



UNIQUE RUSHIKULYA

Sanctuary for olive ridley turtles.

By Murli Menon

There are seven types of sea turtles in India. These include the green turtle, hawksbill, loggerhead, leatherback and olive ridley. The olive ridley turtle indulge in mass nesting, once a year, on a full moon night every March.

There are only three beaches in the world where olive ridley's choose to nest. Coincidentally, all these three beaches are located in Odisha state in India. These mass nesting sites are located at Rushikulya beach in Ganjam District, Devi beach in Puri district and Gahirmatha beach in Kendrapara district of Odisha. We have just returned after a close encounter with nature at Rushikulya beach at Ganjam District in Odisha. Ganjam is a three-hour drive from Bhubaneswar, near Berhampur, on the fringes of the Chilika Lake.

After Rushikulya, we also witnessed the mass nesting at Gahirmatha and Devi beaches. The olive ridley turtles are an endangered species and they need to be protected at all costs.

We passed the historical village of Balugaon along the way from Bhubaneswar to Ganjam. We were welcomed by a group of flamingoes flying in formation, as soon as we entered Ganjam Town. We started our trek to Rushikulya Beach which is three km away and soon found ourselves in the middle of a flat beach with rust coloured sand as far as the eye could see. After 30 minutes of cruising through the beach, we saw a large water body in the distance. We were informed by our guide that the water body is the Rushikulya River which meets the sea at Ganjam. The nearest village

is Gokharguda which is about a kilometre from Rushikulya beach. The other villages on the periphery of the beach include Purunabandha, Palibandha and Nuagaon.

Devi beach is an uninhabited beach which stretches to about 10 km at Jahania village located about 100 km from Bhubaneswar. Gahirmatha beach lies inside the Bhitarkanika wildlife sanctuary and is accessible only by boat.

We went to the edges of the beach to find hundreds of cattle egrets lined up on the edge of the water. It was a pleasure to watch a multitude of colourful birds at close quarters, as they flocked to the edge of the water. The water is shallow and the sand is swampy. The unique feature about Rushikulya beach is the softness of the sand. As the river empties into the sea here, the beach

Before we go on to the main topic, a point needs to be cleared. That is, cross-gender services. Cross-gender services are often misconstrued, though sexual pleasure is an additional feature of massage parlours. First of all, the service is legal if no illegal gratification activity is committed. In immobile unisex salons and spas, many times cross-gender services are given, but there is no sexual activity connected to it. However, spa service-providers, who give cross-gender services at home, are often the objectionable types. Therefore, I have stayed away from such services. But I have to say that I have had a good manicure and pedicure service from a man when I had visited a spa.

The pressure a male service-provider can give on the acupressure points of your hands and feet will have a better and more healthy result than a 'delicate' female's. With this point discussed and put aside, let's see what same-gender services can do or not do for you.

THE PRODUCTS COULD BE ALLERGIC TO THE SKIN OR GENERAL HEALTH THOUGH THEY SAY THAT THEY USE ONLY HERBAL PRODUCTS.

Talking about myself, I discovered that there are such beauty service providers, who visit homes, only when I started getting newsletters from ecommerce websites like *timesdeal.com*. These websites strike deals with the service providers. When clients buy vouchers with heavy discounts from the websites, appointments are fixed and the beautician comes to your doorstep to provide the service in the privacy of your home. One can't help but notice that these vouchers from collaborations between the beauty service providers and ecommerce websites are gaining popularity among people.

Farheen Shaikh, from NailSpa Experience says, "We have been

doing home services for more than four years now. Today people are very busy managing office and home. Many do not have the time to go to a salon and prefer to avail of our services at home. So this is a great way to serve our clients."

Precautions: The dermatologist warns, "People should not undergo such treatments or services at all."

However, if one really wants to go through it, one can keep the following things in mind.

DOS & DON'TS

- It is essential that people do their homework as these treatments can affect not only their appearance but also health and safety as well.
- Find out how effective the treatment is – is it right for you? And what are the potential benefits and side effects?
- Find out safeguards like what you can do if you are unhappy with the result.

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witness mass nesting are the Devi river mouth near Puri and Gahirmatha Beach in Bhitarkanika sanctuary in Kendrapada district. There are few events in the history of Indian wildlife which are more worth watching than seeing thousands of turtles crawl out of the sea and lay their eggs after digging deep pits and covering the pits with sand to protect the eggs from predators.

WHAT A SIGHT!

Thousands of olive ridely turtles emerge from the sea at the same time and nest on the beach together, for two to three days. Only the females come ashore. The males continue to remain in the sea. Nesting takes place in pitch darkness between 12 midnight and 4 a.m. The female digs out a deep pit, using her hind flippers to dig the soft sandy soil. She digs a two-foot-deep pit, lays her eggs in this pit and covers it with sand with her front flippers. Every female lays about 80 to 100 eggs at a time in a time period of 45 minutes.

The mother turtles return to the sea and after 45 days the eggs hatch at dawn, the infant turtles break the shells and crawl on their own into the ocean to join their parents. The baby turtles break out of the eggs and burrow through the sand, reach the surface and open their eyes to see the reflection of the stars in the sea and move in that direction to enter the sea. The sex of the hatching depends on the temperature. More

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females are born at higher temperatures and more males are born at lower temperatures.

Sea turtles return to the place they were born to nest. It is indeed amazing how these turtles manage to find their way back to the beach when they were born after migrating thousands of kilometres from their "natal beach."

Watching thousands of infant turtles hatching from their eggs and entering the sea *en masse* at the exact moment the first rays of the sun strike the Earth, is an extremely emotional experience, which demonstrates the interconnectedness of humans, animals and nature. The turtle hatchlings break the shells of their eggs with a tooth designed for the purpose and emerge from the shells and sense the reflection of the stars in the sea then move towards

is made up of soft sand. It is possible to dig deep into the soil with one's bare hands. The deep blue sky, reflected in the crystal clearness of the waters, is a joy to behold. Watching the crimson sunrise over the rust coloured sands is the highlight of the visit to Rushikulya.

Every year, between January and March, about 3,00,000 olive ridely sea turtles land at Devi, Rushikulya and Gahirmatha beaches for mass nesting! These giant turtles are 70 cm in length and weigh 45 kg. The sea turtle is a marine reptile which has to surface in the sea to breathe. Sea-turtles spend a large part of their lives in the sea but to lay eggs, the females have to come to the shore once a year. It is no coincidence that every year these turtles choose Rushikulya beach for mass nesting.

The other two sites where one can



the brighter horizon and enter the sea.

The nesting turtle is sensitive to light and needs pitch darkness for nesting. Any natural or artificial lighting on the beach disorients the turtles, who may return to the sea without laying eggs if disturbed. Hence it is imperative to ensure minimum movement on the beach, especially during the nesting season.

HOW TO WATCH THE NESTING

To watch the nesting, one has to sleep on the starlit beach in temporary straw huts, scanning the coastline for unusual movement. As soon as one sights a turtle crawling away to the soft sands or spots the tracks of the turtle on the sands, one follows the tracks to spot the turtle, who lays the eggs and returns to the sea, only to return the following year! Olive ridley turtles have a life span of 100 years and nest once they turn 25.

After spending a week each at Rushikulya, Devi and Gahirmatha beaches, observing the mass nesting of the turtles, we can suggest the following measures to protect these gentle and delicate darlings. Jackals should be prevented from entering the beach and eating the turtle eggs, by fencing off the mass nesting sites. Developmental activities including ports, oil refineries and steel plants should be located far from the three turtle nesting sites in Odisha. All commercial activity, including movement of ships and boats should be restricted during the three months when mass nesting takes place. No offshore drilling must be allowed along the route of the turtle migration. Illegal sand mining on these beaches should be stopped with immediate effect.

The female sea turtle requires absolute privacy and should be undisturbed while laying her eggs. As mass nesting always takes place after midnight in pitch darkness, all flashlights and camera flashes should

be avoided while observing the turtles. The female turtles return without laying the eggs if they are disturbed slightly!

Radio-tagging of turtles for research purposes should be banned too. All mechanised fishing should be banned on the Odisha coast with immediate effect.

The enemies of the olive ridley turtle include a port which has come up near Gahirmatha sanctuary, two offshore drilling platforms which are directly in the middle of the migration route of the turtles, 50 kms away from the Devi mouth and Rushikulya beaches, and large trawlers which kill mother and baby turtles in a heartless manner. As turtles come up to breathe every 45 minutes, they are caught in the fishing nets of these large trawlers who fish in the waters off the Odisha coast. The trawler owners kill the pregnant mother turtle by first blinding it by piercing the eyes with hot iron rods heated in the boiler room of the boat. Then they pour hot water on the mother turtle to stun it and then, in a macabre ritual, they behead the mother turtle with a giant knife and throw the dead turtle into the sea. Every year 1,00,000 dead turtles are found on the beaches of Odisha.

As I returned after spending a memorable stay at Rushikulya, I am reminded of an ancient local saying.

**"Turtles are my friends,
Make them your friends today
Together we can save them"**

HOW TO GET THERE

By road: Rushikulya beach is 140 kms from Bhubaneswar. The non-stop drive from Bhubaneswar to Rushikulya should not exceed three hours. Devi beach is 100 km from Bhubaneswar, and Bhitarkanika sanctuary is located about 150 kms. from Bhubaneswar.

By air: The nearest airport to reach Rushikulya beach is at Bhubaneswar. Bhubaneswar is connected by direct flights from most Indian cities,

By train: Ganjam is the nearest

railhead to reach Rushikulya. From Ganjam taxis ply to Rushikulya.

Most trains going from Bhubaneswar to Vishakhapatnam stop at Ganjam.

Where to stay: The forest guest house is the most convenient place to stay during one's visit to Rushikulya. The forest department arranges temporary tents on the beach to watch the mass nesting during the night. The forest guest house charges ₹500 for a double room with an attached bathroom and is located two km from the beach.

Where to eat: Lots of small restaurants serving local vegetarian cuisine dot Ganjam. Freshly steamed vegetables with spices, pumpkin cooked in mustard paste, boiled spinach with pulses are served with rice cooked in an earthen pot at most roadside *dhabas*. The food at the high-profile hotels is only for the gastronomically adventurous who like greasy food. Vegans can choose fresh tropical fruits including water melons, papayas, tender coconuts and bananas which are available at the local market.