

Costa Rica Workshop Gear Recommendations

This is by far the biggest question people have when preparing for the Costa Rica (CR) workshop, so let's figure it out together.

As you know, this is a dedicated wildlife trip, so gear choices should reflect that.

For cameras, you'll want some sort of interchangeable lens camera, either mirrorless or a DSLR. Also, the environment down there is pretty moist and humid, and we did have our Panasonic GH4 give up on us halfway through our last trip - so the more weather-sealed your camera, the better (note that the GH4 was fine after it was dried out).

It's also a good idea to take along a backup body if possible. It's not any fun to have a camera die or get accidentally damaged at the beginning of the trip and no backup really makes it a disaster. So, if you have an extra body, I'd recommend packing it.

As for the camera itself, the biggest factor that I would concern myself with is high ISO capability. Under the canopy, we're frequently in situations where we need fast shutter speeds in very dim light. So, if you have a couple of cameras to choose from for the trip, take the one with the best high ISO abilities.

Lenses

Wildlife

When I was in CR, I found my most common outfit was a D5 and 600mm F4. Don't worry, gear like that is not in ANY WAY mandatory, however, my recommendation is that you'll want a lens that will give you between 500mm and 600mm worth of effective full frame focal length.

So, for full frame shooters, you'll want a lens that gets you to 500mm or 600mm. For crop body shooters (APS-C or DX), you'll want between 350 ~ 400mm (450 ~600mm effective full frame focal length). For Micro 4/3rds, 250mm ~ 300mm (between 500mm and 600mm effective full frame focal

length). You can get away with less focal length, but you will have to plan on cropping. Oh, and no worries if you have more focal length than the examples above (like if you're using a 200-500mm lens on a crop body).

Of course, there were also times where 600mm was far too much and other times when even a 600mm and teleconverter wasn't enough. It really varies, but overall, if you can get into the ballpark I mentioned above, you should be good to go.

These lenses can be either in the form of a prime (like a 500mm F4) or a zoom (like the 200-500 or Canon's 100-400). If you have a teleconverter, it's a good idea to take it along for the more distant opportunities. If you are shooting a big prime (500mm F4, or 600mm F4), it's not a bad idea to have a second, shorter prime along (I use my 600mm and 300PF) or a zoom lens. This gives you both a backup lens and another focal length should the big prime prove too long in any given situation.

The faster the lens, the better. My F/4 glass did pretty well down there, and F/5.6 (or F/6.3) can still work well. However, I wouldn't want to be at F/8 or slower all the time (like using a 300mm F4 with a 2X converter for instance). The takeaway here is that it's dark under the canopy, so always bring your fastest glass. (In fact, some people are renting lenses - LensRentals is a good place).

Macros

Much of the wildlife we find will be small subjects like tree frogs, snakes, lizards, etc. As such, a dedicated macro lens is nice to have along. If you don't have a macro lens it's not the end of the world (most lenses focus pretty close and you can always crop), but if you do have a macro lens, absolutely bring it. Also, sometimes we find really tiny stuff - one of the frogs we discovered was about the size of a pinky nail!

I also recommend the longest focal length you can find. Since our macro work deals with animals, you'll want the longest working distance you can get. Something like a 60mm macro is almost guaranteed to scare off the little critters. I recommend a minimum of 105mm, and honestly, 150mm, 180mm, or 200mm is even better. I personally use an old 200mm macro

and it was about perfect in focal length, but a little slow to focus. I may end up looking at one of the Sigma choices - the 150mm or 180mm - although those lenses are rather large.

We've also had good luck attaching a 1.4TC to the 105 Macro (Nikon) and / or using the 300 PF with a TC as well. The 300 PF + TC is actually pretty close to a true macro lens!

General Shooting

While our emphasis is wildlife, that's certainly not to say there won't be a ton of cool things to photograph with wider lenses - heck, you'll want your camera out on the flight in! It's very scenic once you get out of San Jose.

Plus, we drive by dozens of overlooks and you never know what kind of sunrises / sunsets you'll want to snap. Any good mid-range zoom will work great. I use my 24-70, but anything in that ballpark will do nicely.

If you're still unsure about your lenses, please post your questions to the facebook group and I'll answer from there. (If you're wondering about a specific lens or lenses, someone else probably is too.)

Flash

I also recommend tossing a flash unit in the bag if you have one. We'll be doing some nighttime macro shooting and an external flash can go a long way towards making that a better experience. I'm using a Nikon SB 5000, but any dedicated flash unit will work - it doesn't have to be super heavy-duty or anything, although I don't recommend the built-in flash (if your camera has one).

You might also want a small diffuser, an off-camera cord, and a small fill reflector to attach to the flash. When we were down, I shot my single flash bounced up to a larger reflector and used the built-in "fill card" to throw light at the subject. We're planning to bring a reflector for that purpose, so no need to pack one.

Also, if you have your own macro/flash rig you like to use, feel free to bring it along.

In addition, there are times a little fill flash can help add some light to the dark canopy, so it's not a bad idea to bring along a flash extender too. I use the [MagMod wildlife kit](#) and have been very happy with it. The [Better Beemer](#) is also a good tried-and-true setup. The extenders are totally optional of course, but they can make a difference if you need them.

Tripods / Support

You'll also probably want some camera support. I use both a tripod and monopod, depending on the situation. However, in many cases, you will be forced to hand-hold the lens.

When you're dealing with wildlife in trees, you frequently need to change your height to find an open spot to shoot through. **So, most of the time, it seems like a monopod or hand-holding works best**, BUT there are times when you can use a tripod, and I certainly prefer a tripod if I can use one. Plus, for macro work, a tripod can prove very handy.

My current tripod of choice is a [3 series Gitzo](#) (I use the long one - works well on hills) and [Wimberley WH-200](#) head for my big glass (lenses with an integrated foot). Otherwise, I use the [BH-55](#) ballhead on it.

My monopod is also a [Gitzo](#) and I use the [Really Right Stuff monopod head](#). It's expensive, but it'll last you forever.

*Note that if I could only take one, **I'd choose a monopod for this trip over a tripod.***

I know, those aren't cheap but I've had multiple requests asking what I use. You can certainly get by with less expensive options.

Memory Cards / Backup / Misc

Memory & Backup

You will shoot a LOT of photos in CR - like a LOT. I shot 14,000 in about a week so you'll want to be prepared.

Personally, I have multiple memory cards with me for shooting which I copy to my laptop at night, and then I backup those images to an external drive. Once I have a copy on BOTH my laptop and backup drive, I'll pop the cards back in the camera and reformat. So, make sure you have lots of hard drive / external drive space!

Rain

We'll likely face rain from time to time, so you may also want to get some sort of "raincoat" for your gear. I like the LensCoat Raincoats myself. That said, we won't be out in heavy downpours, but light rain won't stop us.

I'd also bring along a few microfiber cloths for wiping off lenses if they get some raindrops on them.

Of course, you'll also want a raincoat for yourself, but we'll do another e-mail with recommended clothing at another time.

Flashlight / Headlamp

I also recommend taking along a small flashlight or headlamp. Don't go crazy here, we're not trying to land aircraft or anything, just a small light for when we're out at night looking for frogs and such.

Power

We can potentially shoot over 1000 photos each day, depending on the subject at hand, so I recommend at least two batteries - one in the camera and another as a backup. Plan to recharge them each night too - maybe take two chargers if you have them.

Also, remember to bring along extra batteries for things like flashlights, flash kits, etc. There is a limited selection of batteries at the resort, but they are expensive.

Knee Pads

For some of our shooting, we'll be down low. Knee pads aren't required but aren't a bad idea. I'm personally too lazy to use them most of the time, but if your knees are sensitive it might be a good idea to pack a set.

Sunscreen/bug spray

I'd also recommend packing some bug spray and sunscreen. If the sun is out, it'll burn you in a very short amount of time. That tropical sun is brutal.

Bugs aren't the problem you think they would be in CR - they're around of course, but honestly, my backyard is worse. Still, it's not a bad idea to have some along - things change and depending on the location you may want it.

Additional (small) backpack

Another item you might want along is a smaller backpack for days when we don't need all of our gear. I like these Eddie Bauer backpacks, although note that you have to figure out your own padding (I just wrap the items I want in there with a towel). These work great when you just want your camera, maybe an extra lens and a few accessories.

Misc Accessories

Finally, you'll want to make sure you have any miscellaneous accessories along that you may need - things like tripod quick release plates, lens tissues (I like the Zeiss wipes), extra lens / body caps, etc etc...