



TOUR INFORMATION FOR MEXICO *Oaxaca at Christmastime*

These notes are designed to help you prepare for your tour. Please read carefully.

ENTERING MEXICO: United Kingdom citizens will need a passport valid for at least six months from the date of departure. Visas are not required. Citizens of other nations should contact the nearest Mexican Embassy for entry requirements. Tourist cards are required and are issued by your entering airline.

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport and air ticket with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get replacements if your originals are lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopies in a separate bag to the originals.

INTRODUCTORY MEETING: The tour begins and ends in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca. The tour starts with an 18.00 meeting followed by dinner on Day 1 of the tour. This informal meeting affords the leader the opportunity to introduce everyone to each other and to let you know generally what to expect on the trip – pace of the tour, daily routine, etc. If possible, please arrange for your flights to arrive by late afternoon so that you can be present at this meeting. If you can't arrive before early evening, you may want to consider arriving a day early.

TIME DIFFERENCE: The local time in Oaxaca City is -5 hours (GMT).

CURRENCY: The currency in Mexico is the Mexican Peso (MXN). It is always helpful to have some pesos (about £15 worth) with you, and these can be obtained at an ATM in Mexico. Often it is best to change as much as you think you will need at start of the trip. The advent of ATMs means that traveller's cheques are becoming obsolete, and cash or an ATM card is the best way to obtain currency.

LANGUAGE: The major language in Mexico is Spanish. English-speakers are seldom encountered except in the larger city hotels. Your leaders will speak Spanish but understanding even a few basic words may add interest to your trip, so you might consider bringing a small English-Spanish dictionary or phrase book.

CLIMATE: This is the dry season, but we are far enough from the equator that cold fronts from the North America can have a strong effect. Near Oaxaca City and in the mountains early morning temperatures can be quite cold, into the 30's F (-1°C). If it's clear and calm after a cold front, frost is even possible on some mornings. During the passage of a cold front, a persistent mist and fog with wind at 45°F (7°C) can feel even colder, and the high temperature in the mountains may not get much higher than 55-60°F (12°-15°C). But most days it's very pleasant, a chilly 45-50° first thing in the morning, then an hour or two after sunrise the temperatures rise with the sun, peaking around 65-75°F (18°-23°C) in the mountains and possibly up to around 85°F (30°C) in the valley and at Tuxtepec (where it also much more tropically humid). We rarely encounter heavy rain, but light rain or mist is possible in some areas, especially on our trip to Tuxtepec.

In summary, you should be prepared with clothing layers, including gloves and hat, and if misty in the mountains above Oaxaca, rain/wind pants and jacket would be a good idea.

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ALTITUDE: The Valley of Oaxaca is situated at between 5,300 and 6,000 feet. On Cerro San Felipe we'll be birding (slowly) between 9,000 and 10,000 feet.

PACE OF TOUR: We plan to be in the field at dawn, about 06:45, which means an 06:00 departure most days, and an 05:30 departure on at least two. Birding sites are usually 30-45 minutes from the hotels. We usually finish our day's birding before lunch, after which we stop at a ruin, market, or the Tule Tree of more cultural interest, getting back to the hotel between 14:00 or 16:00 with time off until our checklist session and dinner starting at about 18:00. On one day we are back at the hotel for lunch, followed by a siesta and a 16:00 departure for the Noche de Rábanos downtown. We offer owling on one day; starting with an early picnic dinner in a beautiful pine-oak forest.

Birding in and around the valley of Oaxaca is from 5,300 to 6,000 feet in elevation. Birding around the Monte Albán ruins involves walking on uneven ground. Some trails are narrow, scrubby, and thorny (shorts not recommended). There are short series of steps and some moderate slopes within Monte Albán as well as at Yagul.

The drive to and from Tuxtepec takes a full day (with birding stops) on a paved two-lane highway. On those two days, we start with an 05:30 departure. During our full day at Tuxtepec we bird all morning but come back to the hotel for lunch; an optional birding outing is offered in the afternoon.

One Tuxtepec trail we hope to take, in search of Sumichrast's Wren, is about a half mile round trip on very uneven and highly eroded rocky limestone in the forest understory. We proceed very slowly and carefully but those who find this one outing too treacherous may wish to stay back at the vehicle for the two hours or so that we bird here. On Cerro San Felipe above Oaxaca City, we will be birding on dirt roads at about 9,000-9,900 feet. We will be walking slowly at this elevation, but some stretches of road are steep and pose possible difficulties for those with bad knees or hips. A hiking stick might be useful.

Throughout the tour we do lots of standing and watching, and we generally move very slowly. You may find taking a lightweight travel stool that you can carry with a strap over your shoulder useful.

A small amount of group time will be devoted to outings of a more cultural interest, such as visiting the Night of the Radishes, viewing the *calendas*, seeing the famous Tule Tree and spending about one-half hour each at several of the markets and ruins. We'll be at Monte Albán and Yagul ruins a bit longer but birding during that time. Some people may find our limited time in these locations too brief. You may consider arriving a day or two early or staying later if you wish to have more time for shopping or a more complete tour of the ruins (multilingual guides are for hire at Monte Albán). Also, highly recommended by past participants is a tour of ethnobotanic gardens in downtown Oaxaca; in 2016 a 2-hour tour in English was offered only on Thursdays.

The Midnight Mass on the 24th is an attraction for some; Fridays offer a Guelaguetza dance performance, museums and an ethnobotanical garden are popular attractions, and several outlying villages are frequent tourist destinations for their market specialties. Arrangements to visit all of these can be made through the transportation company we use or with the travel desk in our Oaxaca City hotel. The internet is also an excellent resource.

HEALTH: **It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting.** Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

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It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations. These include measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, varicella (chickenpox), polio, and your yearly flu jab. It is further recommended that most travellers have protection against Hepatitis A and Typhoid.

Evidence of a Yellow Fever vaccination must be shown only if you are arriving from an infected area.

Insects: Biting insects and arachnids are seldom a major nuisance although chiggers and biting gnats can be locally numerous at Tuxtepec, and there may be a few mosquitoes active in the late afternoon/early evening even in Oaxaca; only those who are attractive to them and are sensitive to such bites will even notice. Careful application of repellent provides good protection and the leader will advise you when it will be necessary. In general, a repellent should contain 30% of the active ingredient, diethyltoluamide (DEET). Care must be taken to avoid getting the DEET repellent on optical equipment as DEET dissolves older rubber and plastics and can damage coated lenses.

The best prevention against chiggers (but also somewhat helpful against mosquitoes) is to treat your clothing with permethrin one to a few days before you leave home. This non-staining, odourless chemical is non-toxic to humans and protective on clothing through several launderings. The best product is a 10% concentrate which you dilute in the provided large, resealable bag; the clothing is then soaked in it for a few hours and hung out to dry. Be sure to look into this option well in advance of the tour in order to have it delivered on time. Camping supply stores also sell sprays containing 0.5% permethrin, while online sources also offer pump sprays as well. Bring a good insect repellent for mosquitoes and other insects that we'll occasionally encounter.

Anyone who is unusually sensitive to insect bites and stings (ants, wasps) should consider bringing an antihistamine such as Benadryl; ask your doctor for more information. Although pharmacies in Mexico are excellent and well-supplied they are impossible to visit during most of this tour's schedule, so bring enough of the medications you normally use to last the duration of the trip. A first-aid kit will be available during the tour.

Malaria: We understand that travellers to rural areas in the Mexican state of Oaxaca are at risk for malaria. We presume they mean only the tropical elevations such as near Tuxtepec, where we do spend two nights. In reality, Malaria is extremely rare here, and our leaders never take a prophylaxis. Useful information on all aspects of malaria, including how to reduce your chances of being bitten can be found at the website <http://www.preventingmalaria.info>.

Miscellaneous: Sun in Mexico can be very intense. Please bring adequate protection, including a sun hat and a strong sun screen of at least 15 rating. We have found that with careful eating habits, intestinal problems can be largely avoided.

Immodium or Pepto Bismol in tablet form can be recommended as the best treatment for occasional traveler's diarrhea. Gatorade or other electrolyte-replacement drinks in powder form are also worth bringing, as they replace the vital salts and minerals lost during a bout of diarrhea.

In most of Mexico it is recommended not to drink tap water. We will be carrying bottled water and other drinks with us during our days.

It may be difficult to obtain any special medication during the tour, so bring all you are likely to need.

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For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

ACCOMMODATION: In Oaxaca City we stay in a very nice hotel on the hill overlooking the city. The extensive grounds have lots of trees and are surrounded by brushy habitat that can be full of birds. There is a swimming pool. We are not immediately next to downtown, but it is walkable and only a 10-minute (50 pesos) taxi ride; the hotel also provides a complimentary shuttle that runs every hour in the late morning and evening. In Tuxtepec our hotel is much simpler but still modern, with air conditioning, private baths, and a hotel restaurant. Wi-Fi is available in both hotels.

LAUNDRY: A laundry service is available at our hotel in Oaxaca City, but we are not in Tuxtepec long enough for this to be an option.

ELECTRICITY: Electrical current is the same as in the US (110v, AC60HZ) and plugs are parallel prong. Power failures occur, but not with any regularity. Appliances with especially broad ground prongs may not fit outlets at some hotels. An international travel plug is useful and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

FOOD: Breakfasts will be picnics in the field, generally consisting of hard boiled eggs, yogurt, cereal, fruit, etc. Most lunches will be in restaurants, either at our hotel or near our birding, with at least three picnics in the field consisting of sandwiches with cheese and cold meat, fruit, fresh guacamole (made in the field!), snacks and cold drinks. All dinners will be in local restaurants, with the exception of one picnic dinner which will be a bit more substantial than our lunches, followed by owling. In general, the food in Oaxaca City is excellent to outstanding and is often regarded as the pinnacle of Mexican cuisine, which is generally only hot if you add hot sauce to it; restaurants will warn you if any dish is naturally hot. Rich chile-nut sauces of several kinds, called *mole*, and local vegetables and side dishes are consistently raved about during the tour. We make a point to visit three or four of the top restaurants in the city.

Sunbird tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regrettably, not be accommodated. Our tours are carefully scheduled to ensure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to take supplemental food with them.

DRINKS: Bottled water, a soft drink or a beer (or wine if appropriate) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

DRESS: Informal throughout. We have dinner in nice restaurants on several nights where field wear may not be appropriate, but nothing is formal.

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FIELD CLOTHING: The following items are basic. The best approach to the variable climate is to take several layers of clothing that can be added or subtracted according to changes in temperature.

Long-sleeved cotton or fast-drying microfibre shirts	T-shirts
Lightweight wool or wool-blend field socks	Sun hat
Lightweight sweater or Fleece	Lightweight gloves
Heavier sweater / down jacket	Cotton trousers
Sturdy hiking boots for day hikes	Wind/rain-proof trousers
Lightweight raincoat, or wind-proof jacket	Warm cap

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS:

Alarm clock	Sunscreen
Notebook and pencil	Folding umbrella
Small torch with spare batteries	Wrist watch
Small rucksack/day pack	Insect repellent
Ear plugs (if you are a light sleeper)	Water bottle/canteen
Personal medication	Rubber flipflops for showers

Optional: Telescope & tripod (recommended if you have them), camera, film or memory cards, spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), field guide, swimwear.

Note: The most effective insect repellents are those containing at least 35% of the active ingredient diethyltoluamide (DEET). The higher the percentage, the greater the effectiveness. However, care must be taken to avoid getting the repellent on to optical equipment as it dissolves rubber and plastic and can damage coated lenses. A reasonably effective alternative, which isn't corrosive, is Mosi-guard, produced by MASTA, and we recommend this. It is available in most high street chemist (including those at the airport). Camping supply stores sell a product containing permethrin 0.5%, which must be applied directly to clothing in advance of wearing and allowed to dry. This non-staining, odourless chemical is non-toxic to humans and protective on clothing through several launderings. Please make sure you never to spray insect repellent inside the vehicle or when you are standing close to other participants – it may drift on to their optical equipment.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT: The leader will have a spotting scope, a basic first aid kit, maps and copies of the more important field guides and references, audio playback equipment, and a laser pointer.

LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

Bring what you need, but carefully consider the utility of each item. If you have it, please pack soft luggage, as soft luggage is more easily packed into the vehicles. Our leader(s) will help with luggage if they can, but please do not expect them to carry excessively heavy bags. Please do not bring any bag that is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself. Please bring two smaller, lighter bags rather than one very heavy one or alternatively pack a lightweight duffel in your one big bag and redistribute your gear once you join the tour.

For our two-night stay in Tuxtepec a smaller bag is convenient as we will be able to store the bulk of our luggage in a secure room at our hotel in Oaxaca City if you wish. You might also consider arriving with room in your luggage to add any shopping bargains you might pick up on the tour.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain. Although there will be occasions when bird photography is possible, a birdwatching tour is not normally the best means of pursuing this aim. Bring all your film or memory cards with you as it may be difficult to find precisely what you need during the tour. Camera equipment should be packed in moisture- and dust-proof bags, as a precaution. "Digiscoping" is perfectly compatible with the tour, though it is recommended you bring your own telescope as the leader's telescope is not available for this activity.

There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leaders will do all they can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities.

TRANSPORT: Transportation is by 12-passenger minibus. Those who suffer from motion sickness should bring your preferred medication. Participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles.

SMOKING: Smoking is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses when we have group meals together in restaurants. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: While you will probably find it useful to have a book to study the birds before and after the tour, you are not required to bring a field guide, and since your leader will know the birds and have the most important references, you may find it more convenient to leave your book at home than to carry it around. Using a book frequently in the field can also be a distraction from your and the group's enjoyment of the birds, and if you bring one, we suggest you leave it in your room during the tour.

There are many general books on travel in Mexico. Reading any of them will certainly enhance your enjoyment of the trip. One of the best is *Fodor's Guide to Mexico*, published by David McKay and edited by Fisher, Brown et al. Another very pleasant travel book about Mexico is Kate Simon's *Mexico: Places and Pleasures*, published by Thomas Crowell, 1979.

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Howell, Steve N. G. and Sophie Webb. 1995. *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. Oxford University Press. **Recommended**.

Dunn, Jon L. and Jonathan Alderfer. 2011. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. 6th Edition. National Geographic Society, Washington, DC. One of the top two field guides for North America, more portable than the Sibley guide. The new edition includes detailed subspecies maps. Recommended for the North American species that aren't included in the Howell & Webb.

van Perlo, Ber. 2006. *Birds of Mexico and Central America: (Princeton Illustrated Checklists)*. Princeton. This seems like the perfect size field guide, but given the very large geographic range and the inclusion of hundreds of species that do not occur in Mexico, the mediocre-quality illustrations are very small and of limited utility. Considering this plus the idiosyncratic taxonomy, nomenclature, and sometimes misplaced names in the index, we do not recommend this book.

OBTAINING BOOKS: Most of the field guides and the major ornithological references in print are available by mail order from booksellers specialising in natural history titles.

Natural History Book Service Ltd
Tel: 01803 865913
www.nhbs.co.uk

WildSounds
Tel: 01263 741100
www.wildsounds.co.uk

MAPS: Maps of the region may be available from:

The Map Shop
Tel: 01684 593146
www.themapshop.co.uk

Stanfords
Tel: 020 7836 1321
www.stanfords.co.uk

NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB: Please support this charity which aims to raise money to support conservation projects, encourages an interest in the conservation of birds, and liaises with and promotes the work of existing societies within the region. You will find their contact details and further information about the Club at www.neotropicalbirdclub.org

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses etc., and your air tickets will be sent out about three weeks before the start of the tour. If you have any questions about the trip, please contact us.