

# Chiapas April 12-27, 2018

The OCA plans its first “Orchids in the Wild” trip to the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Our in country leader for the expedition will be Dennis Szeszko, and Mary Gerritsen as the OCA tour leader.



In general, Chiapas has a warm, tropical climate, although the central part of the state has several mountain ranges with cloudy, more temperate climates.

Chiapas is home to the ancient Mayan ruins of Palenque, Yaxchilán, Bonampak, Chinkultic and Toniná. We will be visiting the ruins of Palenque at the beginning of the tour.

## Trip Summary

The trip starts by meeting everyone in the city of Villahermosa Tabasco, on April 12 where we will travel by bus, boat, plane and donkey to various reserves, parks and other areas in the state of Chiapas, Mexico.

We will visit ancient Mayan ruins, areas with gorgeous lakes and waterfalls, and unspoiled primary subtropical and tropical forests. Expect to see a rich assortment of Mexican orchids, as well as other flora and fauna.

We expect this tour to fill up very quickly, so if you are interested, send in your deposit as soon as possible. The total number of participants is strictly limited to 14 due to lodging limitations in the reserves we are visiting. At the end of the trip (April 27) we will depart from Tuxtla Guterrez.



Ancient Mayan Ruins at Palenque

DAILY ITINERARY

**Day 1.** Arrive in Villahermosa, Tabasco and travel via chartered bus to Palenque in Chiapas. Overnight in Palenque. Those wishing to visit the ruins in Palenque could arrange to arrive in Palenque a day earlier. Overnight in Palenque

**Day 2.** Travel to Agua Azul waterfalls (travertine pools), hike upstream to see orchids

such as *Cycnoches ventricosum*, swim in one of the jungle pools then transfer to Lacanja Lodge

**Day 3.** We take a dawn boat ride along the Usumacinta River that forms the border between Mexico and Guatemala to reach the Mayan ruins of Yaxchilan deep in the unperturbed Lacandon jungle. Expect to see



Agua Azul Pools



Ancient Mayan Ruins of Yaxchilan



many *Gongora spp.*, *Stanhopea spp.* and Pleurothallid spp. Overnight at Lacanja Lodge

**Day 4.** The area around the jungle lodge is amazingly biodiverse. We will take a jungle walk from the lodge to Lacanja lake and observe the plants and animals of the jungle. There are more than 150 species of orchids in this part of Mexico including *Brassia caudata*, *Chysis bractescens* and *Coryanthes speciosa*. Overnight at Lacanja Lodge

**Day 5.** In the morning we will see the famous Mayan painted murals at the Bonampak ruins under the shade of enormous chicle trees (*Manilkara zapota*) that harbor plants of *Encyclia alata* and *Maxillaria tenuifolia*.

Afterwards, we will be take off from a jungle airstrip and fly over the vast expanse of jungle below before landing in Comitán. In the afternoon we can take a quick tour of the



Lacanja Lake



Jungle airstrip



Mayan murals at Bonampak



Hacienda Santa Maria



*Barkeria spectabilis*



*Laelia superbiens*

Montebello Lakes National Park. Overnight at Hacienda Santa Maria.

**Day 6.** Some easy hikes. In the area around Comitán we may be able to see *Laelia superbiens* growing in the dry temperate oak forests, and we will definitely see the large flowers of *Barkeria spectabilis* in bloom in many locations. We should be able to see large plants of *Oncidium leucochilum* with 2-3 meter

inflorescences alongside *Cuitlauzina pulchella*. Overnight at Casa Santa Lucia.

**Day 7.** Easy day in San Cristobal de las Casas. We will be back in civilization again and this will give everybody a chance to have internet access and get some rest. San Cristobal is a beautiful colonial town with a strong presence of indigenous people and their culture in the Chiapas highlands. Bring a sweater and enjoy a cup of organic coffee that's grown in the



*Lycaste skinneri*



*Rhyncostele cordatum*



*Sobralia macrantha*



San Cristobel

mountains nearby. Overnight at Casa Santa Lucia.

**Day 8.** Transfer to Jaltenango and donkey ride to El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve with guide. Yes, you read that correctly. We will be taking donkeys from Jaltenango up to the El Triunfo Reserve. It's a six hour journey but we will observe many plants and animals as we make our way up the mountain with our guide to Mexico's best preserved evergreen cloud forest and mountain rainforest habitat. On Cerro Ovando alone, about 800 different species of plants have been recorded. Overnight at El Triunfo research station.

**Day 9.** Guided hike in the evergreen cloud forest. It is quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*) breeding season and we have a 90% chance of seeing one of these elusive and magnificent birds in its natural habitat while we trek through the cloud forest with our guide. Expect to see lots of orchids. Overnight at El Triunfo research station.

**Day 10.** Guided hike in the mountain rainforest. These forests are dripping with epiphytes and we expect to see many famous Mexican species and several *Rhynchostele* species during the peak spring blooming season. If we are lucky we may be able to see *Rossioglossum grande* and *Guarianthe skinneri*, as well. Overnight at El Triunfo research station.



Rainforest

**Day 11.** We make the reverse trip down the mountain on donkeys to Jaltenango with guide and transfer to Tuxtla Gutierrez. It's our last chance to appreciate the intricate details found in the flowers of many of the less widely known species of *Epidendrum*, *Stelis* and *Lepanthes* that inhabit these misty mountains. We return to the capital city of Tuxtla Gutierrez. Overnight at hotel in Tuxtla

**Day 12.** From Tuxtla we head north for a day Trip to El Ocote Biosphere Reserve and Sierra las Cotorras with our local guide, Julio Arevalos. Julio has spent over 20 years tracking down orchids throughout the state of Chiapas. At El Ocote Reserve we will find various species of *Sobralia* spp. and *Encyclia diota* growing on the karstic rock outcroppings. Overnight at hotel in Tuxtla,



*Cycnoches egertonianum*



*Epidendrum pugioniforme*



*Prosthechea vitellina*



*Prosthechea cochleata*



**Day 13.** Day Trip to Nuevo Mexico in the Chiapas Central Depression with Julio Arevalos. We will explore the orchids of the lowland deciduous jungle south of Tuxtla which include spectacular drought-tolerant species like *Encyclia cordigera*, *Mormodes* spp., and *Clowesia russelliana*.

**Day 14.** Day trip to Cerro Brujo (Wizard's Peak) with Julio Arevalos. Cerro Brujo is a secret locality and stronghold for populations of *Phragmipedium exstaminodium*, Mexico's only representative of this genus. There will undoubtedly be other surprises in this virginal tract of rainforest near the border with Oaxaca. Overnight at hotel in Tuxtla.

**Day 15.** Day trip to other forests in the area with Julio Arevalos. We will make a group decision as to where we want to go on the last day. It could be that we want to find a particular species that we have missed, or perhaps spend more time exploring in a certain ecosystem. Julio will make some recommendations and accommodate our requests. We return to Tuxtla Gutierrez in the evening and prepare for

our international flights the next day. Overnight at hotel in Tuxtla.

**Day 16.** Departures from Tuxtla Gutierrez to home.

DENNIS SZESZKO



Our guide for the trip will be Dennis Szeszko. Dennis had what all of you would probably consider your "dream job". He was hired by the Mexican government as a research scientist and was lucky enough to spend five years traveling throughout Mexico looking for orchids. During that time, he was employed by the Ministry of Agriculture and his job was to identify the Mexican wild orchids that could be adapted for use as commercial flowers. His adventures took him throughout Mexico looking for the most beautiful clones of many of Mexico's most acclaimed orchid species. He has extensive first-hand knowledge of Mexican orchids, where they can be found, and ex-situ cultivation techniques. His field research formed the basis for his book, *La Orquideoflora Mexiquense*. His large format "coffee table" book featuring hundreds of photographs of orchids in the wild was published by the Mexican government to commemorate the bicentennial of Mexico's independence.

In addition to his scientific research with orchids, Dennis has a keen interest in the business of orchids. He led a government initiative to commercialize Mexican native orchids and transform them into an important new crop for Mexico. He also founded a company that is breeding and developing new varieties of Mexican orchids that will be sold as pot plants and cut flowers. Dennis is particularly excited about the possibility of using *Barkeria* species as the cornerstones of this new enterprise.

Dennis speaks English and Spanish fluently, and is proficient in French. He holds an undergraduate degree in history from Princeton University and an MBA from the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



## Calendar

**Dec 5, 2017: \$500 deposits due**

**Feb 15 2018: Balance of trip costs due**

**April 12, 2018: Arrive in Villahermosa**

**April 27, 2018: Departures from Tuxtla Guiterrez**

## LEVEL OF ACTIVITY AND ACCOMODATIONS:

Participants should be in good physical condition and be expected to walk 2-3 hours on most days with a light backpack that would include field guides, light snacks, camera and water bottles. The climate will vary from extremely hot and humid to chilly at nights in locations at high altitude. The chartered bus will get us near the plants, but to really get up close requires walking in forests and jungles. There is no way around this since we will be traveling to ultra-remote locations where the flora has been perturbed as little as possible to give us the best possibility of viewing rare and endangered orchids in the wild. As a result, during the most rustic parts of the trip, the accommodations will be simple but functional.

This should be a spectacular trip, with the opportunity to mix a little culture with a lot of botany!

If you wish to come, please contact Peter Tobias at the Orchid Conservation Alliance ( [peter@orchidconservationalliance.org](mailto:peter@orchidconservationalliance.org) ). The final price for the trip will be available soon. The price will include all hotels, in country transportation, meals guides, etc. It does not include plane fare to Villahermosa and from Tuxtla to your home city, tips to the drivers or guides, or alcoholic beverages.

Send your \$500 deposit (checks payable to the Orchid Conservaiton Alliance) to reserve your spot on the trip no later than Dec 5 2017 to:

Peter Tobias  
Orchid Conservation Alliance  
564 Arden Drive  
Encinitas, CA 92024

