

# **MEXICO: OAXACA CHRISTMAS BIRDS AND CULTURE**

**DECEMBER 20-29, 2008**

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*A trip to central Oaxaca is more than an ornithological adventure; it's a colorful, vibrant mixture of sights and sounds, both man-made and natural. During this multifaceted tour, which includes several free afternoons, we will have an opportunity to sample much of what makes Oaxaca so special.*

*We'll be exploring a variety of distinctive habitats and life zones, from the lush cloud forest near La Cumbre to the austere deserts of the Valley of Oaxaca. We will also visit impressive pre-Columbian ruins such as Mitla and Monte Alban, which for thousands of years served as cultural and ceremonial centers for such peoples as the Zapotecs and Mixtecs. And we will experience the wonderfully joyous manner in which Oaxaqueños celebrate Christmas.*

*Oaxaca is rich in endemic species, and even in the relatively small geographic area covered during our tour, we will have a chance to see as many as 27 species of birds found only in Mexico. Some of these, such as the Beautiful Hummingbird and Boucard's Wren, are restricted to the arid thorn-scrub along valley bottoms and adjacent slopes. Others, such as Grey-barred Wren and Collared Towhee, must be sought in the cool pine and cloud forests of the surrounding sierras. These upland habitats are particularly interesting for their mixture of temperate, tropical, and Mexican highland species: Brown Creepers and Spot-crowned Woodcreepers, Townsend's Warbler and Red Warbler, Steller's Jay and Dwarf Jay. Although some of the endemics can be challenging to find, many, such as the White-throated Towhee, are common and easily observed.*

*The dates of this tour were selected to coincide with Christmas festivities in the city of Oaxaca. In the evenings preceding the holiday, the hub of activity is the main plaza, or "zócalo." Artisans display giant radishes carved in whimsical forms, and the sounds of marimbas issue from a nearby bandstand. Tourists and locals mingle at outdoor cafes, as itinerant musicians stroll from table to table. Giant paper maché figures circle the plaza, while brass bands, floats, and costumed children parade through the city. Fireworks and rockets brighten the night sky, and all the city's church bells ring simultaneously. It is truly an unforgettable experience.*

*Once you reach Oaxaca City, there will be no hotel changes. Staying in one place will enable us to devote extra time to the distinctive avifauna of central Oaxaca, as well as to enjoy the cultural riches of this ancient and historic region. With the exception of the two full days spent birding at La Cumbre and La Guacamaya, at least part of most other afternoons will be spent enjoying the numerous cultural attractions to be found in and around the valley of Oaxaca. Activities will include shopping for arts and crafts in small indigenous villages, touring pre-Columbian ruins and ornate churches, enjoying colorful festivities such as the Christmas Eve Calenda Parade and Night of the Radishes, or simply wandering around the bustling central square of Oaxaca City. An impressive array of fine restaurants found close at hand will enable us to sample Oaxaca's justly famous cuisine.*

**December 20, Day 1: Arrival in Oaxaca, Mexico.** Participants may make arrangements to arrive in Oaxaca City and transfer to the Hotel Victoria where a room will be reserved in your name. Upon collection of your baggage, proceed through customs and out the exit to the front of the airport. Taxis are easily found, and the ride to the Hotel Victoria costs approximately \$18 U.S. The group will gather with the Tour Leaders in the hotel lobby at 7:00 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner.

NIGHT: Hotel Victoria, City of Oaxaca

**December 21-28, Days 2-8: Birding and Touring the Valley of Oaxaca and Nearby Mountains.** Although our day-to-day destinations and schedule will be flexible, allowing us to take advantage of different festivities, we will visit the following locations during the tour:

**Ruins of Monte Alban.** Shortly after sunrise we'll begin birding around the famous ruins of Monte Alban, located at the top of an isolated and enormous hill towering over 1000 feet above the city of Oaxaca, this site offers spectacular and panoramic views of the city, the mountains, and the surrounding areas. Monte Alban served as the ceremonial and residential center for the ruling Zapotec elite who dominated the lives of literally thousands of people. It defies the imagination that these people were able to transport heavy materials up the sides of this precipitous hill, level the entire summit, and construct large, imposing structures...all without the benefit of pack animals or carts!

Although the sparsely-vegetated slopes surrounding the ruins seem insufficient to support many avian inhabitants, they are remarkably rich in specialized avifauna. As we wander among the ancient structures we will search diligently for such Mexican endemics as the aptly-named Beautiful Hummingbird, Blue Mockingbird, and the ubiquitous White-throated Towhee. Among the other birds found at Monte Alban are Common Ground-Dove, Berylline Hummingbird, Thick-billed Kingbird, and the handsome Black-vented Oriole.

**Ruins of Yagul.** In the morning we will drive out to the ruins of Yagul, an ancient center for political and religious ceremonies. Over 30 structures have been excavated in the arid, cactus-covered hills. While temples, palaces, tombs and domestic dwellings are the most numerous, the more interesting features are a military mausoleum, a large ball court, and a hilltop fortress. The views are wonderful from the top, which provides the perfect spot to search for soaring raptors, such as the White-tailed Hawk. The surrounding desert vegetation can be alive with birds. Several endemics are found on the grounds: Beautiful Hummingbird, Dusky Hummingbird, Gray-breasted Woodpecker, and the handsome Bridled Sparrow. We should also observe the brilliant Vermilion Flycatcher, Nutting's Flycatcher, Cassin's Kingbird, Rock and Canyon wrens, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Lesser Goldfinch during our visit.

**La Cumbre.** One full day will be devoted to exploring the pine and cloud forests near La Cumbre. The area is visually appealing and ornithological famous. It supports several Mexican endemics, including the highly localized Dwarf Jay, Gray-barred Wren, Russet Nightingale-Thrush, the sprightly Red Warbler, the shy Rufous-capped Brush-Finch, and Collared Towhee. With luck, we may spot the tiny Bumblebee Hummingbird—one of the smallest of all hummingbirds. Although some of these species are particularly difficult to observe, we will attempt to see as many as possible.

As we bird our way along winding lumber roads, with spectacular views at every turn, we will scan the forest for lively mixed species flocks and stop at the patches of brilliant Salvia to watch for feeding hummingbirds. Among the possibilities are Band-tailed Pigeon; Magnificent, Broad-tailed and Rufous hummingbirds; Mountain Trogon; the perky Tufted Flycatcher; Hammond's Flycatcher; Steller's Jay; Mexican Chickadee; the secretive Gray-breasted Wood-Wren; Brown-backed Solitaire (its astonishing song is one of the characteristic sounds of the Mexican highlands); White-throated Robin; Hutton's Vireo; a host of warblers, including Crescent-chested, Townsend's, Hermit, Golden-browed and Olive; the challenging Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch; and Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer. These species and more explain why La Cumbre will be the highlight of our tour with respect to natural sights and sounds.

**Mitla.** No trip to Oaxaca would be complete without a visit to the ruins of Mitla. This hills surrounding Mitla have revealed evidence of human habitation dating back to 7,000 BC—some of the oldest in Mexico—and Mitla itself was a secondary seat of power around the time of Monte Albán—about 750 AD. However, the ruins we see today date the centuries immediately preceding the conquest, and were built not by the Zapotecs, but by the Mixtecs. The main attractions of this small but exquisite site are its intricate and well-preserved mosaics of hand-cut stones. The mortar-less construction of Mitla—almost unique in Mexico—was a deliberate design innovation which has enabled these buildings to endure for centuries without the usual cracking or displacement.

Mitla is located in the extreme eastern end of the Oaxaca Valley, amidst an agricultural landscape characterized by row upon row of the distinctive, yucca-like mezcal plant. Production of mezcal, a tequila-like alcohol, is one of the main economic activities of this part of Oaxaca. Our lunch spot near Mitla, Rancho Zapata, is not only an excellent restaurant, but also a mezcal distillery. While waiting for lunch, we will be able to observe the production of this unique regional specialty, and learn how mezcal gets its distinctive smoky flavor, and why some mezcal has a worm in the bottle!

**The Lower Slopes.** The "Lower Slopes" refers to the hillsides along Hwy. 175 (the road to La Cumbre and the cloud forest). These range from a few hundred feet to several thousand feet above the valley level. Habitats include arid tropical thorn forest, oak scrub and pine forest. Careful birding here has sometimes produced the much localized endemic Oaxaca Sparrow, as well as offering chances for Slaty and Dwarf vireos, and the Ocellated Thrasher. Berylline and Dusky hummingbirds work the morning glory trees, and the early morning finds a myriad of orioles, flycatchers, Western Tanagers, and grosbeaks busily engaged in foraging.

**Teotilán del Valle.** We'll spend the morning birding the hills and mountains north of Teotilán del Valle, followed by an afternoon visit to this small town famed for its striking hand-woven rugs. After lunch at Tlamanalli, a restaurant specializing in authentic Zapotec cuisine, we will tour one of the many small, family run operations devoted to the production of hand-crafted rugs and tapestries. The finest and costliest of these are tinted with natural dyes; the intensely maroon "cochineal" is derived from caterpillars hand-raised on prickly pear cactus pads!

Birding areas above Teotilán are somewhat more arid and open than other locales we have visited. Although it can be a difficult skulker, the rare and little-known Dwarf Vireo is resident in these hills. We will make a special effort to locate this vireo. In so doing we will likely encounter a considerable range of other more widespread species, including the Crested Caracara, White-winged and Inca doves, Berylline Hummingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black and Say's phoebes, Western Scrub-Jay, Virginia's Warbler, as well as the striking Elegant (Blue-hooded) Euphonia. Although always uncommon at this time of year, the shy Slaty Vireo and Ocellated Thrasher have also been seen at this locale.

**The Alebrijes of Arrazola.** Only a short distance from San Bartolo is Arrazola, a town devoted entirely to the production of a handicraft style only decades old. "Alebrijes" (pronounced ah-lay-bree-hays) are whimsical, brightly-painted figurines carved from the wood of the copal, or incense, tree. Alebrijes are now renowned both in and out of Mexico, and their production has lifted this formerly obscure town into relative prosperity. Arrazola has cheerfully embraced this notoriety, and its doors are always open. Feel free to stroll from house-to-house and chat with the owners while they carve fire-breathing dragons, paint guitar-strumming skeletons, or insert toothpick spines into polka-dotted porcupines.

**San Miguel Etna and the Guacamaya Road.** An early journey to the west of Oaxaca takes us up this deep valley, following one of the few perennial streams to drain into the otherwise arid Oaxaca Valley. At this time of the year, orchards in the village of La Guacamaya are loaded with apples and attract a wonderful parade of colorful birds including Bullock's Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, Blue Mockingbird, Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch and even, if we are lucky, Aztec Thrush.. Pine forests above La Guacamaya hold a number of highland forest birds, some of which we may not have seen in La Cumbre. These forests are a good place to look for Mexican Chickadee and the rare endemic Dwarf Jay. On our way down, we'll make a short but "birdy" stop

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near the town of San Miguel Etla to inspect the numerous orioles, grosbeaks, tanagers, and vireos that forage along its tree-lined streets.

NIGHTS: Hotel Victoria, City of Oaxaca

**December 29, Day 10: Departure for Home.** Participants may depart from Oaxaca at any time. Taxis are readily available from the hotel to the airport.

**EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS:** Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay to shop or explore on your own, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 8 participants.

**TOUR LEADERS: Héctor Gómez de Silva**

**Héctor Gómez de Silva** began birding at age eight in New York City. He published his first article about birds at age 15 while in Kenya, where he lived for six years. Since his return to his native Mexico in 1985, Héctor has acquired one of the highest Mexico bird lists at over 950 species, and since 1993 he has led numerous tours in Mexico, Costa Rica, Belize, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Kenya, Uganda, Papua New Guinea, and New Caledonia. Héctor has a Ph.D. in ecology from the National University of Mexico, and has published more than 30 scientific articles about bird conservation, ecology, distribution, and natural history. His work on bird songs provided evidence for raising Nava's Wren to full species status. He delights in sharing birds and nature with people who appreciate them.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$3425** per person in double occupancy from Oaxaca City, Mexico. This includes all meals from Dinner on Day 1 to Dinner on Day 9, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Oaxaca City and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$795**. 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 contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$300** 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 90 days prior to the tour departure date.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less **\$125** per person is refundable. If cancellation is made between 90 and 70 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 70 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself.***

If you cancel:

90 days or more before departure date  
Between 90 and 70 days before departure  
  
Fewer than 70 days before departure date

Your refund will be:

Your deposit minus \$125.  
No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded.  
No refund available.

**TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE:** Application forms 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 to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. 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. Contact the VENT office prior to registration for details.**

**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.**

**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.

**BAGGAGE:** We recommend you bring whatever you think you will need and are comfortable traveling with on your way to and from Oaxaca. Because we do not change hotels, space is not as limited as on some other trips. As a precaution, we suggest you pack a change of clothes, your binoculars, medication, toiletries, walking shoes and documents in your carry-on bag. Laundry service is available at the Hotel Victoria in Oaxaca.

**CLIMATE, ALTITUDE, ETC.:** We will move at a leisurely pace and most walks will be over short distances. In Oaxaca, altitudinal changes will vary from 4,500 feet to nearly 10,000 feet elevation. To take advantage of the best time for birding, we will have early starts in the mornings, usually during the dawn hours. The weather should be clear and sunny most of the tour, although unseasonable rains are always a possibility. Daytime highs in the Valley of Oaxaca and nearby foothills will be very warm (75-85 degrees); the mountains will be chilly in the mornings (40-50 degrees) and warm in the afternoons (60-70 degrees). The temperatures may get as low as the 30s, but not likely.

**CLOTHING:** Winter weather is mostly delightful in the Oaxaca Valley; sunny and warm during the day, pleasantly cool at night. However, we will also travel to high, cold mountains, and Oaxaca City itself can occasionally experience cold fronts in late December. Therefore, come prepared for both hot and cold weather! Light field clothing is generally appropriate; this includes several pair of pants and shorts, as well as comfortable shirts, including one or two with long sleeves. A hat is recommended for protection from the sun. Be sure to have a pair of comfortable walking shoes or hiking boots and a second pair of lightweight shoes. Simple rain-gear, a wool shirt or other heavy shirt, a sweater, and a light jacket are also good for cool, damp mornings. Layers are essential for mornings in the mountains of Oaxaca; you may want to include gloves and a warm hat. Our hotel in Oaxaca has a swimming pool, so bring a swimsuit if you wish (but note that the water is not heated!). Dress is casual throughout the tour. If you wish a dress or jacket for dinners, this is your decision.

**CURRENCY:** New Peso (ME\$) - ATMs are available in Oaxaca, but it would be better to bring cash to be exchanged at authorized banks. MasterCard and Visa are the two most widely accepted cards. At some places such as the hotel (e.g. laundry, alcoholic drinks, phone calls) and the Teotitlán del Valle weavers, credit cards are accepted, but cash is still necessary for souvenirs at Mitla and some other places.

**DEPARTURE TAX:** The departure tax is now included in the cost of your air ticket, approximately \$28.

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**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.

**HEALTH:** 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. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

No vaccinations are required for travel to Mexico. Malaria is present in lowland rural areas but very rare at the higher elevations we will be visiting. 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 877-FYI-TRIP (394-8747) or you can check their website at [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel). Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html) (click on travel health).

Avoid uncooked vegetables and fruits that you do not peel yourself. Your leaders will always let you know when it is or is not appropriate to drink the local water. In places where it is not appropriate, bottle or purified water will be provided.

**INSECT PROTECTION:** Although biting insects are typically not a problem at this time of year in the Valley of Oaxaca, they can occasionally be encountered along some of the streams we will visit (e.g., the Guacamaya River). You should therefore bring along a small container of insect repellent.

**ITEMS TO BRING:** You will want to have sunglasses, flashlight and extra batteries, camera and film, water bottle, tissue paper, an alarm clock, and ear plugs (in case of noisy nights). In addition to a Mexican bird guide (see suggested reading), you should consider bringing a North American field guide as well; most North American migrants are not pictured in any of the currently available Mexican field guides. If you are interested in the ruins we will be touring, you may wish to bring a good travel or guide book on the subject (see Suggested Reading.) The leaders will bring a spotting scope and tripod.

**MISCELLANEOUS:**

- **Electricity:** Mexico uses 110 volts AC, the same as the U.S. At times, an adapter may be needed for polarized plugs (those with one prong larger than the other).
- **Time Zone:** Oaxaca is on US Central Standard Time.

**SUGGESTED READING:** Our website, [www.ventbird.com](http://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 this store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You may also visit such other online stores such as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) or [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) which specializes in ornithology books.

***Birds and General Nature:***

Howell, S. and Webb S. *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. More complete and up-to-date than Peterson, but also very bulky. Excellent range maps and illustrations. Your guides will have a copy if you don't feel like hauling this around.

Mason, Charles T., Jr. and Patricia B. Mason. *A Handbook of Mexican Roadside Flora*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987.

Peterson, Roger Tory. *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973. The classic, compact field guide to bird identification in Mexico.

Wauer, Roland H. *Birder's Mexico* (Number Twelve: The Louise Lindsey Merrick Natural Environment Series). College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999. Originally published under the title *A Naturalist's Mexico* as a hard-back in 1992 with color photographs, this paperback edition features black-and-white photos.

***Culture and History:***

- Barbash, Shepard. *Oaxacan Woodcarving*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993. Delightfully written, with color photos of Oaxaca's famed "alebrijes" and their carvers.
- Diaz del Castillo, Bernal. *The Conquest of New Spain*. Viking Press, 1963 (ISBN 0140441239). A translation of the late 1500's classic. Gripping, eyewitness account of the conquest of Mexico, written by a member of Cortez's army. Not about Oaxaca, but helps bring to life a defining period of Mexico's history.
- Kennedy, Diane. *Mexican Regional Cooking*. New York: HarperCollins, 1978. Written by a world authority on Mexican cooking. Many Oaxacan recipes, interspersed with vivid anecdotes and stories.
- Klein, Kathryn (editor). 1997. *The unbroken thread: conserving the textile traditions of Oaxaca*. Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles. Many fine photos of Oaxaca textiles, plus explanations of the production and use of natural dyes.
- Marcus, Joyce. *Zapotec civilization: how urban society evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- Ruiz, Ramón Eduardo. *Triumphs and Tragedies, a History of the Mexican People*. New York: Norton Press, 1992.
- Williamson, Edwin. 1992. *The Penguin History of Latin America*. London: Penguin Books Ltd. Excellent general history, spanning from the conquest to modern day.
- Winter, Marcus. *Oaxaca: the archaeological record*. Mexico, D.F. :Editorial Minutiae Mexicana, 1989. A concise general introduction to the pre-Columbian history of Oaxaca.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, 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. Where 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 May 19, 2008 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.