

Belize & Guatemala

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 – 3(am)

To Belize City and to Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary

Looking down from the aircraft on the approach to Belize City's local airport we'll see idyllic white sand coral atolls then a brilliant green landscape of marshes, forests and mangroves. We'll certainly be keen to start exploring such a promising looking tropical paradise and before we've left the airport orioles, grackles and brilliant Vermilion Flycatchers will catch our eye. Soon we'll be exploring the channels and lagoons of Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. Snail Kites and Black-collared Hawks hunt overhead whilst the variety of herons, egrets, waders and kingfishers is really impressive.

Days 3(pm) - 8(am)

The Maya Mountains and Coral Cays – visiting the Cockscomb Reserve, the Sittee River, Manatees at Gales Point, Hummingbird Highway and the Blue Hole National Park, and Coral Cays for birds and snorkelling

A two hour journey to the gorgeous Parrot Cove Lodge takes us through distinctive local pine savannahs where we'll stop to look for Yucatan Bobwhites, various tanagers, the Rufous-browed Pepper-Shrike, and beautiful butterflies such as the lime and black *Siproeta stelenes* and pretty *Anartia fatima*.

The Parrot Cove Lodge could hardly be better situated with the jagged outline of the Maya Mountains inland, rivers and marshes to either side, a fine sand beach on the shore and Coco Plum Cay in the turquoise waters out to sea. Reef, rainforest clad mountains, rivers and marshes - all less than forty minutes away from a superbly comfortable lodge. Eight days hardly seems enough in such a paradise!

The wildlife of course starts by your Cabana door. Yellow-throated Warblers and Great-tailed Grackles provide musical accompaniment from the beachside coconut palms and Royal Terns sit quietly on the jetty. Breakfast is just yards from the sea - a good time to watch for Manatees that sometimes swim by. Just a few kilometres away is the bird-rich Sittee River. Immaculate Keel-billed Toucans and colourful Collared Aracaris happily feed just metres from us as squadrons of Yellow-headed and Red-ored Parrots fly over. Black-headed Trogons sit patiently as if waiting for us to finally notice they are there and there's Red-capped Manakins in riverside gardens, and fabulous Golden-hooded Tanagers and both Red-legged and Shining Honeycreepers in the citrus groves. In morning sunshine huge male Green Iguanas display their brilliant orange heads from atop riverside trees. Fork-tailed and Scissor-

tailed Flycatchers, both with improbably long tail streamers, perch above side channels where five species of kingfisher occur.

Speeding out to the Cays we'll encounter Bottle-nosed Dolphins cavorting in the bay. Hazy green islands soon become reef-fringed mangroves where we'll encounter one of the most wonderful sights of the tour - Man-O'-War Cay. The island's mangroves are covered in a dense nesting colony of Magnificent Frigatebirds. With wing spans exceeding six feet and long forked tails even one is impressive but thousands of them wheeling just above us will be a truly memorable experience. Many of the males will be sporting the glowing red throat sacs which they inflate to the size of a football! Past evocatively named Coco Plum Cay is Tobacco Reef and Carrie Bow Cay where the Smithsonian Institute has a Marine Biology Station. Underwater is a fantastically rich and colourful reef. Brain corals, gorgonians and Purple Sea Fans host brilliant Blue Tangs, Blueheads and Beaugregories, whilst various butterfly fish, trumpetfish and Bar Grunts add their wonderful shapes and colours to the scene. Snorkeling with the spectacular Spotted Eagle Ray as it flaps its five-foot wings is an amazing experience. On a nearby cay is a relaxing shady restaurant for those who would rather stay above the water.

Triangular Victoria Peak, the second highest of the Maya Mountains, is visible beyond the tracts of rainforest that form one of Central America's finest reserves, the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. Less than forty minute's journey takes us to the visitors centre where tanagers, euphonias and hummingbirds frequent flowers as do colourful butterflies such as orange *Dryas iulia* and yellow and black *Heliconius charitonus*. *Hamadryas* butterflies gather on tree trunks from whence they emit strange clicks and huge Blue Morphos patrol paths, landing where shafts of sunlight illuminate the tracks of animals that passed this way in the night. Jaguar tracks are a frequent sight - Cockscomb hosts the densest population of the New World's top predator and sightings, whilst not commonplace are nonetheless regular - we have perhaps a 5% chance of seeing one during optional night trips. We'll certainly see other mammals such as Red Brocket Deer, Common and Gray Four-eyed Opossums, Gray Fox and maybe Ocelot or Kinkajou. White Hawks stand sentry on tall trees along the entrance road where we'll look for ant swarms as these are followed by an extraordinary variety of birds. Usually a dozen and sometimes up to thirty species of woodcreepers, woodpeckers, antshrikes, antbirds and antwrens are the followers, snapping up any morsel 'flushed' by the marauding ants - it is fascinating to watch these bird 'guilds' in action.

The road northwards is known as the 'Hummingbird Highway' and with good reason for these avian gems are abundant along its length. Stripe-tailed, White-bellied and Rufous-tailed Hummers frequent flowering bushes in the carpark at Blue Hole and we'll encounter a rich variety of birds, including the fabulous Lovely Cotinga, as we walk the trails in this picturesque national park. Gales Point in the Southern Lagoon is home to a sizeable population of Manatees and we'll spend a day around the lagoon where aside from a variety of waterbirds we'll enjoy a relaxing lunch in a garden with

lagoon on either side and an encounter with the Manatees themselves. Small boats take us just a few hundred yards from the shore and we'll be able to sit quietly as the Manatees (and occasional Tarpan) surface around us.

Days 8(pm) – 11(am)

Tikal National Park

Driving away from the Caribbean shores we'll make a stop at Guanacaste National Park where motmots, kingfishers and Belize's national flower, the 'Black Orchid' will be on the agenda. Then we'll pass the Mayan ruins of Xunantunich where fruiting figs attract myriad orioles, euphonias, tanagers, parrots and tityras. Crossing the border into Guatemala we'll stop for lunch. We'll make a short stop on the shore of Peten Itzá Lake to look for Ruddy Crake, Snail Kite, Northern Jacana, Purple Gallinule, Amazon Kingfisher, Anhinga and many waders. We will spend the rest of the afternoon around our hotel in Tikal where we can see Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift, Red-lored Parrot, Yucatan Flycatcher and Roadside Hawk, among others.

The first light in the morning will see us on the trails of the tropical dry forest at Tikal National Park. This famous destination has both categories of a UNESCO Heritage Site, culture and nature, and is part of the largest protected area in Guatemala: The Mayan Biosphere Reserve. The atmosphere is spellbinding. At dawn the booming calls of Howler Monkeys echo through misty tree tops and Montezuma's Oropendulas scold harshly from trees which see an endless toing and froing of parrots and parakeets. The birding here is exceptional with colourful and noisy birds like Olive-throated Parakeet, Pheasant Cuckoo, Gray-throated Chat, Rose-throated Tanager, Keel-billed Toucan, Masked Tityra, Brown-hooded Parrot, White-fronted Parrot and Olive-throated Parakeet making the whole experience unforgettable. Ponds near the hotel are home to dragonflies such as Roseate Skimmer, Flame-tailed Pondhawk and Spot-tailed Dasher and we can find plenty of butterflies even around the lodge grounds and especially the nearby trail to the ponds where we can see Purple-washed Eyemark, Dark Kite-Swallowtail, Mimosa Yellow, White Peacock, Many-banded Daggerwing, American Snout and Banded Peacock.

After breakfast we are going to walk through the ancient structures of this classic Mayan city to learn about the importance of this ancient megapolis. Five enormous temple-pyramids dominate the site which encompasses thousands of other structures many of which still lie buried under mounds of earth. Bat Falcons hunt from the Temple of the Jaguar which covers the tomb of Hasaw Chan K'awil whose marvellous artefacts can be seen in the local museum. With luck we'll see the rare Orange-breasted Falcon too. It is a wonderful haven for wildlife and because everything is thoroughly protected some of the fauna around the temples has become quite friendly. It comes as quite a surprise when the first White-nosed Coati you see walks up to you, sniffing the air to see if you are carrying its favourite snack in your camera bag! Fabulously beautiful Ocellated Turkeys aren't after food but neither are they very

keen to move out of the way! Both of these provide marvellous photographic opportunities. Normally shy Great Curassows, a huge bird usually preoccupied with its 'for the pot' potential, here swagger confidently between tomb and temple whilst lively troupes of Black-handed Spider Monkeys are often more noisy than the mid-morning tourists visiting from their hotels in Remate. Tikal has only three small hotels on site so mornings and evenings are quiet and this is when we'll spend time exploring both the ruins and the fabulous wealth of wildlife.

On our second full day at Tikal we will be exploring some areas where very few people reach inside Tikal National Park. Pale-billed Woodpecker, Northern Barred Woodcreeper, Ornate Hawk Eagle, King Vulture, Mealy Parrot, Keel-billed Toucan, Crested Guan, Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, Black-faced Grosbeak, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper and Wood Thrush are amongst a very high quality cast of birds that we can observe during our walk and there's numerous butterflies too such as Cloaked Scintillant, Bright Brangas, Gray Cracker, Plain Satyr and the lovely Erato Heliconian.

Days 11(pm) – 13(am) Las Guacamayas Biological Station

The largest wetlands in Central America are protected in the Laguna del Tigre National Park. In the mix of ponds and open country Vermillion Flycatchers, Laughing Falcons, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and Gray-crowned Yellowthroats are common. Inside the park we will take a boat to reach Las Guacamayas Lodge, nestled in biodiverse Tropical Moist Forest, a paradise where Wedge-tailed Hummingbirds, White-necked Jacobins, Scaly-throated Hummingbirds, Red-capped Manakins, Black-headed Trogons and Green-backed Sparrows visit the gardens. Dragonflies such as Mexican Wedgetail, Amelia's Threadtail and Smoky Rubyspot can be seen.

The next day, after a traditional breakfast, we will take a boat ride in a quest for one of the most beautiful and elusive herons in the world, the Agami Heron. Gliding along the calm channels we will search the banks for this lovely bird as well as Yucatan Woodpecker, Sungrebe, Green Jay, Yellow-tailed Oriole, Russet-naped Wood-Rail, American Pygmy Kingfisher and Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. We'll walk trails where Golden-hooded Tanager, Black-faced Antthrush, Tody Motmot, Stub-tailed Spadebill and Royal Flycatcher can be found. As the day warms butterflies become abundant and we'll see quite a range of species such as Yellow-bordered Owl-Butterfly, Common Lemmark, Chestnut Crescent, Confused Groundstreak, Dina Yellow, Painted White, Statira Sulphur, Transandean Cattleheart, Polydamas Swallowtail, Alana White-Skipper and Long-spotted Silverdrop.

An after-dinner boat trip will give us the chance to find nocturnal creatures such as Kinkajou and to look for Northern Pottoo, Yucatan Poorwill, Barn Owl and Common Pauraque.

Laguna del Tigre National Park is the only known nesting spot for Scarlet Macaw in Guatemala. We'll walk along a road searching for these spectacular birds and we'll also have the chance of finding Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-collared Manakin, Gray-headed Tanager, White-crowned Parrot, Kentucky Warbler, Tawny-winged Woodcreeper, and Chestnut-colored Woodpecker. Other species we are likely to encounter in the national park are White-whiskered Puffbird, Northern Schiffornis, Golden-crowned Warbler, Northern Bentbill and Long-billed Gnat-wren.

Days 13(pm) & 16(am) Los Tarrales

After lunch on Day 13 we'll transfer to the Fuentes Georginas Regional Park. This reserve is famous for the Sulphur hot springs and pools in the middle of a tropical lower montane wet forest around 8000 feet above sea level. This is a unique place because it is the right altitude to find several range-restricted species such as Wine-throated Hummingbird, Garnet-throated Hummingbird, Unicolored Jay, Rufous-browed Wren, Black-capped Siskin, Highland Guan, Fulvous Owl, Mexican Whip-poor-will and even the almost mythical Horned Guan with little effort. Butterflies like Liris Skipper, American Lady, Orange-striped Eighty-eight, Black-pointed Tilewhite, Yellow-striped Gemmed-Satyr and Guatemalan Copper, the only representative of its group found in Central America, will keep the lepidopterists busy.

By mid-morning we will go back to hotel and then travel to Los Tarrales Reserve, a world-famous destination in the Guatemalan Pacific Foothills where more than three hundred bird species are found. The grounds of Tarrales Lodge start around 2000 feet above sea level and reach all the way to the top of Atitlan Volcano at 10000 feet above sea level.

Cinnamon Hummingbirds are frequent around the lodge whilst fruit feeders there are visited by Yellow-throated and Scrub Euphonias, Yellow-winged Tanagers, Altimira, and Baltimore Orioles, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Rufous-naped Wren, Black-headed Saltator, Summer Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, White-throated Magpie-Jay, and the lovely Blue-crowned Motmot amongst others. There are some nice dragonflies about such as Ornate Helicopter, Many-striped Skimmer, Great Spreadwing, Carmine Skimmer and Slough Amberwing. And butterflies around the lodge are particularly varied with species such as Thoas Swallowtail, Blue Metalmark, Queen Butterfly, Red Cracker, Ruddy Daggerwing, Tiger Mimic-Queen, Yellow-fronted Owl-Butterfly, White-edged Red-ring, Confluent Skipper, and the Two-barred Flasher all present.

We'll be able to visit several different ecosystems here though tropical lower montane wet forest is dominant. In this there are several near endemic birds like Yellow-naped Parrot, Lesson's Motmot, Pacific Parakeet, White-bellied Chachalaca, Rufous-naped Wren, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Tody Motmot, Violet Sabrewing, and Spot-breasted Oriole. The La Rinconada trail will allow us to make the acquaintance of the gorgeous

Long-tailed Manakin and some special hummingbirds like Blue-tailed Hummingbird, White-bellied Emerald and the Blue-throated Goldentail. As the day warms butterflies are very varied along here and include Golden Melwhite, Sky-blue Greatstreak, Confused Tigerwing, Heliconid Ticlear, Guatemalan Tegosa, Mexican Fritillary, many Satyr species, Guava Skipper, Common Ghost-Skipper and Gold-spotted Aguna.

Most surely the highlight of our stay, if we are successful, will be a search for the fabulous Azure-rumped Tanager. To see this very beautiful tanager we'll go up into the cloudforest. It is here that we'll also look for Green-throated Mountain-gems and Black-throated Jays, and we'll have another chance at the Horned Guan. Late in the afternoon we'll make the short journey back to Guatemala City and spend the night at the Radisson Hotel there.

Day 16(pm) & 17 Departure from Guatemala City

We've an early morning flight out of Guatemala City via a US Airport, landing back in the UK very early in the morning of Day 17.

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