

Photo Itinerary - Making the Most of Costa Rica

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The Central American country of Costa Rica is world famous for its coffee, as a surfing destination, and above all else for its astonishing diversity of wildlife and scenic beauty. The country is home to over 9000 species of flowering plants, over 600 species of butterflies, more than 200 different mammals as well as prehistoric looking reptiles and boldly colored amphibians. And, for those of you interested in photographing birds there are few better places on earth. With over 875 species Costa Rica is home to more avian species than Canada and the United States combined. Opportunities for landscape photography are equally diverse with mountains, beaches, volcanoes, tropical forests, waterfalls and much, much more. What more could a nature photographer ask for?

When and where to go:

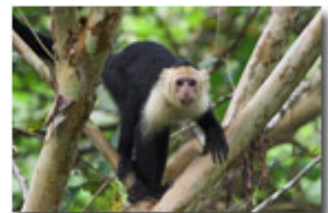
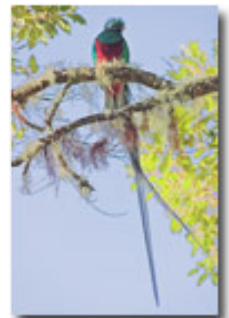
So diverse is the wildlife and landscape of Costa Rica that planning a trip can be overwhelming. Your best bet for experiencing as much as possible is to visit several different life zones at several different elevations. I would also recommend visiting during the dryer months of January through April.

The following are a few of my favorite destinations in Costa Rica for nature photography:

- **La Selva Biological Station:** Located in the Caribbean foothills approximately 2 hours north of San Jose, this biological station run by the Organization for Tropical Studies is a bird watchers paradise. Over 400 species have been observed on site and you are guaranteed to see toucans as well as a variety of wonderfully colored hummingbirds and tanagers.
- **Monteverde Private Reserve:** Tucked away in the mountains approximately 5 hours west of San Jose lies this truly unique cloud forest ecosystem. The park is home to a wide variety of high elevation flora and fauna including the endangered resplendent quetzal – a bird many consider to be the most beautiful in the Western Hemisphere.
- **Corcovado National Park:** Occupying much of Costa Rica's southern Osa Peninsula this area represents the largest and most pristine primary forest remaining in Central America. You will find no wilder more remote place in the country and as such it is not for the faint of heart. Nevertheless the opportunity to see and photograph scarlet macaws, poison dart frogs, all four of Costa Rica's monkey species and perhaps even one of the few remaining jaguars left in the wild makes Corcovado well worth the effort.
- **Tortuguero National Park:** The northernmost section of Costa Rica's Caribbean coastline consists of a distinctive canal ecosystem where water birds including kingfishers and herons flourish. The area however is more widely known as one of the most important nesting sites for the enormous leatherback turtles which come here to nest between March and May.
- **San Gerardo de Rivas:** Most tourists visit San Gerardo de Rivas on their way to the top of Cerro Chirripo – the highest mountain in Central America. The hike to the top offers diverse and exciting landscape photography opportunities and a view from the top that is truly magical. The town itself offers many opportunities to photograph remarkable birds such as the blue crowned mot-mot, red-headed barbet and white-crested coquette.

What to bring:

Because Costa Rica is so rich in nature photography opportunities, you may find yourself shooting much more than you would expect. Be sure to bring sufficient storage for all of your digital files or enough slide film to last your trip. Also make sure to bring spare batteries for your camera and flash as well as any necessary chargers. It may be difficult and certainly will be expensive to acquire these items in Costa Rica.



If you plan to shoot birds here, as is always the case, it's best to bring your longest lens. A 500mm is ideal but a 300mm 2.8 with both 1.4x and 2x tele-converters also makes for a very versatile option. A 70-200mm lens will also likely come in handy for some of the other wildlife you are certain to see. I would also recommend bringing along a wide angle zoom and macro lens. You will use them both! Another invaluable accessory is the Better Beamer flash extender. In overcast conditions, and most definitely under the forest canopy, the Better Beamer is essential.

Transporting all of your gear is most easily done using a good quality photo backpack. For Costa Rica I would recommend bringing a rain cover for your pack, large zip lock bags with silica gel to protect your gear in humid conditions and a small day pack for items such as water, a raincoat and your lunch.

The same qualities that make Costa Rica such an unbelievably diverse photography location also cause variable and often unpredictable weather patterns. Even in the dry season rain gear is a must and if you plan on heading up into the mountains you should also bring at least one set of warm clothes. Lightweight cotton cargo pants work well in most situations and will also help to keep the bugs off.

Travel considerations:

Costa Rica is a joy to travel in with a stable government, high level of education and, relative to its size, the largest national park system in the world. While Spanish is the dominant language English is spoken in all of the major tourist destinations. Do take precautions though as theft within the country is extremely common.

Getting there and around:

Getting to Costa Rica should be no problem as approximately 20 international airlines provide regular service. Upon arrival however, one must decide whether to rent a vehicle or rely upon the country's extensive and inexpensive (yet often painfully slow) bus system. For shorter visits it is almost certainly worth renting a car. Make sure to get one with four wheel drive and absolutely get the optional insurance as the roads are a mess and the locals drive very aggressively.

Final thoughts:

One of the things I love about photography in Costa Rica is the daily opportunity to photograph new species, new landscapes and never knowing exactly what I may encounter. Whatever your specialty, Costa Rica truly is a nature photographers paradise.

For more information on photography in Costa Rica or to see more of Glenn's photos please visit www.glennbartley.com.

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