

Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula – Maya, Monkeys & Turtles

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Cancun; overnight Akumal.
Day 2/4	Akumal
Day 5/6	Chichen Itza.
Day 7/9	Río Lagartos Biosphere Reserve.
Day 10	Depart Cancun.
Day 11	Arrive London.

Departs
November

Grading
A. Day walks only

Focus
Birds, mammals, marine life and Maya history

Dates & Prices
See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code MEX04) or current brochure

Highlights

- Snorkel with turtles from beautiful Akumal beach
- Visit magnificent Maya ruins at Chichén Itzá, Cobá and Tulum
- Search for Spider Monkeys and Howler Monkeys
- Possible avian highlights include Collared Aracari, Keel-billed Toucan, Orioles, Tanagers and Hummingbirds
- Witness the mass gatherings of American Flamingos at Río Lagartos Biosphere Reserve



From top: El Castillo, Chichen Itza (Kerrie Porteous), Collared Aracari (Janice Fiske), Green Turtle (Shutterstock)



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

NB. 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.

Introduction

Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula is a beguiling place. Here, charming colonial towns sit alongside 10th century pyramids, while nearby there are magnificent forests, rivers and coastal habitats, all extremely rich in wildlife. This is a land in which ancient ruins rise from the forests above powder-white beaches and turquoise seas, and it is hard to picture a place in which history and modernity are more tightly or attractively entwined, or that boasts such a pleasant all-round travel experience, with culture, food, climate and ambience all competing to delight the senses.

We begin this tour on the Caribbean coast, snorkelling with Green Turtles at Akumal and visiting the superb biosphere reserve at Sian Ka'an. Our exploration of the peninsula's Maya heritage begins at Tulum, and continues with the rugged ruins at Cobá and the outstanding pyramids, temples and tombs of Chichén Itzá. We will also spend time looking for Spider Monkeys and Howler Monkeys, and enjoy the varied birdlife each area has to offer. Mexico as a whole can boast over one thousand species of birds, a tenth of the world list, and the Yucatán peninsula has seen more half of those recorded. Finally, we will finish our exploration of this wonderful corner of Mexico back on the coast, enjoy boat trips and snorkeling opportunities within the Río Lagartos Biosphere Reserve.

Day 1

Depart London / Akumal

We depart London Gatwick on an early afternoon British Airways flight direct to Cancún, arriving in the early evening. From here we transfer to the coastal town of Akumal, a little over an hour's drive down the coast, and our comfortable beachside hotel for the next four nights. As we're likely to be tired when we arrive, this evening we will simply enjoy our first taste of the excellent Mexican food that we can expect to enjoy over the next 10 days, and explore our surroundings a little before retiring to bed, to be well rested and ready for our first full day in Mexico the following day!

Day 2

Tulum and Akumal

The Yucatán Peninsula boasts some of the most remarkable Maya ruins in all of Mexico. The ancient Maya left behind a stunning array of architectural masterpieces, and our knowledge of their world to this day remains shrouded in intrigue and mystery. They are rightly famed for their art, their mathematics, and their astronomical observations, for the Maya civilization charted the movements of the moon and planets, predicting eclipses and other celestial events with a great degree of accuracy. Their world, heaven and underworld, or Xibalbá, was one great, unified structure, operating under the laws of astrology and ancestral worship. The underworld is reached through the vast cave and tunnel network within the limestone which spans the Yucatán, and the frequent cenotes (or limestone sinkholes) were considered sacred places. Our own exploration of the region's Maya heritage begins on our first morning with a visit to the ruins in Tulum, which tower over a rugged coastline blessed with exquisite beaches and tempting waters. The walled city here served as a major port for Cobá, which we will visit in a couple



Green Turtle at Akumal (by Kerrie Porteous)

of days' time, and was at its peak between the 13th and 15th centuries, before old world diseases brought over by Spanish settlers brought about its demise. We'll spend the cooler hours of the morning exploring the walls, temples, tombs and towers, before retiring to the shade for a well-earned lunch.

Returning north towards Akumal, we will make a short stop at Xcabel, a beautiful, quiet beach and cenote, and the site of a local turtle conservation project. Although the Turtle Protection Centre itself won't be open during our visit, this is a wonderful place to stop for a

welcome cool down, before returning to Akumal itself. Akumal means 'Place of the Turtles' in the native Mayan language, and the Caribbean waters here have long provided a sanctuary for these marine creatures. Four species of sea turtle occur at Akumal, two of which are seen regularly off the coast here. Those that wish to can spend time snorkeling amongst Green Turtles as they feed on the sea grasses just off the shore, and anyone that chooses to venture a little further out onto the reef may well spot a Hawksbill Turtle too. We'll return to our hotel in Akumal this evening and, after catching up on the days sightings, enjoy our dinner together and hopefully a spectacular Mexican sunset over the Caribbean Sea.

Day 3

Sian Ka'an, overnight Akumal

This morning we journey south, for just a kilometre to the south of Tulum lies Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a wonderfully wildlife rich reserve boasting tropical reefs, mangrove forests, freshwater and brackish water lagoons, and pockets of tropical forest. We plan to spend a full day in this fabulous reserve, exploring both by boat and on foot. Hundreds of species of tropical fish inhabit the waters here, as does a small population of West Indian Manatees, and American Crocodile sightings are frequent!

The reserve is also a haven for birds, with well over 300 species having been recorded. As we float gently around the reserve, we can weave in amongst the mangroves and visit the tiny islands, looking for Black Skimmer, Roseate Spoonbill, Reddish Egret, Little Blue Heron, Boat-billed Heron, Lesser Scaup, Black-headed Trogon, Mangrove Warbler and the rare Jabiru stork. Overhead, we will keep our eyes peeled for raptors such as Osprey and Laughing Falcon. In the patches of jungle within the reserve, the likes of White-breasted Wood-wren, Red-throated Ant-tanager and Hooded and Orchard Orioles are all possible.



Roseate Spoonbill (by David Watkins)

Day 4

Cobá

This morning we journey inland, driving for around an hour and a half to the archeological site of Cobá, and its beautiful Maya ruins. We will take our time to explore the rugged temples, pyramids and ancient ball courts, all of which are surrounded by dense jungle. A visit here feels very much like being part of an Indian Jones movie! For those who wish to climb to the top of the Nohoch Mul pyramid, the views of the surrounding lakes and jungle are stunning. It's possible to walk quite some distance exploring this site in its entirety, but for anyone that is starting to tire, there is always the option of hiring a pedi-cab for the return journey to the site entrance!

For anyone that is need of a cooling dip after our explorations, there will be time to visit a couple of the nearby cenotes, for no trip around the Yucatán would be complete without taking a dip in one of these incredible limestone sinkholes that were considered by the Maya to be sacred gateways to the underworld! There can be few better ways to freshen up following a morning's exploration than with a refreshing dip in the beautifully clear water of these magnificent underground caverns.

This afternoon, once the air begins to cool, we will enjoy a spot of birding in the surrounding jungles and at the nearby Cobá Lake. Here, we can look for Pied-billed Grebe, Least Grebe, Great-tailed Grackles and Limpkin, and in the surrounding forests Magnolia Warbler, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Orchard Orioles, Bronzed Cowbird, Bananaquit, Grayish and Black-headed Saltator and Summer and Yellow-winged Tanager, Lesser Greenlets, Yellow-throated Euphonia and Gray-collared Becard are all possible. We return this evening for one more night at Las Villas Akumal, and, if there's time, a final to snorkel or swim in the Caribbean Sea.



Yellow-winged Tanager (by Hugh Tottle)

Day 5

Punta Laguna



Geoffroy's Spider Monkey

This morning we will set off early to visit the small community reserve of Punta Laguna, set in the heart of the jungle. Here, the local Maya community has formed a co-operative to guide tourists around this ecologically important area that is also their home. Our main target will be Geoffroy's (Yucatán) Spider Monkeys, and we will follow our local guide quietly as he or she listens carefully to locate one of the numerous family groups for us. Once located, we can enjoy watching the group whirl through the trees with their long limbs and prehensile tails. It's easy to see, when watching them, why Spider Monkeys are so named! We'll also keep listening out around us, for although they are not seen quite so frequently, Black Howler Monkeys are certainly possible here too. Depending on how we got on the previous afternoon, we may also choose to return to Cobá Lake this morning, to catch up with a few more of the local avian residents of this area.



Keel-billed Toucan (by Peter Dunn)

Next, we will continue our journey inland, pausing briefly to explore the colonial town of Valladolid and enjoy a spot of lunch. We aim to arrive at our next hotel in the late afternoon. Not only will we be perfectly positioned for a visit to the spectacular ruins at Chichén Itzá the next day, but surrounding area is a wildlife refuge, and so in the late afternoon and early mornings we should keep our eyes peeled for such birds as Yucatán Jay, Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari, Painted Bunting, Summer Tanager, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Squirrel Cuckoo, endemic Yucatán Parrots, Yucatán Wren, Social

Flycatcher and the attractive Ocellated Turkey. Mammals are present too, and Kinkajous can be seen leaping through the trees at dusk in search of ripe avocados. Others are harder to find, and a sharp eye will be required to spot the resident White-nosed Coatis or a Northern Tamandua.

Day 6

Chichén Itzá

Chichén Itzá is quite rightly one of the most popular tourist sites in the Yucatán, indeed, in all of Mexico, but fortunately we are well positioned this morning to beat the crowds and enjoy these fantastic ruins in relative peace and quiet. We can take our time to explore the mighty El Castillo pyramid, the great ball court, observatory and “Grupo de las Mil Columnas”, or Group of a Thousand Columns, not unlike a hall of fame, with the pillars revealing

carvings of celebrated warriors, dignitaries and gods. Diving expeditions within the Sacred Cenote here have revealed human bones, all that remains of those forced to take an eternal swim into the Maya underworld.



El Castillo, Chichen Itza (by Kerrie Porteous)

As the crowds build and the local merchants amass, we will take our leave and return to the welcome sanctuary of our nearby hotel for a second night. This afternoon those that wish to can relax in the beautiful hotel grounds, or perhaps opt to join further walks in the surrounding forests to enjoy the wealth of wildlife that resides here.

Day 7 – 9

Río Lagartos

After two nights at this beautiful hotel we return to the coast. This morning we will travel north to the Río Lagartos Biosphere Reserve, in which lies our beachside hotel. As the landscape changes from jungle to grazing land en-route, it will be worth keeping an eye out for birds of prey overhead, such as White-tailed Hawk and Laughing Falcon. Once settled into our hotel, we have the rest of the afternoon and two further full days to explore everything that this wonderful coastline has to offer. From our base in the heart of the reserve, we will take boat

trips into the mangroves to enjoy the resident and migratory birds of Río Lagartos, and explore the surrounding wooded trails on foot.

On one of our mornings here we will take a boat trip to visit the huge concentration of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of fiery orange-red American Flamingos that gather in the reserve. If we time it right, and are able to witness the birds as they take to the skies en masse, the horizon will glow crimson as if the sun is setting.



American Flamingos (by Astrid Frisch)

Other birds to look out for will include Laughing Gull, Crested Caracara, Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Double-crested Cormorant, Royal Tern, Black Skimmer, Boat-billed Heron, Bare-throated Tiger-heron and White Ibis. Shorebirds include Black-necked Stilts, Western, Spotted and Solitary Sandpiper and Wilson's and Semipalmated Plover, and we'll also enjoy an evening boat trip during our stay to look for some of the mangrove bird-life that comes out at dusk and after dark.

Day 10 – 11

Cancun / London

After a thorough exploration of this captivating corner of Mexico, this morning it will be time to return to Cancún's international airport, in order to check-in for our mid-afternoon flight home to the UK. We are due to land back at London Gatwick airport at around 8.00 am the following morning.

Tour grading

We have graded this holiday A, with leisurely day walks only. Terrain is mostly flat and we do not plan to cover more than a few kilometres at any one time on foot. As such, this holiday should be suitable for most people.

Focus

This all-round wildlife holiday will focus on the birds, mammals and marine life, as well as the Maya history, of the Yucatán peninsula.

Weather

We expect warm, sunny conditions for most of the tour with temperatures in the mid to high 20s degrees Celsius. In November the rains are coming to an end, so we should expect dry conditions for much of the holiday, with perhaps just the odd shower that will be quick to pass over.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. We will be using good quality (although not luxurious!) comfortable hotels throughout, each with private facilities. Please note that Las Villas Akumal consists of a number of villas, which usually have two separate, private bedrooms with en suite bathrooms which share one communal living/kitchen area. This communal area may, therefore, be shared with other members of the Naturetrek group (though your bedroom and en suite is, of course, private!).

Extra expenses

The following additional expenses are not included in the cost of the holiday: drinks; laundry; tips for local guides; souvenirs and any other personal expenses.

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 – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mexico> regularly prior to travel.

Security is rarely a problem on any of our trips; the vast majority of the people we come into contact with are scrupulously honest. However, it is only sensible not to put temptation in the way of the local people. Do not take expensive jewellery or watches with you; do not flash your money around, keep your large notes separate from small ones so that when you make a small purchase you only have to bring out a small amount of money. Do not leave anything of value lying around where it can easily be picked up. In short, look after your belongings!

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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