribada*. In exchange, Valverde says: "They take care of the turtles. This means specifically that they engage in activities to keep the beach clean of debris – no small feat in this region – provide turtle guides for tourists, help protect hatchlings from predators, help reduce poaching."

Forty-five to 54 days after they are laid, the few eggs that have escaped being smashed, harvested or devoured