

Mexico's Monarchs, Humpbacks and Birds

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Mexico City; overnight Teotihuacán
Day 2/4	Monarch Butterfly Reserves. Overnight Agua Blanca Lodge.
Day 5/6	Puerto Vallarta.
Day 7/9	San Blas.
Day 10	Depart Mexico City.
Day 11	Arrive London.

Departs

January/February

Focus

Monarch butterflies, birds, whales and history.

Grading

A/B. Day walks only, although at high altitude

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code MEX03) or the current Naturetrek brochure

Highlights

- Watch millions of Monarch butterflies take flight at the famous Monarch reserves
- Visit the Pre-Aztec 'Pyramid of the Sun' at Teotihuacan – the third largest in the world!
- Blue Mockingbird, Red Warbler and Citreoline Trogon among bird highlights
- Wide variety of hummingbirds – from the tiny Bumblebee to magnificent Rivoli's
- Whale-watching for Humpbacks from Puerto Vallarta



From top: Monarch Butterfly (by P Stanbury), Humpback Whale (By P Marshall), Red Warbler (by M Pitt).



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Introduction

Mexico is a fascinating and vibrant country, a colourful land steeped in history, myth and legend. This was the home of the ancient Aztec, Toltec and Maya civilisations, whose great pyramids rival those of Egypt, and landfall for the first of the Spanish Conquistadors as they searched for the fabled Cities of Gold. Today, Mexico is a modern, vibrant and welcoming country, full of natural history, scenic and cultural contrasts. It is also the stage for one of the most remarkable sights in the natural world, the winter gatherings of millions of Monarch butterflies.

Whilst southern-eastern Mexico is clothed in thick tropical forests, in the north and west hot cactus deserts dominate. In between these extremes lie the cool Oyamel Fir forests of the central Mexican state of Michoacán. Here, the temperature, humidity and high altitude combine to create the perfect winter microclimate for millions of Monarch butterflies from the US and Canada which migrate south into Mexico every autumn to escape the cold further north. These are the third or fourth generations of butterflies that left Michoacán the previous spring and, to this day, little is known about how these delicate creatures navigate and how they find these small pockets of forest hundreds, if not thousands, of miles south from where they first emerged as an adult.

As spectacular as the Monarch gatherings undoubtedly are, Mexico has many other wildlife facets to enjoy. During the same months that the butterflies gather in Michoacán, Humpback Whales congregate in Banderas Bay off Mexico's Pacific coast and numerous resident and wintering birds – including up to 25 Mexican endemics – can be found in the nearby wetlands, mangroves and pine forests.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Teotihuacán, Mexico City

We depart London Heathrow mid-morning on a direct British Airways flight to Mexico City. On arrival we will be met by our local guide and drive for 35 kilometres or so (1 hour) to a comfortable hotel on the edge of the city, close the Pre-Aztec pyramids of Teotihuacán. Our drive takes us through the outskirts of Mexico City, a vast urban sprawl with a staggering population of over 22 million people! 'Mexico' as it is known by the locals, is a frenetic bustling place, a strange mix of gleaming skyscrapers and colourful markets. Life here speeds along at frenzied pace, while every conceivable inch of roadside space is packed with stalls and people hurrying to and fro. Mexico is also a city rich in history. Founded in the year 1522 by the Spanish Conquistador, Hernan Cortés, it was built on the ruins of the spectacular Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Some of oldest buildings in the city were constructed from the very stones used to build the Aztecs pyramids, indeed Mexico's central square with its old churches and Aztec ruins is well worth visiting if you choose to extend your stay.

In complete contrast to this urban scrum, Mexico City is surrounded a more peaceful patchwork of semi-desert and farmland. Nearby, cool pine forests cling to a range of extinct volcanic cones and one or two active ones such as the tongue-twisting, and highly active, Popocatepetl (Aztec for 'The Smoking Mountain'). Our destination tonight is the Hotel Villas Arqueologicas, a pleasant hacienda style hotel in the semi-desert and farmland belt a mere 5-minute walk from the edge of the Teotihuacán archaeological site and set amongst lush landscaped gardens.

Day 2 Teotihuacán, overnight Agua Blanca Lodge

A pre-breakfast bird-walk around the hotel grounds this morning will be a great introduction to some of Mexico's more familiar species. Canyon Towhee, Inca Dove and House Finch are a common sight whilst other species to look out for include Audubon's Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Cactus Wren, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Cassin's Kingbird and the endemic Rufous-backed Robin. After breakfast we will take the short walk to the Pre-Aztec city of Teotihuacán. It is worth arriving here as early as we can, as this is a popular place for visitors and locals alike and can become quite busy by late morning. The ancient city of Teotihuacán ('place of the Gods') still remains one of the world's great archaeological mysteries. When the Aztecs first moved into the 'Valle de Mexico' at the beginning of the 15th Century, Teotihuacán had already laid abandoned for 800 years and even today we know very little about the people who constructed this spectacular place and even less about their demise. It is thought to have been settled by the first great civilisation of Mexico around 300 BCE and by its height in 600 CE was home to over 200,000 people making Teotihuacán the sixth largest city in the world at that time. Then suddenly, and in a little over 100 years, the city lay in ruins. Why this happened nobody really knows, but by the end of the 7th Century CE it lay abandoned, its influence in Meso-America abruptly ceasing.



What remains today is the ceremonial centre of the city dominated by two great pyramids, the huge Pyramid of the Sun (the third largest on the planet) and the smaller Pyramid of the Moon. The latter lies at one end of the main north-south causeway called the 'Avenue of the Dead'. A variety of other buildings lie off this main avenue each with its own special significance. Some were thought to have been used for religious ceremonies and human sacrifices whilst others housed the priests and city lords. Temples built to honour one or more of their many gods also dot the site, such the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the 'Feathered Serpent God' who, according to legend, gave humankind science and wisdom. The sheer grandeur of the Teotihuacán and its fascinating history is sure to enthrall us for the next few hours as we fully explore the site; for the energetic there will even be the opportunity to climb to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun, not for the fainthearted, but well worth it for the view.

Whilst exploring Teotihuacán we will also be able to enjoy some of the local semi-desert birdlife. The strikingly scarlet Vermillion Flycatcher is often seen here whilst other species to look out for include Curve-billed Thrasher, Bewick's Wren and Loggerhead Shrike. The site is also home to the endemic Miriam's Pocket Gopher and their mole-like hills dot the citadel.

Around midday or early afternoon we will begin our journey to the pine forests of the Mexican province of Michoacán and Agua Blanca Lodge, our base for the next three nights. It is a beautiful journey of around 4-hours that will soon take us out of the semi-desert plateau on which Mexico City lies and up into the greener more forested hillsides to the west of the city and the neighbouring province of Michoacán. Agua Blanca Lodge is a small attractive lodge set amongst extensive gardens and waterfalls.



Mexican Violet-ear, by Paul Stanbury

This is a fantastic area for birds and we will spend the final few hours of the afternoon in search of such species as Black-vented Oriole, Berylline Hummingbird, Golden Vireo, Western, Summer and Flame-coloured Tanagers, Greater Pewee, Blue Grosbeak and the wonderfully acrobatic Lesser Nighthawk. The Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer is another interesting species to look out for. This bizarre warbler-like bird has outsmarted the plant world by using its sharp beak to pierce the base of flowers thus taking a backdoor to the nectar and avoiding the dusting of pollen that other nectar-loving species must endure.

Once settled into our rooms, we will assemble for an evening meal and, after chatting through the day's sightings, retire with the anticipation of tomorrow, a forest full of Monarch Butterflies and a real highlight of the tour.

Day 3 – 4

Monarch Reserves

The Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) is a beautiful orange and black species, similar in size to the European Swallowtail. Their caterpillars feed exclusively on Milkweed and retain the plant's poison into adulthood. This store of milkweed poison makes Monarch's unpalatable and at the very worst deadly to most potential predators and is an extremely effective means of defence. As summer draws to close and North America begins to cool, millions of Monarchs begin their 3,000 mile journey to their wintering grounds in Mexico. Those populations west of the Rocky Mountains gather in coastal California to winter, but the bulk of the population to the east of the continental divide stream south to the Oyamel Fir forests at over 10,000ft in the transvolcanic belt of central Mexico. Much of this incredible journey remains a mystery. How do they navigate? How do the butterflies that pupated in Canada know to over-winter in these isolated pockets of forest in



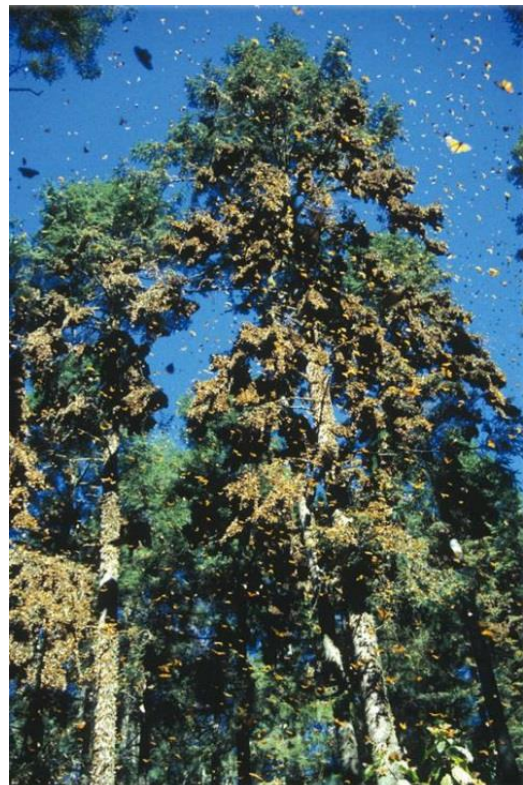
Mexico? Why do they chose these particular forests? It really is one of the natural world's great mysteries.

Those butterflies that over-winter in Mexico are actually the 3rd or 4th generation of those that migrated north the previous spring. For the butterflies that depart from Mexico each spring migrate north in a series of hops, each generation moving progressively further north until the 3rd or 4th generation reach the northern USA and southern Canada in the mid-summer. Some scientists think that whilst many butterflies make the long flight back to Mexico in one hop, others take two generations to return.

During our two days here we will visit two of the butterfly reserves, most likely Sierra Chincua, and then either El Capulin, Piedra Herrada or El Rosario, depending on the advice of our local guide and the location of the butterflies during the time of our visit. Here, the butterflies are not hibernating but in stasis, and need to exercise and drink periodically. They have spent the cool hours of night and early morning crowded onto every conceivable inch of branch and trunk, these clumps grey and camouflaged until they are active. Sometimes there are so many that sizeable branches bend under the sheer weight of tens of thousands of Monarchs; it is a natural wonder impossible to put into words!

We aim to arrive at the Monarch sanctuaries each day by mid-morning.. Then as the sun warms the air, the trees start to come alive as countless wings start to flex and quiver, turning the branches orange as the butterfly's test their flight muscles ready to take them out into the surrounding countryside to feed. On the sunnier days this can develop into the most spectacular sight of all, the air full of thousands of Monarchs, a blizzard of orange and black streaming past you, with thousands more resting on path-side shrubs or drinking from puddles. By midday the whole forest is alive, countless butterflies swirling around in great clouds, the flapping of so many wings sounding not unlike the quiet rustling of a myriad leaves. The experience is so magical you can understand why many Mexicans still hold the Aztec belief that the souls of the dead are reborn as butterflies (the butterflies return around the 1st November each year, the Mexican holiday of 'Dia de los Muertos' or Day of the Dead).

We will spend the following hours slowly exploring the enchanting reserves, enjoying the sight and sound of so many butterflies as well as looking for the birds that also call this forest home. Hummingbirds are normally



the most active species, White-eared, Mexican Violetear and Rivoli's the most plentiful, and these can be joined by Blue-throated and Amethyst-throated Mountain Gems. Species to look out for include Red Warbler, Mexican Chickadee, Slate-throated Redstart, Grey-barred Wren, Russet Nightingale-Thrush Striped Sparrow, Green-striped Brushfinch and Yellow-eyed Junco. We will also be on the look-out for flocks of Black-headed Grosbeaks and Black-backed Oriole, the two species that can cope with the milkweed poison and are happy to eat the Monarchs! We will also visit a small stream that has a population of the endangered Michoacan Stream Salamander, a close relative of the more familiar but critically endangered Axolotl.

Day 5

Fly Puerto Vallarta

After a final early morning bird walk for those that wish, this morning we will leave Agua Blanca Lodge and make our return journey to Mexico City airport for our short flight to the coastal town of Puerto Vallarta. From here, it is just a five-minute transfer to our comfortable hotel for the next two evenings, which is conveniently located in the heart of the marina. The marina is also home to a roving band of Raccoons that may join us in the waterside restaurant!

Day 6

Puerto Vallarta

The coastal town of Puerto Vallarta enjoys more than 300 sunny days per year and is located right on the edge of the largest bay in Mexico, Banderas Bay. This morning we will join other whale watchers for a 3 hour boat ride out into the bay in search of the magnificent Humpback Whale. Banderas Bay is an important breeding and calving ground for Humpbacks and they gather here every year between October and late March. With help from the locals - and an underwater hydrophone - we will try to locate these huge mammals and, if fortunate, listen to them singing underwater. Humpbacks are one of the most entertaining whales to watch and during our time on the water we hope to witness a variety of behaviours including spy-hopping, tailing-lobbing and, for the fortunate, perhaps a full breach, whereby the whale launches itself fully out of the water before falling back with a resounding splash; one of the true highlights of any whale watching excursion!

While whales will be our number one priority on the cruise, we also hope to find pods of playful Bottlenose Dolphins and seabirds such as Brown Pelican, Brown and Blue-footed Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Laughing Gull and Caspian and Royal Terns. For the fortunate there is always a chance to spot a vulnerable Olive Ridley Sea Turtle.



After returning to marina, we will travel up into the mountains for a late lunch. Our choice of lunch spot is an especially beautiful one, where we intend to spend the rest of the afternoon enjoying the surrounding birdlife. Here, we will make a special effort to seek out species that are scarce further north and we have the possibility of sighting the rare Military Macaw and San Blas Jay.

Days 7 – 9

Puerto Vallarta – San Blas

This morning we'll take a second whale-watching trip out into the bay, hoping that we will be treated to more exciting encounters and fascinating behaviour displays from the Humpback Whales! Then, after lunch back in the marina, we will drive north to our next destination of San Blas, and our comfortable hotel for the next three nights.

Despite an increasing population, San Blas still retains the character of a small coastal fishing village and is a popular birding destinations in Mexico. We have two full days to explore the varied habitats, including mangrove and coastal wetlands, arid scrub and deciduous forests, all of which are within easy reach of town. Although the birding can be hard work here, this area is widely considered to be one of the best areas in all of Central America and is home to an exciting assemblage of tropical species, large numbers of wintering land and water birds and approximately 25 Mexican endemics; most within an hour's drive of our hotel! 'The San Blas Christmas Bird Count' has recorded close to 300 species in a single day!



Boat-billed Heron by Josh Joshi

During our stay we will be on the look-out for species including Hook-billed Kite, Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Laughing Falcon, Mangrove Cuckoo, Mangrove Vireo and Mangrove Warbler. During our stay here we will take an afternoon boat trip into the La Tovara mangroves, which are famous for their roosting colony of the pre-historic-looking Boat-billed Heron and for Northern Potoo, the latter emerging at dusk to hawk for insects.

We will also visit the sustainable coffee plantation at Tecuitata. The deciduous forests here can be alive with mixed canopy flocks of flycatchers, warblers and tanagers, whilst fruiting trees are a magnet for Rufous-bellied Chachalacas, Mexican Parrotlets, orioles and thrushes. Mexican Hermit, Mexican Woodnymph, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker, Brown-backed Solitaire, Golden Vireo, Happy Wren, Sinaloa Wren, Mexican Cacique, Western

and Flame-coloured Tanager and a good selection of wintering warblers are all possible. The stunning Citreoline Trogon is surprisingly common, and we have a good chance of seeing two local endemic jays, Black-throated Magpie-jay and Purplish-backed Jay.

As we move around the area we will also keep an eye on the roadside pools and lagoons. These often attract a good number of shorebirds including Collared Plover, but also Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, Ridgway's Rail, Ringed Kingfisher and raptors such as White-tailed Kite and Harris' Hawk. The small bushes and patches of mangroves nearby usually hold Mangrove Vireo, Grey-crowned Yellowthroat and both Ruddy-breasted and Cinnamon-rumped Seedeaters.

The nearby San Blas Fort, situated on an isolated hill between the town and the river, not only provides an excellent view over the surrounding area but also attracts some good birds especially when the trees are fruiting. Species to look out for include Mexican Parrotlet, Rufous-backed Thrush and a variety of hummingbirds.

Day 10

Fly Mexico City and onto London

Depending on our flight schedule we may have time for a final early morning bird walk, before we must sadly drag ourselves away from the beautiful Mexican coastline, and return to Puerto Vallarta for our short flight to Mexico City. From here, we will board our direct British Airways flight later the same evening for the overnight flight back to London.

Day 11

Arrive London

We are due to arrive back at London Heathrow airport in the early afternoon.

Tour grading

We have graded this holiday Grade A/B. Whilst we will not be covering more than 4 or 5 miles a day, at a leisurely pace, some of the paths are steep and rocky and the altitude at the Monarch Reserves (over 3,000 metres or 10,000 feet) can make walking quite strenuous at times. We would recommend that you hire horses at the Monarch reserves, particularly for the walk up. No previous experience is needed as one or two local 'rancheros' will accompany the group up the hill and will lead your horse should you so wish (please note that this is not included in the tour cost, and riding hats are not provided – should you be concerned about this, you will need to bring your own). As such, this holiday should be suitable for most people of average fitness who enjoy walking. Please note that the location of the butterfly colonies - and the length of the trek/horse ride needed to reach them - varies depending on the local weather conditions and time of the year but is normally 40-60 mins.

Focus

The holiday will focus on the spectacular winter gatherings of Monarch Butterflies and mountain birds in the Mexican province of Michoacán, plus Humpback Whales on the Pacific coast. The last few days will be spent watching a wide variety of birds, including some of the Mexican endemics. There will also be time to look for other wildlife, plus Mexican history at the Pre-Aztec archaeological site of Teotihuacán.

Weather

We expect warm sunny conditions for most of the tour with occasional showers, especially in the hills. On occasion it can be quite cold at the Monarch Butterfly sanctuaries, especially first thing in the morning, so a supply warm clothes are essential. The mornings around Mexico City can also be cool, indeed frosts are not unknown at this time of year! On the coast it should be warm and sunny

for the majority of our stay, but it is likely to be cool out on the water so a warm jacket would be useful for the whale watching trips.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday with the exception of dinner on the first evening of the tour if required. We will be using good quality (although not luxurious!) comfortable hotels throughout, each with private facilities.

Extra expenses

The following additional expenses are not included in the cost of the holiday: dinner on Day 1; drinks; horses at the Monarch reserves (approx. 200 / US\$10 each way in each reserve); laundry; tips for local guides and souvenirs.

Your safety & security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mexico, prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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