

Kingdom of the Monarchs Itinerary

Download Trip Details

Day 1: Mexico City, Mexico

Our monarch butterfly tour begins on arrival in Mexico City, with a transfer from the airport to our downtown hotel in the upscale Polanco district. Gather this evening for a welcome dinner with our Expedition Leader, followed by an orientation to the wonders that lie ahead. One of the world's most astounding natural events occurs each year in North America, featuring one of its most unlikely creatures: the delicate monarch butterfly. Every autumn, tens of millions of monarchs set flight on a remarkable 3,000-mile journey from the northeastern U.S. and Canada to their ancestral wintering grounds in the volcanic mountains of central Mexico. The location of their breeding grounds remained a mystery until 1977, and how an infant generation of butterflies finds it anew each year is still an enigma. Filled with anticipation, we look forward to tomorrow's journey into the mysterious kingdom of the monarchs.

Day 2: Angangueo—El Rosario Sanctuary

Leaving Mexico City, we drive into the Central Highlands past vistas of the snowcapped Nevado de Toluca volcano, bound for the small mountain town of Angangueo. Once a copper and silver mining town, today it thrives on butterfly tourism and local agriculture. The village is very picturesque, a tumble of pastel buildings set along narrow cobblestone streets that hug the steep mountain slopes. Enjoy a hearty lunch of homemade Mexican fare before making our first foray into the monarch kingdom at El Rosario Butterfly Sanctuary, one of several sanctuaries within the 129,000-acre Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve.

As we drive high into the hills in an open-topped truck, a few butterflies flit about, offering a hint of what awaits ahead. Riding small Mexican horses provided by the local community (and led by your own caballero, so no prior horseback experience is necessary), we ascend the trail through the forest as hummingbirds and red warblers accompany us to the heart of the monarchs' migration site. What we find is an almost surreal sight. At first glance, it looks as though the trees are covered with rusty autumn leaves. But soon we realize we are looking at millions of butterflies, covering the oyamel fir trees in a delicate, quivering blanket of black and orange. Boughs bend beneath their numbers, though each butterfly weighs less than half an ounce. Massed together in a colony, they cling to the trees in huge clusters to survive the cool winter temperatures. When the sun warms their parchment-thin wings, the monarchs take to the sky in a fluttering cloud of orange—so many that the air hums with their movement. Mexico's sanctuaries are the only place in the world where you can actually hear butterflies' wings beating. Their beauty is so ethereal that many Mexicans still hold the Aztec belief that the souls of the dead are reborn as monarchs.

Day 3: Angangueo—Chincua Sanctuary

At Chincua Butterfly Sanctuary, another magical encounter with the monarchs awaits. Riding horses along the established trail most of the way, we hike in the last bit to reach the mariposas. Sometimes the stream along the forest floor appears to flow orange, covered completely by butterflies as they descend to drink. As Mexican butterfly conservationist Carlos Gottfried said, "When you stand in a monarch sanctuary, your soul is shaken and your life is changed." During our visit, we hear about efforts to preserve this fragile forest ecosystem that is the key to the monarchs' survival, learning about what WWF–Mexico is doing in conjunction with local communities to protect the butterflies' habitat. Our visit is one way to assist, demonstrating to the local people that ecotourism can be a more viable and sustainable source of economic sustenance than logging. Later this afternoon, there's time to discover more of the village of Angangueo, known for its magnificent murals celebrating the importance of monarchs to the community.

Day 4: Angangueo—El Rosario Sanctuary / Valle de Bravo

This morning we return to El Rosario to observe the butterflies in the early morning light. In contrast to our previous afternoon visit, we'll witness the monarchs as they awaken for the day, hoping the sun will shine and warm their wings, prompting lively activity. As the butterflies take flight, we may see them float down to drink nectar from flowers or even alight on an arm or shoulder. The largest of the monarch sanctuaries in the region, El Rosario offers the best opportunity to view large numbers of monarchs in one location. After lunch in Angangueo, we travel to Valle de Bravo and the vacation resort of Avandaro, which means "dream place" in the Tarascan Indian language. Set on a lush hillside overlooking the valley, the hotel offers a relaxing setting in which to enjoy the fresh air and panoramic views from your casita, and perhaps a dip in the pool.

Day 5: Valle de Bravo / Toluca / Mexico City

We take a short hike to Bridal Veil Waterfall before driving to the nearby resort town of Valle de Bravo on tranquil Lake Avandaro. White stucco houses with red tile roofs are covered in bougainvillea, while brilliant flowers in the Plaza Independencia attract a host of birds. Have lunch overlooking the lake and join your Expedition Leader on a walk through the colonial town center and its busy market—a meeting point for locals and visitors alike. This afternoon we begin our return journey to Mexico City, stopping en route in Toluca, originally a 13th-century indigenous settlement, to visit Cosmovitral Botanical Garden. The building's interior, which houses 500 plant species from Mexico and around the world, glows with the ethereal light of stained-glass panels created by Toluca artist Leopoldo Flores. Say farewell over a classic Mexican feast before returning to the capital this evening for a late check-in at our hotel.

Day 6: Mexico City / Depart

Our monarch butterfly tour concludes with a transfer to the airport for flights home.

Physical Rating: Moderate