



Santa Helena Cloud Forest Reserve, Costa Rica

The mud gets everywhere. I'm wearing a plastic poncho, but it's hopeless; nothing stays dry in here. It's an ethereal place. Everything is draped in moss, the cloud hangs amongst the trees, it's dark, damp and muddy, and we love it. After a few days of this everything we own is covered in a thin layer of rain forest slime. The damp mists are swirling all around us, the leaves are constantly dripping, and as we brush through the undergrowth they shed more soggy delights on us just for good measure. The trail is a slippery quagmire that we slish and slide along like inebriated ice skaters. Welcome to the cloud forests of Costa Rica.

The spine of mountains that to the north constitute the Rockies, and to the south the Andes, crosses the narrow isthmus of Central America as a 2000m jungle-clad ridge. The warm air from the Caribbean streams over this ridge en route to the Pacific, cooling as it does so and forming dense

damp clouds filtering through the woods; this is a cloud forest and it's a first for me. We're spending four days here tramping the forest trails in search of the definitive images of this unique eco-system, and despite the grime it's great fun.

Photographing the cloud forest presents some serious challenges. The damp and the mud is an inconvenience to us but if it gets into my kit all sorts of bad things will happen. Every day we trudge thorough the forest in search of strong compositions amongst the seemingly impenetrable mass of vegetation. As it turns out there's a wealth of potential once you get your eye tuned in.

The mud squelches beneath our feet, I stop and look. There's a shot here. Wendy releases the plastic sheet from the back of my Lowe Pro and lays it in the mud for the bag to rest on. I erect the tripod; Wendy then holds an umbrella over the bag as I rummage inside.

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Drips run down my neck but the kit is protected. Wendy and I are now working as a well-oiled machine after days of this. I transfer the camera to the tripod under the brolly; I'm using the panoramic camera vertically. I spot meter off a leaf in the foreground, open the shutter and start the long wait. With a polarizer on to saturate the colours in the vegetation, at f/45 the exposure time is eight minutes. As the feeble light does its work on the silver halide crystals we watch the mists swirling through the lush canopy above - it's incredibly atmospheric. The sounds of the forest envelope us: we are not alone, that's for sure. A Jaguar could be within spitting distance and we'd never know it.

After four minutes I take another reading. The light levels are fluctuating as the cloud blows through the trees; it's half a stop brighter now. I end up giving

it six minutes and start another exposure, and so on. I get off just eight frames in an hour. I don't feel it's enough, allowing for bracketed exposures and the varying amounts of mist. I reload and start on another exposure. Every now and then the sun briefly penetrates the mists in the upper canopy, sending the contrast sky-high and forcing me to abort the exposure. Generally, the flat low-contrast light predominates.

Trudging back, bag heavy on my back, muddy, soggy, exhausted. Images have been made though, and that always engenders a deep-seated feeling of satisfaction. We descend into the bright tropical sunshine of late afternoon. Below and to the west lies the Bay of Nicoya and the Pacific coast - our next destination with palm trees, beaches and sunshine ...

