

EL TRIUNFO

MARCH 19 – 29, 2011

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In this one-of-a-kind trip, participants will experience the majestic mountain citadel known as El Triunfo—“The Triumph.” So wonderful is this place that many who go there behold its cathedral-like forest and spectacular birdlife with reverence. Victor Emanuel calls it his single most-favorite travel destination in the world.

The journey to El Triunfo is a journey back in time, to a previous age when the great forests of Mexico’s Sierras were pristine. The El Triunfo cloud forest is now regarded as the finest natural area remaining in Mexico. To hike these mountain trails and walk among El Triunfo’s one-hundred-foot trees and thirty-foot tree ferns is a rare privilege. In this extraordinary place, participants will have a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in one of nature’s true Edens, exploring an ancient cloud forest in search of some of the most captivating and enchanting birds in the American tropics.

At three hundred thousand acres, the El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve is a sanctuary for a spectrum of bird species whose worldwide ranges are restricted to the mysterious fog-shrouded cloud forests of southern Chiapas and Guatemala. We will spend three days at El Triunfo, walking the trails and peering into the surrounding forest for a suite of higher elevation species. The prospect of seeing such inhabitants as Emerald Toucanet and Garnet-throated Hummingbird is certainly alluring, but this cloud forest is also the domain of the Resplendent Quetzal and the incomparable Horned Guan, quite possibly the two most sought-after birds in Mexico.

For nearly thirty years, VENT has been taking people to El Triunfo to share her beauty and her wildlife. But this trip is much more than a visit to a single site. It is an adventure, and a wilderness trip unlike any other we offer. In addition to our time at El Triunfo, this trip features an unforgettable traipse through southern Mexico’s Sierra Madre de Chiapas. We’ll spend a full week on foot in the heart of the biosphere, climbing up the Atlantic slope, crossing the Continental Divide and descending the Pacific slope to our pick-up point north of Tapachula. Along the way, we’ll befriend a family of horsemen, whose sturdy pack animals are the key to a successful trip.

An added bonus is a full morning of birding at beautiful Sumidero Canyon, whose towering limestone walls support a diversity of plants and birds we will not see elsewhere. From start to finish, this trip promises excitement and adventure, first rate birding, and exhilarating physical exercise.

March 19, Day 1: Arrival in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas. Tour participants are encouraged to arrive at the Mexico City International Airport today in time to connect to Mexicana Flight 7927, which is scheduled to depart at 3:40 p.m. and arrive in Tuxtla Gutierrez at 5:05 p.m. (subject to change). Please allow at least 3 hours connecting time in the Mexico City Airport. Upon arrival, a transfer will be provided to our hotel. Those arriving on other flights may make their own way to the Best Western Palmareca where a room will be reserved in your

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name. This evening, at a time to be announced, the group will meet for a get-acquainted dinner and tour orientation.

NIGHT: Best Western Palmareca Hotel & Suites, Tuxtla Gutierrez

March 20, Day 2: Sumidero Canyon; Transfer to Jaltenango. We'll kick our trip off in grand fashion with a full morning of birding at Sumidero Canyon just outside Tuxtla Gutierrez. Now a national park, Sumidero Canyon offers visitors an outstanding collage of impressive scenery, fascinating botany, and excellent birding. We'll depart the hotel shortly after breakfast, arriving at the park entrance while the morning is still cool. Beyond the gate, a road leading into the heart of the park crosses through several vegetation zones. We'll take time to work a few of the roadside pullouts, as everything we see will be exciting and new.

Our first stop, in the thorn-scrub forest, is likely to be among the most productive. Simply wandering around the parking area and working the forest edge may produce encounters with Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Russet-crowned Motmot, White-throated Magpie-Jay, and Banded Wren. With good fortune we should encounter White-lored Gnatcatcher, a thorn-scrub specialist. Moving farther up the road, we'll make a point of stopping in the bamboo belt, where the endemic Belted Flycatcher resides. In 2007 our group had prolonged views of an actively foraging male.

The road continues into the park's interior and eventually tops out at a dramatic promontory. From our lofty perch, it is instantly clear why this place received park status. Looking out on a landscape of wondrous panoramic scenery, we can view sheer rising walls of ancient limestone towering 2000 feet over the mighty Rio Grijalva far below. With its headwaters on the eastern slope of the Sierra de Chiapas, the Grijalva cuts its way across central and northern Chiapas on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Geologists believe the erosive power of the river is enhanced by an uplift of land occurring simultaneously. The scenic splendor of this canyon is surely not to be underestimated.

Once we tear ourselves away from the vista before us, we'll pay special attention to the birdlife. Sumidero Canyon offers opportunities for a variety of birds that we won't see again. Such localized inhabitants as Slender Sheartail and Bar-winged Oriole headline a list of alluring possibilities. Flowering trees can be productive for waves of birds that include such resident species as Clay-colored Robin and Yellow-throated Euphonia, as well as such northward-surging migrants as Western Wood-Pewee and Western Tanager.

Following a tasty lunch in the field, we'll load up and begin the drive to Jaltenango. The transit will take about four hours, but time passes quickly once we leave the park and move beyond the outskirts of Tuxtla. We'll have plenty of time to view the drier countryside of central and western Chiapas as we move southeast. A short break along the way will keep us alert, and toward late afternoon we'll make a final stop along the river outside of Jaltenango. Though we won't have a lot of time here, we'll likely encounter Groove-billed Anis and Yellow-winged Tanagers.

We'll arrive in Jaltenango early this evening. Jaltenango is literally at the end of the road, but serves as the jumping off point for El Triunfo. Our hotel is very simple and basic, but also very clean. Spending a night here actually provides an interesting experience and is another aspect to our adventure.

NIGHT: Hotel El Triunfo, Jaltenango

March 21, Day 3: Jaltenango to Finca Prusia; Ascent to El Triunfo. After an early breakfast, we'll depart Jaltenango for the Sierra, Finca Prusia, and the trail to El Triunfo! The road is rough in places and very dusty in others. We will be standing and/or sitting in the back of an open truck, so we should be prepared for "adventure travel" from the time we leave town. Because of the hike we'll undertake this afternoon, we'll need to hurry to the trailhead, hopefully arriving by 11:00 a.m. We will make one or two brief stops along the road to sample the area birdlife, but time truly is of the essence.

Our destination is the upper end of Finca Prusia, a large coffee farm that seems to swing from apparently abandoned to partially inhabited. Begun under the ownership of a former German prisoner of war, the property is now owned by his absentee landlord son. The trail to El Triunfo takes off from the upper end of Finca Prusia.

Arriving at the trailhead, we'll watch with interest as some local horsemen strap our luggage and supplies to the sides of their trusted pack horses for the trip up the mountain. We'll start walking at about 4300 feet; the valley floor at El Triunfo sits at an altitude of about 6500 feet. Our walk this first day is about seven miles along a good, wide trail with numerous switchbacks. We will be inside the forest most of the time and should enjoy some good birding. The journey up the mountain is a special one, as it represents the only day we'll be on the Atlantic slope of the mountains.

We would like to be in camp by 5:00 p.m., but we also want to enjoy the forest. The sounds of birds singing from the treetops and understory will seem full of mystery; foreign sounds most of us have not heard before.

NIGHT: Camping at El Triunfo

March 22-24, Days 4-6: Hiking, Birding, and Exploring El Triunfo. Awakening this morning, our first impression of El Triunfo is likely to be the stirring dawn chorus. As light breaks over the forested eastern ridgetops, the cascade of birdsong descends on us. The sweet song of the colorful Yellow Grosbeak surrounds our camp, while throughout the forest one hears the incredibly complex, cascading song of the Brown-backed Solitaire and the sweet carol of the Black Robin. Other memorable songsters we should encounter include Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush; Gray-breasted and Rufous-browed wrens; and Flame-colored Tanager. Another special sound of the cloud forest is the wing-rattling courtship dive of the Highland Guan—it has been described by some as the sound of ripping sail cloth.

Each morning after breakfast, we will gather in the clearing to survey the surrounding forest. Many of the voices that serenaded us while we were still in our tents should be revealed through our scopes and binoculars as gorgeous tropical birds. Yellow Grosbeaks and Flame-colored Tanagers should be common. In the morning, when birds are more likely to perch in the open, we'll scan the bare snags for such dandies as Gray Silky-flycatcher; Emerald Toucanet; and Black and Mountain robins. Migrating flocks of Vaux's Swifts often descend to feed over the valley.

From our base camp at El Triunfo, we'll take trails into the forest to seek the special birds of the region. The possibilities are nearly endless and we'll take time to look at everything, but the prized sightings are the birds that spend their lives entirely within the moist world of the cloud forest. We'll be on the watch for Highland Guan; Yellowish Flycatcher; Spotted Woodcreeper; Black-throated and Unicolored jays; and Blue-crowned Chlorophonia. With luck we will see the incredible display flight of the Resplendent Quetzal, a bird many consider the most beautiful bird in the tropics.

Other cloud forest specialties we hope to find include the shy White-faced Quail-Dove; the Blue-throated Motmot, with its haunting call and soft colors; the striking Spotted Nightingale-Thrush; and the hulking Fulvous Owl. Always we will be thinking about the "pavon," the Horned Guan, one of the world's rarest cracids (curassow and guan family) and surely the most spectacular. Every day we'll be listening for its low-pitched mooring call. We have been fortunate enough to locate the Horned Guan on thirteen of our seventeen previous trips to El Triunfo, but even the possibility of seeing this magnificent bird is exciting.

We will make a point of exploring all the trails in the area, but will spend our time where we think we may see the most. Aside from the birding, El Triunfo offers a complete natural history experience. An impressive variety of butterflies is readily found flitting along the forest floor and perching atop trailside flowers. Such gems as Abderus Swallowtail, Common Morpho, Mountain Longwing, Apricot Sulphur, and Two-barred Flasher are representatives of some of the families of butterflies found here. Mammals, though harder to find, are present in impressive diversity. The wild yowls of the cacomixtle (southern ringtail) are heard each night from the forest surrounding the campsite. We have seen this animal in some years.

NIGHTS: Camping at El Triunfo

March 25, Day 7: Descending El Triunfo, over the Continental Divide, to Cañada Honda. After a final round of birding around the clearing, we'll leave El Triunfo this morning and begin our hike down the Pacific slope of the mountains. Our destination is Cañada Honda (Deep Canyon). Our hike today is about five miles, and the elevation of our camp is about 4800 feet. Departing the clearing, the first mile or two involves an ascent through the cloud forest, where Mountain Trogons may be heard, up to the Continental Divide. From here it's finally down, down, down. We'll leave the cloud forest behind, descend through a zone of pines, and finally arrive in camp in the late afternoon.

We will take our time birding the entire way down the trail, hoping for mixed species flocks that might contain something new! Brown-capped Vireo and Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo are two birds we have chances for. Above Cañada Honda, we'll hear our first Rufous-and-white Wrens belting out their beautiful but somewhat haunting songs.

Central American spider monkeys roam these forests and we will watch for them. These animals are among the first to disappear with human intrusion in the forest, so the appearance of these animals is always a good sign.

NIGHT: Camping at Cañada Honda

March 26, Day 8: Descent from Cañada Honda to Limonar. Cañada Honda is one of the few places in the world where one can hope to see the endemic Azure-rumped Tanager. We will spend much of the morning birding around the camp, and sighting this special bird is our priority. White-eared Ground-Sparrows are also here, but require patience and a bit of luck to detect.

Departing our campsite in mid-morning, we will bird our way down to the next campsite at El Limonar. This hike is only about four miles and will take us through a magnificent oak and sweetgum forest. Our camp, at about 4200 feet, is near a small spring where Emerald-chinned Hummingbirds often come to bathe.

We stand a good chance of finding Rufous and Violet sabrewings along the way and have good chances for finding Tody Motmot. We'll also make more attempts to locate the Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo. We should see Long-tailed Manakins along the way, possibly dancing!

NIGHT: Camping at Limonar

March 27, Day 9: Descent from Limonar to Paval. We will hike the final leg of our journey today, descending 2500 feet from Limonar to Paval. The distance is about 6 miles and will take us into the rich tropical zone. Some of the many species we should see include Blue-crowned, Tody, and Turquoise-browed motmots; Violaceous and Collared trogons; Ivory-billed woodcreepers; Red-legged Honeycreepers; and many others.

At the end of the hike sits Paval at about 1600 feet. Tonight we'll make camp on the old coffee-drying platform.

NIGHT: Camping at Paval

March 28, Day 10: Exploring Paval; Transfer to Tapachula. We'll have part of the morning to bird Paval, one of the "birdiest" places we'll visit on the tour. Birds are everywhere and include a diversity of motmots, trogons, hummingbirds, flycatchers, and saltators. We'll take some organized walks, where we'll seek such special targets as White Hawk and Prevost's Ground-Sparrow.

About 9:30 a.m., we will leave Paval by vehicle for the three mile ride into the village of Tres de Mayo. We'll be met by vehicles and drivers and taken to Colonia Guadalupe, where we'll have lunch in the home of one of our horsemen.

After lunch we'll drive to Mapastepec and board taxis for the trip to Tapachula. We'll arrive at the hotel in the late afternoon. As this represents the only time we have in the Pacific lowlands, we'll offer an optional walk around the hotel grounds for a shot at a handful of very special Pacific coast birds. We'll likely turn up White-bellied Chachalaca, Pacific Screech-Owl, and Giant Wren. The wren is the largest member of its family in the world and a species whose entire range is the Pacific coast of Chiapas. Cinnamon Hummingbirds and Altamira and Spot-breasted orioles are also possible here.

We'll reconvene in the hotel restaurant this evening for our final dinner and checklist session.

NIGHT: Hotel Loma Real, Tapachula

March 29, Day 11: Departure for Home. We will transfer to the Tapachula airport in time for the 6:40 a.m. departure of Aero Mexico/Aero Litoral Flight 2487 which is scheduled to arrive in Mexico City at 8:20 a.m. allowing time for homeward flights (subject to change).

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 14 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Brian Gibbons & Bob Sundstrom

Brian Gibbons grew up in suburban Dallas where he began exploring the wild world in local creeks and parks. Chasing butterflies and any animal that was unfortunate enough to cross paths with the Gibbons boys occupied his childhood. A wooden bird feeder kit sparked a flame that was stoked by a gift of the *Golden Guide* and family camping trips to Texas state parks. Nearly 20 years ago Brian attended two VENT camps for young birders. Birds are now his primary interest, but all things wild continue to captivate him. After college, Brian undertook a variety of field biology research jobs that have taken him to the Caribbean, the Bering Sea, and the land of the midnight sun, arctic Alaska. For many years Brian's field research has involved banding. His most amazing recoveries were a female Wilson's Warbler that had been banded in Alaska and was captured by Brian in Colorado, and a Sooty Tern that perished after a hurricane on the Texas coast; it had plied the Gulf of Mexico and the oceans of the world for 24 years. Brian's recreational bird-seeking has taken him to Machu Picchu in Peru, the Great Wall in China, and the Himalayas in Nepal. He enjoys working with kids, hoping to spark environmental awareness through birds. Brian leads tours in Mexico and the United States.

Bob Sundstrom has led VENT tours since 1989 to destinations including Hawaii, Mexico, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, Iceland, Papua New Guinea, the Southwest Pacific islands, Antarctica, the Bering Sea, and many destinations throughout North America. Bob takes a strong interest in both the natural and cultural settings of his tours. He earned his doctorate at the University of Washington. Bob and his wife Sally live in the rural Scatter Creek Valley south of Olympia, Washington. Bob lived in Seattle for more than two decades, continues to teach birding workshops, and leads a program of short, regional tours that begin in the Seattle area. During two seasons of work in the Pribilof Islands, he helped chronicle the occurrence of North American bird rarities. A skilled birder with a special interest in bird song, Bob has served on the boards of several nature and conservation organizations, as well as the Washington State Bird Records Committee. He is a co-author of *The National Audubon Society Field Guide to the Pacific Northwest*. When not on tour, Bob keeps busy as the lead writer for the daily public radio program *BirdNote*, which is archived at www.birdnote.org.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$2995** per person in double occupancy from Tuxtla Gutierrez (tour ends in Tapachula). This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 10, all lodging during the tour as described in this itinerary, ground transportation, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Tuxtla Gutierrez and return from Tapachula; camping gear (tents, sleeping bags, and pads); airport departure taxes; alcoholic beverages; special gratuities; phone calls; or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the group does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$110**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but do not have a roommate and we cannot provide one for you. This fee covers the single accommodations only at hotels in Tuxtla Gutierrez and Tapachula (Days 1 and 10). This does not cover nor guarantee single accommodations at Jaltenango on Day 2, where you may be asked to share. However, your preference will be noted and accommodated if possible at no additional cost.

Due to the special nature of this trip and the remote area we will be visiting, we require every participant to purchase medical evacuation insurance. A brochure with form attached will be enclosed with your confirmation of tour registration letter that you may use to purchase the appropriate insurance.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Cancellation penalties and refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$250** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made fewer than 120 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions. *We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.*

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$250*
Fewer than 120 days before departure date	No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE: A brochure and application form for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. **We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. VENT recommends Travel Insured International as our preferred insurance provider.** Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related

cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. **Contact Travel Insured International prior to registration for details.** Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than Travel Insured International, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

IMPORTANT NOTE: *Please read your itinerary carefully to see whether or not your tour/cruise requires MANDATORY Medical Insurance which covers you for emergency evacuation/repatriation during the trip.*

This coverage is included in the Worldwide Trip Protector plan offered by Travel Insured International. If you do not choose to purchase the insurance through Travel Insured International, you will need to do so through another insurance provider. A good website for information and acquisition of emergency evacuation/repatriation insurance is: www.insuremytrip.com.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

TRIP EVACUATION INSURANCE: All participants are **required** to purchase a medical evacuation policy for this tour. Application forms for this coverage will be enclosed with your confirmation of registration letter.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

CONDITIONS: A journey to El Triunfo is a wilderness trip to one of the world’s most beautiful cloud forests and provides the opportunity to enjoy the beauty and solitude of such a place. It is remote enough that getting there is not easy. There is no nearby airport or sophisticated road system anywhere near the preserve. As such, the tour begins in Tuxtla Gutierrez in central Chiapas, but ends on the southern pacific coast in Tapachula. Over the course of this expedition, participants will experience a huge diversity of conditions, from warm lowlands to cool cloud forests; from an elevation near sea level to 6500 feet; Atlantic slope birds and Pacific slope birds; and warm days and cold nights. This tour involves a lot of moving; only at El Triunfo are we in any single location for more than one night.

ACCOMMODATIONS: The Best Western Palmareca Hotel & Suites in Tuxtla Gutierrez (Day 1), and the Hotel Loma Real Hotel in Tapachula (Day 10) are very good full-service hotels with large rooms and bathrooms. The Hotel El Triunfo in Jaltenango (Day 2) is very basic, but also very clean, with round-the-clock electricity and hot and cold running water. Jaltenango is a sleepy little town that serves as the jump-off point to El Triunfo, and our hotel is the best place to stay in town.

VEHICLE TRAVEL: Upon leaving the hotel on the morning of Day 2, we will spend a half day at Sumidero Canyon before transferring to Jaltenango for the evening. All travel will be aboard a medium-sized bus or coach in comfortable riding conditions. The ride from Tuxtla Gutierrez to Jaltenango will take three to four hours. The transfer from the Hotel El Triunfo on the morning of Day 3 to the trailhead for El Triunfo at Finca Prusia will take approximately four hours, with a few stops for birding. Travel will be in the back of a large, but very sturdy transport truck. The road to Finca Prusia is rough, and there is no availability of comfortable sport utility vehicles in Jaltenango. The vehicle will move along slowly enough to ensure everybody’s safety. After hiking out of Paval on Day 10, we will ride in a transport truck out to the main highway, where we will switch to vans for the trip into Tapachula.

HIKING & WALKING: A lot of the magic of El Triunfo lies in the hiking and walking aspect to the tour. Unlike any other tour we operate, this one is based nearly entirely around exploration on foot. We have operated this trip in most years since the late 1970s. Participants have ranged in age from 20 to 77 years; however, this is a challenging trip involving a great deal of walking. There will be no true backpacking. This tour should only be

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taken by persons who are in good health and are physically able to walk an average of approximately 4 miles per day on moderate to steep grades at elevations as high as 6500 feet. On our hikes at El Triunfo, we will be accompanied by a local guide, or park ranger who is intimately familiar with the region. All walking will be on well-traveled roads and trails. Off-trail terrain will be avoided. Determining exact distances on mountain trails is difficult, but participants should refer to the following “table” for approximate distances on daily hikes.

Day 3 – Finca Prusia to El Triunfo: Between 7-8 miles uphill 2200 foot elevation gain

Day 4 – Hiking at El Triunfo: Between 1.5 and 3 miles on hilly terrain

Day 5 – Hiking at El Triunfo: Between 1.5 and 3 miles on hilly terrain

Day 6 – Hiking at El Triunfo: Between 1.5 and 3 miles on hilly terrain

Day 7 – El Triunfo to Cañada Honda: Between 4-5 miles downhill

Day 8 – Cañada Honda to Limonal: Approximately 4 miles downhill.

Day 9 – Limonal to Paval: Approximately 6 miles downhill 2500 foot elevation loss

CAMPING: Camping conditions have improved dramatically at El Triunfo. We’ll pitch our tents in the clearing, but will be able to take hot showers and use the flush toilets and wash basin in the building where the researchers stay. All meals will be taken in the mess building, where an on-site cook prepares breakfasts, lunch and dinners. Camping at Cañada Honda, Limonal, and Paval is more primitive, yet the horsemen who oversee our trip down the mountain run a clean, well-organized camp. **NOTE:** Camping for seven consecutive nights involves a special set of pleasures as well as discomforts, but it is our opinion that a visit to one of the earth’s wild places is worth the inconveniences. Every step takes us through a succession of rich life zones that are as interesting and rewarding as our destination.

“TRAIL” FOOD: Your tour leaders will provide an assortment of canned and boxed foods throughout your time in the mountains. Lunches on Days 3 and 7-9 will be on the trail.

THE HORSEMEN: On a trip full of unique qualities, perhaps none exceeds the experience of traveling for three days with a family of horsemen from El Triunfo down to Paval. The Argueta family, longtime friends of VENT and absolutely essential to the logistics of this tour, will greet us while we are camped at El Triunfo. From the time we leave El Triunfo, this family of brothers, cousins, and nephews will oversee the transport of our bags down the mountain from one campsite to the next. Toward midmorning each day, they will overtake us on the trail as they push ahead to the next campsite. By the time we arrive in camp each afternoon, the Arguetas will have a fully functional makeshift campground organized and in full swing!

INSECT PROTECTION: Small biting “no-see-ems” are frequently encountered on some of the stretches of trail at El Triunfo, and particularly on the way down to the warm Pacific lowlands. Please bring an adequate supply of insect repellent. We suggest one or two pump-style containers of Deep-Woods OFF and either a small squeeze-bottle of CUTTER’s repellent lotion or a small capsule of CUTTER’s repellent “stick.” Apply the lotion or stick each morning to more exposed parts of your body, in addition to spraying your clothes. Tucking your pant legs into your socks and wearing long-sleeved shirts are highly effective defenses against biting insects.

A Note About Chiggers: This tour visits areas where chiggers are known to occur. Chiggers are tiny parasitic mites found in most warm weather areas of the southern United States and the world’s tropics. They are especially numerous in grassy areas, where, in the immature stage, they attach themselves to other animals or humans who make contact with the grass as they pass by. Chiggers do not suck blood and the majority of the world’s species do not carry disease. They do feed on bodily fluids, however, through a process in which a digestive enzyme is produced by the chigger which essentially liquefies the skin around the area where the chigger is attached. The chigger is not usually attached to the skin for more than a few hours before it either falls off or is knocked off. Our bodies respond by producing a hardened area as a defense against the chigger’s digestive enzyme. Though the chigger may be long gone, it is the presence of the hardened area, and the body’s natural process of reabsorbing it that typically causes intense itching, often lasting for a week or more. Chiggers

like to attach themselves to areas of thin skin, like around the ankles, beltline, undergarment lines, knees, and elbows.

Chiggers can be avoided by following these procedures:

- Avoid walking, or standing in particular, in areas dominated by grass. These areas are where one is most likely to encounter chiggers.
- Tuck your pants into your socks to avoid direct skin-to-grass contact. Chiggers can find their way through clothing, but this is a standard and effective prevention technique commonly employed by many.
- Apply a cream-style insect repellent, such as “Cutters” to your body from the waist down BEFORE putting on your clothing.
- Spray your pants and socks with a spray repellent such as “Cutters” or “Off.” Repellents with high concentrations of DEET (70-100%) are most effective. You do not need to apply these to you skin, only to clothing. (Be careful as DEET will damage plastics and lens coatings). Repel Permanone is an odorless aerosol insecticide that offers perhaps the best defense against chiggers. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online. It should only be applied to clothes and allowed to dry before you dress. Never apply Permanone directly to the skin. Permethrin is known to be a highly toxic chemical to insects. It is the active ingredient in Permanone, but is present in a small amount (0.5%).
- Powdered sulfur applied to waist, bottoms of pants, sock and boots is also effective at repelling chiggers. However, be warned that clothes will retain the sulfur odor for several washings.
- Shower at the end of each day in the field. Use a washcloth to vigorously rub your legs, feet, and ankles.

By following these methods, you should be able to avoid all chigger bites, as well as tick bites. If, however, you are bitten by chiggers anyway, you can reduce or eliminate the symptoms by applying benzocaine or hydrocortisone creams, calamine lotion, After Bite, or any number of anti-itch products.

CLIMATE & WEATHER: As this journey will take us from the interior of Chiapas to the heights of the Sierra Madre del Sur, we are assured of experiencing a variety of conditions. Late March is a good time to be in southern Mexico. The heat of summer has not yet arrived and conditions are generally dry, with smaller chances for significant rainfall. Around Tuxtla Gutierrez and Sumidero Canyon, participants should expect a beautiful morning (Day 2) with temperatures in the 70s, but warming toward 90 degrees by midday.

Late March is an ideal time to be at El Triunfo, as bird activity is high with drier conditions than later in the spring and summer. The weather can vary from warm and sunny to cloudy, misty, foggy, or rainy. At 6500 feet we will experience chilly to cold mornings, with frost possible, and warm days. Temperatures can range from the low to mid 30s in the early morning into the low 80s by mid-afternoon. More typically a day at El Triunfo may begin with some early overcast and morning temperatures in the low 40s, warming into the mid to upper 70s during the day.

BAGGAGE: Please keep in mind that from the time we arrive at Finca Prusia on Day 3, (jump-off point for El Triunfo), to the time we depart Paval for Tapachula on Day 10, every item of baggage and equipment we bring is transported on packhorses. **All luggage must be of the soft-sided, duffel-bag type and not of excessive size. This type of luggage is more readily attached to the packhorses than hard-sided bags.** Weight is a deciding factor for this primitive-type camping, so pack smart and please do not plan to bring anything that will not be used.

The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Some airlines, including Delta, American, and Lufthansa, have significantly lowered their weight allowances for checked and carry-on baggage, some to as little as 50 lbs per bag. **Please consult your airline to find out specific weight restrictions.**

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As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, your optics and other valuables, medication, toiletries, and important travel documents, and any other essentials in your carry-on bag.

CLOTHING: It is very important to pack “smart” for your trip to El Triunfo. You can very effectively conserve space in your luggage and keep its weight down by bringing only what you need. Getting maximum “wearings” out of your clothing should also be taken into consideration.

As a general rule for going into the field to view the natural world, it is best to avoid brightly colored or white clothing. Earth tones, dark colors, and khaki are preferred. The concept of dressing in layers should also help guide your packing.

- **Underwear** – Try to get at least two days’ use per pair.
- **Socks** – Many people prefer wool socks when wearing hiking boots, as they are thicker and tend to protect better against blisters. Cotton socks are lighter, but sufficient if your boots are well broken in. Try to get at least two days of use per pair.
- **Pants** – Khakis or other lightweight cotton pants are ideal, especially when you’re hiking in warmer conditions. Denim, while certainly acceptable, is not as comfortable as lighter weight material. The best choice may be the ultra light, but durable field clothing widely available at any outdoor store. Brands such as Ex Officio specialize in making this type of clothing.
- **T-Shirts** – Several short-sleeved t-shirts are essential for layering. They work well as undershirts, or for when out in warm or hot weather. A long-sleeved t-shirt or two will come in handy for the cool mornings at El Triunfo.
- **Outer Shirts** – 2 or 3 long-sleeved shirts are essential for protection from the sun and biting insects. Cotton works, but the lightweight field clothing sold in various outdoor stores is preferred. Such shirts tend to be designed with good ventilation, which allows you to cool off quickly and for your clothes to dry out fast when wet. These shirts frequently come equipped with multiple pockets for holding pens, notebooks, and other gear.
- **Sweaters and Fleece** – Please bring one very good sweater or fleece for the mornings at El Triunfo. Temperatures in the low 30s are entirely possible and you could be miserable if you are not properly prepared.
- **Jacket** – In addition to a sweater or fleece, a jacket is strongly recommended. Make sure that it is water repellent and provides warmth, yet doesn’t consume too much space in your baggage.
- **Hats** – A hat for protection from the sun is essential. Many people like the “Tilly-style” and its wide flat-brimmed design. Others prefer a simple baseball cap. In terms of sun protection, baseball caps do not offer any defense against sunburn on the ears, side of the face or neck.
- **Footwear** – See next section.
- **Long Underwear** -If you tend to get cold at night.
- **Swimsuit** – Hotel pools and bathing in streams on the trail

FOOTWEAR: Good footgear is essential. On a hiking trip, few things can reduce your level of enjoyment like bringing insufficient footgear. Please bring a quality pair of hiking boots or sturdy trail shoes with ridged soles, preferably waterproof, and which offer good ankle support. Be sure to break in new boots or shoes before coming on the tour (wear for several weeks). If you tend to get blisters, be sure to apply moleskin or blister padding before you begin hiking. The added weight of a daypack, believe it or not, can also cause blisters. Boots should be laced loosely for uphill hiking and tightly for downhill.

Bringing a pair of sneakers or other light shoe for time around the campsite or when not out on trails is also a good idea. If your primary hiking footwear gets too wet you will be glad to have the second pair, while waiting for your boots to dry. A pair of thongs or other light open-toed shoe may come in handy for coming and going from the shower/bathrooms at El Triunfo.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: None

EQUIPMENT: One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. As this tour requires that participants bring more supplies and equipment with them as compared to other tours, we refer you to the separate packing list for all recommended items.

DOCUMENTS: Travel into Mexico for citizens of the United States requires a passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure. Non United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions. Additionally, a tourist card, which may be filled out aboard your flight to Mexico, is required. Both the passport and the tourist card must be carried with you while in Mexico.

As a safety measure, photocopy the first two pages of your passport. Keep the photocopies in a safe place, so if your passport is lost you will have proof of identification. Your passport should be signed and easily available at all times. You will need it for check-in at the airport on your first day of departure, so **do not pack it in your checked luggage.**

Visas are not required for U.S. citizens for entry into Mexico. Laws governing non-U.S. citizens may vary; please check with the Mexican consulate or embassy in your home country.

CURRENCY AND MONEY MATTERS: Your tour fee includes most necessary expenses, including all meals and beverages (non-alcoholic only). You will want to bring enough cash to cover such extra expenses as taxi rides, gratuities (optional), meals on your own before and after the tour, and personal items. Opportunities for shopping and gift buying are few during the tour, so the need for extra cash is limited. U.S. dollars are widely accepted by taxi drivers and SOME shops, stores, and restaurants, but this is unpredictable. Small denominations of cash are best, as any places we visit where money could be spent will likely be unable to provide change for large bills or travelers checks.

Should you extend your time in Mexico beyond what is offered in the tour program, you'll want to obtain local currency. U.S. Dollars are easily exchanged into Mexican pesos at exchange stores in the United States, at many major U.S. airports, and at banks in larger Mexican cities. While the exchange rate is more favorable in Mexico than in the U.S., you may feel more comfortable exchanging money before departing from home.

In larger cities, such major credit cards as Visa and Mastercard are universally accepted at bigger hotels and restaurants. ATM machines are available in Tuxtla Gutierrez. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

TIME: Southern Mexico in March operates on Central Standard Time (CST).

MEDICAL SERVICES: As this is a wilderness trip, we will not be close to emergency personnel or facilities. No sophisticated medical facilities are available at El Triunfo. People who are not fit for a wilderness-type trip, including those with physical disabilities that affect mobility and balance, heart or immune deficiencies, or other conditions associated with poor health, are advised not to join the tour. A serious health emergency at El Triunfo may result in an air evacuation, which will come at considerable expense to you, and which may not be possible in certain areas. **All participants are required to purchase a medical evacuation policy for this tour.** Please refer to the TRIP EVACUATION INSURANCE section above.

HEALTH: A trip to El Triunfo offers an extraordinary travel opportunity, yet it is also a moderately strenuous trip requiring hiking/walking distances of approximately 2 to 5 miles a day, with one hike of approximately 8 miles. For this reason, we strongly suggest you consider your overall physical condition before registering for this tour. This tour is not a good choice for those with existing medical conditions pertaining to cardiac, pulmonary, or circulatory disorders, or chronic knee and foot issues.

Currently, no major shots or inoculations are required for travel to Mexico; however we recommend that you contact your physician for general advice on travel immunizations. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

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Hepatitis A is a disease of contaminated food and water. Precaution against the disease comes in the form of a two-shot sequence. Hepatitis B is a disease transmitted through unsanitary needles and contaminated blood. Precaution against the disease comes in the form of a three-shot sequence.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists Mexico as a known country where travelers are at risk of contracting malaria. Specifically, the state of Chiapas is listed as an “at risk” location. In thirty years of operating tours to El Triunfo, there has not been a single instance of a VENT tour participant or leader contracting malaria. Our tour leaders do not take anti-malarial medications. Malaria-carrying mosquitoes tend to predominate around human settlement in lowland areas with warmer temperatures and abundant moisture and humidity. Malaria transmission occurs with far less frequency at higher elevations where temperatures are cooler. As the majority of this trip is spent in the mountains, we consider the risk of contraction extremely low.

However, in keeping with official CDC notification, we cannot guarantee that you are NOT entirely risk free of contraction. If you harbor any fears or concerns about contracting malaria, we recommend you consider a routine anti-malarial regimen of chloroquine, which is the preferred preventative drug of choice in Mexico and northern Central America. As always, please consult your physician.

Be sure to notify VENT and your tour leaders of any allergies or known medical conditions, so that they may better care for your comfort and safety. If you have a known allergy to bee or wasp stings, you should carry an anaphylaxis kit (Anakit or EpiPen) as a routine precaution.

If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

Sun Exposure – The sun’s ultraviolet rays are always a threat to sensitive skin. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. Be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

Water & Food – The two most likely sources of illness are dehydration and bacterial infection. To prevent dehydration, it is very important that you consume plenty of water. We require all participants to bring **two** one-liter bottles with tight-fitting or screw-on caps. Regarding infection, you will be provided with bottled water at the beginning and end of the trip and treated and/or boiled water while at El Triunfo. We take all precautions to ensure that the food you are provided is safe to eat.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line at 800-CDC-INFO or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel and type in “Mexico” in the “Traveler’s Health” section. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

ELECTRICITY: Power throughout Mexico is supplied through 127V/60Hz outlets. Standard American-style 110V equipment with the flat-pronged plugs works easily and without the use of special adapters or power converters. Electricity is available throughout the tour except from the time of descent from El Triunfo on Day 7 until arrival in Tapachula on the afternoon of Day 10. Electricity at El Triunfo, though technically available, is a very recent newcomer to this previously more primitive site. Researchers have brought in chargers that do allow participants to recharge small items such as razors and cell phones; however, the continued availability of this source of electricity cannot be assured. Electricity is available with certainty only on Days 1, 2 and 10.

DEPARTURE TAX: As of this writing, Mexican international departure tax is not being collected at airport check-in. This is subject to change without notice.

SUGGESTED READING: Our website at www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from the store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You might also want to visit such other online stores as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com. For the ABA/Lane Guides, try the ABA Sales Birding Store at www.americanbirding.org/abasales.

Birds:

Howell, Steve N.G. and Sophie Webb. *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. **This is the best field guide ever produced on the birds of Mexico. It is a large guide, so if you don't want to bring it, your tour leaders will have a copy available for group use.**

National Geographic Society. *Field Guide to North American Birds*. Fifth Edition. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006. It's a good idea to bring a field guide to North American birds as we will see many Neotropical songbirds either on their wintering grounds or on the move as early north-bound migrants.

Butterflies:

Glassberg, J. *A Swift Guide to the Butterflies of Mexico and Central America*. Sunstreak Publishing, 2007.

Garwood, Kim and Richard Lehman. *Butterflies of Northeastern Mexico*. Second Edition. Eye Scry Publishing, 2005.

History:

Parks, Henry Branford. *A History of Mexico*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1969. A truly outstanding treatment of Mexican history is especially appealing as it is highly "readable." There are many books available on the history of Mexico; but though older, this one is one of the best. Originally published in 1938.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on June 28, 2010 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.