ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING PHENOMENA in nature is the annual migration of millions of Monarch butterflies (Danaus plexippus) southward from their breeding grounds in the United States and Canada east of the Rocky Mountains to overwintering sites in the mountains of southern Mexico. Hundreds of millions of Monarchs fly along the Gulf Coast, or across the Gulf of Mexico, to eventually reach the belt of high volcanic mountains which stretches across the southern end of the central Mexican plateau.

AT ABOUT A DOZEN ISOLATED PLACES WITHIN the high-altitude fir forests of this zone, Monarchs pass the winter in aggregations that exceed two billion individual butterflies. Throughout periods of sunshine, millions of butterflies will take flight from the roosts and sail to nearby stream banks to drink, then soar again into the air and eventually return that afternoon to their original roost on the surrounding trees. You will have the opportunity to see them packed in the countless millions on the roosts in the early morning, as well as in flight at midday, feeding on wildflowers (which amazingly bloom throughout the year at these elevations in Mexico), and watering at streams.

THE BEAUTY OF THEIR RUSTLING WINGS clearly audible at times of mass flight, the sprinkling of orange Monarch scales drifting down through the green fir tree boughs, and sheer magnitude of the numbers seen, all combine to make this one of the most amazing experiences imaginable. Bring your best photographic equipment to record this miracle for your friends and relatives to marvel at when you return home!
ANGANGUEO

Today visit El Rosario Reserve, the first Monarch colony and the one most generally accessible to the public. The journey begins with a wake-up hike to the site. Or, if you prefer, you can rent a horse (around $5 U.S. or 100 Mexican pesos). This large overwintering colony normally contains well over 100 million adult Monarchs and has an excellent trail system winding through the fir-covered slopes on which the colony is located. Additionally, there is a nearby stream where the butterflies may fly at midday to drink water. Have a simple picnic lunch while enjoying this spectacular phenomenon and watch the butterflies go through their daily cycle of activities. At this time of year, they may take flight for an hour or more to secure water, nectar, etc., before returning to their roost on the tree limbs or trunks. Please be prepared to be independent today during butterfly watching. In the late afternoon, return from the mountains to the picturesque colonial town of Angangueo. You will have free time to enjoy the hotel gardens, walk and photograph the interesting scenes and people in this beautiful town, or to just relax. This evening, Dr. Daniels will be available to answer questions, discuss the Monarch migration and what to expect tomorrow. Overnight at Hotel Don Bruno. (BLD)

ANGANGUEO

After breakfast, ascend into the mountains to approximately 10,000 feet elevation to visit Sierra Chincua, one of several nearby Monarch sites. The day will start with a hike up to the reserve entrance. Horses are available for rent at an extra fee for this portion (around $5 U.S. or 100 Mexican peso). Once at the entrance to the reserve, continue up the mountain on foot until you reach the site where the butterflies are roosting. The hike is uphill but you will be able to walk at your own pace and stop and rest as needed. The remainder of the afternoon entails walking around the butterfly site on your own and photographing and watching butterflies independently. A boxed lunch will be provided to eat at leisure. Bathroom access is at the base of the mountain and can be reached by walking or renting a horse. There are also vendors at the base selling food, beverages, and local crafts. The site is typically shaded so remember to dress in layers due to high elevations. Late in the afternoon, return to Hotel Don Bruno for dinner. Overnight at Hotel Don Bruno. (BLD)

MEXICO CITY

After breakfast, depart for the Mexico City area and the pyramids at Sun Juan Teotihuacán. After a delicious lunch at a local restaurant near the pyramids, you’ll have the afternoon to explore this world-famous archaeological site, which covers 2 square miles and contains many structures including two large pyramids. The Pyramid of the Sun, at a height of more than 200 feet, is one of the largest structures created in the pre-Columbian New World. After time to explore the ruins on your own, return to your hotel located on the Zócalo for a farewell dinner. Overnight at Zócalo Central Hotel. (BLD)

MEXICO CITY / DEPART

This morning you will be transferred to the airport for your flight home. Breakfast will be included depending on your departure time. Please be aware that you need to be at the airport three hours ahead of your scheduled departure flight time. This goes for the flight to Mexico as well as on the way back. Please pay careful attention when you book your return flight, as a 7:00 am departure from Mexico City means that you will need to wake up at 3:30 am to get to the airport by 4 am. If you choose to make an early morning booking there is no problem in terms of getting you to the airport on time, but we want you to be aware of the three-hour check-in time. (B)