

COSTA RICA'S SELVA VERDE NATURE RESERVE

# RETURN TO WONDERLAND

Part Two of our extensive trip report  
on Costa Rica's Selva Verde Nature Reserve,  
including the unmissable river excursions  
along the spectacular Rio Sarapiquí



■ An adult male Green Basilisk *Basiliscus plumifrons* in breeding livery stakes its territory by the Rio Sarapiquí's boulder-strewn shores.

■ Strawberry Poison Dart Frog *Ooophaga pumilio*, a tiny Dendrobatid frog whose range is restricted to the Caribbean slope of Costa Rica.



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As our fiberglass launch glides quietly and noiselessly along the swift-flowing, jade green Sarapiquí river, I cannot help reflecting on Costa Rica's successful act of balance – the river banks drifting by are as wild as they can be, with huge sandy beaches overshadowed by enormous trees festooned with bromeliads, lianas and

orchids, and yet a few meters beyond lie the neatly cultivated banana plantations or small family-owned farms so typical of the agricultural Heredia region. Now and then we catch a glimpse of a large Plumed Basilisk or an even larger Green Iguana basking in a sunny spot, side by side with a few cattle quietly feeding by the river's edge or a noisy, joyful group

of kids happily splashing in the water. Surprisingly, they all fit in the same larger picture – an apparently balanced canvas in which humans and wildlife have found a way to coexist peacefully. However precarious this truce may be, one cannot help but admiring Costa Rica for the gigantic efforts it has taken to ensure it – this tiny, peaceful Central American

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*Multicolored living jewels littering the rainforest floor*

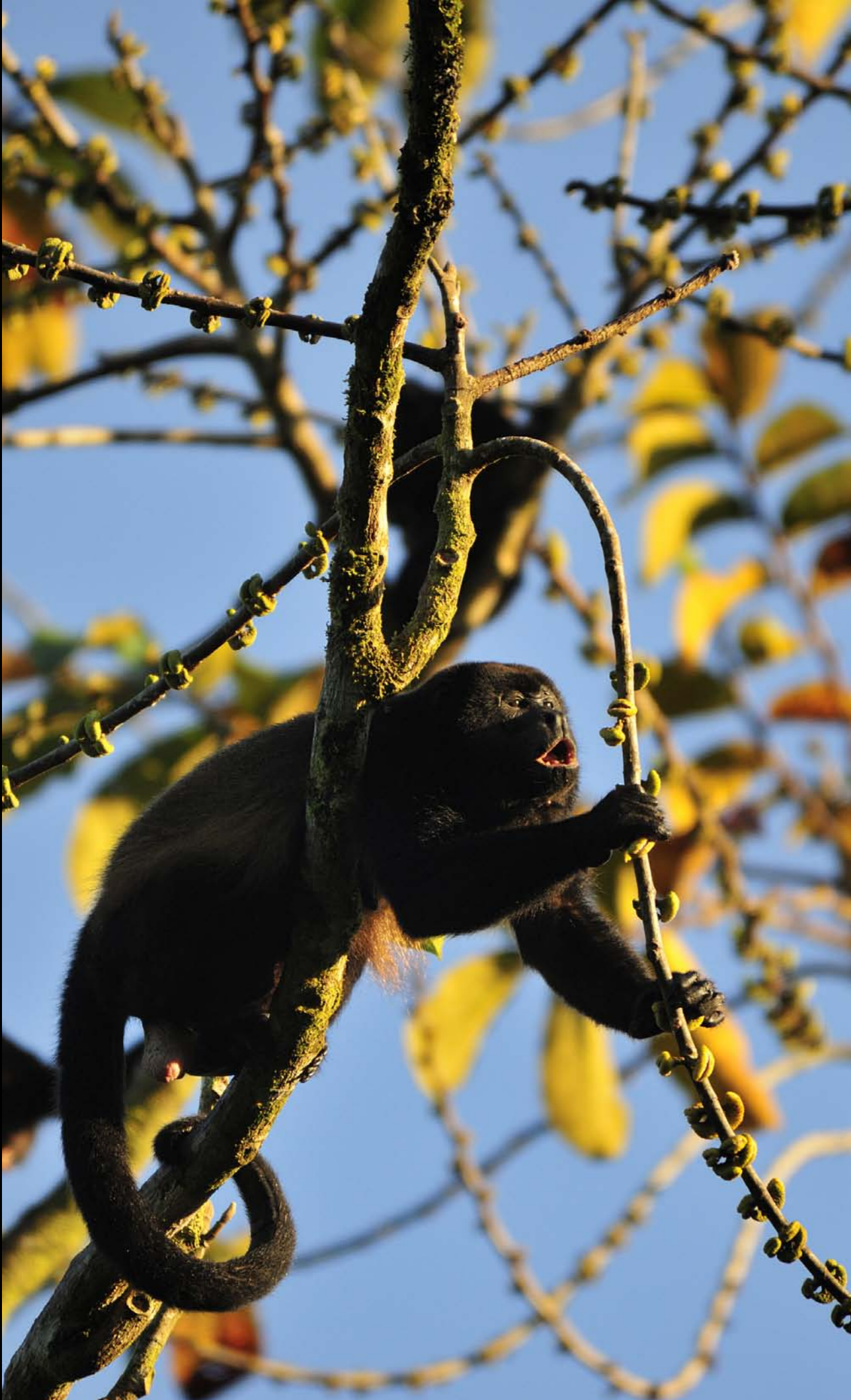


A large female ■ Hercules Beetle *Dynastes hercules* surprised on a branch during a torrential downpour. This is one of the largest and heaviest insects in the world.

*Like a sculpted statue  
the caiman lies still, in  
patient wait of its prey*

A perfectly camouflaged  
Spectacled Caiman  
crocodilus basks on the shores of  
the Rio Sarapiquí.





Left, an adult male Mantled Howler Monkey *Alouatta palliata* feeds at dawn. Above, a male Chestnut-mandibled Toucan *Ramphastos swainsonii*, one of Selva Verde's most conspicuous (and noisy!) bird species.

nation truly is a beacon for conservation worldwide, and a prime destination for wildlife photographers and nature lovers. Gazing in the shallow water slipping below us, I can see with absolute clarity huge shoals of 50cm-long, rainbow-sided, trout-like fish swimming in the lazy current, perfectly silhouetted against the white pebbles of the river bottom. This is the end of the dry season, and the mighty Sarapiquí is at its lowest – in a few weeks, with the coming of the rains, this peaceful, slow-moving watercourse will rapidly transform into a raging, dangerous, foaming mass of churning muddy water. As we elegantly dodge a bone-white tree trunk emerging from the surface, our boatman's hoarse whisper awakens me brusquely from my reverie – "Caimàn!". Snapping to attention, we take our binoculars to our eyes and scan intently the closest river

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■ A scenic corner of the Rio Sarapiquí in proximity of the La Selva Biological Station. A peaceful image of bucolic wilderness - but did you see the basking Spectacled Caiman *Caiman crocodilus*? This photo is a good example of the difficulties encountered when trying to spot well-camouflaged wild animals in their environment.





Top left, an unidentified longhorn beetle; bottom left, a Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog *Dendrobates auratus* with rather uncommon markings. Above, a leaf-mimicking grasshopper, one of many several species found in Costa Rica.

bank, looking attentively at the sandy beach and among the trees' gnarled roots, but as the launch glides to a noiseless halt and beaches itself we can only look at each other and shrug in delusion – surely our guide was mistaken? Our questioning gaze to him is met by a flashing smile (and a decidedly ironic gaze) as our Tico friend silently points a couple of meters from us – and sure enough, as the landscape

shimmering in front of us falls together like the pieces of a puzzle, a large Spectacled Caiman basking by the river's edge emerges from the broader picture, its dragon-like upturned snout mirrored in the clear waters lapping at its webbed, clawed feet. As if by magic, we can now suddenly see with utmost clarity its armored body resting on the sand, its thick, muscular, plate-covered tail stretched behind it, its jewel-like

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*The impish grin of  
the red-eyed green  
elf of the rainforest*



■ One of Costa Rica's most iconic and eagerly sought-after species, the Red-eyed Tree Frog *Agalychnis callidryas* can be occasionally observed at night in rainy weather. The Pacific population sports purplish red - rather than blue - flanks.





■ Clockwise, from top left: an unidentified, toupet-like and highly urticating caterpillar, a small Litter Toad *Rhaebo haematiticus*, a brightly marked grasshopper nymph and a male adult Central American Ameiva *Ameiva festiva*.



The bright colors adorning this Saturnid moth caterpillar advise would-be predators to stay well away from its highly urticating bristles. A warning coloration - ie an aposematic livery - is commonly shown by urticating, poisonous and venomous organisms.



amber eyes unblinkingly meeting our gaze. Once again, nature has gracefully fooled us, disguising its treasures as they were all the time right in front of our unseeing eyes – we could clap our hands in sheer joy as for the next twenty minutes we methodically click away at our complying subject, so close we could actually touch it. Nor the gentle Caiman will be the only subject of the day, as we did right in renting the launch just for ourselves and doubled the normal duration of the river trip: the cruises normally last two hours and take place with a boatful of tourists (six, eight or even ten people, normally not interested at all in a wildlife photographer's needs),

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The stunning   Murano glass-like semitransparency of the bright red young leaves at left seems to mirror the aposematic coloration of the infinitely smaller Strawberry Poison Dart Frog *Oophaga pumilio* at right. Excellent climbers, these tiny amphibians have been collected in the forest canopy at a height of more than 60 meters - a very long climb and no mean feat for such a small species.





■ A rather unusual sighting: imposing Turkey Vultures *Cathartes aura* will occasionally enter the rainforest canopy if attracted by the smell of carrion, but are usually found in more open environments.



Top left, Black-cowled Oriole *Icterus prothemelas*; bottom left, Golden-hooded Tanager *Tangara larvata*, locally known as "Siete colores". Above, adult male Green Basilisk *Basiliscus plumifrons* in breeding livery displaying on the dark, wet forest floor.

but to barely scratch the surface of what the Sarapiquí has to offer, one needs solitude and longer stays. We like the river trip so much, in fact, that later on we take another one – bagging several enormous American Crocodiles, packs of Collared Peccaries, Mantled Howler Monkeys, a bounty of river birds, an enchanting Two-toed Sloth and even the rare sighting of a Neotropical River Otter catching its fish prey. At the end of the

day, we disembark with full memory cards and a nagging thought – what else could we have seen if we had taken the full trip north to the border with Nicaragua? It's just a few hours after all, but in progressively thicker forest and far from human settlements – our guide mentioned the possibility of getting close to even bigger American Crocodiles up there. Maybe next time...

■ The stunning profile of a Walking-leaf katydid *Mimetica mortuifolia* nymph less than 1cm long - without its enormous antennae, of course! Finding such small subjects at night requires a great deal of careful observation.

*Strange creatures that go bump into the warm humid tropical night*



Portrait of a █  
 Green leaf  
 Praying Mantis  
*Choeradodis*  
*rhombicollis*, a very  
 photogenic and  
 rather common  
 inhabitant of Selva  
 Verde's lowland  
 rainforest. The flat  
 protrusions of its  
 thorax make this  
 species basically  
 invisible among the  
 leaves of the  
 creepers where it  
 commonly lurks.  
 Right, the  
 unmistakable  
 and rather gaudy  
 inflorescence of a  
*Heliconia* species.





Vines and creepers drape the tree trunks in every corner of the forest.

The Rio Sarapiquí boat trip takes place a few miles from Selva Verde itself – the Nature Reserve is admittedly crossed by the river itself, which however assumes a decidedly more stream-like character there, with a few easy rapids and a more rocky environment. Great fun for those interested in rafting surely, but not so conducive to good wildlife photography! It is one of the many interesting excursions one can undertake from Selva Verde itself – in fact, it is perfectly possible to hire a launch for a couple of days and motor all the way up to Tortuguero National Park, on the Caribbean coastline, from the town of Puerto Viejo. In Costa Rica the

opportunities for nature and wildlife explorations are literally endless, and the whole Country's economy is so carefully structured around the core idea of ecotourism that none of the hassles to be expected elsewhere in organizing trips to protected areas are to be feared here – in fact, visiting the place is rather like entering a kid's toys and candy store, one doesn't know where to start from! It is also difficult for newcomers to fully realize how small Costa Rica actually is – there are a few vantage points along the Cordillera Central, the mountain ridge dividing the Country from north to south, from which one can simultaneously see the Pacific and

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Top left, female ■  
*Anhinga Anhinga*  
*anhinga* drying its  
 wings by the Rio  
 Sarapiquí; top  
 right, a large  
*Psalmopoeus*  
*reducus* Costa  
 Rican orangemouth  
 tarantula lurking in  
 ambush by its  
 arboreal lair;  
 bottom right,  
 displaying *Ground*  
*anole* *Norops*  
*humilis* male,  
 showing gular  
 dewlap; bottom  
 left, *Shining*  
*Honeycreeper*  
*Cyanerpes lucidus*.



■ Antonella is dwarfed by a gigantic fallen tree trunk, thickly colonized by creepers, mosses and epiphytes. The complex, multi-layered environment of the Caribbean rainforest of Selva Verde Nature Reserve is quite evident here - microhabitats are almost endless. With the coming of the rainy season the dry, leaf-covered river bed will soon become a sluggish, slow-moving forest stream.





Adult male ■  
Green Basilisk  
*Basiliscus plumifrons*, left, displaying the typical head bobbing used to stake its territory. Right, a sizeable Common Boa *Boa constrictor* makes its way among the forest's undergrowth. This generally harmless but ready-to-bite species can reach a length of more than 4.5 meters - although it remains generally smaller - and it is equally at home on trees or on the ground.



A small Praying Mantis has just completed its ecdysis - the moulting process by which it emerges from its old exoskeleton - leaving behind its empty shell.



Atlantic oceans on clear days, and getting from one National Park or Nature Reserve to the next is more often than not a matter of hours rather than days. Despite its small size, however, Costa Rica boasts an enormous variety of biotopes thanks to its greatly varied orography, so that some species which are not present in any given spot can be frequently and reliably seen and photographed just a few miles away but at a different altitude. But among all

these wonderful choices, ranging from rainforests to volcanoes and from sun-drenched beaches to mist-shrouded cloud forests, the discerning visitor and wildlife photographer should not miss the option of a long, quiet, relaxed boat trip along one of Costa Rica's big rivers, such as the Rio Sarapiquí in the Heredia region or the Rio Tarcoles on the Pacific coast. Experience worldwide has taught us that river boating, given the right conditions and in the presence of an

*Emerging from the old shell to begin a new life with a fresher one*



experienced, knowledgeable guide, offers some of the best chances ever for successful wildlife photography, often allowing a close approach to normally wary subjects and guaranteeing the sighting of shy species which would otherwise go easily missed in the closely-curtained forest environment.

There's one facet of wildlife photography where boat trips cannot not really deliver, and that is, predictably, macrophotography – an activity unto itself which requires a very close, specific approach to the subject and a very firm footing (many use tripods – we don't). No worries however – Costa Rica is one of the world's top destinations for macro, and taking great shots can often be ridiculously easy as a network of trails criss-crosses every National Park or Nature Reserve, allowing close observation and interaction with macro subjects. Trails vary in difficulty, but most are extremely well-maintained and easily

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Far left top, the much-feared "Bala" or Bullet Ant *Paraponera clavata* - fast, aggressive and capable of inflicting one of the world's most painful stings. Top left, Ground anole *Norops humilis*. Bottom left, a very unusual image of a tiny, newly-metamorphosed Red-eyed Tree Frog *Agalychnis callidryas* caught in mid-yawn. Notice reticulated membranes covering the eyes.





A Robber Fly (family Asilidae) has just captured a winged ant and is now sucking the body fluids from its prey using its proboscis. Robber flies count more than 7.100 species worldwide.



managed by visitors (Selva Verde even offers paved and roofed ones in the surroundings of its Lodge area to avoid getting drenched when it rains!), so the chances of taking a few good pics are extremely high on any given day (or, better, night). The right thing to do here, as usual, is to walk at a snail's pace, pausing every few steps, listening carefully and checking every possible nook and cranny which might

be inhabited by an interesting species. As our magical Caiman - which suddenly emerged from the complex tapestry of its river bank background to reveal itself after having been there all the time - has already demonstrated, most of our subjects are always there, often in full sight. The secret is to use one's eyes well...and Costa Rica's rainforests are the perfect training ground to learn that fine art. ●

Top, male  Mantled Howler Monkey *Alouatta palliata* feeding in the forest canopy; top right, an unidentified but colorful assassin bug; bottom right, a longhorn beetle.

A Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth is hanging upside down from a tree branch in a lush green forest. The sloth's fur is a mix of brown and green, with a prominent greenish tint on its chest and face. It has a broad, pig-like snout and two large claws on its front feet. The background is filled with dense foliage, including large green leaves and moss-covered branches.

Getting its greenish coloration from the algae living on its fur, a Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth *Choloepus hoffmanni* hangs upside down from its tree branch perch in a typical posture. This fairly common but not easily sighted species can be identified by its broad, pig-like snout and by the two large claws on its front feet.



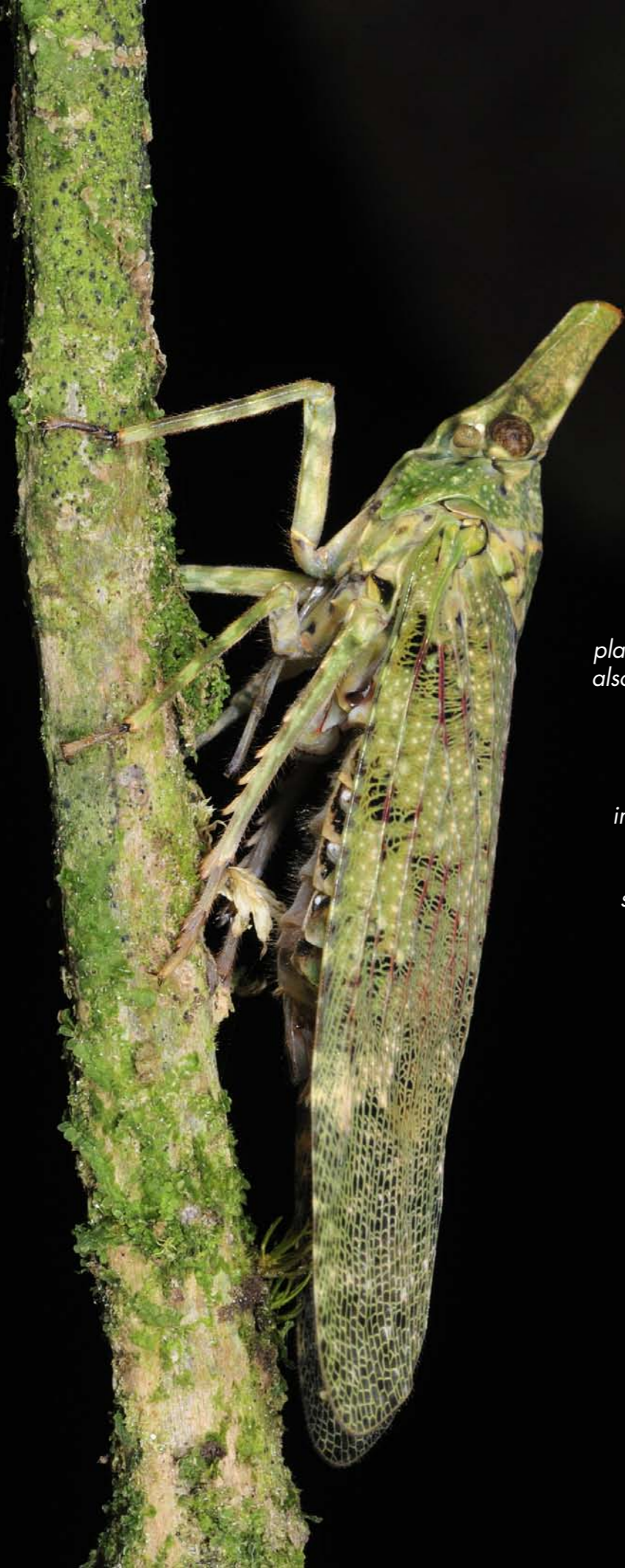


Clockwise, from top left: male Passerini's Tanager *Ramphocelus passerinii*, unidentified grasshopper (notice curious heart-shaped marking on its back!), Blue-gray Tanager *Thraupis episcopus* and unidentified longhorn beetle.



Green Leaf  
Praying Mantis  
*Choeradodis*  
*rhombicollis* in  
threat posture,  
clearly showing its  
enlarged, flattened  
thorax.





An   exquisitely camouflaged planthopper (see also page 73 for a detailed dorsal view). Right, the necklace-like infructescences of a palm; far right, a scenic view of the Sarapiquí river from the Selva Verde suspension bridge.





■ Green  
Honeycreeper  
Chlorophanes  
spiza males  
display a dazzling  
blue-green  
iridescence.



■ Clockwise, from top left: Bright-rumped Flycatcher *Attila spadiceus*, subadult Green Iguana *Iguana iguana* basking on a branch (notice brighter pattern and colors, typical of young specimens), unidentified mantid in threat display and Social Flycatcher *Myiozetetes humilis* sunning itself.



■ The sculptured features of a Spectacled Caiman *Caiman crocodilus* floating on the surface of the Rio Sarapiquí. This species can be occasionally approached very closely if one moves slowly and cautiously.



*Living logs lying in silent ambush but ready to strike*

■ A backlit Tree Frog is silhouetted behind a large leaf. Top right, an unusually large Drab Tree Frog *Smilisca sordida* found at night; bottom right, a Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog *Dendrobates auratus*.





The lowland rainforests of Central America usually show a more open canopy than those of South-East Asia or the Amazon region of South America, allowing more sunlight to reach the lower levels and the ground itself.





Clockwise, from top left: Pug-nosed Anole *Norops capito* on the forest floor at night, Collared Peccary *Pecari tajacu*, Galliwasp or "Escorpion coral" *Diploglossus monotropis* female, Black River Turtle *Rhinoclemmys funerea* with *Julia* sp. butterfly looking for salts on its head.





A stunning Bare-throated Tiger Heron *Tigrisoma mexicanum* struts on a beach of the Sarapiquí river. This is one of Costa Rica's largest, most stately and easily sighted waterbirds.



■ Clockwise, from top left: two mating *Ascalapha* sp. moths, portrait of a Tailless Whipscorpion *Paraphrynus laevifrons*, a *Caligo* (probably *atreus* sp.) Owl Butterfly and a large Golden Orb-weaver *Nephila clavipes* spider with its incredibly strong, golden web.

A scenic view of the Sarapiquí river in the vicinity of Selva Verde Nature Reserve.



ANIMA MUNDI ON YouTube

Click on the images and watch two short videos on Selva Verde Nature Reserve and its wildlife.





Far left, male Striped Basilisk *Basiliscus vittatus* in breeding livery; left, a spectacularly camouflaged planthopper; right, a clear-water forest stream at Selva Verde.

■ Delicately nuanced, a budding *Musa* sp. flower is bathed in pinks on the bright green background of its leaves. In a few weeks this beautiful inflorescence will have transformed into a...banana.

*Abstract patterns and flashes of colors among the forest's chiaroscuros*





A juvenile Central American Ameiva *Ameiva festiva* moving on the leaf-covered forest floor displays its metallic-blue tail. Far left, a beautiful Broad-billed Motmot *Electron platyrhynchum* perching in full sight.

*The tiny, colorful  
and pugnacious  
Sumo wrestlers  
of the rainforest floor*

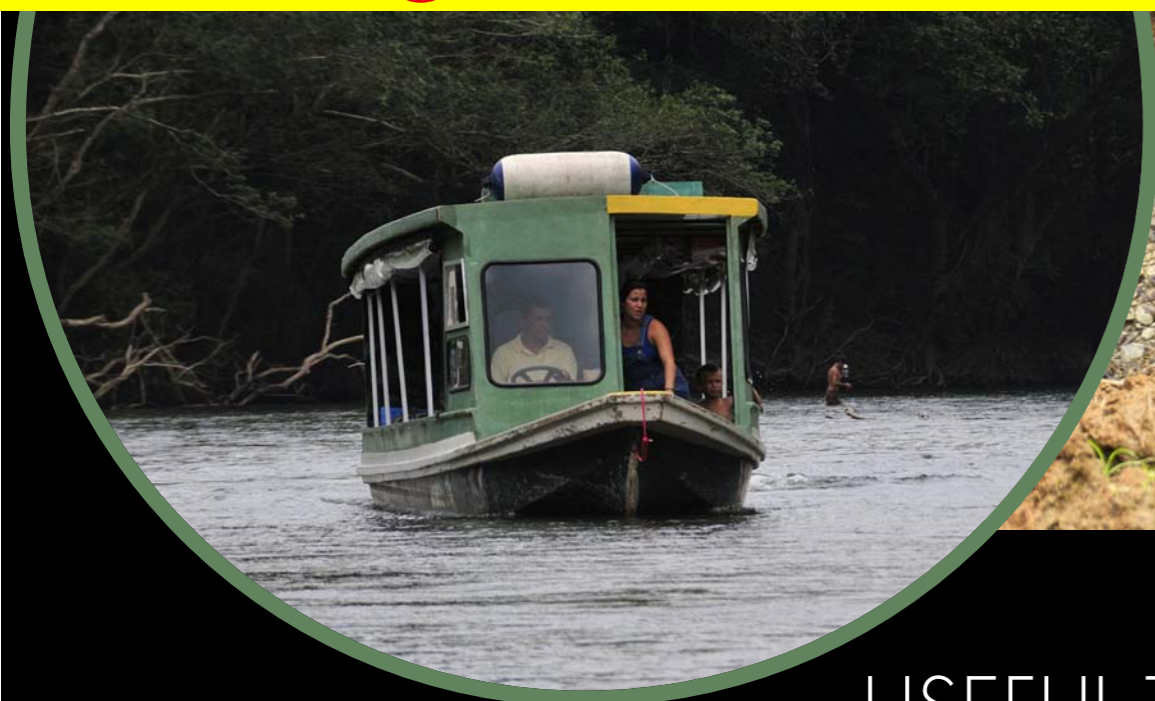
■ A tiny Strawberry  
Poison Dart Frog  
*Oophaga pumilio*  
displays openly its  
pugnacious nature.  
Males of this  
species will fight for  
hours to solve their  
territorial disputes.





## 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 dazzling variety of flora, fauna and scenic landscapes



**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 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 – 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 prices honestly aren't the lowest in the world, so inquire carefully about options before choosing. ●