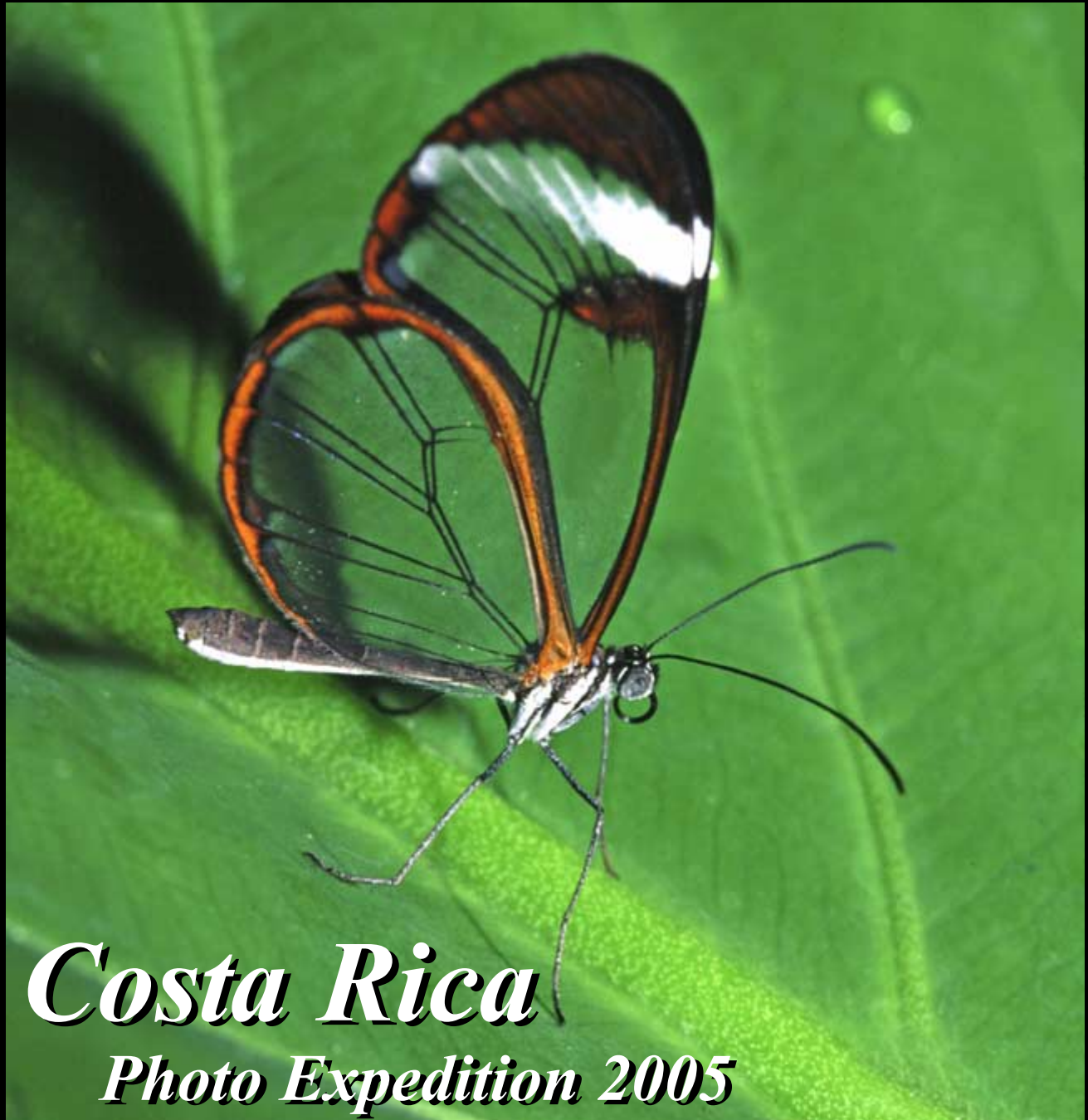


Focus On **NATURE**

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Costa Rica

Photo Expedition 2005

*Costa Rica: like no other place on Earth · Shooting in the
Rainforest · Warnings! · Things to bring · Trip schedule*

Costa Rica: like no other place on Earth.

©R. Munguia

Nothing better to define a wet forest than the Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica- the tropical rainforest that attracts many photographers in search of magnificent images. A few hours inside one of these forests and soon you'll be running out of film or should I say, cards.

While most people are attracted by the extensive avian fauna, these ecosystems provide endless opportunities for the well-rounded nature photographer.

While walking the trails at Monteverde Cloud forest, you can't miss the many amazing insects that thrive there.

Looking closely under leaves, you might find roosting butterflies, huge caterpillars or rainbow colored grasshoppers. Every step you take on these trails can lead to new photo opportunities. It can get to the point where your brain is overloaded, and you can't barely focus anymore. The misty mornings are truly an experience for the landscape photographer, as the light

filters through the trees. Scanning the canopy, you might glimpse at a Bellbird or a Slaty trogon getting ready for the day ahead. No trip to Monteverde is completed with-

out a stop at the Hummingbird Gallery, that more than just a photo gallery, it's a live hummingbird galore. Feeders are all over the place bringing over 10 species of hummers within an hour. They fly left and right, buzzing your ears without fear. The town of Santa Elena at the entrance to Monteverde hosts a series of interesting places. One such place is the Monteverde Frog Pond, a little but interesting site to see many of the native frogs of Costa Rica, including the arrow poison frogs and the red-eyed tree frogs. Also in Santa Elena, you can pay a visit to the Monteverde Butterfly Garden, definitely better than chasing butterflies in the wild. Here you'll have your picks from Blue Morphos, Clearwings, Heliconias and Malachites surrounded by magnificent vegetation including local

vines and extravagant birds of paradise.

But the best of Costa Rica is yet to be found off the beaten paths of places such as the Curú private preserve, where time stands still and nature continues in front of your eyes. There was my first encounter with Scarlet macaws in the wild, and they still flash in my eyes three years later. No better way to enjoy these birds than flying low over the ground and better yet, when they stop in a nearby branch to play and preen for an hour, within feet

of your lens. Hopefully, I'll get to see them again this year. They announce their beauty with loud squawks every morning and late afternoon over the Tárcoles river, near Carara National Park, a great place for birds and amphibians. When I first walked into this park, I was received by an army of Leaf-cutter ants, carrying large amount of green leaves they were picking from a nearby tree. Just

the sight of the walking leaves against the morning light made this an unforgettable experience. But I made it there following directions from a herpetologist as to were

to find the Black and Green Dart Frogs. Amazingly, he nailed down the directions to the inches.

"Follow the trail until you get to the large tree, make a right and count 50 feet, to your right a tree with a large opening, look inside and you'll find a pair". Those were his words and that's exactly what I did. Within minutes, I found myself observing these beautiful gems of the amphibian world. The most amazing part is that my friend the herpetologist lives more than 100 miles away from this place, and his last visit to the site was more than a couple months before.

One of the many indescribable



Red-eyed Tree Frog
©Reinier Munguia



Scarlet Macaw at Curú
©Reinier Munguia

experiences in Costa Rica is the sound of Howler monkeys every morning. It can go from scary to comical, when several males give up their locations with the crack of dawn, alerting all the troop members of their presence and intentions. So if you plan to sleep until late in the morning, for sure they'll wake you up.

Driving through the unpaved roads off the beaten path can lead to wonderful encounters, like a troop of Coatis eating on the side of the road, or a Chestnut Mandible Toucan eating fresh fruits from a tree. In fact, you get to see a lot more while traveling these roads than walking the trails of the highly visited parks. It's an interesting way of finding wildlife that otherwise would have been almost impossible to see. This practice can also bring a lot of challenges. In one occasion, I was heading to the beaches of Ostionales National Park hoping to catch a glimpse of the Olive Ridley Turtles nesting on the beach. The road was a little muddy, but the worst part came when the road ended in a river, and we had to push the Jeep across the river to continue our trip. Luckily, it was only 2 feet deep, but enough to get us wet. Unfortunately, we came a little late and most of the nesting activity was over, and all it was left was a few turtles that never made it back to the ocean. On our trip back, we found several species of parrots squawking from nearby palm trees and a Blue-crowned Motmot sitting on a barbed wire, not too photogenic though.

The landscape is amazing, especially the waterfalls embedded in the mid-

dle of nowhere, surrounded by exuberant vegetation and beautiful fauna. Walking through shallow creeks under the canopy can produce hundreds of images that denote the wet nature of the rainforest. If there's something in abundance, it's water. Throughout the day, it's common to get unannounced showers and even during a perfectly clear day, the moisture from the Pacific rises over the western slopes and turns into clouds within seconds. Even if it doesn't rain, you'll feel wet when the



*The carcass of an Olive Ridley awaits the usual butchering from the Black Vultures and Cacaras at Ostionales National Park
©R.Munguía*

area gets engulfed in these massive clouds in formation. The beaches of the Pacific are among the best places to take photos at sunset, as the sun reflects on the wet sandy beaches creating a kaleidoscope of colors.

To experience mother earth in action, it's enough with a visit to Arenal, an active volcano that expels rocks and molten lava almost everyday. Best time to watch is at night on a dry and clear sky. But Costa Rica is not only about the wildlife, their colorful people, the markets, and the daily life around the small towns are really interesting. The same day we arrived to Costa Rica, we decided to go across the Golfo de Nicoya, and we

needed to take the ferry. As usual, there were several trucks and cars and many people in bicycles waiting to board the boat. We first thought there was no space for all the vehicles, people, and even live animals that were getting packed in the boat. Incredibly, we all made it in that trip, and to our surprise, as soon as the boat was few hundred feet from the docks, the party began. Open bar on the boat, with beer, sodas and snacks, for a trip that lasted about 30 minutes. We all sat on the open deck of the boat, and enjoyed our trip with drinks in hand. What a cultural clash!

While driving through the rural areas, you'll find all kinds of things that will make you stop, from inviting fruit markets, to artists selling their crafts and even kids blocking the road to collect "toll fees" to raise money for their baseball team. Hope the ones here in the states don't learn those tricks. In a country full

of natural riches but economical poverty, it's hard to miss those interesting shots of people, their lifestyle, and their closeness to mother nature. As you drive through this country, pay attention to the little details, like the old guy driving a herd of cows on the road, the water taxi man driving people upstream, or the guy selling roasted chicken on the side of the road. Costa Rica is a unique country, a little paradise for some, and the worst nightmare for others, like the local business owner fighting the big corporate takeover. A paradise that even with all the conservation efforts up to day, might still succumb to the pressures of the economy, and then, it will all be gone. -RMC

Shooting in the rainforest

Text & Photos ©R. Munguia

Shooting in a rainforest brings a series of challenges for the novice in this field. Having worked for many years inside El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico, my trip to Monteverde came with no surprises. But for those of you meeting the rainforest for the first time, you're in for the wet ride of your life. There's no weather forecast in the rainforest. What the weather man says in the morning news does not apply to the macro climate of the wet forest. The humidity combined with the high temperatures of the summer months can lead to a lot of thunderstorms and fogged lenses. The most interesting part is that, opposite to Florida where it normally rains every afternoon during the summer months, in the rainforest it can rain at anytime and without warning.

For the reasons discussed above, it's recommended that you wear clothes that can get dirty and wet, and carry a



Owl Butterfly - Costa Rica. Balanced fill-flash are essential in the understory
©R.Munguia



Bare-hearted Glass Frog. This frog was about 1/2 long . I found it 5 miles inside one of the trails at Monteverde Cloud Forest.

©R.Munguia

raincoat in an accessible pocket of your backpack in case it takes you by surprise. I have found that buying a larger size raincoat, usually allows to put it over your backpack. All photographic equipment must be carried in a backpack style camera case to free

your hands in case you slip. The forest floor is covered with decaying leaves, but with the constant foot traffic on some trails, the ground turns muddy and slippery, making it hard and dangerous. High hiking boots are almost obligatory, not only for the protection when walking over roots and side vegetation, but in case of an animal bite. Costa Rica is well known for the poisonous snakes, and while encounters with one during daylight are rare, at night things change dramati-

cally. Many snakes are nocturnal as the mice they eat are active at night, meaning chances of coming too close to one by mistake are higher. It's also a good idea to bring few Ziplock bags large enough to fit your camera body and lenses, in case the rain turns into torrential downpours.



A lot of things happen during the day, so keeping the eyes open may yield an interesting catch.

©Reinier Munguia

One other element to fight inside any rainforest is the lack of light. While



*White-fronted Parrot near
Ostionales.*
©R.Munguía

vegetation on the ground is low and scarce, the top of the trees are dense and block up to 80% of the light.

This can be a real challenge at the best of times, imagine what happens when rain clouds cover the sky.

Well, you are going to use the flash more often than not. Even on the open areas of a forest, you might need to use some fill flash to improve shadow details around your subject. Expect slow shutter speeds when shooting under the canopy. In order

to balance the flash with the ambient exposure, be ready to use a tripod. A tripod is your most valuable piece of equipment in low light situations. Using wide open apertures will guarantee faster shutter speeds while softening some unwanted background. A flash with built-in zoom head will work great for far away subjects. To project the light even farther, the use of a Better-Beamer or Project-A-Flash will greatly improve your flash range while saving battery power. By focusing the flash light, the light can travel a longer distance while saving battery life. This is really important while working away from any power source. Make a habit of bringing spare batteries, and a car charger for charging while on the road. Make sure you switch your flash off when not in use. The capacitors will continue to draw energy from the batteries even when they sit idling.

There's plenty of opportunities for the macro photographer in the rainforest, meaning an off-camera flash will be extremely handy. Any macro lens from 50-180mm will work just fine for 1:1 and 1:2 magnification power. Many of the macro subjects

found in the forest tend to be slow as they don't get as much radiation from the sun, so posing them is not that hard. Beware from picking up caterpillars, especially those with spiny looks, they tend to be poisonous. When walking through the trails, learn and train yourself to see with your peripheral vision. Many subjects will try to hide from you as you approach them, and many jump out of sight as you pass them. Your eyes can see objects and sense motion even when you don't have a direct contact with the subject. Scan slowly but don't take your eyes from the trail for prolonged times, occasionally tiny reptiles and amphibians may stop on the trails to get warm.

Colors are hidden in the deepest areas of the forest in the form of orchids and glowing fungi. We even have bioluminescent mushrooms that can only be seen at night. There are so many organisms, that you must be really careful as you look, in order to find them. Many people that visit the rainforest for the first time come back a little frustrated, and usually complaining about not seeing as many things as they expected. Well, reality is that many of them didn't know where to look for, and since their brain database didn't have any entries for the new organisms in front of their eyes, they probably missed a lot. Do a good research about the living creatures you're about to encounter, that way you have a mental picture of what to look for. Now you're ready to explore in search of those creatures, keep in mind you're invading their space and they can retaliate. Respect them, and make sure to leave them as you found them, and never block their path. Stress can kill most animals. Try to spend the least time possible to get your shot. For sure you won't run out of subjects to shoot if you choose any of the Costa's rainforest.



On e of the most amazing caterpillars I have ever seen. Taken in Monteverde Cloud Forest.
©R.Munguía

Warning!

Costa Rica is a country full of surprises, good ones for the most part. Unfortunately, there are few things that I want to make sure everybody on this trip understand to ensure our safe return. In the end, we are a small group with a bunch of eye-catching toys. One of our toys can be the annual income of many Tics. I have compiled a list of things we should have in mind while wandering around to cover both protection from humans and non-human creatures, and for the total enjoyment of our time there.

Costa Rica Survival Rules

#1 only applies to San Jose

1. Avoid the big city- San Jose is like any other major metropolis. Crimes can and do take place at anytime. While in the city, keep your money in your shoes and don't carry an exposed wallet or purse. Everything should be packed inside a tight backpack. Stay with the group and avoid going out at night. Keep your camera safe at all times, not with a neck-strap, but concealed in your backpack.

2. I enjoy night walks through the forest. Nobody goes out at night without rubber boots (we'll get them in Costa), headlamp or flashlight. Spare batteries are always suggested. For your safety at all times, don't wear open shoes or sandals.

3. Every member should have a small first aid kit, to cover minor injuries caused by animals or plants.

4. Don't fool around with any snakes, especially if you don't know them. In many cases, people don't make it to the hospital in time. Beautiful snakes are usually deadly, but ugly ones can harm you too. Few species

we may encounter include: Eye-lash viper, Fer-de-lance, and Bushmaster.

5. Costa's weather can be a challenge, and rain comes and goes without warning. Have your raincoat in the backpack. It's cold at high altitude without rain, imaging with a downpour.

6. Be careful where you step. Your first step might feel secured but the second could send you down into the hole. Snake bite incidents happen when you don't watch your steps.

7. Carry enough water and snacks for a half day trip. Granola or energy bars work great, as long as you have something to gulp them down-water. Do not carry more than you need, always travel as light as possible. The heat and the humidity can take a toll on the inexperienced hiker.

8. Food is great in Costa. No McDonald's or BK's in every corner, meaning you'll eat a lot of typical Tican food. Rice and beans are in the menu for breakfast. Not a bad choice if you have a long day of hiking ahead. Stops while on the road for chicken and rice, and local fruits are common when traveling with me. Love guavas, lychees & "mamoncillo".

9. If ever approached by the locals, be courteous and polite. If in doubts on how to proceed, call me! Costa Ricans are among the friendliest people I've ever met. Talking to them can lead to great photographic opportunities, they know the whereabouts of the wildlife.

10. Try to stay awake while we drive through the narrow roads and off-roads of the country. There's so much to be seen and many animals will flash in front of the windshield. Relax and Enjoy!

Required Gear

Photographic equipment

Tripod-Most important.

19mm-35mm for extreme wide landscapes.

28-70mm general purpose zoom.

300mm (minimum) for wildlife.

50mm/105mm macro

1.4X/2X Converters.

Full size flash w/spare batteries.

Off-camera cable.

***Don't forget your charger(s)**

Personal Items

Make sure you have the following items when you pack.

(3) Jeans

(1) Long sleeve

(5)Shirts

(3)Shorts

Raincoat

Jacket/Sweater

Insect Repellent - 3M brand if at all possible.

Personal First Aid Kit

Hiking Boots (wear this for your flight; use that space for something else.)

Food- we'll get that in Costa.

Cash- automatic tellers are hard to find

Cell phone- Stays at home.

For Nikon Users, I have a couple of long lenses available for you to use. I'm bringing Flash setups for hummers and video equipment to film our trip.



May 31- Arrival and trip through Braulio Carrillo NP.

June 1- Visit to La Selva Biological Station.

June 2- La Fortuna & Arenal Volcano

June 3- Monteverde/Santa Elena

June 4- Monteverde

June 5-Carara NP

June 6- Barú NWR

June 7- San Isidro/San Gerardo

June 8- Mirador de Quetzales /Central Mountains

June 9- Irazú Volcano/Braulio Carrillo.

June 10- San Jose

June 11- Departure.

Note that the schedule is likely to change based on the weather conditions during those days. Once we arrive, we'll have a conversation with a local guide regarding the most successful areas for wildlife and bird photography at the time. With all this new information, we can modify our itinerary to make the best use of our time. Get ready for the adventure.