

Heroes in a Half Shell

Zante's Laganas Bay is home to its most celebrated resident: the loggerhead sea turtle. But even this thick-skinned survivor needs a little looking after

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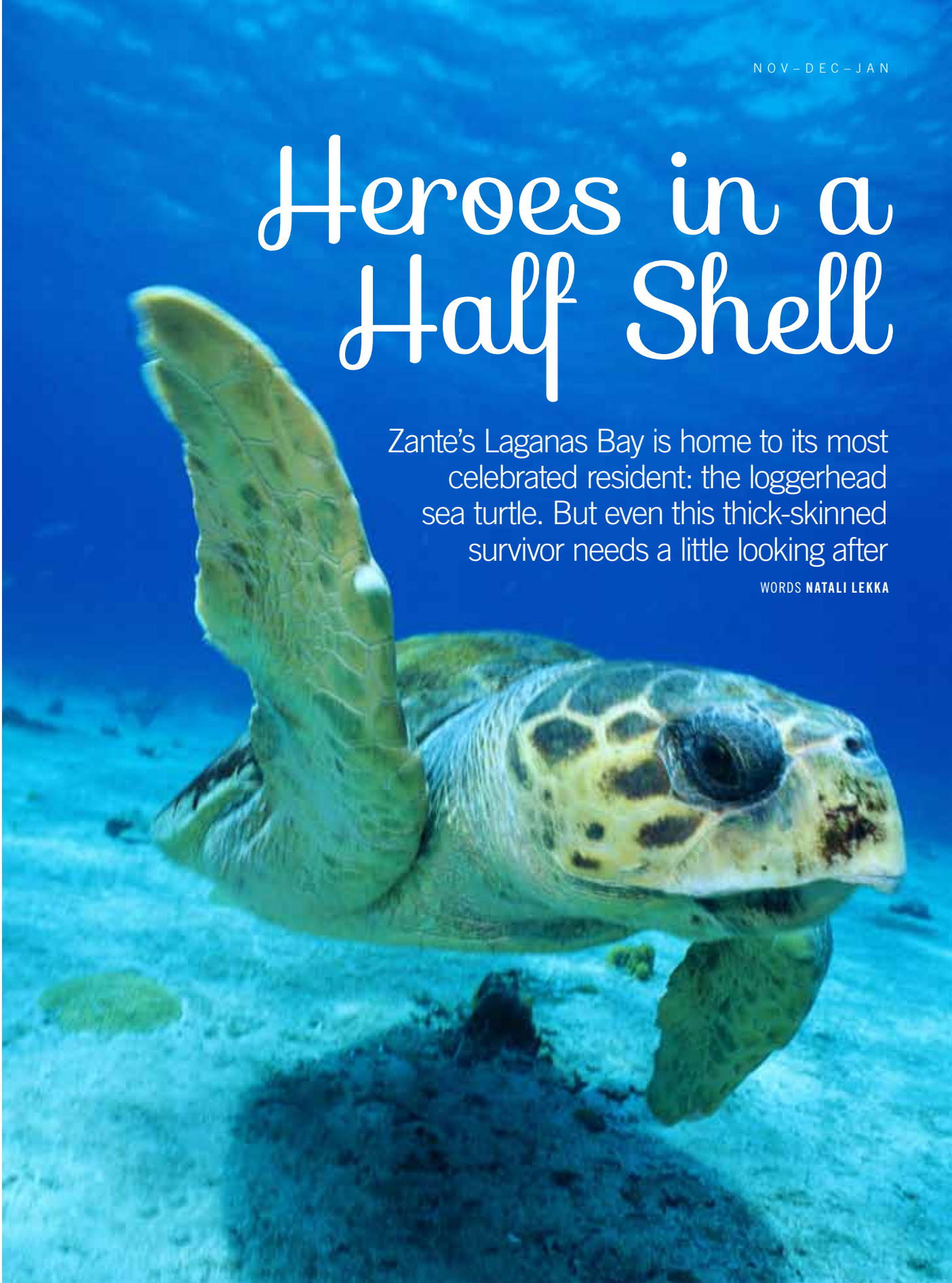


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With its 9km-long strip of sugar-fine golden sand, Laganas Bay is the most popular draw on the island of Zante (or Zakynthos in Greek). Younger visitors head to Laganas beach, a coastal resort offering all sorts of watersports and beachfront bars, while families opt for the pristine Kalamaki beach. This beautiful area is also one of the few places in the entire Mediterranean basin where sea turtles (*Caretta caretta* in Latin) come to lay their eggs each year. Numbering in their hundreds, and increasingly vulnerable to human interference, the sea turtles have transformed the island into a hub for environmentally conscious holiday-makers, who relish the idea of swimming in these crystal-clear seas.

Because the turtles are endangered, a presidential decree was signed in 1999 to establish the National Marine Park of Zakynthos, an initiative intended to preserve the ecological balance of Laganas Bay and its islands. "Our mission is to inform visitors of the dangers of uncontrolled tourism development," says Dr Drossos Koutsoumpas, the marine park president. "It is our hope that they will want to contribute to our efforts by following our advice on how man and turtle can coexist peacefully."

The *Caretta caretta* sea turtle is the largest hard-shelled turtle alive today. It measures just over a metre on average and weighs around 125kg. It's easily distinguished by the red-brown colour of its shell, powerful jaws and large head (hence the name). Healthy loggerheads have an average lifespan of 50 to 70 years. When they reach 30 they return, every two to three years, to the shores where they were born, with the females laying up to 150 eggs. They dig a 50cm-deep chamber on the beach with their hind flippers, usually laying more than one clutch during the nesting season, which peaks in July and August. This means that each year it's possible to have as many as 1,200 turtle nests scattered across the bay's six main nesting beaches, which span 5.5km. Though most are hidden underground, you can still make them out by the specially constructed wooden pyramids that marine park employees build around them to protect the nests from clumsy bathers. The



SOME SEA TURTLE SPECIES ARE SO OLD THEY'RE THOUGHT TO HAVE LIVED WITH THE DINOSAURS

eggs lie buried in the sand for approximately two months before they hatch, then each baby makes its way back to the sea.

But with only a few thousand loggerheads left in the Mediterranean, practical steps are needed to help conserve them. While swimming is permitted in the shallow waters of the bay, it's only allowed between 7am and 7pm, because during the night the sea turtles come to the shore to lay their eggs. Motorised watersports are forbidden, and a six-knot speed limit has been imposed on all boats so as not to frighten these beautiful creatures. ►





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MORE STARS OF THE SEA

► Zante's unsung hero is the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*), named after the hood-like folds of skin on its head. Although it's one of the rarest sea mammals in the world, there are currently thought to be 250 in Greece, of which 15 have found shelter on the craggy shores of western Zante. On average they measure around 2.5 metres and weigh about 320kg. Most are born in autumn and will spend the first two weeks of their life in the island's numerous caves before swimming in the sea. Seals were considered a good omen in ancient Greece. Archaeological excavations have even unearthed an old coin, dating back to 500 BC, with the head of a monk seal engraved on it.

► If you take a boat cruise around the island, you might be able to spot some dolphins. The rich and varied marine life also includes octopuses, manta rays, crayfish, moray eels, barracudas, parrotfish and bluefish, making it ideal for snorkelling and scuba diving.

► If you want to go turtle spotting, the island travel agencies organise daily cruises in special glass-bottomed boats sailing from various parts of the bay. A cruise usually lasts about three hours and will take you to Keri caves and as far as Marathonisi (or "turtle" island) for swimming. This is a small, pine-covered island with white sandy beaches and turquoise-blue waters. It's a common nesting area for the loggerhead sea turtle and, coincidentally, it's also said to resemble the shape of a sea turtle.



• Clockwise from top right: unspoilt Laganas Bay; sea turtles in their natural habitat; the endangered monk seal; loggerhead hatchlings; Marathonisi island



TURTLE EGGS LIE BURIED FOR TWO MONTHS BEFORE EACH BABY MAKES ITS WAY BACK TO THE SEA

Laganas Bay, one of the most popular tourist areas on the island, has limited its development to the remaining 3.5km of coastline, since noise and lights can disorientate turtles looking to lay their eggs on the shore or impede newly hatched babies from finding their way back to the sea (they generally use the moon as a guide). If you're looking to party into the small hours, head to Laganas town for nightclubs and bars, while those seeking a quiet night out should visit Kalamaki, just a short taxi ride away.

Despite these measures, you probably won't come across a sea turtle walking across the beach. In fact, the best way to ensure a sighting is to rent a water bike or canoe, or take a special turtle-spotting cruise. Sea turtles are air-breathing reptiles and, although they can hold their breath for several hours depending on their levels of activity, they still need to surface to breathe. Most holidaymakers have found that the best time to catch a glimpse of them swimming is early in the afternoon, although this generally depends on the sea temperature and the direction of the wind. Snapping a photo of a sea turtle breaking the surface feels like a great achievement, and is definitely something to show off in the family album.

• Above: a baby loggerhead heads slowly sea-wards. Only one in a thousand hatchlings survive to adulthood

Thanks to the turtles, swimming in the national marine park can be a great experience too. Dozens of volunteers work hard to make sure that the sea and the shores of Laganas Bay remain clean, as sea turtles can be easily trapped by rubbish. The bay is also always jellyfish-free, as this happens to be the turtles' favourite delicacy. During the night, volunteers patrol the shores to make sure that the turtle nests remain protected and intact.

Sea turtles are one of the oldest creatures to have ever walked the planet. Some species are even said to have lived with the dinosaurs. While it's not entirely clear why they chose Laganas Bay to lay their eggs, it's thought that the shallow, warm waters, high concentration of seafood and fine sand make it ideal for nesting.

Unsurprisingly, the *Caretta caretta* sea turtle has become something of an island mascot. Locals have built an entire industry around the loggerheads, offering eco-friendly turtle-spotting boat trips to thousands of travellers each year, to witness these creatures in their natural habitat.

In fact, such is the sea turtle's popularity that each 5 June, on World Environment Day, the Marine Park organises several special events in its honour. Alternatively, watch out for the Festival of the Sea Turtle, planned for next August. During the festival, shops in every corner of the island will sell sea turtle soft toys and souvenirs – and even those who aren't usually interested in natural history take the time to celebrate a true local hero.

ZANTE

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