

Chiapas

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Mexico City

After a direct flight from the UK we arrive into Mexico City around six in the evening. We'll spend the night at the nearby Hotel Grand Prix.

Days 2 – 4 (am)

Sumidero Canyon and San Cristobal

We've a dawn flight out of Mexico City which lands at around eight in the morning at Tuxtla Gutierrez's little airport. We'll be straight out into the endemic-rich West Mexican Thorn Forest that runs up behind the town to the spectacular Sumidero Canyon. This is one of the most fantastic landscapes in the whole of Mexico, a country with as much to offer in that department as anywhere in the world. The Grijalva River drains the central valley of montane Chiapas and then cuts its way out in a kilometre-deep gorge. A road snakes up through the national park and has along its route several viewpoints into the canyon. This road is exceptional for both birds and butterflies. Fruiting figs attract Streak-backed and Bar-winged Orioles, Banded Wrens, and Chachalacas too. Russet-crowned Motmots and Collared and Violaceous Trogons perch quietly below the frenzied feeding. Malachites flapped rather lazily up and down the road, their lime-green and back wings looking fantastic in the sun. The similarly coloured Zebra Heliconid flies more purposefully. The Malachite's cousin, the Rusty-tipped Page, a fabulous thing, sits on roadside *Combretum farinosum*, the flowers made up of long groups of brilliant red-orange stamens that turn green with age. We'll see large Yellow-bordered Owl-Butterflies whose fantastically camouflaged undersides contrast with the flashes of dark purple-blue as they fly. Indeed there are a number of butterflies here that flash blue as they fly, notably Bluewings and *Eunicas*. Glaucous Cracker sits in typical pose, head down, and almost as cryptic are the Karwinski's Beauties. Squirrel Cuckoos do the large orange bird in a tree disappearing trick as we sort out the various flycatchers that include both Belted and Pileated. Canivet's Emeralds, Slender Sheartails and Green-fronted Hummingbirds visit the abundant roadside flowers.

In the afternoon we'll take a boat trip along the canyon. Black Vultures crowd the banks and we'll see Osprey, Ringed Kingfishers and Mangrove Swallows as we cruise into the ever deepening chasm. In places the canyon is over a kilometre deep and pretty much vertical too with the sky narrowed to a band of bright blue above us. Around us American Crocodiles lounge on sand banks and Geoffrey's Spider Monkeys cavort through trees covered in yellow blooms.

In the afternoon we'll reach cultured San Cristobal where the colourfully attired local Indian populace mingle with tourists amid shops selling rustic crafts and restaurants serving sophisticated cuisines from around the world! During our stay we'll ensure that there's time to relax and enjoy this lovely town.

The forested Cerro Huitapec reserve is just ten minutes from our hotel. White-eared Hummingbird, both Chestnut-capped and White-crowned Brushfinches, Steller's Jay, and Russet-collared Thrushes frequent the lawn around the information hut. A well-made path takes us through the mixed pine and oak woodlands, the latter a very diverse group here, and we pass some very large specimens of the strawberry tree *Arbutus xalapensis*. Mountain Trogons call quietly from oaks festooned with fabulous bromeliads. The spikes of *Tillandsia guatemalensis* have long red and green inflorescences that reach more than a foot above the basal rosettes. The ground flora is varied and includes saprophytic *Conophilis alpina*, a pretty *Viola*, *Begonias*, the milkwort relative *Moninna ciliolata* with yellow and deepest blue flowers, and several red *Salvias*. Ferns are prominent with lots of maidenhair ferns as well as some giant bracken. A spectacular red and green bloom attracts Amethyst-throated Hummingbird and Garnet-throated Hummingbird. Lovely little Crescent-chested Warblers will be seen throughout, their little trilled song our constant companion. Black-throated Green, Golden-cheeked, Nashville, Magnolia and Blackburnian Warblers are common and we'll encounter parties of Unicolored Jays. Less common are Black-throated Jays and Blue-throated Motmots. Strong-billed Woodcreepers are impressive as they scour the oak trunks but our attention is sure to be grabbed by the fabulous Pink-headed Warblers that make this superb little reserve their home.

A rich array of bromeliads drapes the oaks of the local Orchid Garden and the forests that surround it. There's huge hanging *Tillandsia ponderosa*, grassy-leaved *Tillandsia vicentina*, odd-looking *Tillandsia eizii*, strange upside down *Tillandsia seleriana*, and the spanish-moss look-a-like *Tillandsia usneoides*. Two-tailed Swallowtails fly through the garden as we photograph brilliant green and blue lizards. The place is a veritable wildlife haven. Magnificent Hummingbirds allow close approach and we'll watch the thievery of Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpeckers in the hibiscus bushes. Replanted from the local forests are many orchids notably lovely *Epidendron radioferrens*. There are so many species here; *Epidendron ciliare* - a stunning spidery concoction; elegant porcelain *Rhyncholaelia glauca*; *Prostheca cucullata*, the Black Orchid and Belize's National Flower. *Maxillaria variabilis* flowers in both yellow and purple forms, *Oncidium sphaecelatum*, *Maxillaria densa*, *Oncidium leucocilum*, *Prostheca chocaoensis*, *Stellis immersa*, *Stellis leucopogon*, the hugely impressive *Laelia superbeins*, *Evarionthe aurantiaca*, orange *Lycaste aromatica*, and *Lockhartia verrucosa*.

Days 4 (pm) – 6 (am)

Montebello – Quetzels & Swallow-tailed Kites

The Hacienda Museo Santa Maria provides us with the most sumptuous of breakfasts but will we be able to concentrate on it? The Hacienda is a very birdy place! Azure-

crowned Hummingbirds buzz around the restaurant and as we eat we'll be able to watch Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, noisy Great Kiskadees, lots of Western Tanagers, Hooded Orioles and Clay-colored Thrushes. The fields surrounding the hacienda are also full of birds with brilliant Vermilion Flycatchers, cute little Rufous-browed Wrens, and flocks of Indigo Bunting, Blue Grosbeak and the very striking Rufous-collared Sparrow.

Large colonies of pink *Spathoglottis* orchids and showy orange orchids line the roadside as we enter Montebello National Park. The road winds through a pleasing mix of upland cultivation and cloudforest remnants with a staggeringly diverse flora and fauna. Every now and again exquisitely picturesque lakes appear from between the fern and moss-laden trees. These vary incredibly in colour, with all manner of shades from blue to lime green and from turquoise to jade. Like a secret hoard of gems many of the lakes are hidden in the forest, and we'll spend time walking down tracks to these. As the sun warms up the butterflies start dancing. Heliconids flutter back and forth in front of us whilst spectacular species like the Splendid Mapwing sun themselves on the track. Flocks of Unicoloured Jays are accompanied by Masked Tityras, Grey Silkies, Azure-hooded Jays, Spot-crowned Woodcreepers and several species of warbler and tanager. Following them in the understory where lurk many species of Satyr (butterflies!) are Golden-browed Warblers, Green Jays, and the rare and very striking Blue & White Mockingbird. Fabulous iridescent Green-throated Mountain-gems, each feather a shimmering shade matching the colours of the lakes, are joined by other hummingbirds such as tiny Black-crested Coquette, Wine-throated Hummingbird and Sparkling-tailed Woodstar. Even brighter, and reckoned by many to be the most beautiful bird in the world, is the Resplendent Quetzal whose shimmering green plumage is set off by the in-your-face red belly. There are so many beautiful species here – Emerald Toucanet, Blue-crowned Chlorophonia, Barred Parakeet, Flame-coloured Tanager and, if we are very lucky, the Lovely Cotinga. A magnificent Swallow-tailed Kite sails over the lagunas, and we'll watch superb Greater Swallow-tailed Swifts arcing through the same skies. We'll see the enigmatic Cloud-Forest Monarch and the simply stunning Anna's Eight-eight, all red, blue, black and white – a truly amazing butterfly.

Days 6 (pm) & 7 (am) **Los Nubes Lodge**

After an early morning in Montebello we'll continue right through the park and descend the eastern slopes of the Chiapas Highlands. Contrary to information given in some birding guides this road goes through almost unbroken superb habitat, the cloudforest gradually changing to rainforest and the landscapes full of cliffs and rocky bluffs that rise above the forests. Orchids and Bromeliads and butterflies are everywhere. Every so often the very good quality road descends into deep valleys where spectacular aquamarine rivers (some of them 'hot'!) cut through the hills. We'll spend the afternoon at one such river where a lovely lodge has been built next the

great cascades and waterfalls of Los Nubes. There is a wonderful swimming spot in the clear waters by the lodge itself, and there are trails through the forests. Green Kingfishers hunt along the river and around the lodge we'll see hummingbirds such as Long-tailed Hermit, Emerald-chinned Hummingbird and Violet Sabrewing. Along the trails we'll seek shy forest denizens such as Slate-coloured Solitaire, White-faced Quail-Dove and Spotted Nightingale-Thrush. A sunny morning will see numerous large 'whites' include Orange Sulphur, Cloudless Sulphur, Lyside Sulphur and the impressively large Yellow-angled Sulphur congregating along the river banks by the lodge. Joining them are Ruddy Daggerwing, the unique Tiger Beauty, and the unfortunately named Common Banner, a butterfly whose beauty far outreaches its given name. The fabulous Emerald-patched Cattleheart flashes its red and emerald wings from the forest edge where we'll find the glorious little Mexican Cycadian and Rusty Page. By mid-morning the track alongside the river is alive with butterflies with Dingy Purplewings and both Blue-eyed and Small-eyed Sailors joining the common Julias and the Many-banded Daggerwings! In the afternoon of Day 7 we'll descend to the rainforest of Lacandon and fabulous Guacamaya.

Days 7 (pm) – 9

Guacamaya – the Lacandon Rainforest of Montes Azul

What a beautiful lodge! Guacamaya's gardens consist of impressive rainforest trees, these draped with orchids and bromeliads, and an abundance of planted Heliconias with colourful flower spikes. The large cabins have high thatched roofs, the rooms very spacious and comfortable. The walls are screened on two sides allowing a pleasant flow-through of air and these have shutters for privacy or night-time, and though tropical there is never a need for air-conditioning or even fans here for the design keeps the cabins a remarkably pleasant temperature. Guacamaya is a local Lacandon initiative funded by the Mexican government, allowing the local people to maintain very high standards even though the remoteness of this lodge means it is little visited and hardly known outside of Mexico. I am sure that will start to change for this is one of the finest wildlife lodges we've ever come across.

We will have been welcomed by the tremendous roars of Howler Monkeys, a sound memorable on every level. We'll no doubt have seen them feeding in the trees on the bank of the great Lacantún River right by our rooms. Spending time on the balconies of our rooms at Guacamaya will be a tour highlight and very productive. Flocks of Brown Jays scold us as they move through the trees, passing metre-long bright green and orange Iguanas sleeping on the branches. Great Currassows strut past and flock after flock of Mealy Parrots and Red-lored Parrots fly back and forth over the river. Keel-billed Toucans and various Orioles and Tanagers feed in the trees by the restaurant, Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds visit the feeder there. Giant Potoos roost in the grounds of the lodge and fabulous Scarlet Macaws nest in large cavities in the forest giants near our rooms, and are quite happy

to pose for visitors, looking back at us inquisitively and generally conversing with each other about the intrusion!

We'll take boat trips along the river, a perfect way to see the incredibly abundant wildlife of the Parque Naturales Montes Azules. We'll move from bank to bank along the Lacantún and get really up close to the wildlife as we explore the narrow San Negro River. Early morning and the trees are alive with Yucatan Black Howlers and the noise is awesome! Spider Monkeys swing from riverside boughs. Parrots fly back and forth in groups and so too do the Scarlet Macaws which seem very common here. Keel-billed Toucans are commonplace and we'll see their crazily-marked relatives, the Collared Aracaris. Male Giant Cowbirds are an extraordinary sight as they strike angular poses on sandy banks and we'll see Gray-necked Wood Rails and Limpkins on these. Amongst the many herons and egrets are Bare-throated Tiger-herons and Boat-billed Herons. Amazon and Ringed Kingfishers zip up and down the river and the lovely Sungrebe swims close to the banks. The river edge forest is surprisingly flowery. There are trailing vines with large bracts and tubular orange blooms, a shrub with sprays of violet-blue blooms, and any number of yellow-flowered vines, lianas, shrubs etc., one of them an impressive *Roldana* species. Trees have white, blue, yellow and pink blooms! On the trees is an upright orange and yellow flowered bromeliad often growing with a striking pink orchid. Groups of Crested Guans and Plain Chachalacas push their way through the flowery tangles disturbing Iguanas from their rest and sending butterflies into the air. Erato Heliconians flash green and red whilst Three-tailed Swallowtails and Tiger Heliconians fly back and forth across the river. Montezuma's Oropendula are hardly out of sight and the river trips are good for raptors too, with good views likely of Hook-billed Kite, Roadside Hawk, Osprey and the lovely Grey-headed Kite.

We'll have boat trips both mornings at Guacamaya but we'll also need plenty of time to explore the grounds of the lodge and nearby areas. Black Orchids and a couple of stunning *Oncidium* Orchids are found on many of the trees here. The grounds are full of butterflies too with Zebra Heliconids, Banded Peacocks and Isabella Heliconids as well as Red-rims. There are several swallowtails including the Green-celled Cattleheart, a species known in Mexico only from Lacandonia, and the lovely metalmark, the Red-bordered Pixie. The mud-puddling frenzy along the riverbanks mid to late morning is quite unbelievable. No less than six species of Kite Swallowtail including the marvelous Bow-winged Kite-Swallowtail, a large species with a lime-green wash to the wing bases, and a peachy wash to the striped body gather in numbers with Daggerwings and Sulphurs. Among these swallowtails is the large orange Androgeus Swallowtail and the rare Salvin's Kite-Swallowtail. The striking Blue & White Heliconian will be a memorable sight as will be the elegantly marked Chiapas Stripe-Streak and the glorious red and blue Yellow-rimmed Eighty-eight. Lineated Woodpeckers, Olivaceous Woodcreepers, Yellow-winged Tanagers, Golden-winged and Hooded Warblers, Blue Ground Dove, and the hummingbirds Little Hermit, Green-

breasted Mango and White-bellied Emerald, make the birding within the grounds a continuous and rewarding exercise.

As night falls we'll offer a boat trip as well as walks around the grounds. We'll see plenty of Pauraques and a few Short-tailed Nighthawks. Common Opossum and the beautiful Four-eyed Gray Opossum are found around the grounds and Pacas come to graze on the lawns. We'll see just how many American Crocodiles live in the river by their eyeshine, and hope to see a Kinkajou or a Margay or maybe Ocelot along the riverbank.

Day 10

Bonampak

We'll depart Guacamaya very early so as to have as much of the day as possible at Bonampak before heading on to Palenque in the evening.

Bonampak is a great little Mayan site. If it wasn't so remote it would be one of Mexico's most popular for the setting amidst mighty rainforest trees is stunning. Among the ruins are monolithic limestone stelae and story-telling murals that gave archaeologists their first insight into the Maya's darker more violent past.

The entrance track, peopled only by occasional Lacandon Maya driving visitors in with their little buses, is an amazingly rich wildlife site. Aztec Parakeets, Bat Falcons and Slender Sheartails welcome us to the carpark. This is a wonderful site for butterflies. Thick-bordered Kite Swallowtail and Guatemalan Kite-Swallowtail sit along the tracksides and there is an abundance of heliconids with Zebras, the Postman, and the lovely blue, black and white Blue & White and Grinning Heliconians fluttering slowly by. Black Swallowtails and the lovely red, blue, black and white Navy Eighty-eight sip salts as we photograph them at our leisure. It will be difficult to know whether to concentrate on the brilliantly-coloured birds of the track edge and the canopy, such as the gorgeous Green Honeycreeper, shimmering blue Red-legged Honeycreeper or Yellow-throated Euphonia, or whether we should concentrate on the ant parties and skulkers of the undergrowth... Trying the latter we'll find Dusky Antbird, Blue-winged Warbler, Smoky-Brown Woodpecker, Long-tailed Hermit, White-breasted Woodwren and Plain Xenops. Tody Motmots and Scaly-throated Leaf-tossers are common but elusive. With little hunting at this site Tinamous are easier to see than in many places and so we'll have a good chance to see Slaty-breasted, Great and Little Tinamous wandering the forest floor. There are many butterflies in here too including the Quiet Diaph, a strangely shaped butterfly of the rainforest's shadiest spots. Back out in the open and we'll be looking for Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-whiskered Puffbird, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher and many hummingbirds including Purple-crowned Fairy and the lovely Long-billed Starthroat. King Vultures and both Ornate Hawk-Eagles and Black Hawk-Eagle appear overhead from time to time and we've a good chance of seeing one or more of Barred Forest-Falcon, Collared Forest-Falcon and White Hawk.

Days 11 – 14 (am)

Palenque

During the evening of Day 10 we will have settled into the lovely Misión, a superb hotel set on the edge of town, on three sides surrounded by thick forest. Not surprisingly the grounds are full of fauna, so we'll plan to have plenty of time for siestas here when we can explore or enjoy the amenities. These include an enticing swimming pool and a Temascal. This is a kind of pre-hispanic hamam which is stunningly set in a very secluded spot with high rainforest trees draping lianas over the scene. You can relax in an outdoor jacuzzi of considerable power as monkeys watch from above and hummers zip past just above the frothing waters. The hotel grounds are great for butterflies with the Common Morpho very obvious while Yellow-fronted Owl Butterflies often sit on the walls outside our rooms. There's Tiger Heliconians, Blue-Gray Satyrs, Gray Crackers, and the lovely Chiapas Stripe-Streak.

We'll spend plenty of time amongst the ruins at Palenque, mostly looking at the abundant birds and butterflies, but we'll also offer an archeological tour for those that want to find out more about the impressive structures dotted through this atmospheric site. Many people rate Palenque as the most beautiful of all the ancient Maya sites. The setting is indeed fabulous, the impressive structures nestling at the base of the Tumbalá Mountains with the great floodplains of the Usumacincta River stretching northwards all the way to the coast. We'll explore the striking Temple of the Sun and Temple of the Cross, wander the Ball Courts, and admire the Temple of Inscriptions, set with high canopy rainforest looming over it. Indeed it is the forest itself that provides much of Palenque's beauty, with yellow-flowered trees standing out against the varied greens and reddish tints of the rest of the forest. It is a fantastic place for birds and butterflies. The huge Yellow-bordered Owl Butterfly sits quietly on tree trunks and trying to photograph it we disturb several butterflies flashing indigo as they leave; a bunch of Purplewings. Groups of Many-banded Daggerwings sip salts as do stunning Yellow-rimmed Eighty-eights. We'll hear Crackers as they sit in groups on the lower trunks, clicking their wings in chorus. We'll see Stoplight Catones, Little Banners and Pearly Leafwings as well as a whole host of skippers, some of them really beautiful such as the Red-collared Firetip and the Brilliant Blue-Skipper. The Beautymarks are a bit of a holy grail for butterfly enthusiasts and Palenque is home to all four Mexican species. They are incredibly beautiful insects with the single or double-striped wings adorned with brilliant reds and blues, and the hindwings, in the case of the Sword-tailed Beautymark, having tails as long as the wings!

Though Palenque does get busy with tourists few visit early in the morning and later there are numerous quiet trails where we'll also find the birdlife at least a little habituated to the presence of people. Thus photography and viewing of normally shy species can be easier at Palenque than more remote sites. In particular species such as Royal Flycatcher, Tody Motmot and Scaled Antpitta might be seen. Slaty-tailed, Collared, Violaceous and Black-headed Trogons are all found along its trails. Other quality species include Great Antshrike, Barred Antshrike, Golden-hooded Tanager,

White-collared and Red-capped Manakins, Thrushlike Mourner, Grey-collared Beccard, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Golden-Olive Woodpecker, Pale-billed Woodpecker, seven species of Woodcreeper, and an abundance of warblers, orioles and flycatchers.

A beautiful wide trail takes us down through forest of great beauty. The trees are varied, and draped in lianas, and there are many flowers in the mid and canopy levels. Amongst the eleven species of hummingbird known from the site are the stunning White-necked Jacobin and rare Wedge-tailed Sabrewing. Two small rivers descend through cascades and waterfalls making a sublime scene. Various crescents, heliconids and satyrids flit through the forest corridors where we'll get close up views of Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, as well as Worm-eating Warbler, Black-throated Saltator and Eye-ringed Flatbill. There is an excellent museum and book and craft shop. The open areas around it are great for photographing butterflies (and toucans and monkeys!). Well over twenty species of swallowtail are known from Palenque, notably Ruby-spotted Swallowtail and the wonderfully named Confused Swallowtails, as well as Bow-lined Kite-Swallowtail and Victorine Swallowtail. The Green Heliconian is among a dozen or more species of Heliconian we can expect to see. Last word though on the butterflies might well go to a Regal Greatstreak or perhaps an Imperial Sunstreak, both shimmering emerald beauties that can easily claim to be among the world's most beautiful butterflies.

We'll spend a couple of afternoons out in the savannahs and marshes just east of Palenque where there is a superabundance of wetland birds. Large flocks of Whistling Ducks and Blue-winged Teal will be seen and in places the numbers of herons, egrets, ibises and jacanas beggars belief. Black-collared Hawk and Yellow-headed Parrot occur, but easier to see in numbers are Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures and White-tailed Hawks. Fork-tailed Flycatchers are a wonderful sight and quite common too and we'll look for Grassland Yellow-Finch, Plain-breasted Ground-Dove and Double-striped Thick-knees in the short-grass savannahs. Laughing and Aplomado Falcons survey the scene from prominent lookouts. Masked Ducks are rather a local speciality and we'll hope for two of Mexico's most spectacular birds, the immense Jabiru, and the rare Pinnated Bittern.

We'll also visit Roberto Barrios. This is a beautiful spot, set in hills and valleys that could easily take the name Blue Mountains though they are scenic rather than high. The river is quite something, another turquoise beauty, with great pools cut by bands of limestone over which the waters fall. Here is a marvellous array of butterflies. Red Zinnias attract Common Zebras, Theona Checkerspots and Orange-barred Sulphurs. There are Eighty-eights, Orion Cecropians, Four-spotted Sailors and lots of Gaudy Patches and Postmen. We'll see the fantastic Brilliant-blue Skipper, gorgeous White-banded Grayler, staggeringly bright Stoplight Catone, Leading Red-rim, lovely Fire-branded Metalmark, and the Confusing Sister, as well as White Satyrs, Polydamus Swallowtails, and Disturbed Tigerwings.

Day 14 (pm)

Evening flight to Mexico City

During the latter part of the afternoon we'll make the two hour journey from Palenque to Villahermosa where after dinner we'll catch the late evening flight back to Mexico City and settle into the Grand Prix Hotel close by the airport.

Day 15

Teotihuacan. Evening departure from Mexico City

After breakfast we'll head out to Teotihuacan, the City of the Gods. Over a hundred thousand people lived in the city in its heyday and the remains today are impressive still. Many of the structures date from around two thousand years ago. We'll take a look at the famed Temples of the Moon and the Sun, and the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, one of the most important Aztec deities. The semi-arid highlands here offer a completely different flora and fauna to the rest of the tour so pretty much everything we see will be new. Perhaps the star bird is the endemic Ocellated Thrasher. Bright green Xami Hairstreaks settle on pyramid-side weeds and Crevice Spiny Lizards do press-ups on the pyramid steps. Broad-billed Hummingbirds flit busily by and other birds we'll enjoy are Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Blue Grosbeak, Say's Phoebe and the beautifully patterned Cactus Wren. In the evening we'll return to the airport which is on the same side of town as the ruins for our 21.00 departure.

Day 16

Arrive UK/Europe

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the report from our previous tours to Chiapas. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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