Costa Rica: The Forest Jewel of Central America Tour Report 2025

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by Virginia Wilde

If you are a wildlife photographer with an artistic disposition, Costa Rica will not fail to bedazzle you. Its land is a collage of a thousand shades of green – amplified and blended in the canopy-filtered light – that frame and envelope an extravagant profusion of life. Without even trying, Costa Rica makes for rainforest photography at its best.

Amidst this cornucopia of birds and beasts, some species inevitably steal your heart. On this year's tour, several Fiery-throated Hummingbirds – strong contenders for the world's most beautiful hummingbird – took time out from their constant dramatic ballet of jousting over nectar to perch on our fingertips. Or settle in the palm of our hands.

It's hard to describe, afterwards, the feeling of holding such a bird. One minute, you're endeavouring to photograph a blur of jade and sapphire; wings stitching shimmering threads through the air.

And the next, there's curious eyes gazing up at you from a vivid diamante face. Tiny warm claws of weightlessness in your hand; tiny heart pattering like a biotic machine gun.

It would take a hard heart not to be moved by the weird wonder of it all.

For seasoned nature photographers, there's no doubt that some wildlife destinations score highly on the raw and the muscular. But the heavyweight champion in charm and beauty? Well, for that, Costa Rica is hard to beat.

This year's tour had some genuinely lovely wildlife experiences. Among the 122 bird species were seven of owl, at least 13 of hummingbird, 16 reptiles, 11 mammals, ten amphibians and a dizzying number of tropical insects, spiders and plants.

For some tour members, photographing the Resplendent Quetzal – the cloud forest's iridescent avian prize – was an undisputed highlight. For others, possibly the riverine wildlife of remote Caño Negro, or the sheer assortment of rainbow-hued tropical birds that assembled – then dispersed – around us.

For my part, I loved the Ghost Glass Frog, small but mesmeric with its cryptic, narcotic eyes. And the flash of the Emerald Basilisk Lizard – aka the 'Jesus Christ Lizard' – as it duly ran on water.

Also adored were the cheeky antics of the endangered Geoffrey's Spider Monkeys. And the sweet-faced White-nosed Coati – on a morning when the tropical rain produced its thundery worst – launching a coordinated berry raid on the ornamental fruit trees.

So replete with wildlife subjects was our tour, that selecting photographs for this report was no insignificant challenge!

The Tour Begins: Hotel Bougainvillea and its Paradise Gardens

If there's a more beautiful starting point on any Wild Images tour than the Hotel Bougainvillea, I've yet to see it. Not necessarily for the hotel itself (although it was lovely and the food was delicious) but for the ten acres of botanical gardens that repeatedly win awards for 'the best garden in Costa Rica.'

Several tour members arrived early, happy to spend whole days wandering the grounds that explode with life. Here, more than 600 species of colourful tropical plants; heliconias, bromeliads, orchids and trees attract a huge abundance of birds, butterflies, frogs and even iguanas.

Small patches of Costa Rica's crops – such as coffee, cocoa, bananas, pineapple and papaya – nestle alongside clumps of the strikingly-coloured rare Jade Vine, while prime bird targets here included a pair of Mottled Owls roosting in the bamboo, and the ridiculously

photogenic Lineated Woodpecker.

Other avian treats were the racquet-tailed Lesson's Motmot, the Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Blue-grey Tanager, Hoffman's Woodpecker, Crimson-fronted Parakeet and the Clay-coloured Thrush: Costa Rica's national bird.

Located on the outskirts of the capital San Jose, the Hotel Bougainvillea's brimming gardens were a good entry point to the vast wild richness of Costa Rica – notably one of the most biodiverse places on Earth.

Despite being smaller than 20,000 square miles (about the size of the US state of West Virginia, or half the size of England) Costa Rica is home to more than half a million species. Almost 6% of the world's total biodiversity is here, with the country especially rich in butterflies and birds.

Much of this rich floral and fauna comes down to its geographical location, climate and topography. Costa Rica – whose name means 'rich coast' in Spanish – straddles the Mesoamerica isthmus between North and South America, facilitating the migration of plants and animals between continents.

Added to this is its neotropical climate, its volcanic bedrock producing highly fertile soils, and its wide range of ecosystems ranging from mangroves, tropical and cloud forests, to coral reefs.

And with more than 25% of its land mass protected in national parks and reserves, Costa Rica well deserves its reputation for environmental conservation and sustainability. To this end, its rainforests are some of the few worldwide that are actually increasing in size.

Our tour visited three of Costa Rica's seven provinces, travelling between lowland, mid-altitude and high-altitude rainforest, aiming for the widest variety of bird and animal life.

Sarapiqui: Hypnotic Frogs, Snakes and Lowland Hummingbirds

Leaving Hotel Bougainvillea's gardens was always going to be a wrench. But after breakfast we duly bundled into our spacious bus – driven by our brilliantly laid-back and good-humoured driver Luis – stocked up on water and bus snacks in the local supermarket, and headed north towards Sarapiqui in the neighbouring Heredia Province.

Our destination: Hacienda La Isla eco-lodge, tucked away in the foothills of the Braulio Carrillo National Park: one of the largest protected areas of primary cloud and rainforest in Costa Rica.

We passed through a verdant mountain-range, clad in giant-leaved Gunnera, before stopping for coffee on the lush hillside of La Cinchona. At our viewpoint cafe, hummingbirds buzzed around feeders. And raptors – including our first Black Vultures – soared over the nearby San Fernando Waterfall.

Here, avian treats included our first tanagers: the Silver-throated, Scarlet-rumped and Red-legged Honeycreeper; both Prong-billed and Red-headed Barbet; and the charismatic Northern-emerald Toucanet – an iconic bird of the tropics.

No fewer than five hummingbird species hovered around us on the deck, so close sometimes that we could hear the hum of their wings. We had our first sightings of the pugilistically-named Violet Sabrewing, the Purple-throated Mountain Gem, Green Thorntail, Long-billed Hermit and one of my favourites: the shimmering Green-crowned Brilliant.

Hummingbirds flap their wings at between 50-80 beats a second, making them a blur to the human eye. When diving, this reaches a staggering 200 beats a second, which – coupled with their unusual ability to fly backwards – makes them a challenge to photograph unless you factor in some shutter speeds of at least 1/3,000 or 1/ 4,000.

But there's also a beauty in photographing hummers at a slower speed. If you can manage to get the eye or part of the body sharp, trying for a speed of 1/160 or below can yield some lovely motion blur. And it is this type of result that can make hummingbird photography so addictive.

Leaving the bird cafe, we arrived at Hacienda La Isla for a hearty Tico fusion food lunch. In the afternoon, we endeavoured to explore the surrounding forest trails in search of frogs, birds and howler monkeys. I say 'endeavoured', because the supposed circuit trail had more

trail forks and ancillary routes than I previously anticipated.

But our hour-long hike (with an additional ten-minute detour where I considered the potential ramifications of getting us lost) revealed a lek of White-collared Manakins, Crested Guan and Spot-crowned Woodcreeper.

Later, as we relaxed with a beer by the lodge's river, we were joined by our first Emerald Basilisk Lizard; seemingly content to perch by us. Under the decking, a Russet-naped Wood Rail pottered around, while Snapping Turtles and small Spectacled Caiman lay lapped by the gently-flowing water.

After dinner, we met up with local nature guide Randell, for what was undoubtedly the best night walk of our tour – and the first introduction for some of our tour members to macro flash photography.

As we wandered slowly through a small tract of rainforest near the lodge, Randell pointed out a variety of small geckos and frogs. We had good sightings of four spider species: the Banana, Golden Orb Weaver (renowned for having the strongest silk in the world), Brazilian Wandering and an impressive Striped-knee 'Zebra' Tarantula.

Next, we were all duly – and appropriately – frightened by the line of hefty-looking Bullet Ants, named for the extreme pain they deliver following a sting (akin to being ACTUALLY shot.)

But our evening's unquestionable highlight wert the many Red-eyed Tree Frogs that hopped around a bush in the lodge's grounds. Undoubtedly one of the world's most iconic frogs, if a child were to paint a classic rainforest frog – using only the brightest colours in their paintbox – it would surely look like this.

The following day, we joined one of Heredia Province's leading naturalists – the wonderfully knowledgeable and conservation-minded Jose 'Donde' Copa – for a break-neck tour of some incredible local wildlife.

If you could bottle Donde's enthusiasm and export it, well, the world would surely be a more vibrant place. We had barely even disembarked from the bus before he bounded up the drive of his rainforest home, pointing out a raft of Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs and geckos among the leaves.

From Donde's garden hide – looking out over a small stream and loops of vine – we photographed a surprising array of bird species.

Our first Green Honeycreeper (with the male a glorious turquoise) sat next to a cobalt-blue Shining Honeycreeper. Next up: a Montezuma Oropendola; Orange-chinned Parakeet, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Northern Black-throated Trogon and a Green Kingfisher.

Hummingbirds included the large Green-breasted Mango and the remarkably chilled-out (as hummingbirds go) White-necked Jacobin.

Before long, Donde had ushered us back into the bus for a quick drive down the road. A short wander along a dense rainforest trail yielded sightings of a pair of roosting Crested Owls. At the same time, we took it in turns to photograph a colony of absurdly cute Honduran White Bats, nestled together under a large broad leaf.

One of my favourite species of the tour, these leaf-nosed white fruit bats construct roosting 'tents' out of understory plant leaves – strategically cutting the leaf ribs with their teeth to hold the sides of the leaf together as a defence against potential predators, too much light, and the rain. They're such enchanting – and ingenious – creatures!

Pressing on, Donde took us across a stream, through a cow field and past lines of Leafcutter Ants, to photograph a handsome roosting Spectacled Owl.

Briefly stopping to view our first Sloth – a Brown-throated (Three-toed) species very high in the trees – we continued into a meadow for a special sighting with a Great Potoo (famed for its bulging marble eyes and wide mouth) and its downy chick. I'm fascinated by Great Potoos – as were many of the tour members – so this was a treat.

After lunch, we returned to Donde's garden for more hummingbird photography, while he gathered a succession of frogs and snakes from around his home. The absolute highlight: a Ghost Glass Frog – normally incredibly hard to find and see. This tiny translucent frog wowed us all with its hypnotically spangled eyes!

Other species from Donde's snake and frog dash included a golden-eyed Granular Glass Frog, a baby Cloudy Snail Eater snake and the rightly-feared Fer de Lance snake (responsible for more human deaths in Central and South America than any other reptile.)

My favourite of his snakes: the gorgeously-vibrant, yellow-coloured Eyelash Pit Viper – named for the characteristic scales above its eyes that resemble eyelashes, to aid with camouflage.

Finally, it was time to leave Donde's home – but not before he brought out some of his wonderful wildlife artwork. It was a great day with a true specialist in his field.

The following morning – after being woken at 4am by the distant but unmistakable whooping roars of Mantled Howler Monkeys – I finally located the troop in the trees not far from the bank on the opposite side of the lodge's river. I tried to rouse as many of the group as possible to photograph these primates, that take their 'mantled' name from the long auburn guard hairs that streak down their flank.

After breakfast we headed to a Sarapiqui-based conservation project, set up by the nature-loving son of a former extractive farmer – who was persuaded to then conserve wildlife, rather than destroy it. Now, this family-owned refuge is a haven for different frog and bird species, with their team rescuing snakes that would otherwise be killed by local land-owners.

On arrival, we photographed a very sound-asleep (and foliage-covered) Hoffman's (Two-toed) Sloth, before heading to a clearing – overlooked by some roosting Lesser White-lined Bats – set up as an outdoor 'studio' to photograph a variety of endemic frog and snake species.

Here, we were able to get close to some incredibly striking frog species, all caught that morning and then released into the wild. These included a Boulenger's Snouted Tree Frog, Green and Blue Poison Dart Frogs and more Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs (known as the 'Blue Jeans frog' due to its indigo-coloured legs.)

The snakes were – without exception – stunning. I'd never seen a Boa Imperator (constrictor) in real life before, and was unprepared for the beauty of this heavyweight reptile.

Other subjects included a Side-striped Pit Viper, Hog-nosed Pit Viper, Ambulated Tree Boa and – another favourite – the whip-thin but almost two-metre long – Brown Vine Snake, with navy-blue gums.

After our session, we headed into the haven's forest to photograph another White-collared Manakin lek and a second colony of Honduran White Bats; this time just a spirited mother and her infant, roosting in their leaf tent together.

Further bird sightings here included a Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Grey-headed Chachalaca and Ringed Kingfisher.

By lunchtime, cooked by our guide Jose's sister, droplets of rain had started to fall. Within an hour, it was torrential. For the rest of the day, the rain fell not in drops but in a continuous sheet, blurring the edges of the forest and all around it.

Eventually, we called it a day, heading back to our lodge to marvel at the ferocity of the tropical rainstorm and relax with delicious home-grown food on the riverside deck.

Into Alajuela Province: King Vultures, Nesting Pygmy Owls and Spider Monkeys

As we left Sarapiqui the following morning, Luis got word about a collapsed bridge on the road to our next destination: the sprawling eco lodge reserve of Laguna del Lagarto.

To give the road-builders time to build a stone crossing point, we made a short diversion to a birding site ran by a friend of Luis. Here, our female guide Luciana took us to a roosting site used by a Striped Owl and her five-week old chicks. We were able to spend some time in a meadow – keeping enough distance to not bother the owls – but near enough to photograph the owlets' wonderful ear tufts.

As we returned from the meadow, we had our first sightings of Yellow-throated Toucan! We waited patiently by a nesting box, in the hope that the cutest-looking baby toucan (that repeatedly popped out its tiny head and bill) would tempt its mother down.

Alas, we had to press on. And, sure enough, after a two hour drive over the border into the Alajuela Province, we reached the road impasse. Our nascent plan: for Luis to leave the bus, join guides from Laguna del Lagarto in helping to carry our bags over the 15-metre wide river bed, and then have us hop onto a new bus waiting for us on the other side.

The only thing we needed to do was navigate our way down into the mostly-dry river ditch, keeping our feet dry using the strategically placed rocks, and help each other up on the opposite bank.

This was mostly straightforward, yet not without some physical strain for some – despite the group's efforts to muck in to help. But given the state of the former bridge – and the rapidity with which it was repaired, just two days later – we were all impressed by the work ethic of Costa Rica's bridge builders!

Our time at Laguna del Lagarto was unquestionably one of the highlights of the tour. The lodge comprises 500 protected hectares (1,200 acres) of contiguous lowland rainforest and lagoons. But, crucially, has several naturally-constructed viewing platforms enabling eye-level photography of a myriad of tropical birds – with plantain feeders and nesting holes at a strategic distance of no more than four metres.

Trucking into the lodge for lunch – served on the largest and most prominent viewing platform – it soon became hard for most of us to actually eat our food, so plentiful were the species flying in around us!

This large decking became the centre of activity for our time here. Being able to sip a coffee or beer, while photographing such colourful birds, well who among us wouldn't love this?!

Unluckily for me, I forever seemed to be taking down the lunch or dinner orders – or bringing a round of group drinks – when anything of particular note flew in. Thankfully, many in our group got wonderful images of Great Green and Scarlet Macaw, among other great sightings.

Up on this dinner hall balcony, our bird tally quickly totted up. Most notable were the pairs of rainbow-coloured Keel-billed Toucan, tossing food to each other in a perpetual game of 'catch.'

Other avian delights: Collared Aracari, Olive-backed, Yellow-crowned and Yellow-throated Euphonia, Golden-hooded and Plain-coloured Tanager, plus good sightings of Black-crowned and Masked Tityra. Added to this: a raft of Brown-hooded Parrots, Crested Caracara, Red-lored Amazon and Broad-billed Motmot.

Under the decking, we clocked mammal sightings of Agouti and our first spirited White-nosed Coati.

A species of particular fascination, for all in our group, were the pair of Pygmy Owls, nesting in another part of the lodge's grounds. This duo made fairly regular (but sometimes erratically-timed) returns to their nesting hole to feed their chick, carrying the spoils of hunts – mostly hapless frogs or insects.

Watching the nesting hole, hoping to catch the moment that the hungry owlet half-emerged from the nest hole to meet its parents, became a favourite activity for this year's group.

Over the following two nights at Laguna del Lagarto, half the group had a stab at bat photography. Our local guide at the lodge – Didier – talked us through the settings and technique in a 90 minute masterclass, using a flash set-up and radio triggers. (The lodge had triggers for Canon and Sony, while one group member had his own set-up for Olympus.)

Some group members were able to achieve fantastic images of Orange-bellied Nectar Bats and Pallas' Long-tongue Bat. For those observing, even just watching the bats flit around in the darkness was interesting. And – both nights – we were visited by a single firefly (the biggest I have ever seen) which I found mesmerising.

The following day was as full as you could get at this wonderful eco-lodge! Many group members rose at dawn to go birding at their own speed and, after breakfast, we headed down a dirt track and by a lagoon stuffed with Spectacled Caiman, for our session in the King Vulture hide.

Laguna's specially-designed hide is one of the few places in the world set up with the express purpose of watching these stunning raptors – as they feast on carrion in front of you.

Among the two dozen or so Black Vultures, we were lucky enough to have around eight King Vultures – great hulking white and black raptors (with a strikingly colourful head and neck) – and one of the largest New World vultures, second only to condors.

Believed, by the Mayans, to be messenger birds who relay information to the gods, King Vultures are very charismatic birds to spend a morning with!

In the afternoon, Didier took us to a garden a short drive from the lodge, looking out to a meadow backed by towering trees.

Here, we were able to photograph some wonderfully-coloured smaller birds at close range – such as euphonias and tanagers – before turning our attention to more hummingbirds. While we were enjoying another hummingbird masterclass, a very tame and fluffy pet rabbit hopped around our chairs, hoping for a scratch behind the ears.

It was also here in the private garden that we had our best Geoffroy's Spider Monkey sightings. These large New World monkeys have disproportionately long limbs, which, combined with their prehensile tails, make them look like spiders when swinging through the trees. Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys are an increasingly endangered species, suffering a 50% population decline over the past 45 years.

We duly abandoned our hummingbird shoot to watch a small troop of these beautiful primates swing in towards us – nervously at first and with two infants – taking photographs when we could as they emerged from gaps in the trees.

After dinner that evening, half the group opted to go for another night forest walk. This 90-minute nature trek started gently enough – taking in a Common Pauraque, Bullfrog and Spectacled Caiman that our guide seemed to know by name, as they responded to him like excited Labradors greeting their owner.

But the hike was also hard-going in the humidity. We were taken deep into thick rainforest, on muddy trails. My highlight was the Net-throwing spider but – as we endeavoured to return to the lodge – we had no option but to pass under the largest spider web – complete with tarantula – that I'd seen in years. Not easy for one of my very arachnophobic group members, who coped incredibly, given the circumstances!

On our last morning at Laguna del Lagarto, we woke to torrential rain. Finally, there was enough of an interlude for us to join Didier on a short nature drive and walk, with much-enjoyed sightings of a Middle American Screech Owl, gloriously charming Red-capped Manakin and a Bare-throated Tiger Heron.

All of us agreed we could have stayed at this lodge for at least a week, but we had to press on for the most northerly section of our wildlife odyssey.

Caño Negro: Northern Riverine Haven for Kingfishers and Wetlands Birds

Several members our group were particularly looking forward to this stage of our tour: the watery birding paradise that is the Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge, just 12 miles south of the Nicaraguan border.

These wetlands – a haven for thousands of migratory waterfowl – are known for their ecological richness, and as one of the best places for bird watching in all of Costa Rica.

The main part of the refuge – the Caño Negro Lagoon – is fed by the Rio Frio River, drying up during dry season into smaller lagoons and pools: just perfect for water birds.

Driving north in the Alajuela Province, up to the small town of Los Chiles, we passed miles of agricultural land – fields for dairy farming and crops such as pineapple, coffee, sugarcane and bananas.

We made it to the dock for 3.30pm, in time to jump onto our private boat for an almost three-hour river cruise to see as much wildlife as we could.

Caño Negro didn't disappoint. Kingfishers and Red-winged Blackbirds were our constant companions. In fact, I don't think any of our group had ever seen as many tropical kingfishers in any one place. We had continual sightings of Amazon, Ringed, Green – and the American Pygmy (a species one group member, in particular, was thrilled to see, having always eluded him on previous birding tours.)

Wetland species began to tot up, such as our herons: Green, Black-crowned Night, Tricoloured, Bare-throated Tiger and – my favourite – the stocky, adorable-faced Boat-billed.

As we rounded the curves of the lagoon – which became so shallow in places that our boat driver had to punt us back into the deeper water – we had more and more sightings of Ibises, egrets, Anhinga, fishing Neotropical Cormorant, Northern Jacana, Sungrebe, Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, Iguanas and even a Common Potoo high in the trees.

And as the sun started to set, we finally disembarked and headed to our small family-run lodge for dinner. This friendly and homey lodgings was a favourite among some of our group – not only for the wonderful food and cocktails, but for the mix of 60s, 70s and 80s pop classic songs it played in the dining hall.

Rising before dawn the following morning, we had just enough time for coffee and cookies before piling on to another private boat for our sunrise Caño Negro cruise. This wildlife voyage was even more fruitful than the night before – despite the heavy rain, bucketing down, that supplied a wonderful slightly misty and atmospheric backdrop to our sightings (and made us grateful for the boat's roof.)

We were able to traverse far shallower areas of the wetlands, enabling us to get even closer to kingfishers and other birdlife. My highlights included a nursery of baby Spectacled Caimans – wonderful to see but frustratingly hard to photograph in the rain – and some beautifully posing Nicaraguan Slider Turtles.

And finally, in the shallowest waters of all, in an eerily quiet part of the lagoons, we found a much-desired bird species: the extremely localised Nicaraguan Grackle (both male and female together.)

After a full three hours on the river – which we nearly overshot thanks to my lax timing and desire to keep on exploring – we returned to our lodge for a hearty breakfast, reluctantly leaving Caño Negro to head back south again.

Arenal Volcano: Sloths, Stormy Weather and some wonderful White-nosed Coati

Before pulling into the bustling tourist town of La Fortuna, we stopped for coffee at a famous 'Iguana Cafe', which – despite being located on a busy road – lived up to its name by overlooking a small gorge teeming with a large number of (all-sized and coloured) Green Iguanas.

We later found a steak and fish restaurant for lunch, with lovely staff intent on us trying Costa Rica's national aperitivo, Guaro. This spirit, made from sugarcane, was served as a spicy shot containing lime and Tabasco sauce. To be honest, it was enough to blow your throat out – but at least Luis loved it.

La Fortuna sprang up as a spa town, fed by the many hot springs that arise from the geothermal waters of the hot Tabacon River. Now a thriving mecca for adventure sports, it is overlooked by Costa Rica's most notable volcano: the Arenal.

After an eruption in 1968 that destroyed three towns, for decades Arenal held the title for the 'world's most active volcano', continually spewing orange lava until 2010, when it was declared functionally inactive.

Frustratingly for us, the Weather Gods were not on our side during our time in this region, with Arenal's famously commanding peak perpetually covered in a fog of cloud. Only one group member – Katherine – managed to glimpse the peak, after she was out birding and the cloud briefly cleared.

Our eco-lodge in this area: the impressive Arenal Observatory Lodge, featuring 870 acres of primary rainforest, tropical gardens and pastureland inside the Arenal Volcano National Park.

With several trails, a frog pond, observatory tower and gardens – accessed via rope bridges – to explore, most of our time here was spent attempting to dodge the relentlessly heavy tropical thunderstorms, for long enough to get out birding.

Among my favourite species here were the wonderful Crested Guans and Great Curassows that wandered around the Cecropia trees. And despite no luck in locating the Black-crested Coquette, we had great sightings of numerous hummingbird species in the botanical gardens. And the occasional flash of Spider Monkey in the trees.

However, my highlight was undoubtedly the cheeky foursome of White-nosed Coati. This small team of sweet-faced mammals launched a co-ordinated raid on an ornamental Hackberry tree, scampering up and down the branches and gorging on red berries – clearly delighted by their luck.

Because of the heavy rain forecast, I moved our Sloth session to the following morning, whereupon we headed back towards La Fortuna to a conservation site renowned for its reliable sightings of both Two and Three-toed Sloths.

Our three-hour guided walk did indeed deliver a number of sloth sightings – many of them high up in the trees and hard to photograph. Towards the end, however, we had more luck, with one Brown-throated (Three-toed) waking enough from its slumber to open its eyes and reveal its smiling-looking face.

Other wildlife at this site was surprisingly active. We rounded one trail to hear a fury of desperate squawking from a small flock of Grey-headed Chachalaca. The reason for their panic soon became apparent: a Fer de Lance snake had just pounced on one of their flock – and slowly began to attempt to devour it, head-first, while it was still just alive. For some members of our group, this whole process was fascinating. For others, it was all a bit raw!

The trail also revealed a pair of roosting, and very handsome, Black-and-White Owls, more Red-eyed Tree Frogs, Leafcutter Ants, a lovely Rufous-tailed Jacamar (one of my favourite birds) and an Emerald Tanager. Not bad for a morning on a day set to be a wash-out.

Inevitably, though, the storm clouds rolled in. We grabbed sandwiches at a nearby deli cafe and raced back to our Arenal Observatory Lodge, hoping to do as much birding as we could before we were washed out.

But despite our hopes, the rain soon became so heavy that even attempting to photograph in the gardens was akin to standing in a full-power jet shower.

Despite sheltering under trees, we were forced to retire to our rooms – or head to the restaurant (which, incidentally, served phenomenal meals) looking out over the distant shoreline of Lake Arenal in one direction and the volcano in the other – in search of a beer or cocktail.

That evening, a brief break in the rain unexpectedly unveiled one of the most vivid sunsets I have seen in years. Pure gold over a distant lakeside, and proof that every cloud has a silver – or gold – lining.

San Gerardo: Cloud Forests, Rainbow-hued Hummingbirds and the majestic Resplendent Quetzal

More heavy rain thwarted our attempts for a final birding morning, so we waved goodbye to the mist-shrouded Arenal Volcano and began our five-hour drive to the Talamanca Mountains and high-altitude Cloud Forest.

Our base: the wonderful Paraiso Quetzal Lodge, just outside the small mountain town of San Gerardo de Doto. Getting here is no main feat, with an altitude gain of approximately 2,730 metres – which you can definitely feel if, like me, you attempt to run to breakfast.

Private chalets look out onto 80 hectares (almost 200 acres) of primary cloud forest that protect an impressive array of flora and fauna. Guides say that on a clear day, you can see both the Caribbean and Pacific from up here.

Up here, the temperature was noticeably chillier. Thankfully, the lodge had a roaring open fire continuously providing warmth and comfort near the dining room and bar!

As I was checking us in, I noticed not one of the groups was behind me to collect their keys. And no wonder: out on the outside decking, by the dining room, hung some nectar-feeders, around which hovered some of the most breathtakingly colourful hummingbirds you could ever hope to see.

Chief among these was the Fiery-throated Hummingbird – famous for its iridescent plumage and feisty, dynamic behaviour. No other hummingbird combines every colour of the rainbow on its throat and breast.

This jewel of a bird – native to the cloud forests of Costa Rica and western Panama – can display shades of orange, red, yellow and blue on its throat, depending on the angle of light and movement of its feathers. With a metallic green body and shimmering blue crown, this is a truly knockout bird.

Another beauty at the feeders was the larger Talamanca Hummingbird – a fellow ‘mountain gem’ hummer, also endemic to the highlands of Costa Rica and Panama.

Sideways on, male Talamancas have a dark green gloss and dull head. But when they turn their heads, there's a flash of metallic turquoise chin and gorget, and a striking violet crown.

Other species around the feeders included Volcano and Scintillant Hummingbirds, Long-tailed Silky Flycatchers gorging on berries, Lesser and Brown Violetears and the occasional Slaty Flowerpiercer.

One afternoon, we set up flowers drenched with sugar syrup for a hummingbird session – beloved by half the group for photography, while others preferred to shoot hummers and birds like the neon-green Golden-browed Chlorophonia in the bushes below.

It was here on this deck that some particularly confident Fiery-throated Hummingbirds began perching on our arms and hands, gazing up at our faces. This inevitably sparked some rare 'selfie with a hummingbird' style shots – but one of those experiences that will remain with me forever.

Yet our main focus at this altitude: the iconic (and culturally sacred) Resplendent Quetzal. We had three morning sessions focused on this rainforest beauty – the largest of the trogons – and heralded for its great beauty.

During breeding season (our time here) males grow elongated upper tail feathers that form a long flowing train of iridescent turquoise streamers. But seeing both male and female is an unforgettable sight – as they suddenly appear from the forest, their shimmering plumage a flash of metallic blues, greens, and reds.

Our first morning session focused on a nesting site in nearby pastureland. Local farmers here have worked together to protect the quetzal, using the money from ecotourism to fund nesting sites. It was genuinely lovely to witness both the male and female bringing wild figs and avocado to their young chick.

At an alternative nesting site – shown to us by our knowledgeable guide Oscar – was located nearer the lodge, around a ten minute walk along a forested trail. This nesting hole was much closer for photographic purposes, and e had good sightings of both male and female quetzal on our second morning. Frustratingly for us, on our final morning, we waited for almost four hours to see no male at all.

Yet we were all happy with our time here, surrounded by mist and hummingbirds. Another treat was the surprisingly hungry Mexican Hairy Dwarf Porcupine that seemed happy for us to photograph it as it devoured leaves, just outside tour members John and Katherine's chalet.

On our last morning, we waved goodbye to the scores of hummingbirds and drove for coffee at Miriam's – one of the most famous cafes in Costa Rica for their bird feeders.

Here, we had brilliant sightings of Acorn Woodpecker, Flame-coloured Tanagers, Large-footed Finch and Spotted Wood Quail.

But finally, it was time to leave for the drive back to San Jose. What a fitting end to a stunningly-diverse Costa Rica tour, packed with a kaleidoscope of colourful birds, reptiles, amphibians and often charismatic mammals, that make their home in these bursting wetlands and forests.