


SPOTLIGHT

Roadside Orchids

Viewing Species During a Day Trip in Costa Rica

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDER VASILJEV



[1] Often on our day trip, we passed through the open areas reserved as pastures. Most of the trees were cut down, but those left standing were hosts to a vast variety of epiphytes.





SITUATED BETWEEN TWO CONTINENTS with a rich topography of more than 100 spectacular volcanic formations and a wide array of habitats, the tropical nature of Costa Rica is amazingly abundant. For an orchid enthusiast, it is a thrilling place to visit. More than 15 percent of the 8,000 flowering plants in the country are orchids. Here, in the premountain and mountain cloud forests, their diversity reaches its highest level and profusion, but spotting epiphytic orchids in these forests is not easy. Many flourish high in the canopy, up to 100 feet (30 m) above the ground, obscured from view by the dense undergrowth. After hours spent rummaging through the forest, I am excited and rewarded every time I find a blooming orchid in the mass of vegetation.

Roadsides offer different but equally gratifying ways to view orchids. While driving through Costa Rica countless times, I often noticed orchids on trees and outcrops alongside the road. During my recent midsummer visit, I proposed to my Costa Rican friend, photographer Gregory Basco, that we take a trip in search of the roadside bloomers on the quiet country roads where frequent stops would be safe.

With an early start, a winding road took us in our dark-green Nissan X-Trail over small bridges overlooking rushing mountain streams and waterfalls, past the cloud forest and by open pastures. At times, clouds of fog and mist completely obscured the view as we drove between the Porvenir (7,437 feet [2,265 m]) to the Poas (8,871 feet [2,700 m]) volcanoes across Costa Rica's Central Volcanic Range. At an elevation of approximately 4,600 feet (1,400 m) breezes of cool air refreshed us where we frequently pulled over to stop and photograph, with the temperature here fluctuating between 55–70 F (10–21 C).

One of the great benefits of orchid scouting on the mountain roads is that the terrain on one side of the road steps down, thereby displaying the tree tops at eye level.

- [2] As our descent down the Caribbean slope continued, we encountered a sparse group of trees hosting blooming colonies of a *Stelis* species.
- [3] Rushing from the slopes of Volcano Poas, the stream carries the mineral-rich water. The blue color is the result of a chemical reaction.
- [4] Passing over the bridge through a patch of forest, I noticed a plant of *Epidendrum firmum* in flower. Attached to a small tree, the orchid was hanging over a stream. This species is closely related to *Epidendrum difforme*.



The outcrops and vegetation that flank the road provide a good habitat for orchids that receive more light on trees that host a wide variety of epiphytes. However, for terrestrial orchids, there is a trade-off because they are often subjects of occasional clearings by the road service crews.

Pastures present another excellent environment. Trees left standing in the field were verdant with countless aroids, bromeliads, ericads, ferns, gesneriads and, of course, orchids, thriving in the mist-saturated air. Like magnets, these solitary trees attracted epiphytes colonizing their every trunk and branch.

With the rainy season in progress, many orchids were bearing fruits. Nonetheless, for some it was a time for flowering. As we drove on the Pacific side of the Central Volcanic Range we noticed many blooming orchids: *Dichaea*, *Elleanthus*, *Sobralia*

and a few *Maxillaria* species, as well as several species of *Pleuriothallis* and *Stelis* decorating the tree trunks and branches with carpets of yellow or reddish flowers.

By the side of a small stretch of road, several trees played host to *Oerstedella exasperata*. The host trees were small, making the *Oe. exasperata* seem enormous. Their branched inflorescences, extending more than 4 feet (1.2 m), carried dozens of flowers attracting pollinators, but there was also a peculiar commotion going on besides the pollination. At closer examination, I found that many flowers were missing their parts, or complete crowns, carved away in half circles: Leaf-cutter ants were to blame. They tirelessly chewed through the flower parts, leaving only the column and lip untouched. Fleshy orchid petals and sepals were too heavy for some ants to carry, and were dropped to the ground

[5] Emerging from the curve of a serpentine road, we encountered a large clump of *Elleanthus aurantiacus* in full bloom. Its branching stems were anchored in a thick carpet of moss among the grasses and other plants. We found this orchid growing both as a terrestrial and epiphyte. However, the terrestrial plants were much more developed and more abundant with flowers.



where they were picked up and carried to the underground nest. The pollinators and ants worked side by side, each focusing on their own tasks.

Our trip continued as we reached an elevation of 6,400 feet (1,950 m), where the road started to meander down the Caribbean slope, with more orchids on display. This side of the Central Volcanic Range presents a different environment compared with the Pacific side. It is cloudier, thus the temperatures are slightly lower. The dry season is less evident and precipitation is ample. We began to see different species of orchids: *Epidendrum parkinsonianum*, with its long-leaved pendulous clumps attached to vertical tree trunks. The showy flowers of *Lycaste macrophylla* and *Prosthechea brasavolae* were beginning to open. Tiny plants of a *Telipogon* species forming buds were nestled in twigs and small branches of guava trees planted along the road. We also encountered more species of *Elleanthus*, *Maxillaria*, *Sobralia* and *Stelis* to add to our list.

On our way, we passed through a few rural villages, each with a handful of houses

with nicely kept front yards full of plants and fruit trees, but one house had a special draw: Planted on its façade was a massive clump of *Sobralia chrysostoma* crowned with two dozen or so large white blossoms. The plant was showy despite the ephemeral flowers lasting only one or two days. Often, growing within the same area, *Sobralia* plants will bloom simultaneously. Sure enough, as we drove nearly a mile from the village, I spotted another *Sob. chrysostoma* in bloom. With these sightings, the off-season for blooming orchids didn't seem so lacking in flowers.

As we descended to about 3,900 feet (1,190 m) our list of orchids grew, but with just enough daylight left to get home before dark, it was time to turn around. Later that evening, over a traditional Costa Rican dinner, called *casado* — *gallo pinto* (mixture of rice, black beans, onions and cilantro fried in oil), fried plantains, meat of choice, tomato and cabbage salad and tortilla — we recounted our day's experience and planned future photography trips. Of course, I wouldn't give up the thrill of a

[6] As we scouted the road descending down the Caribbean slope of the Central Volcanic Range, it was easy to spot a large clump of *Lycaste macrophylla* nestled on a tree with a dozen or so flowers and buds.

[7] We found a small epiphytic *Maxillaria* growing on large trees of the Melastomateaceae family. We identified it as probably *Maxillaria microphyton*, which is closely related to *Maxillaria flava* and *Maxillaria wercklei*. This is a group of small-sized plants with branched clustered stems producing yellow with purple flowers.

[8] *Sobralia chrysostoma* displayed its showy flower growing high on a tree trunk by the side of the road.

hike through tropical mountain cloud forest. Experiencing the adventure of "orchid hunting" on foot is irreplaceable, but I admit that driving in a comfortable car and seeing orchids out of a rolled-down window was great fun, and the variety of species that we were able to see and photograph was remarkable.

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If You Go

THERE are rainy and dry seasons in Costa Rica, referred to as "green season" and "high season," respectively. On the Caribbean side, the rainy season is April to December. On the Pacific, it is slightly shorter, from May to November, followed by the dry season. The best time to visit, however, is a personal preference. For orchids, I prefer to visit during the "green season," especially at its beginning.

Currency Colón (colones plural) currently (December, 2010) exchanges at around ¢503 per US dollar.

Language Primary is Spanish, though many speak English as a second language.

Current Electric power in Costa Rica is 110 V, 60 Hz, and electrical plug is type A and B, same as in the United States.

Travel Information <http://www.visitcostarica.com> is a great place to start. — *Alexander Vasiljev.*



[9] In some parts of *Elleanthus glaucophyllus*, the flowers were already replaced by developing capsules, but as we continued our trip through the Caribbean side of the mountains we spotted plants in full bloom.