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# Flight of the Monarchs: Mexico's Mystical Butterfly Migration

Explore the captivating journey of millions of monarch butterflies as they embark on a spectacular migration to Mexico.

By Liisa Atva

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A monarch butterfly pauses on a bloom during its epic journey to Mexico. Photo by Joshua J. Cotten, Unsplash

## Butterfly Reserves

The branches of the surrounding Oyamel fir trees droop from the weight of

vibrating clusters, and the forest floor is aflutter. When a mating pair of monarch butterflies land on my arm, I freeze. My friend Karen whispers, "It feels like any moment now, fairies will appear."

In March 2024, two friends and I embarked on a nine-day "Monarchs in Michoacán" tour with guide Marina Aguirre. An archaeologist with a degree in history and a passion for the arts, Marina has been conducting her *Marina in Mexico* tours for fourteen years.

While the main focus of the tour was the monarchs, it was also a culinary, cultural, and folk-art experience.

It was only after booking that I read the Canadian Government's advisory to avoid non-essential travel to the state of Michoacán in Mexico due to high levels of violence and organized crime.



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However, the area we traveled through by private coach, four and a half hours northwest of Mexico City, felt quite safe. Also, the butterfly reserves and the city of Morelia, where we stayed most nights, were exempt from the advisory.

The Mariposa Monarca (Spanish for monarch butterfly) biosphere reserves cover over 500 square kilometers and are recognized UNESCO World Heritage sites. At the El Rosario and Sierra Chincua reserves, the butterflies gravitate to fir groves atop 3,000-meter-high mountains.

At both reserves, we had the option to ride horses partway up or walk. More comfortable on my own feet on steep, rugged trails, I opted for the latter. It was a tough slog uphill, and prone to altitude sickness, I was grateful for the altitude medicine I took in advance.

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## **The Monarchs' Epic Journey and Sacred Return**



Monarch butterflies gathering at Sierra Chincua Reserve. Photo by  
Liisa Atva

From November to March, the reserves are the winter home for eastern and central North American monarchs that have migrated an astonishing 4,800

kilometers from Canada and the United States.

After a period of suspended maturation in the reserves, the monarchs reproduce and then die off. In early spring, their offspring begin the journey north. Living only weeks, they are replaced by two or three more generations along the way.

The super generation, the one that makes it back to Mexico in the fall, lives eight to nine months, following routes where milkweed flourishes, as it is vital for their larva.

The monarch's arrival in Mexico at the beginning of November coincides with Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations. Many locals believe the monarchs are spirits of the dead returning to reassure those left behind that they are fine.

Although monarch numbers have been declining, it was encouraging to hear the guides say the number returning was more than the year before.

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# **Cultural Highlights**



Lively Locals of Pátzcuaro, Mexico. Photo by Liisa Atva

In addition to the monarchs, our tour included stays and visits to lesser-known Mexican cities and towns. Our first two nights were in Tlalpujahua, a small town known for its lavish Christmas decorations. Since it was months

past the Christmas season, the town was quiet.

For our first night, Marina arranged a private dinner for us at Frida's, a local restaurant. During dinner, our group of twelve took turns introducing ourselves and saying what had brought us to the tour.

Interestingly, several of the group referred to themselves as "snowbirds" who wintered in other parts of Mexico. I suggested that they could also refer to themselves as "monarchs" since several had mentioned that living in Mexico was transformative.

To top off a delicious, authentic Mexican meal, we were treated to an evening of bluesy music with Mexican and African vibes from Marina's brother on the harmonica, and his Belgian friend who had perfected his hand drumming technique in Africa.

When our driver, Miguel, joined the musicians, I was surprised at how good a singer he was. It turns out he is a member of the popular Mexican Band, Los Angeles. When he sang *Killing Me Softly*, we all joined in, and the lyrics soon became instead "tequila me softly."

## Charming Morelia and a Culinary Surprise

**Morelia**, the second place we stayed, is a pretty, colonial city with a central plaza surrounded by hotels and restaurants that spill out onto wide covered sidewalks where roving bands of musicians play.

Our comfortable, centrally located abode was the **Hotel Casino**, which, despite its name, does not have a casino.

You know you're somewhere authentically Mexican, with more local than international tourists, when most restaurants don't offer English menus nor have English-speaking staff.

At a small restaurant at the base of the trail to the Sierra Chincua reserve, my friend Barb ordered the lunch special. She thought she had ordered chicken, but Google Translate said "armadillo." At first, she wasn't a fan, finding the skin chewy and greasy, but later declared the meat okay.

## Monarch Butterfly Tour

# Connecting Through Art, Culture, and Conversation

We also visited local artists and artisans at their home studios in nearby villages, each with their own specialty. **Patzcuaro** is known for its pottery, Cupula for furniture making, and Santa Clara del Cobre for copper art. Chatting with the locals was a tour highlight.

While visiting an art gallery adjacent to the university in Morelia, Marina invited three students to practice their English with us. When asked if they had questions for us, the first one was, "I have heard in the USA many students leave home to go to school.

Do their parents support them?" I left that one for the Americans on our tour to answer. When I asked where they would like to travel to, all said they wanted to see more of Mexico before mentioning other places in the world.

Mexico is a diverse country with many fascinating places to visit in addition



to the more well-known tourist destinations. Like the monarchs, it keeps calling me back.

**Author Bio:** *Liisa Atva is a world wanderer and writer based in Steveston, British Columbia, Canada.*

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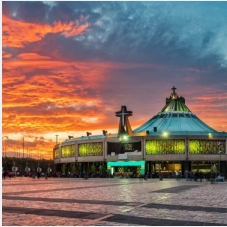
Wow this sounds like a place of wonder and learning. Mexico is a great place to visit and the people are so nice. Inspiring article! Makes me want to plant some asclepias / butterfly weed!

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