



Riding a caballito (a small horse) to the Sierra Chincua Butterfly Sanctuary. The trek is a 1.5-kilometre climb to a height of 3,300 metres above sea level. **GEORGE MUCALOV**

Flight of the Monarchs

Butterfly sanctuary trek in Mexican mountains an eye-opening time



A Monarch butterfly from the Sierra Chincua Sanctuary. Every year millions of butterflies migrate here to breed. JANICE MUCALOV

Janice and George Mucalov
SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

The butterflies are everywhere — swirling about our faces, alighting on bushes, quivering in the sunshine on nectar-laden lupines.

Thousands upon thousands of delicate orange-and-black Monarchs fill our view. When clouds scuttle overhead, we even hear the susurration of their wings, like soft rain falling, as they flutter to the trees to huddle in clumps. It's quite magical — almost otherworldly.

And yet...

We've come to see where the Monarchs winter in Mexico each year after migrating an astonishing 4,000 to 5,000 kilometres from Eastern Canada and the United States —

the longest-known journey in the insect world.

Our expedition from the colonial city of Morelia has been less remarkable.

But still, it's been a long day trip for us — by car, horse and on foot — to visit this butterfly sanctuary at a breath-sucking elevation, high in the Sierra Madre Mountains.

And now that we're here, the clusters of butterflies clinging to the fir trees aren't as humongous as shown in photo books.

The clumps are supposed to be thicker than oak barrels used to age wine. And the trees should be so coated with butterflies that the forest looks as if it's on fire. And why aren't branches drooping with the weight of so many butterflies that

they almost crack and break before our very eyes?

"There aren't as many Monarchs in the mountains as there used to be," our guide Raymundo Vargas explains simply. "They used to cover 3,000 trees in one sanctuary. Now only 2,000 trees are covered."

We learn the butterflies have been dying in record numbers in recent years.

One reason is that the herbicides used by Canadian and American farmers are killing the milkweed on which Monarchs lay their eggs and feed. Scientists warn the butterflies could even soon be wiped out altogether.

So, on this brilliant, warm, bluebird day, we are thankful to witness the butterfly display we see.

Our adventure began earlier in the morning when Raymundo picked us up from our Morelia hotel. A reliable Toyota. A safe driver who spoke good English. Scenic roads. A good start. We cruised through expansive rolling countryside, past corn fields, prickly pear cactus, donkeys and avocado plantations before branching off onto a narrow road snaking up into the mountains.

At a rest stop a couple of hours later, we refuelled on hand-pressed tortillas and "atole" (hot milk sweetened with sugar and cinnamon), boiled on a clay, wood-burning oven.

Raymundo chose the Sierra Chincua Sanctuary for us to visit, as it was clear up top. It's one of four sanctuaries open to visitors in what is now the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. In 1975, Canadian zoologist Fred Urquhart discovered the Monarchs (which some say used to number almost a billion) congregate each winter in this pocket of forest, after spending the summers in Eastern Canada and the U.S. The area is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

How the butterflies find their way to these Oyamel fir forests in Mexico is a mystery (though it's speculated they have a built-in compass).

What is known is that Monarchs live about four weeks on average.

But the fourth generation of butterflies born in September lives for eight to nine months.

This miraculous change allows this "Methuselah" generation to migrate south and escape the winters that would otherwise kill them.

Very sensible of the Monarchs (like Canadian snowbirds seeking the sun), we mused, after parking the car on a grassy atoll and reading



The hike up to the butterfly sanctuary offers a superb vista of the surrounding hills and countryside.

GEORGE MUCALOV

a little more about them in the visitor centre.

Beyond the centre, signboards in English and Spanish advised of a "moderate to challenging" hike 1.5 kilometres long. The air was thin at this altitude, some 3,300 metres above sea level, and even a slight uphill walk caused the heart to pound.

Thank goodness for the horses. The locals, who have discontinued logging in the reserve, now make a living taking visitors who prefer not to walk up to the sanctuaries on caballitos (small horses).

"Janice, with your cold, you go on the caballito," directed Raymundo, who planned to walk up with George.

The little horse, led by an old man in a cowboy hat, cost no more than \$7 to ride, and the 30-minute clip-clop up a skinny path through the silent forest was an unexpected delight.

We met again up top at the roped-off edge of the sanctuary. Clouds of Monarchs snuggled in bunches on the trees to stay warm, bursting into flight when touched by the warming rays of sunshine.

"You know, legend has it that the butterflies are the souls of dead children returning to earth," shared Raymundo, as we sat on a log quietly taking in the scene. "They arrive here at the end of October, the same time as

our Day of the Dead holiday."

Come February, the butterflies mate, he added. Then in March, they begin their epic return migration back north. Finally it was time for us to leave the Monarchs. Safe, for now, dancing in the breeze between sunbeams in the embrace of the protected Mexican forest.

If you go

The best time to see the Monarchs at the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve is in February, when they mate and are the most active.

From Morelia, it's a 10-hour day trip to the sanctuaries (includes a three-hour drive each way).

We booked our visit through S&S Tours (ss-tours.com), which specializes in learning adventures to Latin America. Owner Sue Stilwell can arrange independent private day tours with a driver/guide from Morelia for \$175 US per person. Private and small-group multi-day trips, which include overnighting near the sanctuaries and two days with the Monarchs, are also offered.



A beautifully coloured monarch rests peacefully on a flower blossom.

JANICE MUCALOV

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