

Mexico – Birds & Culture of Oaxaca

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Overnight flight via Mexico City
Day 2/5	Arrive Oaxaca. Local birding and cultural excursions
Day 6/8	Sierra Madre mountains
Day 9/10	Huatulco (Pacific Coast)
Day 11	Depart Huatulco, overnight flight
Day 12	Arrive London.

Departs

February – April

Focus

Birds and culture.

Grading

A. Day walks only, early starts.

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code MEX06) or the current Naturetrek brochure

Highlights

- Oaxacan endemics Blue-capped Hummingbird and Oaxaca Sparrow
- Other Mexican endemics include Beautiful Sheartail, Dwarf Jay, Slaty Vireo, Grey-breasted Woodpecker
- Vibrant, cultural city of Oaxaca
- Archaeological sites such as Monte Alban and Mitla
- Plethora of warblers, orioles, flycatchers, tanagers and hummingbirds
- Extension into neighbouring state of Chiapas for Rose-bellied Bunting and Nava's Wren



From top: Monte Alban, White-throated Magpie Jay, Collared Trogon



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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 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 and scenic and cultural contrasts.

Oaxaca state in particular is one of the most unique and fascinating parts of the country. It was the stronghold of the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples and therefore has plenty of archaeological sites to discover, the most impressive of which is Monte Albán, which was the capital of the Zapotecs and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The crafting heritage of these pre-Columbian peoples is very strong to this day, with the region renowned for its pottery, exquisite textiles and alebrijes – brightly painted wooden animals. It is also a hotbed for distinctive and delicious cuisine, which we will be sampling a lot of throughout this holiday.

However, the primary focus of our holiday will be the wildlife and birds in particular. The variety in habitat, from the scrubland plains to densely forested mountains and coastal wetlands, means that it has the highest recorded number of species of any state in Mexico, with this figure almost at 750. It has two species that are found nowhere else, the exquisite Blue-capped Hummingbird and Oaxaca Sparrow, and dozens of other species that are only found in southern Mexico, plus even more countrywide endemics. It is also at the top or bottom of the range of many species that are much more common throughout the Americas, plus it is on the migratory route between North and Central America.



Orange-breasted Bunting

This is a special region for many reasons and a visit here will live long in the memory. You can make it even more special by doing our 5-day extension to neighbouring Chiapas, which holds even more avian and cultural delights!

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

Depart London

We depart London Heathrow in the evening on an overnight flight to Mexico City.

Day 2

Arrive Oaxaca

We will have a few hours in connection in Mexico City before taking our second flight south to the city of Oaxaca, capital of the state of Oaxaca. We will arrive in the morning and make our way to our hotel on the edge of the historic centre, our base for the next four nights.

The rest of the day will be a relaxed one, exploring the charming and culturally rich historical centre of Oaxaca, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The city sits in a picturesque valley surrounded by the Sierra Madre mountains, which was home to the Zapotec and Mixtec civilisations. Despite



Church of Santo Domingo

the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors 500 years ago, the heritage and traditions of these pre-Columbian peoples are still very much alive in the language, crafts, festivals and cuisine of this region.

We will wander the cobblestone streets, surveying the colourful colonial buildings and architectural landmarks such as the Church of Santo Domingo and the Cathedral. The main square is a lovely space in which to have a

drink in a café and enjoy watching the locals go about their business.

Oaxaca is renowned for its unique and distinctive cuisine. It is the birthplace of seven distinct varieties of mole, a complex sauce made with over 100 ingredients, including chocolate, chilli, and other spices. Other local favourites include tlayudas (large, crispy tortillas topped with refried beans, lettuce, avocado, meat and Oaxacan cheese), chapulines (grasshoppers of various sizes doused in chilli), and mezcal, a smoky agave-based spirit similar to tequila. We will visit the food markets on our wanderings to see these and other culinary delights, as well as the artisan market, as the area is well known for pottery, weaving, and alebrijes – brightly painted wooden animals.

There will be some downtime to relax before dinner this evening in a local restaurant.

Day 3

Tlacolula Valley

This morning we will head out into the Tlacolula Valley, which runs south-east of Oaxaca. Our first stop will be the dam at Piedra Azul (Blue Rock), a small reservoir just north of Teotitlán del Valle. We will scan the water here and can expect to see waterfowl such as Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck and Northern Pintail, as well as various herons and egrets, and around the water's edge and the trees beyond, we are likely to see species such as White-throated Towhee, Slate-throated Redstart, Black-vented Oriole, Curve-billed Thrasher, Black Phoebe, Great Kiskadee, Belted Kingfisher and Lesser Goldfinch, commonly seen near the water's edge.

Our next stop will be the Benito Juárez Eco-touristic Centre in the hillside of the valley. Surrounded by dense pine and oak forests and at an altitude of 3,000 metres, Mexican endemic species we will be looking out for here include Rufous-capped Brush-finch, Dwarf Jay, Red Warbler, Collared

Towhee, Grey Silky-flycatcher, and Mexican Chickadee, as well as hummingbirds such as White-eared and Garnet-throated.

We will then head back down into the valley to Mitla archaeological site, which became the main religious centre of the Zapotec civilisation, and then the Mixtecs that subsequently arrived in the Oaxaca valley. It was built as a gateway between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and the nobility that were buried here were believed to be destined to become “cloud people”. It was occupied for about 2,000 years up until the arrival of the Spaniards in the 1500s. The present-day ruins consist of five buildings which were ceremonial and residential, and one of the most fascinating features are the intricate and geometric friezes that adorn some of the structure.



Day 4

Presa La Mina & La Cumbre Ixtepeji

This morning we will head eastwards once more to Presa La Mina, a lake surrounded by forest clad hills. Key species include the vibrant Vermilion Flycatcher, Rufous-backed Robin, Oaxaca Sparrow and others could include Mourning Dove, Squirrel Cuckoo, Western and Summer Tanagers, and raptors such as Cooper’s, Red-tailed and Short-tailed Hawks.

We will then head into the Sierra Madre hills to the north of Oaxaca, and specifically to La Cumbre Ixtepeji. Here is another myriad of pine and oak woodland, as well as sections of cloudforest, making this a productive area for birding. Some of the species to look out for here include Bumblebee, Amethyst-throated and Berylline Hummingbirds, Mexican Violetear, Least and Dusky-capped Flycatchers, Dwarf Vireo and the sensational Mountain Trogon.

Day 5

Monte Albán & Teotitlán del Valle

This morning, we will visit the archaeological and UNESCO World Heritage site of Monte Albán built upon a small hill in the middle of the central valley, with 360-degree views below. For nearly a thousand years, Monte Albán was the socio-political centre of the Zapotec civilisation and had links with other Mesoamerican peoples and cities such as Teotihuacan and Palenque.

It is one of the more impressive pre-Columbian ruins in Mexico and we will take the time to explore the various structures and carvings that adorn the buildings. The dry shrub around the site is ideal habitat for Mexican endemic species such as Grey-breasted Woodpecker, Beautiful Sheartail, Pileated Flycatcher, and Slaty Vireo, plus the splendid Blue Mockingbird and Elegant Euphonia, Rufous-capped Warbler, plus migratory species such as Warbling Vireo and Townsend's Warbler.



Elegant Euphonia

This afternoon we will head back out to the town of Teotitlán del Valle, a beautiful example of a mix of Spanish colonial architecture and traditional artisan Zapotec textiles. We will explore the streets here, visiting the church with its intricately ornate interior, and the local market. We will make a birding stop nearby, as well as visiting the town of Tule, which is home to a special tree in the grounds of the church here and considered to be the widest tree in the world. It is a Montezuma

Cypress and according to Mixtec myth, people originated from cypress trees, and therefore are considered sacred.

Day 6

Travel to San José Pacifico

We will have one final morning birding in the surrounds of Oaxaca, on the hunt for any of the specialities that we might not have seen so far. We might head back to one of the locations we have already visited or somewhere new.

This afternoon we will leave Oaxaca behind us and head south into the Sierra Madre Sur, the southern part of this mountain range. It is about a 4 hours drive which we will break up with a birding stop. We will arrive at our lodge in the town of San José Pacifico, our base for the next two nights.

Day 7

San José Pacifico

We will start today with another exploration of the grounds of our accommodation before heading to El Manzanal, a remote location deeper into the forested mountains. Here we can hope to see several warblers including Hermit, Tennessee and the Mexican endemic Red Warbler, White-throated Towhee, Happy and Grey-barred Wrens, Russet Nightingale-thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Warbling and Golden Vireos, Chestnut-sided Shrike-vireo as well as flycatchers, orioles, and tanagers, plus Bumblebee and Amethyst-throated Hummingbird. This is also a good area for raptors, with Black and Turkey Vultures often seen cruising overhead.

We will return to our lodge and spend a couple of hours birding in the grounds here, with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains. Here we might see species such as Hooded, Baltimore and Black-vented Orioles, Blue Jay, Hermit and Crescent-chested Warblers, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, various hummingbirds and, if lucky, the beautiful Rose-breasted Grosbeak.



Red Warbler

Day 8

Finca la Soledad & Finca Don Gabriel

This morning we will return to El Manzanal for another visit at a slightly different altitude. In addition to tanagers, orioles, flycatchers and warblers, species of note that we might find in here include Painted and Indigo Buntings, Slate-throated Redstart, Olivaceous Woodcreeper and the splendid Collared Trogon and Northern Emerald-Toucanet. These mountains are also home to Ivory-billed Woodcreeper and the Mexican endemic Grey-crowned Woodpecker which we will hope to see.

Then we take another step in our journey southwards towards the Pacific, with the road now particularly bendy as it traverses the steep slopes of the Sierra Madre, as we make our way to the next accommodation, Finca Don Gabriel. Built on the top of a ridge, this is another fantastic place to stay



Western Mexican Chachalaca (Bene jálva)

and bird, and we should have time after our arrival to scope out the gardens. We might be fortunate enough to see the Mexican endemic, West Mexican Chachalaca, a noisy, long-tailed game bird which is often detected first by its raucous song. It feeds on fruit and plant material on the ground and also high in trees, where it runs along branches, but for a big bird, it can be surprisingly hard to see. Some of the 'garden' birds we might see here include Tropical Parula, Cassin's Vireo, White-throated Thrush and Ring-eyed Flatbill, and there is also the chance for the Mexican endemic Mexican Hermit.

Day 9

Pluma de Oro del Sur & Tangolunda

Another early start today as we head to Café Pluma Oro del Sur for coffee and birding. This highland location is another excellent spot for observing species like the Mexican endemic Grey-crowned Woodpecker, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Blue Mockingbird, Happy Wren, Golden Vireo, Golden-crowned Warbler, Red-headed Tanager, Rufous-capped Brush-finch, Dwarf Jay, White-throated Magpie Jay, and Garnet-throated Hummingbird, which are all adapted to the region's cool, elevated pine-oak forests.



Garnet-throated Hummingbird

This is also one of the best areas to see the Oaxacan endemic and highly localised Blue-capped Hummingbird and we will work hard to see this beautiful bird. It darts quickly among flowers, flashing open its mostly white tail. Both sexes have a bright rusty panel in the wings, which appears as a blur when hovering. The male is brilliant green overall with a blue cap and the female is pale grey below and has less white in the tail.

We will then head south once more and finally reach sea level, where we will head to the small coastal town of Tongolunda, and the golf course behind it, which has a river, pools and woods. Here we could see the Mexican endemic Russet-naped Wren and Golden-cheeked Woodpecker, as well as Western and Thick-billed Kingbirds, Black-and-white Warbler, Yellow-winged Cacique, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Altamira and Orchard Oriole.

We will then take the short drive to our final destination for the final two nights, the town of Huatulco, built in a sheltered bay on the Pacific coast.

Day 10 Pelagic Boat Trip & Huatulco National Park

We set off early this morning to the harbour and our boat for a 5-hour pelagic trip. Birds that we can hope to see are Red-necked Phalarope, Elegant and Royal Tern, Galapagos and Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Nazca and Cocos Booby, and Black Storm and Tahiti Petrel, among others. The most common cetacean found in these waters is the Coastal Spotted Dolphin, a subspecies of the Pantropical Spotted Dolphin, which we could also see, as well as Bottlenose Dolphin.

We will return to land for lunch and then head into Huatulco National Park, which is one of the most biodiverse regions on Mexico's Pacific coast, combining tropical dry forests with mangroves. We can hope to see species such as Citreoline Trogon, Orange-breasted Bunting, White-throated Magpie Jay, Flammulated Flycatcher, Red-breasted Chat, Rufous-backed Robin, Olive Sparrow, Banded Wren, Mangrove Swallow and the stunning and elusive Russet-crowned Motmot.



Russet-crowned Motmot

Day 11 Huatulco NP; Fly Mexico City & London

Depending on our flight schedule, we should have time for a final morning of birding in Huatulco National Park, before we must sadly drag ourselves away from the beautiful Mexican coastline and make our way to Huatulco Airport for our flight to Mexico City, and from there for the overnight flight to London.

Day 12 Arrive London

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

CHIAPAS EXTENSION

Day 11

Huatulco National Park & Ixtepec

Depending on our flight schedule, we should have time for a final morning of birding in Huatulco National Park before we drop the others off at Huatulco Airport for their journey home.

We will head east, hugging the coastline for about four hours, making a birding stop en-route, before reaching the town of Ixtepec, our base for the night.

Day 12

Tolistoque Ojo de Agua & Tuxtla Gutierrez

This morning, we will head east once again to Tolistoque Ojo de Agua, a series of freshwater pools in amongst limestone cliffs and brush. It is a popular swimming spot for locals, but we will be there early as it is also a prime location for birding, with a mixture of riparian and semi-arid habitat. We will be on the lookout for species like Orange-fronted Parakeet, White-lored Gnatcatcher, Stripe-headed Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak and Yellow-throated Warbler. It is also a good location for the extremely localised Cinnamon-tailed Sparrows, which are most often found in small groups by the water's edge, and the sumptuous Rose-bellied Bunting. Other Mexican endemics that can be found here include Citreoline Trogon and Colima Pygmy-Owl.

It is a 5 hour drive this afternoon as we continue in an easterly direction, making a birding stop en-route, and crossing the border into Chiapas, arriving at our base for tonight near Tuxtla Gutierrez.

Day 13

Selva El Ocote & San Cristóbal de las Casas

This morning we will spend time on the edges of the Selva El Ocote Biosphere Reserve. It is a wildlife haven where tropical deciduous and evergreen forests meet dramatic limestone canyons (El Ocote is the Spanish name for a species of pine). The reserve includes patches of medium and highland forest, which bridges the gap between lowland rainforests and Chiapas' higher elevation cloudforests, further enhancing the ecological diversity, to the extent that almost 400 species of birds have been recorded here.

The main target species here is the endemic and highly localised Nava's Wren, and we will try our best to find this reclusive bird. Other magnificent species found here include Keel-billed Toucan, Collared Aracari, Altamira Oriole, Citreoline, Gartered and Collared Trogons and, if lucky, the spectacular King Vulture. A variety of hummingbirds can be seen here, such as Canivet's Emerald, Buff-bellied and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, as well as a host of colourful tanagers and warblers such as Magnolia and Yellow.



Montezuma Oropendola

We shall also hopefully see Montezuma Oropendola and the male's unique and memorable courtship display, where it swings on a branch a full 180 degrees, spreading out its tail feathers and making a loud series of gargling noises which crescendos when fully upside down.

We shall also visit Laguna Belgica, a small community run educational reserve, where there have a population of Red-eyed Tree Frog, interesting fungi plus birds such as Gartered Violaceous Trogon, Olivaceous Woodcreeper and Band-backed Wren.

We continue heading eastwards and visit Sumidero Canyon National Park, a spectacular natural landmark featuring towering cliffs that rise over 1,000 metres above the Grijalva River. Formed by tectonic activity millions of years ago, the canyon stretches about 8 miles with dramatic vertical walls and a winding river below. The park covers nearly 22,000 hectares and hosts diverse wildlife including spider monkeys and crocodiles, although we will be lucky to see these. We will take a boat trip on the river, underneath the imposing cliffs, all the while scanning the landscape and skies for any birding activity.

We will continue to San Cristóbal de las Casas, our home for the next two nights.

Day 14

San Cristóbal de las Casas

The wooded hills around San Cristóbal are perfect for birding and we will spend the morning at Parque Ecoturístico Montetik, a community-owned reserve south of San Cristóbal, spanning about 250 hectares of pine-oak forest rich in bromeliads and epiphytes. This is the only accessible region in Mexico to see the endangered Pink-headed Warbler, plus we can expect to find Wilson's and Hermit Warblers, Unicoloured Jay, Hammond's Flycatcher, and White-eared Hummingbird amongst others, and the Blue-throated Motmot that also has a limited range within these highlands.

We will return to San Cristóbal in the afternoon to explore this picturesque colonial town nestled in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. Known for its cobblestone streets, colourful facades, and rich indigenous culture, the town is a blend of Spanish and Maya



San Cristobal de las Casas

influences. It serves as a central hub for many of the surrounding rural communities and has vibrant food and craft markets.

On 1st January 1994 it became the focal point of a major political event in Mexico when the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), a leftist revolutionary group composed mainly of indigenous people, rose up in arms and seized control of the town and several others in the region. Their uprising was deliberately timed with the implementation of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which the EZLN opposed, arguing it would worsen conditions for indigenous and rural communities. Led by Subcomandante Marcos, the movement drew global attention to issues of indigenous rights, poverty, and social justice in Mexico. Thirty years later many of the same issues persist, but the EZLN has long since disbanded and the town is a relaxed environment, with the only reminders of the movement being Zapatista dolls available for sale.

Day 15 Sumidero Canyon NP, fly Mexico City & London

We depart San Cristóbal and head towards the airport of Tuxtla Gutierrez. Depending on the timing of our flight, we might be able to make one or two stops along the way. One stop might be Reserva



Flame-coloured Tanager

Ecológica Huitepec, a small reserve just outside of town, and home to species such as Flame-coloured Tanager, Painted Redstart, Hooded Grosbeak, Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush and Hutton's Vireo, amongst others.

Another is Rancho Nuevo which is also a community-managed ecotourism park known for its towering pines over 45 metres tall and a spectacular 6-mile-long cave system. Bird species recorded here include Yellow-backed Oriole, Western and Eastern Wood-Pewees, Tropical Kingbird, Olive-backed Sparrow, and various warblers and flycatchers.

We will continue to the airport of Tuxtla Gutierrez for our flight to Mexico City, and from there for the overnight flight to London.

Day 16 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. Whilst we will not be covering more than 4 or 5 miles a day, at a leisurely pace, some of the terrain is steep in parts. There will be early starts as the birding is best at this time of day, some long days and some long drives as well between overnight locations. As such, this holiday should be suitable for most people of average fitness who enjoy walking.

Focus

The wide variety of birds, including two endemics to Oaxaca and several Mexican endemics. There will be times when we target these species. There will also be cultural elements to this trip, particularly in and around the city of Oaxaca, including archaeological sites.

Weather

We expect warm sunny conditions for most of the tour but the mornings and evenings are likely to be cool in Oaxaca and the Sierra Madre mountains. Down on the coast it will be much warmer.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday, starting with lunch on Day 2 and finishing with breakfast on Day 11. We will be using good quality (although not luxurious!) comfortable hotels throughout, each with private facilities.

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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