

Sierra Madre Oriental

Mexico's Mysterious East

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

To 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.

Day 2

Bernal Pueblo Magico and into the Sierra Gorda Mountains

After breakfast we'll head northwards out of the metropolis and across the Bajío to the Pueblo Mágico of Bernal where we'll stop for lunch. Pueblo Mágicos are a select group of villages and small towns in Mexico recognized for their astonishing beauty, rich history or extraordinary legends. In the case of Bernal it's the mixture of superb location under the great 'sugarloaf mountain' that dominates the small town, and its lovely streets full of artisans and sumptuous food outlets. We'll get to enjoy a little of the latter for lunch and we'll spend a little time exploring the streets. Even inside the Pueblo Mágico our first Two-banded Swallowtail will be noted and the Grackles will be noisily accompanying us. We'll no doubt see our first brilliant Vermilion Flycatchers before continuing our route to Conzá, a town in the midst of the sublime landscapes of the Sierra Gorda.

Days 3 & 4

Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve

The Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve, occupying the northern third of the State of Querétaro, is at the top of the Mexican biodiversity league. From the oldest semi-desert in the country, enduring for around 65 million years, to the coniferous forests of the highest ridges, life flourishes here. The extraordinary richness found within its oak forests, tropical forests, riparian forests, and the ever-shady cloudforests, provide a home to a staggering 800 species of butterfly, fully one-third of the Mexican total. There's 340 bird species including Magnificent Hummingbirds and Bumble-bee Hummingbirds, Mountain and Elegant Trogons, Blue-crowned Motmot, and endemics Bronze-winged Woodpecker & Crimson-collared Grosbeak. There's 110 species of Mammal and an amazing 134 species of Reptiles.

A winding path between ancient oak trees takes us to a lookout point on the Cerro de la Media Luna. This spectacular landscape is one of the most extraordinary sights of the Sierra Gorda where one can see the transition from the semi-desert to temperate forests. Around us will be Mountain Trogons, Bluebirds, Mexican Jays, Spotted Wrens, Magnificent Hummingbirds and Bumble-bee Hummingbirds. Pine Flycatcher, Blue-crowned Motmot, Collared Forest Falcon,

Elegant Trogon, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Scrub Euphonia, and Flame-colored Tanager are just some of the lovely birds we can see around El Chuvejé waterfall. This is a natural waterfall more than 35m in height whose crystal-clear waters drop into a river sheltered by magnificent *Platanus mexicana* trees. Many butterflies come to mud-puddle near the falls including Narrow-banded and Mexican Dartwhites, various swallowtails and the American Snout. Further east in these mountains we'll search for some of the specialities of the Sierra Madre and its temperate forests, such as Bronze-winged woodpecker, Black-headed Nightingale Thrush, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Crested Guan, and the rare endemic Bearded Wood-Partridge.

Magnificent Swallowtails glide through the sunlit glades bedecked in an amazing range of Salvias that offer a plentiful nectar source to the hummingbirds. The swallowtails are a spectacular sight, their large black wings, perhaps twice the area of a European Swallowtails, dissected by a brilliant golden band. The similarly marked but markedly smaller female Golden-banded Dartwhites, though looking like Magnificent swallowtail are in fact a 'White'. Two and Three-banded Swallowtails are also common and we'll see various Cattlehearts (a type of swallowtail) and the lovely Pink-spotted Swallowtail. In the higher forests are Mexican Pine-Satyr and various Crescents and Sisters. Lower down we'll find the strange Crackers. These butterflies audibly click their wings as they sit camouflaged on tree trunks. Here we'll find Brownish Cracker, Gray Cracker and the spectacular Orange Cracker. Large emerald and black Malachites lurk here and there and the impressive Rusty-tipped Page will be much enjoyed. Karwinski's Beauty is well-named and other beautiful nymphalids we'll see include the Red-rim, Orange-striped Eighty-eight, and the simply gorgeous Common Banner.

We'll not ignore the local culture either as right in the heart of the Sierra Gorda is the Mission of Santiago de Jalpan, built between 1751 to 1758 by Fray Junípero Serra, and now designated as a World Heritage site by UNESCO. Even the hotel's gardens are rich in birdlife – there's Ferruginous Pygmy Owls, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, Elegant Trogon, Blue-crowned Motmot, Gray-collared Becard, Elegant Euphonia, Rufous-capped Warbler, Masked Tityra, Spot-breasted wren, Audubon's Oriole, Broad-billed Hummingbird all to be seen within the property's garden and there's butterflies too such as the lovely Superb Cycadian, the Tropical Leafwing and the gorgeous Mexican Bluewing.

Day 5

Edward James's "Las Pozas" Garden, Xilitla, & Sótano de las Golondrinas

We'll make an early morning visit to the Sótano de las Golondrinas. This is sure to be a tour highlight! This huge sinkhole offers a unique natural phenomenon, in which thousands of White-collared Swifts undertake their daily journey to feed on passing insects. The spectacle has been described as a "river of birds" in the sky, while at the same time Green Parakeets circle to leave the sinkhole. After the spectacle, we will move to nearby Aquismón for a slap-up breakfast.

British aristocrat Edward James built a surreal sculptural garden known as "Las Pozas". This garden, surrounded by lush vegetation, became his resting place. It is an eminently surreal site for its sculptures, as well as being full of wildlife. The gardens are a result of James' search for a 'Garden of Eden' which took him from southern California into this quiet backwater of Mexico where with the help of one Plutarco Gustalum he found what he what he was looking for in Las Pozas. The gardens we see today were almost forty years (and \$5 million) in the making with extensive plantings of both native and non-native vegetation including thousands of orchids all providing a backdrop for the James' surreal sculptures. These are many and varied. Some are several stories high and have names like 'The Staircase to Heaven' and the 'The House on Three Floors Which Will in Fact Have Five or Four or Six'! The natural luxuriance of the garden means that we'll never be short of butterflies to watch such as Red-bordered Pixie and the gorgeous Fine-lined Stripe-Streak if surreal sculpture is not your thing. There's metalmarks in the shape of Purple-washed Eyed Metalmark and Quilted Metalmark, and some lovely Nymphalids such as Blue-eyed Sailor, Orange-striped Eighty-eight, Florida Purplewing, Mexican Heliconian, Variable Prestonian, Tiger Heliconian, the widespread but always beautiful Malachite, the elegant Pearly Leafwing, and the brilliant Stoplight Catone. We'll also see the Thick-tipped Greta, one of a group of glasswing butterflies, and the Surprising White. Surprising of course in that it's black! Though the brilliant red, blue or yellow highlights do take the eye. Avian interest is high with some really nice species such as Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, White-crowned Parrot, Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Tamaulipas Pygmy-owl, and the lovely Emerald Toucanet.

Day 6 – 7(am)

El Tajin, Cienega del Fuerte, Playa Maracaiba & The Gulf of Mexico

En route to the Gulf Coast we'll stop at El Tajin, a fantastic complex of pyramids that must rank with any of Mexico's more vaunted pyramid sites, this one lesser known due to its position well away from any of the regular tourist trails. Adjacent wooded patches have Rose-throated Becard, Masked Tityra, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Yellow-winged Tanager, Black-headed Saltator and Montezuma Oropendola. Butterflies are plentiful and include the Crimson Patch, the Red-rim, Camberwell Beauty (OK, here it is the Mourning Cloak), the gorgeous Whitened Bluewing, the Pipevine Swallowtail, and a whole range of confusing Crescents, Satyrs and Skippers...

The wetlands at Tecolutla will see us rapidly gaining a huge list of ducks, egrets, herons and the like. Crested Caracaras overfly the marsh sending the abundant Ruddy Crakes into hiding. Northern Harriers will just have arrived from the north along with a host of waders such as Yellowlegs and Pectoral Sandpiper. Tricoloured Heron, White bis and White-faced Ibis will all be seen and as well as a good variety of seedeaters, we'll see White-eyed Vireo and the impressive Altamira Oriole.

Day 7(pm) & 8(am)

Xalapa Botanical Garden

During the afternoon of Day 7 we'll travel south stopping by a streamside where Guatemalan Kite-Swallowtails with almost transparent wings gather to sip salts before reaching the charismatic town of Xalapa and the stunning Jardín Botánico Francisco Javier Clavijero. The botanical garden started forty years ago and took as its *raison d'être* the native subtropical forest and so the garden contains native forest with some exceptional large trees of *Ulmus mexicana*, *Ostrya virginiana*, and two localised oaks, *Quercus xalapensis* and *Quercus germana*. There's a truly stupendous *Platanus mexicana* too. Enjoying the local climate is an impressive collection of cycads and also some lovely trees of *Magnolia dealbata* and *Magnolia schiedeana*. Naturally occurring Bromeliads just love this place and adorn all the trees and there's plenty of orchids too. Mexican Cycadian butterflies a striking and lovely metalmark, are common here. One of the butterfly highlights of the trip will no doubt be an encounter with another metalmark, the tiny but amazing Carousing Jewelmarks, which if scaled up somewhat wouldn't look out of place in the Rio Carnival! Some other brilliant species here are the Common Brangas, and both Black-veined Greatstreaks and White-tipped Greatstreaks, hairstreaks all, and like the Jewelmark, dressed to kill. Even the skippers can be very attractive – the Emerald Agunas has a bold iridescent green and a white stripe across its wings. Wedge-tailed Sabrewings visit the garden's flowers and we'll look for Spot-breasted and Band-backed Wrens as well as Golden-Olive Woodpecker and Gartered Trogon.

Days 8(pm)-10

Huatusco Cloud Forests

The borders of Puebla and Veracruz states lie along a line of peaks that catch the air rising from the Gulf of Mexico. The resultant cloud forests are amongst the most beautiful and biologically rich in Mexico.

We'll visit an 'ex-farm' where the local landowner is doing his bit for re-wilding and is allowing the land to return to its former splendour. One of the cloud forests most significant inhabitants here is an oak tree. But this is not any old oak (and there are so many species in Mexico), this species has the biggest acorns of any oak in the World. The landowner is actively replanting *Quercus insignis* on his land and as well as his saplings we'll also see mature specimens of this lovely oak tree and of course the very impressive acorns. This is an exceptional area for butterflies with all manner of Tigerwings, Ticlears, and lots of those lovely Eighty-eights sunning themselves on the farm tracks. Under shade we'll find the transparent Clearwings, Gretas and Ithomias. There's Dartwhites and the unusual and strangely shaped Mimic-whites. There's Least Heliconian and exican Heliconians as well as the more widespread Erato Heliconian, the latter two species both having a red-banded wing and a yellow-banded wing but the opposite way round! White-striped Groundstreaks are stunning and perhaps it is not surprising to see Bromeliad Scrub-Hairstreaks given the number of bromeliads in the trees. There's White Satyrs and White-banded Satyrs, and Red-lead Fiestamark, a truly lovely metalmark that

doesn't always show the red in its name! We'll also hope to see the small but brilliant peachy-red, black and white little Zebra-tipped Geomark. Overhead we'll look out for Ornate Hawk-Eagle of which there are several pairs in the area. Barred Parakeets zip past occasionally and we'll look out for parties of Azure-hooded and Unicolored Jays. In the undergrowth is the lovely White-naped Brushfinch and we'll also look out for Collared Trogons and Amethyst-throated Hummingbirds.

Day 11

Orizaba & Sumichrast's Wren

Orizaba, also known as Citlaltépetl, is one of a series of stratovolcanoes strung across the Neo-Volcanic Axis in central Mexico. It is at a heady 5636m far and away Mexico's highest peak. What's more impressive is that it rises from land at relatively low levels and therefore looks all the more magnificent. Its stunning snow-capped cone is home to Mexico's largest glacier, and this feeds permanent rivers that have carved an extraordinarily complex landscape of canyonlands that flank the great volcano's eastern slopes. These are full of amazing birds and butterflies – gorgeous Anna's Eighty-eights are common, and we'll also see iridescent Navy Eighty-eights, Ruby-spotted Swallowtails, Pearly Leafwings, Orange Crackers, Splendid Mapwings, Lamplight Actinotes and Broad-banded Swallowtails. In the strange limestone karstic terrain south of the great volcano lives the enigmatic and rare Sumichrast's Wren, and here we'll also find Emerald Toucanet, Collared Trogon and the Wedge-tailed Sabrewing.

Dingy Purplewings erupt from shaded banks in numbers whilst the plentiful flowering herbs at this season attract White-spotted Tanmarks, Tiger-eye Hairstreaks, Great Tanmarks and Golden-snouted Scallopwings. The latter is a skipper - Mexico is exceedingly rich in skippers and we'll no doubt amass a substantial list. Though many are rather dull there are also quite a number of really rather beautiful and often surprisingly large species such as Two-barred Flashers, Frosted Flashers and Yellow-tipped Flashers. Common Morphos zoom up and down the canyons whilst mud-puddling spots can hold double-figures of Sulphur species as well as elegant Waiter Daggerwings.

As well as the rare wren there are other choice birds here too. Red-lored Parrots are always flying over and there's plenty of hummingbirds notably White-bellied Emerald and Azure-crowned Hummingbird. Blue-crowned Motmots will enthral us and other birds that tell of the almost tropical nature of the habitats here are Collared Aracari, Olivaceous and Streak-headed Woodcreepers, Tropical Parula Red-throated Ant-Tanager and Chestnut-headed Oropendola.

Day 12

Tehuacan-Cuicatlan Biosphere Reserve and Botanical Garden

The Tehuacan-Cuicatlan Biosphere Reserve protects the greatest cacti forests in a country most famous for them. Giant Barrel Cactus, *Ferocactus robustus*, squat amidst an impressive 'Cardonales' forest of species such as *Pachycereus weberi* and *Cephalocereus columna-trajani*, both of which can reach 15m in height –

truly an extraordinary sight. Amongst them are pretty little flowering Mammillarias and all manner of strange and wonderful and often flowering shrubs, trees and herbs. Many Hummingbirds visit these blooms notably the local Green-fronted Hummingbird and the well-named Beautiful Hummingbird. Roadrunners zip hither and thither and Ocellated Thrashers stab at passing insects.

Day 13 – 15(am)

Oaxaca: Monte Alban Zapotec Site & the Sierra Juarez

We'll finish in lovely Oaxaca, full of fine green-stone architecture and wonderful food, and surrounded by a marvellous habitats.

We'll visit Monte Alban, the zenith of the Zapotec culture. Founded around 500 BC and dominating the region from its ridgetop position for more than a thousand years Monte Alban faded into anonymity well before the conquistadors arrived. Blue Mockingbirds, Slaty Vireo and White-throated Towhee can be seen around the ruins and there's a good chance of seeing Gray-breasted Woodpecker. Our rather amazing list of wrens will continue with both Rock Wren and Canyon Wren, as well as the unusual Boucard's Wren too! Mexican Silverspots are a striking but common butterfly that can easily be seen around the site along with West Coast Lady and various Crescents.

Almost forty percent of Mexico is covered in a beautiful habitat known as Pine-Oak Forest. This varies hugely in appearance and species through the length of the country but it is invariably a most enjoyable habitat to spend time in and at La Cumbre in the Sierra Madre de Mihuatlán close to the city there is a particularly fine example of this genre. Here amongst pines and oaks draped in mosses and Bromeliads we can find some real avian gems such as Red Warbler, Blue-hooded Euphonia, Dwarf Jay and Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo. Both Painted Redstarts and Slate-throated Redstarts are common and we'll hope to see Mountain Trogon again. As we admire the beautiful mountain vistas the haunting song of the Brown-backed Solitaire will always be in the background. We'll also see Gray Silky-Flycatcher, Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, noisy Gray-barred Wren, Rufous-capped and Golden-browed Warblers, and lots of White-eared Hummingbirds. Streamsides on the way up are a good place to look for Mexican Dartwhites, gaudy Orange-striped Eighty-eights, Banded Mapwings, and both Red-spotted Patches and Guatemalan Patches. Higher up we'll look for Snowball Skippers and Black-pointed Tile-Whites and with luck the impressive Cloud-forest Beauty as well as the gorgeous Turquoise Emperor.

A must see in this area is the famed Tule Tree or Árbol del Tule, renowned as the 'stoutest' tree in the World! Though not so very tall (though still an impressive 35m) it is the 11m diameter trunk of this stupendous tree that sets it apart. It is a Montezuma Cypress of great age, one thousand five hundred years, and still counting!

Day 15 (pm)

Flight to Mexico City and departure

After a final chance to taste Oaxaca's famous cuisine at lunch on Day 15 we'll catch a flight back to Mexico City and then connect with our international flight back to Europe.

Day 16

Arrive Europe

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