

■ The Red-eyed Tree Frog *Agalychnis callidryas* is one of Costa Rica's most iconic species. This one is in its darker green, nocturnal livery.



COSTA RICA'S SELVA VERDE NATURE RESERVE

WELCOME TO WONDERLAND

A stretch of carefully preserved Caribbean lowland rainforest proves to be pure heaven for nature lovers and wildlife photographers

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The suspension bridge we're standing on - a somewhat flimsy looking affair of criss-crossing steel cables and planks spanning the width of the Sarapiqui river at a rather worrying height - swings and bounces like a taut rubber band as we scan the surrounding forest canopy, the first light of dawn creeping on the undulating, endless tree tops with a pale golden sheen. Suddenly, without a word, Antonella grabs my arm and points straight forward. Emerging from the shadows and starkly silhouetted against the pale blue-grey sky, a mother Howler Monkey carrying her baby on her back is gingerly moving towards the end of the branch she's standing on, clearly toying with the idea of crossing across the bridge's width by jumping across

and grabbing the closest branch of the opposite tree. Fascinated, we watch how carefully and gracefully she moves on all fours, at least a hand and a foot always in contact with the branch, using her thick, muscular, prehensile tail as a safety line. A few meters from us, she pauses momentarily, giving us a cursory glance and briefly evaluating the distance separating her from her next objective. She stretches forward, holding to her perch by her feet and tail, reaching for the branch facing her - as the flimsy twig she's holding on gives treacherously way, bending under the combined weight of the female and her child. Horrified, we watch her helplessly as she crashes noisily down, missing the steel cables by a few inches.

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A large Green Iguana (Iguana iguana) displaying its bright breeding colors as it basks on a sandy bank of the Rio Sarapiqui, the region's most important watercourse.

*A living false leaf
patiently waiting among
a million other real ones*

Have they both fallen to their death on the forest floor below? But we needn't worry: Howler Monkeys - out of necessity - learn to be stupendous acrobats very soon, and our mommy breaks her fall a couple of meters below, a good thirty meters above the ground. Unfazed, she climbs back to her starting point - her baby still straddling her back like a miniature furry jockey and apparently enjoying himself immensely - and pauses for several seconds, evaluating the situation, sitting at the tip of a perilously swinging, thin branch. I could swear she's scratching her head in frustration as she's considering the problem facing her. Abruptly, she turns and unceremoniously dumps her baby,

which promptly grabs the branch with everything he's got. We stare incredulously at each other - is she going to cross safely now, unencumbered by the weight of the baby, and abandon her progeny behind? Once again, we are put to shame. The female holds tight to the branch tip with her feet and tail and launches herself through the void with a somewhat purposeful abandon - there, she has grabbed the opposite branch and now she's spanning the void between the two tree canopies! Stretched between the two towering trees, she turns her leonine head, and we can see her dark eyes glinting as she silently looks at the baby behind. Without a moment's hesitation, the

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*A Green Leaf Mantis
Choeradodis rhombicollis
is all but invisible as it
mimics the foliage of the
creepers growing on a
tree trunk. This is one of
Costa Rica's most
fascinating insects, a
stunning example of
highly evolved
camouflage.*

— An early morning image of Costa Rica's eastern lowland rainforest - a rich, moist environment which hides among its luxuriant vegetation an immense number of species. Selva Verde's forest receives its highest rainfall between May and September, but it remains humid for the rest of the year.





A Red-eyed Tree Frog *Agalychnis callidryas* displays its pale green day coloration and its climbing prowess. This tree-dwelling species can usually only be encountered when it descends from the forest canopy to breed, at the start of the rainy season.

baby rises, stands on all fours - and crosses the chasm on her mother's back, using her a suspension bridge. In less than a couple of seconds, it's done. The baby straddles its mom's back again, the female lets go the old perch, grabbing with all fours (or fives?) the new branch, and they both silently vanish in the canopy again. Ecstatic, Antonella and I look at each other, swinging in unison with rubber legs at the suspension bridge's bouncing, a big smile on our faces, as the roaring chorus of the Howler Monkeys troop heralds a new glorious day in Selva Verde, Costa Rica.

HEAVEN ON EARTH FOR WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHERS

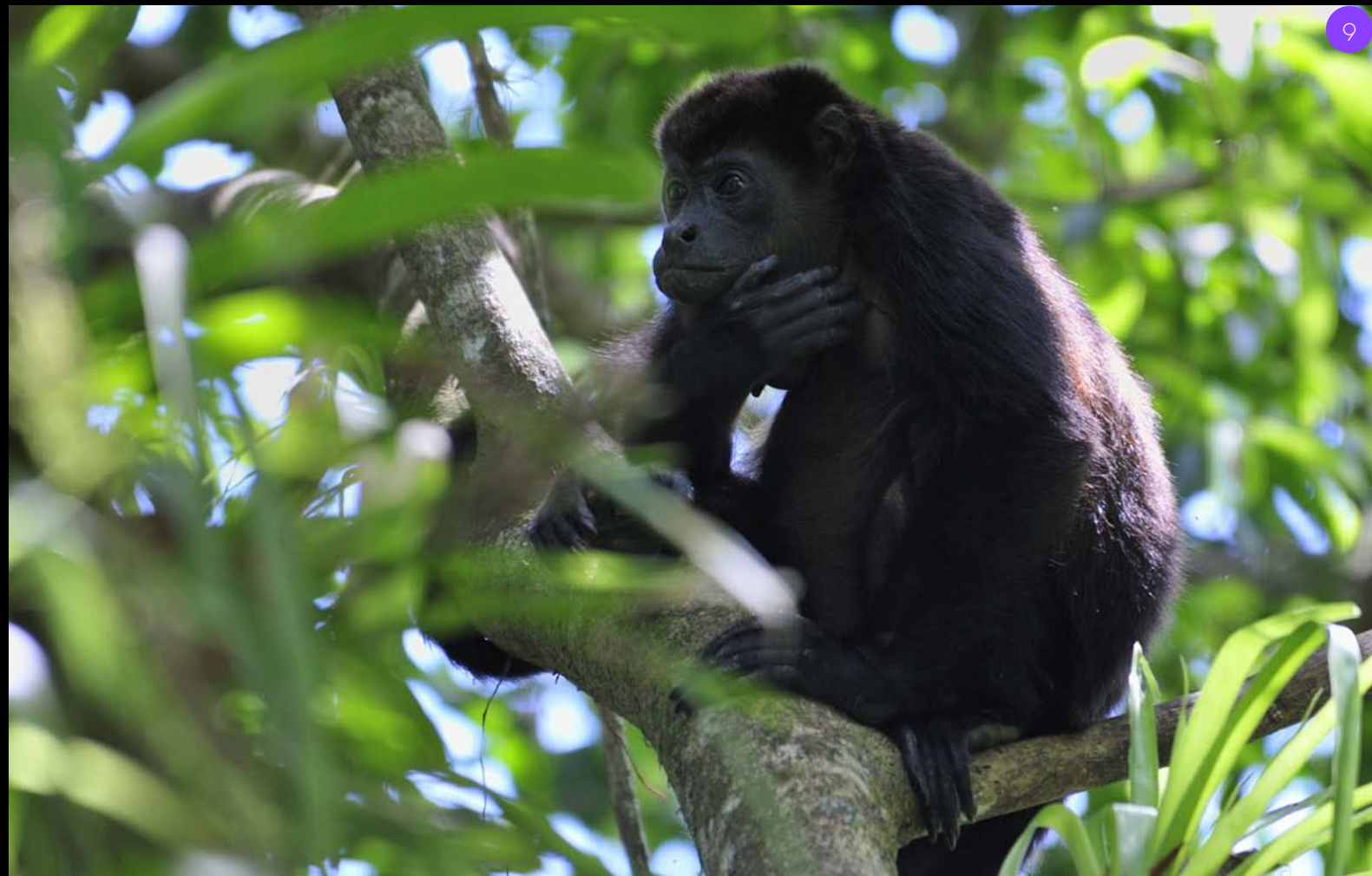
Despite having been to Costa Rica twice in the past, this has been our first "serious" wildlife photography trip to the lovely Central American country, and we have to admit we've been once again deeply impressed - by the friendliness of the people, the quality of the infrastructures, the proficiency of the local naturalist guides and, above all, by the stunning richness, diversity and quantity of its wildlife. *Pura Vida*, as the locals are fond of saying at every possible occasion! Be it incredibly colorful birds, shy forest mammals, dazzling amphibians and reptiles or stunning insects, Costa Rica is bound to leave the discerning visitor totally awed - and with a substantial

amount of very satisfying photographic trophies in the bag. Carefully geared and organized towards the eco-tourism industry (its main source of income at the moment), the country of Costa Rica is blessed with a variety of diverse tropical habitats, environments and biotopes, all of which are easily visited and rapidly reached thanks to the Country's small size. A network of carefully maintained National Parks and Nature Reserves (often privately owned) offers unbeatable wildlife viewing opportunities to visitors: from the nesting sea turtles at the aptly named Tortuguero NP to the stunning Resplendent Quetzals of the Monteverde cloud forest, from the dry deciduous forest of Guanacaste on the Pacific coast to the perennially moist lowland forests of the Caribe, Costa Rica truly is a nature lover's wonderland. During the time of the year chosen for our visit (ie April), the Caribbean rainforest habitat in particular seemed to offer good chances to see and hopefully photograph most of the species we were especially interested in for an extensive *ANIMA MUNDI* article, and our search for a suitable location soon provided us with several interesting options, as the Sarapiquí region (which takes its name from the river crossing it) is dotted with a number of National Parks and Nature Reserves.

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A few examples of the Caribe's extraordinary wildlife, which can easily be observed in several protected areas of Costa Rica's eastern side. Left, a Great Kiskadee Pitangus sulphuratus; right, a Mantled Howler Monkey Alouatta palliata; bottom right, a Chestnut-mandibled Toucan Ramphastos swainsonii; and bottom left, a Green Parrot snake Leptophis ahaetulla.



■ An unidentified cicada-like species, possibly related to Fulgorid planthoppers, displays a curious protuberance on its head. Neotropical forests host an immense number of species, most of which are still unnamed.



Among these, *Selva Verde* offers, hands-down, the best compromise between a very comfortable and perfectly managed tourist Lodge (with spacious and spotlessly clean accomodation and excellent food) and a surrounding pristine lowland forest habitat, a 500-acre private Nature Reserve crossed by the river Sarapiqui and mostly comprising undisturbed primary forest habitat. Skilled guides from the lodge are permanently available for day and night excursions along the Reserve's immaculately maintained trails (we were lucky to often have with us in the forest our eagle-eyed friend Alejandro Esquivel Gaitàn, who spotted several of the highly camouflaged subjects of the photos gracing these pages), while several interesting trips can be easily organized to other nearby Reserves - notably *La Selva Biological Station* (a University-founded facility mostly aimed at researchers, which however charges high prices to visitors) and *La Tirimbina*.

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Strange and mysterious creatures still waiting for a name



A Mantled
Howler Monkey
Alouatta palliata
enjoys its early
morning fruit
breakfast. Notice the
clever use of the
muscular, prehensile
tail - a veritable fifth
limb and a highly
functional adaptation
to an exclusively
arboreal existence.
The dawn chorus of
Howler Monkeys is
truly unmistakable -
and deafening.

■ A leaf-mimicking Praying Mantis waits on a stem for its unwary prey. Tropical mantids often offer some of the most extraordinary examples in the art of disguise.



Comfortable boat trips along the rio Sarapiquí also offer priceless chances to view Collared peccaries, Spectacled caymans and - with some luck - uncommon, highly endangered species such as Neotropical river otters and American crocodiles. Within Selva Verde itself - be it in the garden-like, carefully managed area surrounding the Lodge cottages or inside the Nature Reserve proper across the Sarapiquí - one can expect to easily see most typical Costa Rican lowland rainforest species such as Chestnut-mandibled and Keel-billed toucans, Violaceous, Black-throated and Slaty-tailed trogons, Montezuma

Oropendolas, hummingbirds belonging to several species, parrots, tanagers and Broad-billed motmots among birds, and Kinkajous, Howler monkeys, Two-toed and Three-toed sloths, Tayras, squirrels and armadillos among mammals; Plumed basilisks, ameivas, large Green iguanas, river turtles and several species of snakes are also commonly observed among Costa Rican reptilian species, while Strawberry poison dart frogs, Green and black poison dart frogs and Red-eyed tree frogs are some of the most spectacular, iconic and easily observed amphibians of Selva Verde, especially at the start of the rainy season in April-May.



A dazzling high speed air ballet by the masters of the forest sky



Swooping in a dazzling display of aerobatics and aerial prowess, Montezuma Oropendolas *Psarocolius montezuma* enter and exit their basket-like nests, which hang in colonies from the canopy of the tallest trees available. Nests are built at the tip of single, thin but robust branches, and the birds carefully select only straight-trunked, stand-alone trees on which no creepers or lianas grow.



The forest at dawn, still cloaked in mist and dripping with moisture. Later on in the day, when the sun comes out, the Pale-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus guatemalensis* (far left) will look for grubs in old or rotting trees. Notice how this large bird holds firmly to the trunk by splaying its clawed feet, using its stiff wide tail for extra support.



A scenic vista of the Rio Sarapiquí at its lowest, towards the end of the dry season. With the coming of rain this pebbled stream will rapidly transform itself into an impassable, raging mass of muddy water.



■ An extraordinary sight as a Neotropical River Otter *Lontra longicaudis* emerges briefly from the waters of the Rio Sarapiquí to munch on its fish prey. This is a rare and endangered species.

The Great Green Macaw *Ara ambiguus* is somewhat of a symbolic species for the Sarapiquí region with its imposing size and its greatly endangered status, and pairs can be occasionally heard squawking loudly far away in the forest canopy or sighted at dawn and just before sunset, as they fly high up and in close formation to their feeding grounds, usually fruiting Almendro (*Dipteryx panamensis*) trees. Insects are too numerous to name, but they are represented by several imposing, exceptionally photogenic species - including the Leaf Praying Mantis, Leaf and Cone-headed katydids, *Morpho* and Owl butterflies and the stunning Hercules and Harlequin Longhorn Beetles. Even the huge tarantulas lurking on the tree trunks are big and beautiful here! The layout of the Lodge and its surroundings greatly facilitate the viewing of wildlife, as the property is criss-crossed by a somewhat initially confusing maze of roofed concrete trails - which allow the unexpected luxury of safe, comfortable and perfectly dry walks at night or in the rain.

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■ The fairy-tale, dragon-like looks of the Green Basilisk *Basiliscus plumifrons* belie the peaceful nature of this splendid reptile. This is a fully mature male in its blue-tinged breeding livery.





■ A Bark Mantis (left), a Longhorn Beetle (right), a Ground Anole *Norops humilis* (bottom right) and a Yellow-headed Gecko *Gonatodes albogularis* (bottom left).



*Burning bright among
the forest's shadows,
asking to be seen by all
to avoid being eaten by one*



■ A spectacular Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog *Dendrobates auratus* advertises its toxicity thanks to its stunning aposematic colors. 4,5 cm long, this is a common species.

Nothing like the real deal in the primary forest, of course – but a welcome extra touch for those who are understandingly unwilling to walk at night, possibly in a torrential rain, in a virgin rainforest where a few seriously dangerous and perfectly camouflaged creatures might actually lurk among the dead leaves. To top it all, the Reserve is within easy reach from the capital, San Jose - just a couple of hours' driving on good paved roads crossing at length the famed Braulio Carrillo National Park, offering stunning scenic vistas along the way. If we had to find a minor fault in Selva Verde, it would have to be just that – its close proximity to civilization and a high traffic road, but that is close to being unavoidable in a small and relatively developed country like Costa Rica, where to find total isolation one would have to stay further south, in the jungles of Corcovado National Park, close to the border with Panama.

THE FASCINATING STORY OF SELVA VERDE

The story of Selva Verde Nature Reserve and Lodge is as fascinating and complex as its own tropical rainforest habitat, and it certainly makes for some good reading. Rather than reiterating what has already been written, we'll quote directly from the [Nature Reserve's website](#):
"Selva Verde exists today because of one woman's desire to make a difference."

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Top left, a Chrysomelidae Tortoise Beetle with its eggs; top right, a Micrathena sp. Two-spined Spider; bottom right, two unidentified Leafhoppers, and bottom left a Red-throated Ant Tanager *Habia fuscicauda*.



— A Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth *Bradypus variegatus* hanging from its perch is hardly visible to the casual observer. Notice the greenish tinge of its fur due to symbiont algal growth.


As a pioneer in the business of ecotourism, Italian-born Giovanna Holbrook traveled the world creating unique adventures for avid naturalists. In 1982, already based in the USA, Giovanna arranged an ornithological field study in Costa Rica for the National Aviary. At the last minute, accommodations for the explorers fell through and they found themselves stranded in the middle of nowhere, without a place to stay. Giovanna raced to Costa Rica to rectify the situation. A full day drive from San Jose, over barely passable dirt roads, found her deep in the canton of Sarapiquí - a place that would forever etch itself upon her heart. During her stay, Giovanna discovered a large tract of old growth forest was up for sale and was ready to fall to the chainsaw. Never one to shy from a challenge, Giovanna bought the property on the spot and embarked on an adventure that continues to this day. Selva Verde's early days were full of excitement. Shortly after purchasing the property, Giovanna discovered squatters staking claim to her land. She enlisted her good friend Dr. Tom Emmel and with the help of a local conservationist, confronted the squatters. After some intense and heated negotiations, a deal was struck. If the squatters agreed to vacate her property, they would be offered jobs once the project was completed.

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Another lucky shot as a Neotropical River Otter emerges in a bend of the Rio Sarapiquí to feast on its Tilapia fish prey. Such sightings are extremely rare in Central America today.





Looking like a proverbial  bad-omen trio from a cowboy movie, three Black Vultures *Coragyps atratus* scan the forest floor, looking for carrion and small living prey.



Over the next several years, Giovanna continued to travel back and forth between the US and Costa Rica as the dream of Selva Verde began to take shape. Soon the original house was hosting visiting researchers and plans were underway to build additional guest rooms and a dining hall. A quarter of a century later, Selva Verde is a world renowned eco-lodge committed to advancing the practice of sustainable tourism. Selva Verde began with one woman's dream of preserving nearly 500 acres of endangered tropical forest and the multitude of species that call it home. Through her unwavering devotion, Selva Verde is now a premier ecotourism destination, protecting the most accessible rainforest in Costa Rica, and attracting nature

enthusiasts from around the globe". Despite its relatively small size, Selva Verde offers exceptional if not downright ideal viewing opportunities to those interested in the exuberant Central American fauna and flora, with easy and permanent access to large tracts of untouched primary forest and photographer-friendly, more open plots surrounding the Lodge itself. The rainforest surrounding Selva Verde provides habitat for over 300 bird species, 120 species of mammals, 48 amphibian species, 89 reptile species, more than 10,000 species of insects, 330 species of trees and countless plant species. Costa Rica itself, by the way, is home to 5% of the world's known species. As such, it is often the destination of choice for several highly regarded

professional wildlife photographers, who regularly conduct group workshops there. But there is more – let us quote again Selva Verde's informative website: "Thirty years ago, rainforest stretched from Costa Rica's Central Valley to the Atlantic coast. Today this area is a patchwork of small fincas, agricultural plantations, and a handful of rainforest reserves. Selva Verde is one of those reserves - protecting an important remnant of the forests that once blanketed the area. In order to maintain optimal levels of biodiversity within the reserve, Selva Verde is working with local conservation organizations such as the Sarapiquí Conservation Learning Center and the Great Green Macaw Project to create forested pathways between Selva Verde and other preserves in the area.

A four-meter long adult American Crocodile *Crocodylus acutus* warily basks on the river edge, ready to slide into the water at the first disturbance. This is a mostly fish-eating species.



Small but nonetheless somewhat dangerous, a juvenile Hog-nosed Pit Viper *Porthidium nasutum* lies in wait for a passing prey, confiding in its cryptic coloration and pattern. Notice the light-colored tail tip, used as a lure to attract lizards and mice.

Heat sensors silently and implacably scanning the darkness



A close-up of an adult Hog-nosed Pit Viper reveals its characteristic upturned rostral scale and the heat-sensitive loreal pits - placed between the eye and the nostril - which help this crotaline snake in detecting warm-blooded prey at night.



“Two-headed butterflies” (left) refer to a number of species featuring antennae-like streamers on the posterior edge of their wings, evolved to distract a predator’s attention. Fulgorid planthoppers (right) are related to cicadas and are often exceptionally colorful but equally difficult to identify correctly. Both can be easily observed in Selva Verde Nature Reserve.



These pathways, known as biological corridors, will allow rainforest wildlife to migrate more freely and ensure a brighter future for the area's biodiversity. Selva Verde's Rainforest Reserve has been identified as a critical piece of a much larger corridor initiative known as the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC). The MBC is an international initiative that links critical habitats from southern Mexico to Panama in an effort

to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable development throughout this ecologically fragile region. Selva Verde sits in the middle of the San Juan - La Selva section of the MBC and provides habitat for one of the corridor's most endangered species - the Great Green Macaw. Less than 200 of these birds can be found in Costa Rica. The macaw's very existence is tied to the Almendro tree - the bird's preferred nesting and food

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Roaring under a torrential rain, the Rio Sarapiquí makes a fittingly dramatic background to a gigantic *Megasoma elephas* Rhino beetle, one of the world's largest, heaviest and strongest insects.





A group of caterpillars (left) display an apparently aposematic (ie warning) coloration, while an unidentified and possibly undescribed lichen katydid (right) proves itself to be an indisputed master of camouflage. Less than 3cm long, this extraordinary species was completely invisible to the naked eye once it stopped moving.



A whole existence which unfolds on the vertical plane, from the lowest branches to the loftiest forest canopies



The Variegated Squirrel *Sciurus variegatoides* is the largest and most colorful of the squirrels found in Costa Rica: with its tail it can reach a length of 60cm.

Colors and shapes from Selva Verde's rainforest: from left, a wild banana *Musa* sp. terminal stem with apical flower and fruits, a *Paullinia* sp. in flower - showing its unnerving eye-like seeds - and a blooming *Heliconia*.



■ The otherworldly appearance of a Cone-headed Katydid Copiphora rhinoceros, a predatory nocturnal grasshopper quite able to inflict painful bites to those careless enough to handle one. It feeds on other insects and even small reptiles and amphibians, which it grabs using its spined forelegs.



source. The wood of the Almendro is also a very desirable building material and has been extensively logged throughout the Sarapiquí. Selva Verde's reserve protects one of the largest Almendro trees in the region and macaws are frequently seen in and around the preserve. Selva Verde is committed to working with local and regional conservation organizations to save Great Green Macaws and the Almendro trees - within our preserve and beyond our boundaries. Protecting the Great Green Macaw's habitat also protects habitat needed by many other rainforest birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and plants - ensuring a future for rainforest biodiversity and for Selva Verde".

The images we have taken in Selva Verde should hopefully speak for themselves, and more (and even more spectacular ones!) will follow in our next issue with the second and final part of our trip report. Until then - start thinking about your next photographic trip to Costa Rica, a wildlife and nature lover's wonderland!

DON'T MISS THE SECOND INSTALLMENT OF OUR SELVA VERDE STORY - COMING IN OCTOBER 2011 ON ISSUE 4 OF ANIMA MUNDI - ADVENTURES IN WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY!



Left, a Saturniid moth caterpillar with highly urticating bristles; right, a male Chestnut-mandibled Toucan *Ramphastos swainsonii* in full display; bottom right, a Strawberry Poison Dart Frog *Oophaga (ex Dendrobates) pumilio*; bottom left, an Olive-backed Euphonia *Euphonia gouldi* feeding on ripe berries. As anywhere else, wildlife photography in Costa Rica requires a degree of patience and some specific knowledge.



— Selva Verde's forest canopy - as most of Costa Rica's rainforests - is alive with scores of spectacular bromeliads, plants thriving on air humidity and rainfall which are host to a multitude of insects, amphibians and small reptiles.





Top left, a male Slaty-tailed Trogon *Trogon massena*; top right, a Montezuma Oropendola *Psarocolius montezuma*; bottom right, a Keel-billed Toucan *Ramphastos sulfuratus*; bottom left, a Blue-gray Tanager *Thraupis episcopus*.

Unfazed by the rain, a pair of Black River Turtles *Rhinoclemmys funerea* sit by the river bank. The male, in breeding livery, is on the right and can be identified by its bright orange throat and front legs.



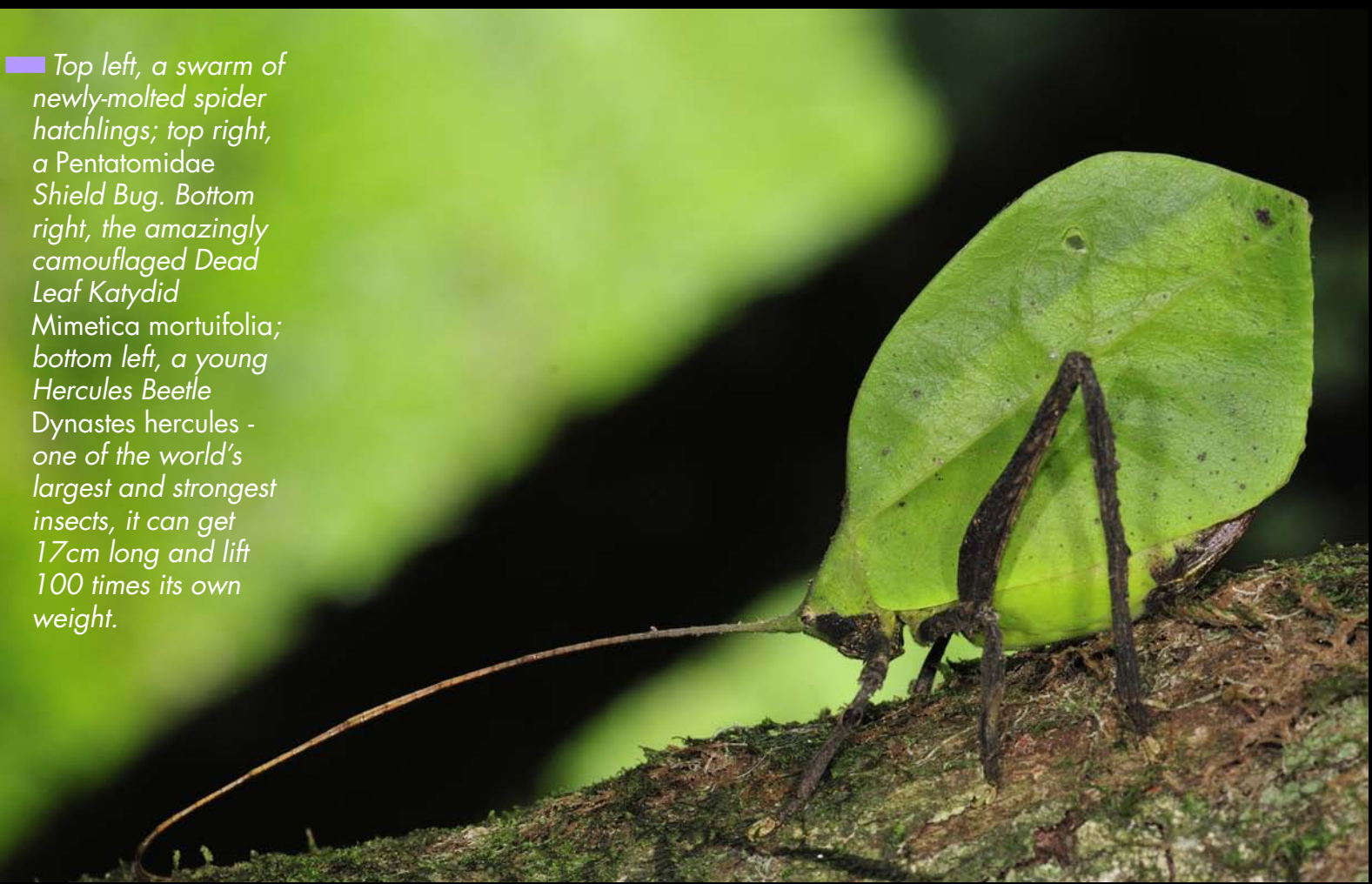


Large or small, the wild denizens of Costa Rica's lowland rainforests can be often exhilaratingly beautiful. Left, an adult male Green Basilisk *Basiliscus plumifrons* in its blue-throated breeding livery; right, a jewel-like Turquoise Cicada *Cicada Zammara smaragdina*, one of Central America's most colorful insects. Despite their apparent showiness, most rainforest animal species are in fact rather difficult to spot in the field.





Left, a male and his harem of Proboscis Bats *Rhynchonycteris naso*, often see roosting head-down on tree trunks by the river side. Right, an unidentified and splendidly camouflaged Bark Mantis.



Top left, a swarm of newly-molted spider hatchlings; top right, a Pentatomidae Shield Bug. Bottom right, the amazingly camouflaged Dead Leaf Katydid *Mimetica mortuifolia*; bottom left, a young Hercules Beetle *Dynastes hercules* - one of the world's largest and strongest insects, it can get 17cm long and lift 100 times its own weight.



More somberly colored than its close relatives, the Striped Poison Dart Frog *Phyllobates lugubris* is also the most toxic among Costa Rica's members of the Dendrobatidae family.

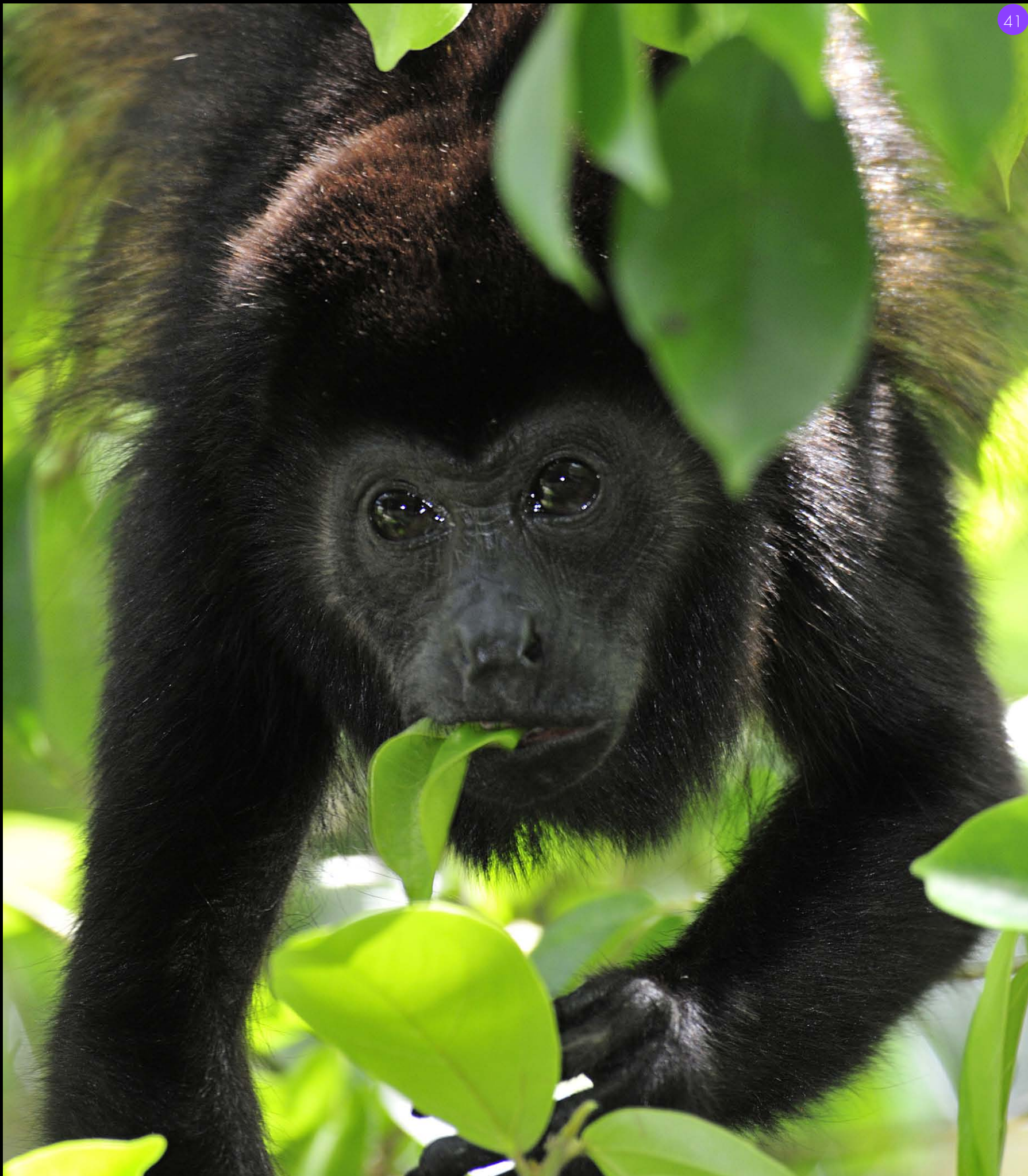


Click on the images and watch six short videos about Selva Verde Nature Reserve and its wildlife

- Selva Verde Intro
- The Leaf Mantis
- The Almendro tree
- The Red-eyed Tree Frog
- The Hercules Beetle
- The Poison-dart Frog

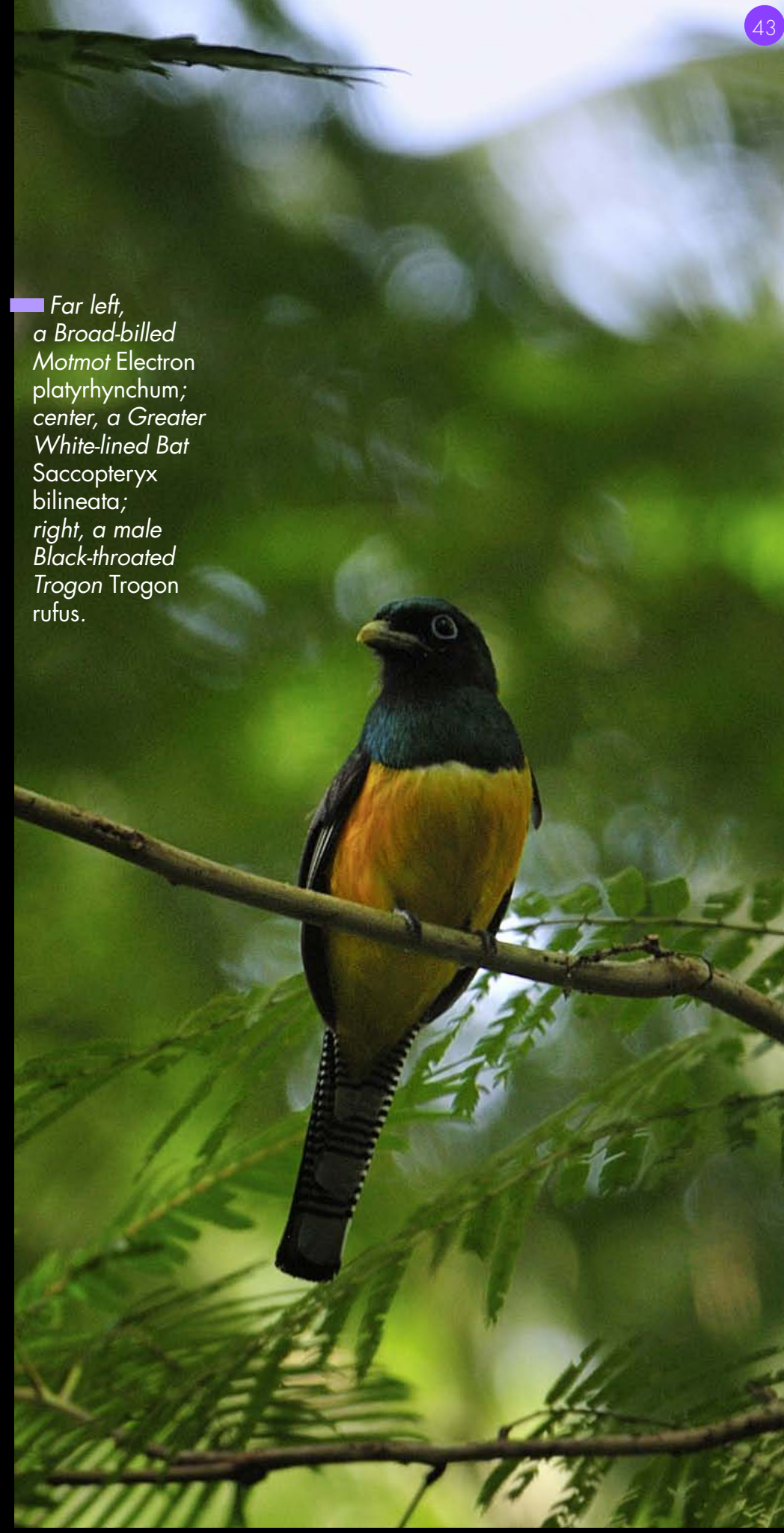
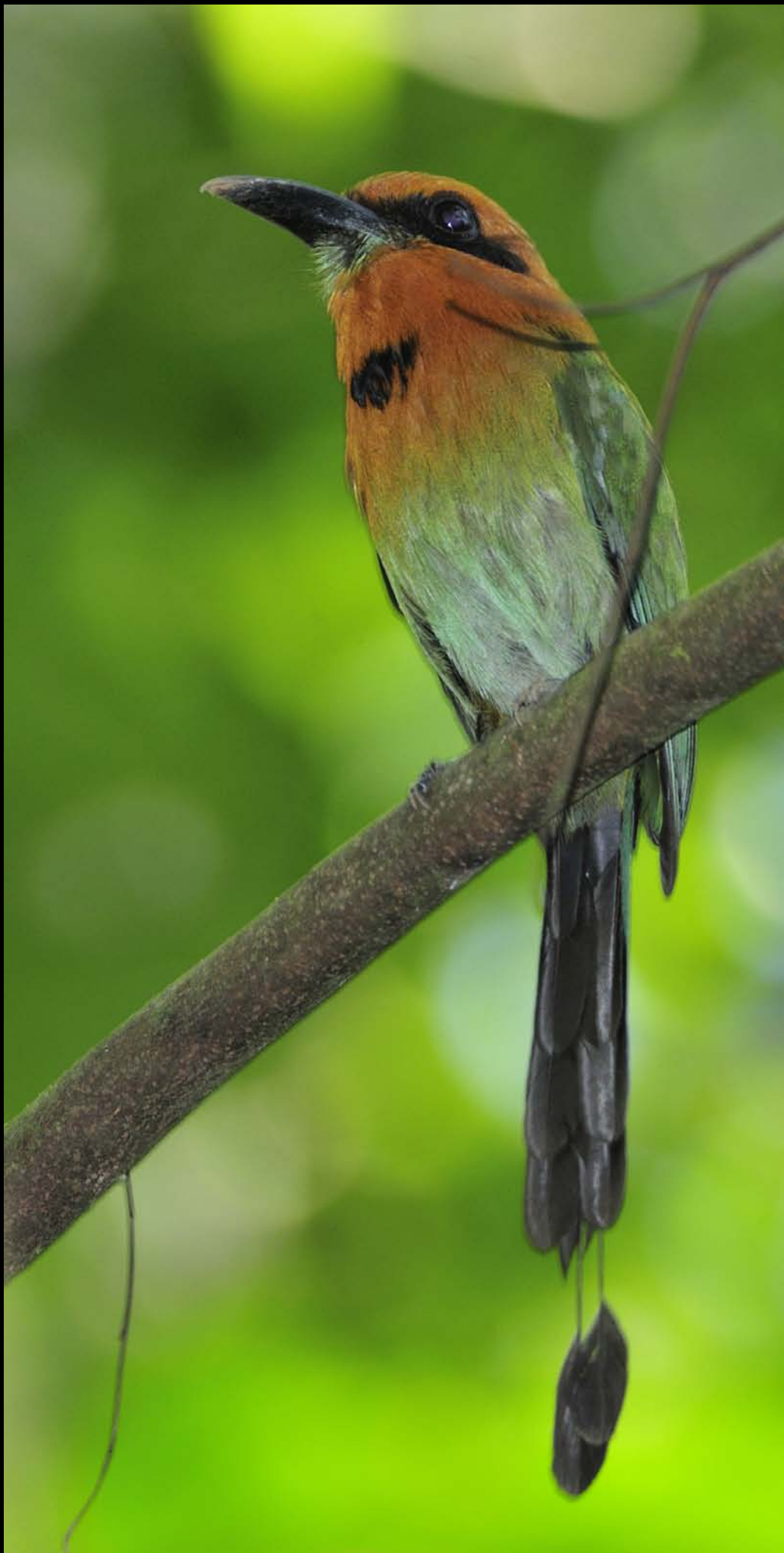


Left, a female Black-throated Trogon *Trogon rufus* - a colorful and relatively common but easily unnoticed species usually found in the forest understory. Right, a close-up of a feeding Mantled Howler Monkey *Alouatta palliata*, a highly social species whose territorial, deep-throated roaring at dawn and dusk is one of the most unmistakable (and occasionally startling to newcomers) sounds of the lowland forests of Central America.





A large male adult Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) basks high up in the forest canopy. Selva Verde is home to stunning specimens of this common but nevertheless imposing, beautiful species.



Far left, a Broad-billed Motmot Electron platyrhynchum; center, a Greater White-lined Bat Saccopteryx bilineata; right, a male Black-throated Trogon Trogon rufus.



Two *Heliconius hecale zuleika* Spotted Longwing butterflies joined in mating. The arrival of the rainy season in April-May triggers reproductive behavior in most tropical species.



Selva Verde Nature Reserve encompasses several different lowland rainforest environments, often offering open landscapes and scenic vistas. Left, a view of the Sarapiquí river framed by hanging lianas and bromeliads; right, Antonella is dwarfed by a 50 meter-tall, 600 years-old giant Almendro tree (*Dipteryx panamensis*), an endangered species which is crucial to the survival in the wild of the Great Green Macaw *Ara ambiguus*.



Sun-loving, peaceful dinosaurs addicted to bananas



The highly textured, prehistoric-looking profile of a fully mature, adult Green Iguana *Iguana iguana* male at his strapping best and in full breeding livery. This 2-meter long species is diurnal and exclusively vegetarian.

At-a-glance travel guide

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: COSTA RICA



USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

Some simple, common sense, field-tested advice and information to make the best out of your trip and avoid hassles, worries and problems

ROUTE: Your flight will land at Juan Santamaria International Airport in San Jose, smack in the middle of the Country. From the capital it's a two-hour long car drive to Selva Verde – your driver will be waiting at the passengers' exit to pick you up with the resort minibus. Keep your camera at hand - it's a very scenic drive as the road passes through the beautiful forested hills and ravines of Braulio Carrillo National Park.

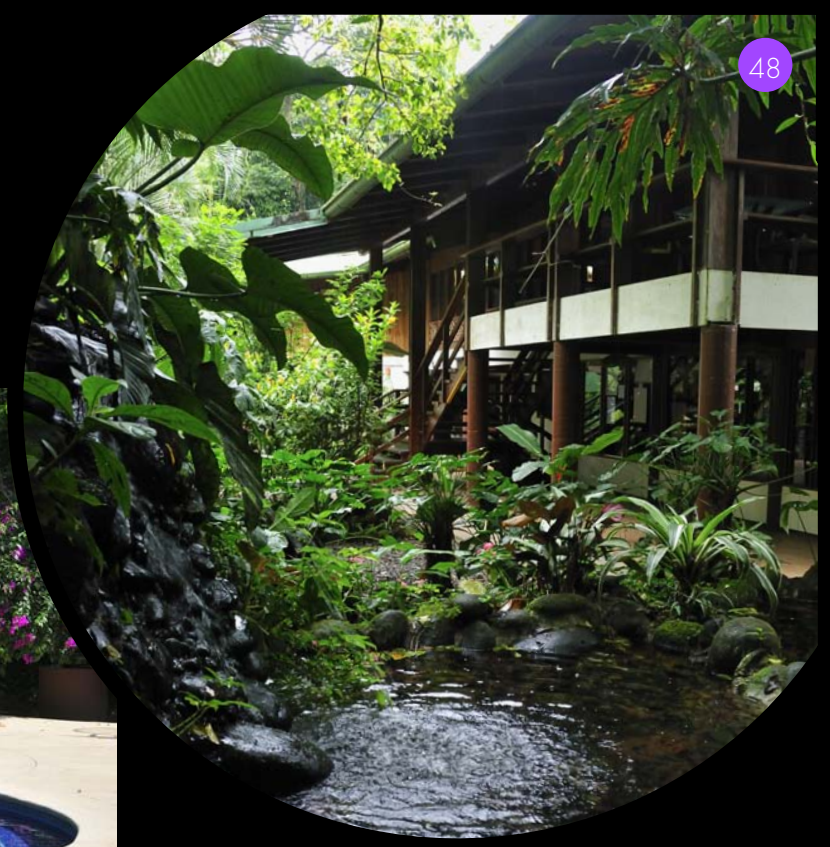
MEANS OF TRANSPORT: None since you won't need one. For excursions to nearby Nature Reserves or the Sarapiquí river, the Lodge will

gladly organize some private transport or get a taxi for you - public buses are also available. Renting a car and driving around isn't really a good idea at all - it might save you some money but truck drivers in Costa Rica are a reckless, dangerous breed and deadly road accidents are a daily occurrence.

CURRENCY: Trips are usually paid in advance, but extras and bills at [Selva Verde Nature Reserve and Lodge](#) can be settled in Euros or US currency. The local currency is the Costa Rican Colon or CRC. All trips and excursions can be paid to the Lodge together with your bill at the end of your stay - very convenient.

ACCOMODATION: Selva Verde Lodge is a beautifully organized, spread-out compound comprising a main body with two restaurants, plus about 40 double rooms and several bungalows broadly dispersed on a huge, semi-wild forested and gardened area. All buildings are on stilts and are connected by long, paved and roofed walkways, very useful for a short post-dinner stroll if you're not up for a night walk in the primary forest (which can only be visited with a guide). There's also a lovely and perfectly maintained swimming pool, but you'll probably be too busy photographing animals to make much use of it.

A nation where “eco-tourism” is not just an empty word



FOOD: Excellent and abundant - you can choose between the Italian Restaurant on the ground floor, La Terrazza, for a dinner *à la carte* (and the Italian recipes are done properly for once!), or opt for a rich buffet in the self-service restaurant right above it. Food is healthy and absolutely safe - we consumed staggering amounts of fresh salads and fantastic fresh tropical fruit juices every day for four weeks and never had the slightest problem. Don't miss the typical Costa Rican breakfast - *Gallo Pinto*, a rustic, country-style dish of fragrant rice steamed with chili, black beans and coriander and with fried eggs on the side.

LANGUAGE: English and Spanish.

WORRIES: Costa Rica is a safe country with a very high rate of literacy and a reasonably high standard of living: "Ticos" (colloquial for Costa Ricans) are usually extremely friendly and pleasant and we love

them! However - as in most countries - it's better not to walk around at night with an expensive camera dangling from your neck if you're in some dubious neighbourhood. Inside the Selva Verde compound you'll be perfectly safe obviously as there's security round the clock. More dangerous might actually be the silly habit of walking around barefoot at night and without a torch - this is the home of the much feared (and rightly so) *Terciopelo* or *Fer-de-Lance* *Bothrops asper*, a big, fast, very irritable and extremely dangerous venomous snake.

HEALTH: No worries. Botflies (1cm-long parasitic maggots of the fly *Dermatobia hominis* which develop in the living flesh of mammals before pupating) are present, but cases of human infestation are rare in the Sarapiquí area.

CLIMATE: Warm, tropical, occasionally rather humid

- but not as stifling or hot as you might imagine in the early mornings or at night (in fact it can be refreshingly cool at night, especially if it rains). The rainy season from April to September is the best for insects, amphibians and reptiles, but birdwatchers might instead want to visit from November to February.

BESIDES: Not much art or local culture, but an incredible amount of wildlife and wilderness which will dazzle even the most seasoned nature travellers - from beautiful beaches (both on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts) to mangroves, from cool montane cloud forests to warm lowland rainforests, from seasonally dry biotopes to perennially humid ones, Costa Rica has it all. Nature travel destinations are mostly easily accessible, well organized and easily explored - just remember that prices honestly aren't the lowest in the world, so inquire carefully about options before choosing. ●