



Travel

South FOR THE Winter

It's the perfect time of year to escape to Costa Rica and explore diverse wildlife and landscape photo opportunities

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH MILLER



Scarlet macaws are one of the most colorful and photogenic birds in the tropics, but they're hard to photograph because they typically stay high in the trees. The key to photographing them is figuring out which trees they like to frequent or roost in and then climb a hill or tree nearby to get an eye-level perspective that makes the tree the background rather than the sky. Often, guides know spots where you can set up a good angle on a popular tree.

Nikon D3S, AF-S Nikkor 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G ED VR

The key with tropical frogs like this green and black poison dart is to use two light sources similar to working in a studio situation. The forest floor is often very dark and high contrast, so adding light gives you much more control over the situation. Ideally, work with another photographer so you can trade off holding the lights, and don't stress the frog by photographing it for very long.

Nikon D800, AF-S VR Micro-Nikkor 105mm f/2.8G IF-ED, 2 LED panel lights

Has winter got you down? Tired of cold, short days where photography has lost some of its fun? Perhaps it's time you plan a winter photo trip to the tropics. While many tropical countries are great for escaping winter's cold, Costa Rica is quickly becoming one of the world's best winter photo locations. In addition to warmer weather and great photography, Costa Rica is perhaps the safest and most developed country in Central America, making for productive photography. Ecotourism is the largest segment of the Costa Rican economy, so travel is easy and lodges are set up specifically for nature-loving visitors like photographers.

Best Time? Our Winter.

While photographers will do well visiting Costa Rica any time of year (even in the rainy season), visiting during our winter coincides with their dry season. Yes, it always rains in the tropics, but it does rain a bit less in the winter, which makes for easier photography. Officially, the dry season runs from about mid- to late December (a few weeks later on the Caribbean Slope) until late April, but anytime during the winter will make for an amazing trip.

Typical winter weather and temperatures will vary depending on your elevation and proximity to the ocean, the Caribbean Slope being typically wetter than the Pacific Slope. At either

coast, you can count on hot and humid weather, but as you work your way up toward the mountain cloud forests, temperatures cool and you may even find yourself wearing pants or a long-sleeve shirt in the evenings.

A Wildlife Paradise

For wildlife photographers, Costa Rica is also a winter migratory birding hotspot due to its unique location along the Pacific Flyway. Several southbound migratory bird species from North America travel through Central America, and many choose to overwinter in Costa Rica. Combine that with the fact that Costa Rica has a relatively small land mass, creating one of



Deep in the rain forest, sunrises and sunsets often go unnoticed due to the tree canopy. When you can find a good vantage point where you can look above the treetops, it's worth hanging out and waiting. My favorite places to shoot treetop sunrise/sunset are in the higher-elevation cloud forests because the clouds pick up so much color. Nikon D300, AF Zoom-Nikkor 80-200mm f/2.8D ED

the most diverse bird populations in the world during the winter, and photographers have the opportunity not only to photograph native tropical species, but also North American species that they normally would have to travel great distances to photograph back home.

All this talk of birds doesn't even include all of the unique species of poison dart frogs and snakes, or waterfalls, or cloud forests, or beaches—oh, my! The truth is that for most of us traveling outdoor photographers, the hardest part about Costa Rica is deciding what not to shoot. There's just no way a typical two-

week trip will leave you satisfied. You'll likely find yourself like many of us—trying to figure out how to justify just “one” more trip south to escape the winter.

Planning Your Trip

When planning your trip, especially if it's your first time to Costa Rica, it pays to focus your energies in fewer locations, rather than trying to see and photograph the entire country. While it's not overly large, it often takes a while to get from one area to another.

Since travel days aren't typically very productive in terms of photography,

it's best to maximize your shooting by traveling as little as possible. Typically, when I guide a photo trip in Costa Rica, we try to spend at least three nights in each location so we have two full days of shooting between travel days. If you have more time, spending even longer in each location will allow you to be even more productive. By taking one's time and getting to know an area well, it gives photographers a chance to learn wildlife habits, deal with any bad weather, and most importantly, have the time needed to create those once-in-a-lifetime photos that don't happen quickly.

On a typical trip, photographers fly into San José and spend a single night before heading toward the Caribbean coast to a location like Tortuguero National Park, where they're able to get up close and personal with wildlife using boats along river canals. Shooting from boats allows you to get closer to wildlife than otherwise possible, and Tortuguero is also a great spot for many of the migratory species from North America. Although the winter isn't peak turtle season in Tortuguero, there's still a chance to find a leatherback sea turtle on one of the park's beaches.

Following Tortuguero, head inland to the Caribbean lowlands and the Sarapiquí area, where poison dart frogs and birds abound. This is one of the best

Josh Miller's Gear For A Typical Costa Rica Trip

- **Nikon D800E** with vertical grip for most work
- **Nikon D3S** for fast action flight work (will be replaced by the D5 when it comes out)
- **AF-S Nikkor 500mm f/4G ED VR** for serious bird work at feeders, as well as boat tours (if I want to go light, I may leave this at home)
- **Nikon AF-S Teleconverter TC-14E III** for extending the 500mm
- **AF-S Nikkor 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G ED VR**, a great walk-around lens that provides a wide range of focal lengths and fast autofocus
- **AF-S Nikkor 16-35mm f/4G ED VR** for a great landscape range
- **AF-S VR Micro-Nikkor 105mm f/2.8G IF-ED** for frogs and butterflies
- **Nikon SB-800 AF Speedlights** (two to four of them, depending on the subjects)
- **2 LED panel lights** for macro work; this is becoming a more common and easier way to light small macro shots because the light is continuous
- **Gitzo GT-3540LS tripod with Kirk Enterprises head** for lenses up to 500mm
- **Wimberley Sidekick** for working with the 500mm while not adding the weight of a full gimbal head to my already heavy bag
- **2 Bogen lightweight travel light stands** for holding lighting gear



When photographing hummingbirds, I first look for a background near a place already frequented by the tiny birds. Lodges often have hummingbird feeders, so that makes it even easier. After finding a good background, I'll line it up with a nice flower using a longer lens to isolate the bird and flower as much as possible from the background. Then, with the camera locked down on a tripod, it's a matter of waiting until the birds come to my flower. At a lodge, adding a cable release and a cup of coffee make for a relaxing shoot that even can happen when it's raining. I may add a couple of off-camera flashes to catch more of the bird's colors, if needed. Nikon D3S, AF-S Nikkor 200-400mm f/4G ED VR II



The red-eyed tree frog is, by far, the most popular and easily photographed poison dart frog in Costa Rica. It's easy to find at night around water sources and makes a loud call, giving away its location. Using two lights held by another photographer, we were able to fully compose our shot and only take a couple of frames to avoid stressing the frog.

Nikon D800E, AF-S VR Micro-Nikkor 105mm f/2.8G IF-ED, 2 Nikon SB-800s off-camera

areas to photograph a true Costa Rican classic, the red-eyed tree frog. While not a great photo opportunity, adventurous photographers often find a rafting trip on the Sarapiquí River to be a change of pace and a trip highlight.

After the lowlands, head upslope for cooler weather in the cloud forest. For years, the most popular cloud forest location has been the world-famous Monteverde region. While this area is popular for a reason, and offers a wide range of lodging and food options, it has become so developed that working

here as a photographer is more difficult due to the crowds.

If you don't mind the longer drive, many photographers would be better served by heading to the Savegre region, which offers fewer people, good wildlife, dramatic landscapes and waterfalls. Savegre also offers a greater chance to photograph the most sought-after bird in all of Central America, the resplendent quetzal. Just make sure to pack everything you need before heading to Savegre, because there are no stores, and the few lodges in the area are expensive.

If you still have time for another stop before flying home, heading down from Savegre toward the Pacific coast is a great way to end your trip with a sunset. Basing yourself near Dominical or Jaco gives you a chance for tropical sunsets and more wildlife. On your way back to San José, make sure you don't miss the spectacular boat tour on the Tárcoles River, where you'll see crocodiles, wading shorebirds and, hopefully, scarlet macaws flying overhead. Book your boat tour in the early morning or late afternoon for cooler temperatures and better light.

To Guide, or Not to Guide

As someone who guides tours in Costa Rica, one might expect me to say a photo guide is a must, but for the motivated and researched photographer, Costa Rica is a great place to go on one's own. It's safe, has great local transportation and many people speak English. The question becomes how limited is your time, and how much are you willing to pay to get the most out of your trip.

Most professional photographers hire a "fixer/guide" when on assignment in foreign countries to help maximize their time by handling logistics and translation, and for their natural history knowledge. Similar to a fishing guide who's on the same river every day and knows where the fish are, the knowledge of photo guides is often just as specific. By having a guide handling everything else, photographers can focus on photography and increase their "catch" dramatically.

While it's possible to keep the costs down by arranging all the logistics yourself and just hiring a local guide in specific locations, as needed, most photographers join packaged tours, which include lodging, transportation, meals, a local naturalist and a photo guide. Having personally done both, and now working as a photo guide, my advice is, if you can afford a packaged trip, you come home with better photos in the end. While you may have your camera mastered, a guided trip will put you and your camera in front of wildlife more often and in better locations than you'll likely find by yourself on your first trip.

Another way to keep costs down while increasing your "catch" is first to join a packaged tour and afterward spend another week or two doing your own photography in just one or two locations.

This allows you time to learn about photographing in the tropics during your tour and then time afterward to apply your new knowledge. Any good tour company will be more than willing to give you advice on where to spend your remaining days and often can help arrange transport or individual rooms, as needed.

What to Bring

When planning your Costa Rican adventure, it's best to pack as light as possible. While traveling with a camera is always a hassle, adding heat and humidity makes the task doubly difficult. Often, it's best to pack a day bag with just what's needed for a specific shoot, rather than carrying everything with you everywhere.

Personally, when I lead trips in Costa Rica, I pack everything into a large Think Tank Photo roller bag, which I leave in the van or in my room, and carry a smaller F-Stop daypack with just the equipment I need for a given day or shoot. While this makes carrying my gear much easier, it does mean once in a while I do miss a shot where I needed something that was left in the big roller, but overall this makes dealing with the heat much more pleasant. The key to doing this successfully is knowing what you'll likely be shooting in any given location and then planning accordingly. Asking a local or your guide is a great way to be as prepared as possible for each situation.

Determining the subjects you plan to shoot during your trip will help you decide what to pack and what to leave home. In addition to the typical lenses and tripods, if I intend to do much macro or hummingbird photography, I also pack a fair amount of lighting equipment. On a typical trip, where I plan to photograph everything from small macro frogs to landscapes and birds, I end up bringing a lot of gear.

Endless Opportunities

Over the years, I've visited Costa Rica more than a dozen times, but each time I visit, I find new subjects and new photo opportunities. Even though Costa Rica is small compared to some states in the U.S., there's so much to explore, I doubt I'll ever be finished.

Yes, I may have visited a lodge before, but part of what's fun about wildlife photography is that it's unpredictable. With landscape photography, a

little research means you know exactly what a waterfall looks like before you get there (maybe even what lens to use), and as long as the light is good, you'll get the shot. With wildlife photography, each trip offers up totally different photographic material, which often builds heavily on your earlier experiences.

So pull out your lonely camera gear and escape the cold of winter by heading south to Costa Rica. Make yourself a shot list, but keep it flexible; be ready for all the opportunities that come your

way, and you'll soon be asking yourself the same question I am: "Have I really been to Costa Rica more than 12 times, but there's so much more to shoot?" or

Josh Miller's images have been featured in publications throughout the world, and his work is represented by Aurora Photos. To find out more about his work and his workshops, follow Miller on Facebook and on Instagram @joshmillerphotography, or visit his website at joshmillerphotography.com.



Rio Celeste is unique in that it has a distinctive turquoise color due to large mineral concentrations. Best photographed during the dry season so the water is even more blue, the key with shooting any waterfall is being there when it's in complete shade or in overcast light. This not only allows for slower shutter speeds needed to blur water, but also helps reduce the contrast range so everything can be captured by your camera's sensor.

Nikon D800E, AF-S Nikkor 16-35mm f/4G ED VR, Gitzo tripod