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A MID-SUMMER NIGHTS DREAM

'Turn out the Lights' Has Become a Custom on St. George Island

What the heck kind of vacation destination is this? I rent a luxurious Gulf front home on a remote island, complete with a magnificent, virtually private beach, and the first thing they ask me to do is turn off my outside lights.

The remote vacation destination is St. George Island, some four miles off the Franklin County coast in Northwest Florida's "Panhandle" region. In a hard- to- get -to coastal area dubbed "Florida's Forgotten Coast" - situated east of Panama City and southwest of Tallahassee. From these directions you immediately know that you don't "accidentally" come upon St. George Island.

Believe it or not, there is good, logical reason why beachside island residents and visitors are asked to turn off their outside lights at night during the summer months. And most all do. No, not to save energy. No, not even to suggest a good night's sleep. It's so baby sea turtles don't get distracted!

St. George and its surroundings have evolved into one of Florida's premier ecotourism destinations. As part of the Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve (ANERR), the nation's largest well preserved reserves, the island is a natural attractor to all kinds of fish, birds and critters. Many labeled protected or endangered.

Lots of female loggerheads as well as leatherback and green sea turtles instinctively head for the island when it is time to celebrate motherhood. Actually they are instinctively "returning" to their birthplace and completing a most hazardous and unlikely cycle. Having survived against amazing odds.

Most of the mothers-to-be arrive under the cover of darkness. Some may actually slowly pull themselves across the sand to the precise spot where they were born. Isn't Mother Nature amazing?

A sandy hollow is created and Mom starts laying her eggs. Possibly for the second or third time this nesting season. Within 30 to sixty minutes she may have laid 100 or more such half-dollar size eggs. And then she does the unthinkable. She packs up her bags and heads back to sea without even leaving a

forwarding address. No, she doesn't sit on the nest or watch the youngsters arrive. She leaves them to fend for themselves when they hatch some two months later.

Not that she would be all that much help. Except maybe as a guide. A baby turtle's chance of survival is mighty slim. Beside their natural enemies (birds, raccoons, crabs and the elements), there's the human element. Entire nests can be wiped out in a single careless misstep. Still another enemy is a single light bulb.

Hatchlings need and want to head to sea. If it is nighttime they are guided by the horizon. To these little guys a bright light bulb looks like a massive moon. And off they trudge. In the wrong direction. That's why islanders encourage that you turn out the lights when the party is over.

Most visitor centers prominently display maps showing you how to find the bungee cord jumps or shopping malls. The St. George Island Visitor Center reserves its main bulletin board for updates on the turtle nesting season. Not only are the actual beach nests clearly marked with warning signs and flags, the bulletin board map also marks the spots.

Fortunately, the unborn island turtles have many good SGI friends who keep an eye on things and help protect them. Few as dedicated as longtime island resident Bruce Drye. The now retired former ranger (20 years) at St. George Island (Julian Bruce) State Park did not allow his environmental dedication diminish at retirement.

His phone number is posted all over the island and the minute one of the massive (up to 275 pounds) loggerhead is spotted coming out of the water he is headed out of the house. To insure that she has safe passage to her desired spot. Drye knowing full well that misplaced human obstacles on the beach can actually discourage the mother-to-be and cause her to do an about face.

Just as crowds inevitably gather whenever dolphins are seen frolicking in the warm Gulf of Mexico waters or a couple of sea cows (manatee) are spotted rolling in the bay, the spectacle of a huge turtle paddling across a beach draws lots of attention.

That's when the St. George Island "Turtle Man" will inevitably show up and provide one of his tried and true lectures on preservation of the species. He'll note that the sea turtle population is dwindling and that it is up to us two-legged creatures to take care of our flippered friends. His fiery red mustache twitching as he tactfully admonishes those who would leave poisonous junk on the beaches for the turtles to consume. Or carelessly encroach on nests.

Although the chances are slim that you will ever get an up close and personal opportunity to observe an endangered sea turtle crawling up on the beach and depositing her eggs, many are willing to take their chances and make reservations on St. George Island during the May to August nesting season.