



## The Turtle Defender: Mariana Pereira

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The sight of newly hatched sea turtles making their way from the nest to the shoreline before being swept away by the waves is both life-affirming and poignant as we know only one in every one thousand will make it to adulthood. Even then, the threats they face range from plastic pollution to getting hit by boats, entangled in fishing nets or killed for their meat or shell. As a result, all six sea turtle species found in The Indian Ocean are in danger of extinction. One Maldivian resort trying to make a difference is The Nautilus in the Baa Atoll, where Mariana Pereira, 31, works as a resident marine biologist. Alongside coral restoration work, she rescues injured sea turtles and is planning a project to protect nesting turtles and their eggs, which are often dug up by poachers and sold at local markets as a delicacy. “There is a lot of work to be done to make sea turtle conservation a priority in the local community,” she says, “and it’s crucial to get the message out that it will benefit the tourism economy.”

Her idea is to encourage locals to report sightings of nests so that they can be monitored, and to turn turtle hatching into a guest experience. Long term, Mariana, from Porto, would like to replicate a project she facilitated in Cape Verde where she recruited poachers to work as turtle rangers, patrolling the beaches to guard nests. “It was amazing to see how their mentality shifted,” she says.

In the meantime, she collaborates with the Olive Ridley Project, an international charity, by logging turtle sightings into a central database used to determine priority conservation actions. “One of my objectives is to help lobby the Maldivian government to set stricter speed limits for boats in turtle hotspots,” she says, “though the tricky part will be enforcing them.”

Guests wanting to get involved can go snorkelling or diving with Mariana to photograph the turtles, which are identified by their facial scales. Whenever they find one that’s not yet in the database they can even name it, an experience she hopes makes a lasting impression. As she says, “Change has to come from all levels, and if we can raise awareness of these endangered species among the younger generation in particular we have more hope for the future.”