

## Costa Rica

### *A Through the Lens Tour*

#### **A Greentours Itinerary**

The tour structure will be different from normal Greentours trips with more emphasis on being in the field at the best time for photography i.e. getting up early for the first couple of hours of light for landscapes, staying out later for sunsets, night walks. Most tuition will be in the field with the chance to review things in the evening on a laptop for those shooting digital. Since people will be of varying abilities rather than a formal series of lectures full of technical talk we'll be opting for a relaxed approach with Tony Beck providing pointers '*en la selva*' as they are needed and holding sessions as and when we encounter suitable subjects. These will be aimed at improving technique in terms of composition, depth of field and exposure. However, to set the scene there will be a discussion at the start to ascertain abilities and go through various aspects at some stage during some days when appropriate.

Costa Rica is a superb location for photography, especially macro and there will also be night-time excursions to make the most of this. This is a 'no rush' tour concentrating on photographic subjects. Nonetheless always have binoculars handy as the bird and animal watching will still be good, it's just that building a big list is not the main aim with this tour.

It is important to be familiar with at least the basic operation of your kit. Endless fiddling as your subject slowly creeps away and other group members are waiting is not what you want, understand the buttons. There will be times where some of us miss out because a subject doesn't wait around, please be patient as this is unavoidable and we'll all get/miss our chances! Ideally we want to be concentrating on improving composition, exposure and sharpness not which button to press for this or that to happen.

#### **Days 1 – 3(am)**

##### **San Jose and Bosque de Paz**

After arriving at San Jose's international airport we'll make the short journey to the tranquil Bosque de Paz. In the morning we'll begin a holiday packed with a never-ending stream of new wildlife and it starts right in the hotel grounds. Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrushes and Great Kiskadees serenade us as we admire orchids such as apricot-coloured clumps of *Acineta densa* and the strange *Trichosalpinx memor* looking like so many dark and white chocolates hanging from a branch! Many butterflies are attracted to the thin blue wands of *Stachytarpheta*, especially spectacular 'long-tailed' skippers and strikingly coloured *Heliconius hecale*. Costa Rica's spectacular birdlife might begin with a brilliant Blue-crowned Motmot, the cryptically-patterned Scaled Antpitta, or perhaps the fabulous Emerald Toucanet.

The lodges hummingbird feeders can barely cope it seems with the throngs of these tiny iridescent birds. Over twenty species of hummingbird visit, among them Magenta-throated Woodstar, Green Thorntail and the fabulous shimmering jewel that is the Purple-crowned Fairy. Groups of Black Guans also come to the gardens, these rare birds are particularly approachable here, whilst early mornings White-nosed Coatis come into the garden to check for a quick meal. At night Pacas come out of the forest into the garden. We'll walk the property marveling at the brilliance of Red-headed Barbets and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis as the spectacular Ornate Hawk-Eagle soars overhead. In fact the embodiment of avian glory, the Resplendent Quetzal, is a frequent visitor here, or maybe we should save them up for later in the trip. Under forest we'll start to familiarize ourselves with the many less showy birds such as Immaculate Antbird though we'll no doubt be impressed by Buffy Tuffedcheek and the Gray-throated Leaf-tosser!

### **Days 3(pm) – 5(am)** **Laguna Lagartos**

The raucous calls of Mealy Parrots and Montezuma's Oropendulas will greet us as we enter Laguna Lagartos's 1250 acres of virgin rainforest. The trees will impress as forest giants still survive here. Helpfully many of the trees have labels with their common and latin names. Troupes of Spider Monkeys will be feeding on the fruits of Almendros trees, a tree that also attracts the rare and very impressive Great Green Macaw. A night walk to any of these fruiting trees should reveal Peccaries and in the branches above Kinkajous. Great Curassow's sometimes flap calamitously across the trails and we'll seek Great Tinamous and Blue Ground Doves as well as Slaty-backed Forest and Crimson-fronted Parakeets.

Strawberry Poison-dart Frogs and the stunning Green and Black Poison-arrow Frog are both common along the trails and another emblematic species of these Neotropical Forests is quite common here – the Scarlet Macaw. Army ant swarms are a must see, not only **are** they impressive to watch in their own right, but they have followers! All sorts of creatures are involved in some way with these moving hooovers but it is the birds that will be most noticeable. Careful searching amongst the constantly shifting parties reveals Ocellated Antbirds and the striking Bicolored Antbird as well as various Antwrens and Antshrikes. Spectacled Caiman sit quietly along the riverbank as the distinctive Sungrebe cruises past and White-faced Capuchins cavort in the trees. Laguna Lagartos is really a microcosm of what Costa Rica is all about - incredible biodiversity!

The lodge itself has a most productive garden some great feeders attracting Keel-billed and Chestnut-manibled Toucans, both easy to photograph here, as well as the wonderfully marked Collared Aracari. Hummingbird feeders are also productive with some choice species visiting such as Blue-throated Goldentail and White-necked Jacobin. Afternoon of Day 5 we'll transfer to the Caribbean Slope and the wonderful Rancho Naturalista.

## **Days 5(pm) – 7(am)** **Rancho Naturalista**

The marvellous Rancho Naturalista nestles amid the mountains of the Cordillera Talamanca on the Caribbean Slope. Situated around 900m above sea level the lodge commands superb views of Volcan Turrialba and the even higher Volcan Irazu, both topping 3000m. An extensive network of trails allows us to explore the 50 hectare private reserve. This sounds small by comparison with some of the lodge reserves we'll visit on this tour, however the mix of primary forest, wooded pasture and mountain streams is home to an amazing biodiversity. 430 bird species have been recorded in and around the reserve! Rancho Naturalista is probably most famous for its hummingbird feeders and hummingbird pools. Each evening Violet-crowned Woodnymph, the lovely Snowcap and fantastic Purple-crowned Fairy visit these pools to bathe, a fantastic photographic opportunity for us. There are so many hummingbirds at Rancho Naturalista. A dozen or so species frequent the balconies and the feeders – elegant White-necked Jacobin, Violet Sabrewing, the Red-footed Plumeleteer, and the lovely Black-crested Coquette too. We could spend all our time with the hummers, but there's so much else to see here. Green Basilisks and Variegated Squirrels both visit the balconies, whilst on the lawns are Brazilian Rabbits. The lodge operates two moth lights that each evening bring in a staggering variety of moths, as well as other fantastic insects like the Harlequin Beetle, Lichen Katydid and the impressive but weird Dobson's Fly. Common birds around the lodge and the reserve are Montezuma's Oropendulas, White-crowned Parrots, and fabulous wing-snapping White-collared Manakin at their lek. The lovely Golden-hooded Tanager is a frequent sight, its local name meaning 'seven-coloured tanager', a reflection of its complicated plumage! Rancho Naturalista has a number of birds that are rare elsewhere, the Snowcap and Black-crested Coquette included, but there are also the beautiful Spotted Ant-Bird, Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser, Thrushlike Schiffornis (you can't come home unless you've seen one of those!) and an isolated population of the range-restricted White-crowned Manakin. The delightfully smart little White-ruffed Manakin is the final piece in our manakin puzzle, only the range-restricted Lance-tailed Manakin is not possible on this tour.

Afternoon of Day 5 we'll transfer to the mountains south of San Jose and the fabulous Savegre area.

## **Days 7(pm) – 10(am)** **Savegre: San Gerardo & San Isidoro de General**

Amongst some of Costa Rica's finest ethereal landscapes we can see Fiery-throated Hummingbird, Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher and Sulphur-winged Parakeets. Purple flowered *Fuchsia paniculata* and the epiphytic orchid *Epidendrum radicans* shine out of the mists. Amongst the handsome foliage of *Gunnera insignis* we'll find the gigantic pink or white flowered *Dahlia imperialis*. Avocado trees are favoured by Costa Rica's

most famous bird, the magnificent Resplendent Quetzal, thought by many to be the world's most beautiful bird. These dazzling creatures can be observed at close quarters as they focus on downing the energy-filled fruits! Our lodge's feeders attract the glorious Magnificent Hummingbird as well as Green-crowned Brilliant, Green Violet-ear and the tiny Volcano Hummingbird, the male furnished with a shining violet collar. The grounds host Blue-hooded Euphonia, Yellow-thighed Finch, Collared Trogons, and as Red-tailed Squirrels play along the boughs, we'll search through the Tanager flocks, noting Flame-coloured, Silver-throated and Spangle-cheeked amongst others. The highest point of the pass is above the cloud-forest. Here is a bizarre flora of strange umbellifers and Hypericums and we'll look for Volcano Juncos and admire lovely orange-flowered *Bomareas*, vivid magenta *Salvias* and fine *Calceolarias*. Whilst here we'll have a chance to visit the excellent art and craft shop at the Dante Lodge.

During the middle part of Day 10 we'll travel down to Puerto Jimenez from whence we'll board a boat to cross the gulf to the Osa Peninsula and the incomparable Bosque del Cabo.

### **Days 10(pm) – 14(am)** **The Osa Peninsula**

Bosque del Cabo's fantastic private reserve overlooks the Pacific Ocean from the headlands of the Osa Peninsula. Run by a keen naturalist who has produced a book on the Osa Peninsula's natural riches, this superb place is ideal for those that want to be constantly amazed by new fauna and flora. All four of Costa Rica's monkey species are common here and the lodge is host to many rare species such as Yellow-bellied Cotinga and the local Golfo Dulce Poison-dart Frog. The rainforest here has been described by the National Geographic as "the most biologically intense place on earth". Rare Central American Squirrel Monkeys, huge Green Iguanas and elegant Chestnut-mandibled Toucans seem to visit the balconies of each of our gorgeous cabins in turn, like some kind of welcoming committee! Flocks of brilliantly-coloured tanagers feed above us whilst stunning Fiery-billed Aracaris and both Baird's and Slaty-tailed Trogons feed on Zapote trees surrounding their gardens! Dawn echoes to the loud calls of family groups of Mantled Howler Monkeys that, along with White-faced Capuchins and Central American Spider Monkeys, pass through the lodge grounds on a regular basis. A well-maintained system of trails takes us through a rainforest of buttressed trees and beautiful bright yellow and orange heliconids. Inside are such gems - the shimmering blue *Morpho amathonte* patrols sun-dappled streams where Jesus Christ Lizards hurtle across the water on two legs as we approach. Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths move in ultra slow motion, whilst pale Tent-making Bats peer back at us from their finely stitched shelters. Impossibly delicate 'Helicopter Damselflies' (*Megaloprepus coerulatus*) are a whirr of crazily angled wings, whilst a metallic 'chink' reveals the minuscule Little Hermit hummingbird - certainly smaller than the damselfly! Glorious Red-capped Manakins display in undergrowth

inhabited by Barred Antshrikes and fantastic Poison Dart Frogs - the glistening black and turquoise *Dendrobates auratus* and the tiny copper-lined *Phyllobates vittatus*. On the grounds is a little pond which attracts all sorts of other frogs as well the amazing Cat-eyed Snake which is of course hoping to dine on frogs legs! Variegated Squirrels play in the vines and an abundance of birdlife includes White-shouldered Tanager, Plain Xenops, Olivaceous Flatbill, both Black-throated and Violaceous Trogons, and the White-whiskered Puffbird. Scarlet Macaws fly in to roost each evening and we'll be in position to watch their garish colours illuminated by the lowering sun. Walking local trails we'll watch shimmering Blue Morphos and Black-and-green Poison-dart Frogs hop through the forest litter and above Three-toed Sloths are quite common in the Cecropia Trees. Virtually the entire suite of lowland rainforest mammals from Central America are found around Bosque and sightings of such elusive species as Ocelot and Jaguarundi are not infrequent and Tayras and Tapirs can sometimes be seen too. Glasswing Butterflies pause on floribund vines, and iridescent Beryl-crowned Hummingbirds call loudly from branches bedecked in little bromeliads. White Hawks and Bat Falcons hunt overhead and, off-shore from the miles of fine beaches patrolled by Magnificent Frigatebirds, are Bottle-nosed Dolphins and, probably, Humpback Whales.

### **Days 14(pm) – 15(am)** **La Cusinga & to San Jose**

After lunch on Day 14 we'll travel up to the Pacific Coast. A big fig tree en route usually attracts interesting birds and we can hope for Yellow-billed Cotinga here. We'll settle into the fine lodge at La Cusinga. In the later afternoon we'll walk amongst five-century old Ajo trees and watch Blue-crowned Manakins and equally Blue-crowned Motmots amid La Cusinga's fine tract of primary Pacific Rainforest. Also here will be Violaceous Trogon, Cherries Tanagers and Wedge-billed Woodcreeper. We can hope to see Green-and-black Poison Frogs here.

After breakfast on Day 15 at La Cusinga we'll drive northwards. En route we'll no doubt stop for various wildlife encounters which might include Swallow-tailed Kites, Three-toed Sloths and Fiery-billed Aracari.

### **Day 16** **Arrive in the UK/Europe**

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