

OAXACA & CHIAPAS

April 21-May 2, 2020

The Oaxaca valley is well-known for its splendid scenery, unique artisans, colonial architecture and pre-Columbian ruins, and fabulous cuisine. The birding is also great with a habitat mix of thornscrub, cactus laden foothills and montane pine forests. In and around the Oaxaca valley it is possible to see 27 species of birds endemic to Mexico including Beautiful and Dusky Hummingbird; Ocellated Thrasher; Slaty, Dwarf and Golden vireos; Oaxaca and Bridled Sparrow and White-throated Towhee. In the nearby mountains of Cerro San Felipe a different set of endemics can be seen including Collared Towhee, Red Warbler, Dwarf Jay and Long-tailed Wood-Partridge. In addition to birding the Oaxaca Valley we will have time to visit the pre-Mayan ruins at Monte Alban and Yagul, the weavers market in Teotitlan and the historic central zocalo in Oaxaca City. Further enhancing the experience will be each evening's culinary adventure during which we can sample the delicious cuisine for which Oaxaca is world-renowned. The second half of the tour will be spent in the state of Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico. Here over 500 species of birds occur including local rarities like Rose-bellied Bunting, Giant Wren, Nava's Wren, Slender Sheartail, Long-tailed Sabrewing and Belted Flycatcher. While in Chiapas we'll visit Sumidero Canyon, nearly as deep as the Grand Canyon, but cloaked in tropical dry forest. This spectacular geographical feature is a birder's paradise and we'll spend one full day seeking its avian treasures. We'll also spend time in the coastal lowlands around Puerto Arista looking for Giant Wren, White-bellied Chachalaca, Double-striped Thick-knee and Spot-breasted Oriole, and visit the Tuxtla Gutierrez Zoo where Great Curassow, Crested Guan and Plain Chachalacas wander the trails. We'll spend one day in and around the beautiful colonial city of San Cristobal de las Casas where Blue-throated Motmot, Rufous-collared Robin and Rufous-browed Wren can be found. The entire tour holds the possibility of 300 species of birds including over 40 species endemic to Mexico. Despite these overwhelming numbers, the tour will be conducted at a leisurely pace and, given the cultural opportunities, will be appropriate for both serious and casual birders alike. We will spend 4 nights in Oaxaca City, 4 nights in Tuxtla Gutierrez, 2 nights in Arriaga and a single night in Juchitan. This will keep packing and moving and their related stresses to a minimum, further enhancing your enjoyment of the tour.

Day 1-Tuesday April 21: Arrival to Oaxaca City. Upon arrival at the airport you will be picked up and transferred to our hotel. Since most flights from the U.S. do not arrive in Oaxaca City until later in the evening, dinner will not be included in the tour price. Night in Oaxaca City.

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Days 2-4-Wednesday-Friday April 22-24: During our three full days of birding in the Oaxaca valley our schedule will be flexible. This will allow us to plan our daily activities based upon weather and particular birds we are still seeking. It will also give us time to visit some of the indigenous villages and artisan markets for which the area is so well known. We will plan to visit the following sites:

The Ruins at Monte Alban: The famous ruins of Monte Alban are located at the top of a hill towering over 1000 feet above the city of Oaxaca and offer a panoramic view of the city and the surrounding areas. Monte Alban is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and served as a ceremonial and residential center for the ruling Zapotec elite who dominated this part of Mexico until about 500-750 A.D. The fact that the enormous stone structures were built at the top of this steep incline over 1500 years ago without the aid of machinery is mind-boggling. Although the ruins themselves hold little in the way of interesting birds, the arid landscapes covering the surrounding hillsides can be very productive. Here we will expect to find an array of Mexican endemics including Dwarf and Slaty vireos, Pileated Flycatcher, Dusky Hummingbird and White-throated Towhee. Among the ruins themselves we'll see Rock Wren, Common Ground-Dove, Nutting's Flycatcher and Vermillion Flycatcher.

The Ruins at Yagul: The ruins of Yagul are much smaller and attract fewer crowds than Monte Alban. Located about 30 minutes southeast of Oaxaca City, the site has over 30 structures that have been excavated including a military mausoleum, a large ball court, and a hilltop fortress. The road leading up the hill to the site is an excellent place to search for Black-vented Oriole, Bridled Sparrow, Gray-breasted Woodpecker and Thick-billed Kingbird. The surrounding desert vegetation hosts several endemics including Beautiful Hummingbird and Boucard's Wren. If we feel energetic we can hike up to an overlook that provides a gorgeous vista of the surrounding area and also is a good place to scan for Crested Caracara, White-tailed Hawk and other local raptors.

La Cumbre: We'll spend an entire day exploring the pine and cloud forests near La Cumbre, which after the arid valley below, will seem like another world. These mountains are home to several Mexican endemics including the highly localized Dwarf Jay, Gray-barred Wren, Russet Nightingale-Thrush, Red Warbler, Rufous-capped Brush-Finch, Collared Towhee, Mountain Trogon and Long-tailed Wood-Partridge. The flowering roadsides also hold many hummingbirds including Garnet-throated, Bumblebee and Green Violet-ear. As is usually the case with mountain birding the secret to success is to find mixed flocks. If we are lucky enough to locate one it should contain Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, Golden-browed Warbler, Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer, Crescent-chested Warbler, Olive Warbler, Hutton's Vireo, Tufted Flycatcher, White-throated Robin and much more. During our search the haunting song of the Brown-backed Solitaire will provide background music. We can't expect to see all of these birds in a single day but given our flexible schedule we will have a second opportunity to visit LaCumbre if we wish to do so.

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Teotitlan del Valle: We'll make an early morning visit to the scrubby hills above the town of Teotitlan del Valle. At the town reservoir we should find breeding Least Grebe, Black Phoebe and possibly a few lingering ducks and shorebirds. As we wind our way up the road into the mountains we'll pass through a progression of habitats ranging from arid scrub to cool pine forests. At the lower elevations we'll search for several important endemics including Ocellated Thrasher, Oaxaca Sparrow and West Mexican Chachalaca. Some of the commoner species will be Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Western Scrub-Jay and Curve-billed Thrasher. As we gain altitude we'll look for Black Thrush, Bridled Titmouse, Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, Aztec Thrush and other high elevation specialists. We'll plan to return to Teotitlan for lunch and then visit one of the local family run weaving operations, which produce beautiful carpets and tapestries. All of the wool is hand spun and the colors are produced using natural ingredients like cochineal and indigo. During our morning birding we are certain to see locals gathering materials for use in the weaving operations. This is a community that truly believes in "going local."

Garbage Gulch: This area is located along Highway 175 in the foothills below LaCumbre. Though the name of the area is less than appealing, a nice variety of Oaxacan endemics can be found here during a morning of birding. Some of the targets here will be Ocellated Thrasher, Dwarf Vireo, Slaty Vireo, Oaxaca Sparrow and Elegant Euphonia. Though we will have other chances to see these birds it is always to good to have several opportunities.

The Village of Arrazola: This small village about 30 minutes from the center of Oaxaca City is famous for its production of a unique handicraft called "Alebrijes." These whimsical wooden figures are carved from the wood of the copal tree and are well known among Oaxacan craft aficionados. Many of the residents of the town make and sell the figures and it is easy to spend several hours strolling the streets and chatting with the artists. Don't forget your wallet as most people find it impossible to resist the purchase of at least one of these colorful pieces of Mexican folk art.

Nights will be in Oaxaca City.

Day 5-Saturday April 25: We'll depart Oaxaca fairly early this morning as it is nearly a 5-hour drive to Juchitan de Zaragoza. Our first stop will be near a group of microwave towers near Mitla where we'll have final chances for Ocellated Thrasher, Dwarf Vireo and Oaxaca Sparrow, if we have not yet seen them. The road up to the towers is also good for Lesser Roadrunner. Throughout the the remainder of the drive the scenery is absolutely spectacular and will mitigate the need to spend much of a day in the vehicle. We'll also mix in several birding stops that might turn up White-throated Magpie-Jay and Orange-breasted Bunting and a quaint roadside lunch stop will give us chances for Green-fronted Hummingbird and Long-billed Starthroat. In the afternoon, as we near Juchitan, we'll stop at an archaeological site where we might find Lesser Ground-Cuckoo and the en-

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demetic and very local Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow. We will try to check into our hotel by 3:00 PM and after a short rest we'll drive south to the estuary at Santa Maria Xadani where there are often large numbers of shorebirds, terns and other water birds in late April. Night in Juchitan de Zaragoza.

Day 6-Sunday April 26: This morning we'll visit a thorn forest near Tehuantepec where we will focus on the endemic Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow. Other birds of interest here include West Mexican Chachalaca, Lesser Ground-Cuckoo, Laughing Falcon, Citreoline Trogon, Red-breasted Chat, Banded Wren and the stunning Orange-breasted Bunting, which can be downright abundant. Continuing west toward Chiapas, we'll stop at Bahia Ventosa to look for shorebirds and lingering waterfowl. Before checking into our hotel in Arriaga, we'll drive into the Sepultura hills to look for one of the tour's most beautiful birds, the endemic Rose-bellied Bunting. If there is sufficient energy and interest we may also take an evening drive to look for Pacific Screech-Owl and Buff-collared Nightjar. Night in Arriaga.

Day 7-Monday April 27: We'll begin with a riverside breakfast near the coastal town of Puerto Arista. As we eat we will be able to watch many birds streaming up and down the river. This is a good site for Limpkin, Common Black-Hawk and a host of other birds not likely to be seen elsewhere during the tour. After breakfast, we'll spend the entire morning the fields and coastal areas between Puerto Arista and Boca del Cielo. Our main goal here will be the endemic Giant Wren, but many other exciting possibilities will be available including White-bellied Chachalaca, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Spot-breasted Oriole, Northern Bobwhite, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater and possibly Double-Striped Thick-knee. We'll return to Arriaga for lunch and then check the nearby river flats for shorebirds, terns and other waterbirds. Night in Arriaga.

Days 8-11-Tuesday-Friday April 28- May 1: We'll have breakfast at our hotel and then revisit the hills above Arriaga on the old highway to Tuxtla. This area is the stronghold for the extremely range restricted Rose-bellied Bunting and in the early morning they are quite easy to find along the road. Other birds of interest here include Long-tailed Manakin (more often seen than heard), Green-fronted Hummingbird, White-lored Gnatcatcher, Striped Cuckoo and West Mexican Chachalaca. After a couple of hours of morning birding we will begin the 2-hour drive to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas. Our route will pass through some excellent open field habitat where we can look for Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and other interesting species. As was the case in Oaxaca, we will maintain a flexible schedule during our time in Tuxtla Gutierrez in order to maximize our chances of seeing the target birds. Though the timing of our forays will be left open we will visit the following venues.

Sumidero Canyon: Sumidero Canyon offers fantastic birding with many localized specialties and spectacular scenery; in short, it is a great place to spend an entire day. Habitats range from dry forest to more humid tropical forest and each area provides different

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species. In the drier areas we can look for Russet-crowned Motmot, Plain-capped Starthroat, Red-breasted Chat, Flammulated Flycatcher, Altamira Oriole and Varied Bunting while in the more humid regions we can expect Canivet's Emerald, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Cabanis's Wren, Blue-and-white Mockingbird, Northern Bentbill, Bar-winged Oriole, Northern-Emerald Toucanet and Fan-tailed Warbler, and at the overlook at the end of the road we can search for Slender Sheartail. One of the park's specialties is the Belted Flycatcher, which is a fairly common breeding species in bamboo thickets. This species is tough to see when it isn't nesting so the timing of our visit gives us an excellent opportunity of finding one. The birding here will be of the leisurely, roadside variety as there are many pullouts where we can stop as we move through the park. At the end of the road we'll reach a scenic mirador that will provide exquisite views of the Rio Grijalva valley. This overlook will make it clear why Sumidero has been made a national park.

Tuxtla Gutierrez Zoo: The Tuxtla zoo is a world class zoological park that exhibits many of southern Mexico's native animals in their natural habitats. To maintain this ambience the zoo has been vegetated with native tropical plants. This lush forest is a haven for birds and as we wander the grounds we can search for Great Curassow, Crested Guan and Plain Chachalaca, all of which have been successfully reintroduced here and are unusually common.

San Cristobal de las Casas: From Tuxtla Gutiérrez we will drive about an hour and twenty minutes to the lovely colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas to look for birds of Chiapas' highland pine-oak forest such as Blue-throated Motmot; White-eared and Amethyst-throated hummingbirds; Pine, Yellowish, and Buff-breasted flycatchers; Unicolored Jay, Black-capped Swallow, Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush and Gray-Silky Flycatcher. Nearer the city we should be able to locate Rufous-collared Robin, which is fairly common in San Cristobal's wooded parklands.

El Ocote: About 50 minutes from Tuxtla Gutierrez is a forested limestone outcrop that is home to one of Mexico's most localized endemics: Nava's Wren, which has only been recently split into a distinct species. Though the wren is the main attraction here, the reserve is filled with birds and worthy of spending an entire day. Possibilities include Canivet's Emerald, Long-tailed Sabrewing, Collared Trogon, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, Northern Bentbill, Green Shrike-vireo, Brown Jay, Slate-colored Solitaire, Crimson-collared Tanager, Band-backed Wren, Yellow-billed Cacique, Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush, Yellow-winged Tanager and many more. In 2012 we spent a full day at this venue and recorded nearly 100 species! Nights in Tuxtla Gutierrez.

Day 12-Saturday May 2: The tour ends this morning at the Tuxtla Gutierrez airport.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

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FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$2850** per person in double occupancy from Oaxaca City, Mexico. This includes all meals from breakfast on Day 2 to dinner on Day 11, all accommodations, ground transportation during the tour, airport transfers in Oaxaca City and Tuxtla Gutierrez, entrance fees and guide services provided by the tour leader. It does not include airfare from your home to Oaxaca City or home from Tuxtla Gutierrez, airport departure taxes (usually included in airline ticket), alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. The single supplement for this tour is **\$450**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please send a signed and completed registration form to Otus asio Tours at 900 Hillsborough Road in Chapel Hill NC 27516. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. **The deposit is payable by check; credit cards are not accepted.** The balance of the tour fee is due 90 days prior to the tour departure date and final invoices will be mailed in early January 2020.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Cancellation Penalties and Refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less \$250 per person is refundable. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date and after final payment is received the refunded amount will be limited to the amount that can be recouped from merchants and booking agents. This could be as little as 25% of the tour price. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.***

Refund Schedule

Before January 23, 2019: Your deposit minus \$250.

Cancellation on or after January 23, 2019: Refund amount dependent upon amounts that can be recouped and may be as little as 25% of the tour price.

BAGGAGE: As space in the vehicle is tight, we suggest that you limit your baggage to two duffel bags or a soft-sided suitcase. Please pack as lightly as possible! For protection against a lost bag, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, your binoculars, medication, toiletries, walking shoes, and documents in the carry-on.

CLIMATE, ALTITUDE, AND TRIP DIFFICULTY: The tour will be conducted at a leisurely pace, with most walks covering short distances on roads or trails. Altitude will vary from sea level to 9,000 feet elevation. To take advantage of the prime birding activity, we will begin our days at dawn and, on most days, have breakfast in the field. There may be hotels that will provide us with an early breakfast, but this isn't a certainty so we'll need to be prepared for picnic breakfasts. The weather should be clear and sunny

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for most of the tour, though unseasonable rains are a possibility. Tuxtla Gutiérrez will be hot and humid with daytime temperatures of 80-90 F. The mountains around San Cristóbal de las Casas and at La Cumbre may be chilly (40-60 F) in the morning with warm afternoons (60-80 F). In the Oaxaca valley it will be cooler and less humid with daytime highs around 80 F and pleasantly cool evenings.

CLOTHING: Light weight field clothing and casual attire are appropriate for this tour. A couple of pairs of quick dry lightweight pants shirts that can be washed in the evening will help minimize your packing. We recommend long-sleeved shirts and long pants for protection from biting insects and the sun. A comfortable pair of tennis shoes or hiking boots will be appropriate for footwear. Also suggested is a sweater or light jacket for the mountains. You may also want to bring a pair of gloves for the higher elevations.

DOCUMENTS: To enter Mexico you will need a passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure date. Upon entering the country you will be issued a tourist card. Both the passport and the tourist card must be carried with you while in Mexico.

HEALTH: Please remember to bring any prescription medicine you are taking and to pack it in your carry-on baggage. We recommend that you be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B. None of these are required for travel to Mexico but prudent travelers should be current on these things regardless of their destination. There are no required inoculations for travel to Mexico. Malaria is present in lowland rural areas in Chiapas but very rare at the higher elevations. We suggest that you check the CDC website for current recommendations regarding malaria. The web address is www.cdc.gov/travel.

Drinking the tap water is not recommended in most places in Mexico. Bottled or purified water will be available for purchase throughout the tour.

INSECT PROTECTION: Mosquitoes, chiggers, and other biting insects are not likely to be problematic during the tour. However it is always best to be prepared and we recommend bringing some insect repellent, just in case.

OTHER TRIP ESSENTIALS: If you are an avid shutterbug you will want to bring your camera and extra batteries. Other important items will be sunglasses, sunscreen, lip balm, water bottle, toilet paper and an alarm clock. You may also wish to bring a coffee cup and a plastic bowl for use at breakfast. This will prevent the need of buying disposable cups and bowls, which will add to Mexico's trash problem. A day-pack would also be a good idea.

MISCELLANEOUS:

There is no departure tax due at the airport. This fee is included in the cost of your air ticket.

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Electricity – 110 volts

Language – Spanish is the official language

Time – Central Standard Time