



## Visiting Monarchs in Mexico

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### Some tips to make your trip beneficial to you and the butterflies!

- The best time to visit the monarch sanctuaries is January – early March. Butterflies are condensed in smaller areas after arriving in early November. They become more active as winter turns to spring.
- The sanctuaries are high elevation: 10,000 feet or higher. This may prove difficult for some visitors, since there is a lot of walking, much of it on steep trails. Hiking poles may be helpful. If you are prone to altitude sickness, you might want to acclimate at lower elevation for a few days. All the sanctuaries offer horseback rides, but I preferred to walk among the butterflies.
- Stay on established trails in the sanctuaries. Loud talking and flash photography are prohibited. It is also prohibited to touch any of the butterflies, even dead ones. Sadly, you will see a lot of dead monarch butterflies on the ground. Many do not survive the winter.
- There are native guides stationed along the trail. Most do not speak English. Some might show you monarch tags they collected. These tags need to be given to researchers, so even if they offer some for sale, do not purchase any tags. That data is lost if you buy the tag. Here's a link that describes the tagging program: <https://monarchwatch.org/tagging/>
- The monarch butterflies are active on warmer, sunny afternoons. They nectar on flowers, sip water from spring seeps, and will land on people who stand still in a sunny spot on the trail. At El Rosario, we watched thousands of butterflies streaming like a river downslope until they landed in a moist area to get water. Don't forget to listen to the butterflies when thousands take flight!
- On cooler, cloudy days, monarch butterflies cling to the oyamel fir trees with their wings folded. Very few, or none, might be active. Here's a great video of a swarm: <https://www.nathab.com/blog/spy-hummingbird-monarch-butterfly-footage/>
- If possible, schedule your trip over multiple days to increase your chances of a sunny day. The really magical experience is when the monarchs are flying around you and among the trees. Visit during midweek when there are fewer visitors. Watch for hummingbirds, too.
- Local residents are encouraged to protect the oyamel fir trees from logging and clearing for crops, so they depend on tourists for part of their income. Buy food and souvenirs to support monarch protection. Plan to spend several nights in nearby communities but bring warm clothes since it gets cold at night. The sanctuaries open early, but the monarchs won't be active if it's cold.
- The monarch overwintering sites are one of the greatest wonders on Earth, so show the local people you care by purchasing textiles, food, and gifts. Their craftsmanship is top notch.
- The monarch sanctuaries are not like U.S. national parks. Much of the land is owned by the community. It is dangerous work to protect these forests. The Mexican government could do so much more to protect the area and the community leaders who protect the sanctuaries.



I visited two sanctuaries, El Rosario and Sierra Cinchua in January, 2019, with my husband and a small group of friends, one of whom is Mexican. We also hired two local Mexican guides for the sanctuary visits.



### State of Michoacán:

1. **El Rosario** is the most visited and is considered the premier of the sanctuaries. Most of the butterflies overwinter here. Transportation is arranged from the towns of Ocampo and Angangueo (an old mining town with interesting history). There are many crafts and food vendors just after you enter El Rosario. Save time to purchase gifts and food when you finish your walk.
2. **El Cinchua** is not as developed as El Rosario. There are less people, the trails are more rugged and narrow. This sanctuary offers a more intimate experience than El Rosario.



### State of Mexico:

There are two more reserves described below, quoted from sources like Monarch Joint Venture, which provides a lot of information on these other sites:

<https://monarchjointventure.org/faq/visiting-mexican-overwintering-sites>

3. **“Cerro Pelon**, where the monarch migration was first confirmed, is the least visited and least touristy of the sanctuaries. It features the longest and steepest trail up to the colony, as well as the most pristine forest.”
4. **Piedra Herrada:** “The location of the monarch colony has shifted a lot the past few seasons, meaning that some years the ascent can be steep while others it’s relatively easy. Piedra Herrada’s proximity to Valle de Bravo and Mexico City means that weekends can get crowded.”

### So you want to visit a Monarch Sanctuary? Plan for more than one day at the sanctuary.

- I went on somewhat of a private tour with family and friends. I’m not sure if my friends will lead another trip – but it’s possible. Send me your name and contact information and I’ll pass it along to Mark Bonta, who will get in touch with you if/when he plans another trip. It will probably be a combination of butterfly and birding, with lots of hiking, so get in shape.

I’ve heard these are good tours, but I’m not endorsing any of them. Do your homework and ask any tour company to send you client references who are willing to talk to you about their trip.

- This is a great website if you’d like to practice your Spanish and travel independently, but please hire a local guide near the sanctuaries and support the local economy! The company, “Mexperience,” will also set up a guided trip for you.

<https://www.mexperience.com/travel/outdoors/monarch-butterflies-mexico/#4>

- Sadly, the National Butterfly Center is closed, but you can review a trip they held in 2018: <https://www.nationalbutterflycenter.org/monarch-trip>