Ecological Society of America Adventures

Maya Biosphere Reserve
TIKAL NATIONAL PARK EXPEDITION
January 3 – 8, 2025

For Information & Reservations:
Call 1-800-252-4910 or
1-408-252-4910 or
Email BetchartTerri@gmail.com

Betchart Expeditions Inc.
17050 Montebello Road, Cupertino, CA 95014

Optional Highlands Extension to Antigua
& Chichicastenango
Jan 8 -11, 2025
Ecological Society of America  
Maya Biosphere Reserve  
TIKAL NATIONAL PARK EXPEDITION  
January 3 – 8, 2025  

With optional Highlands Extension  
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Join us for an in-depth ecological exploration of Tikal National Park with fellow ESA members!

The Maya Biosphere Reserve, within which Tikal National Park 576 km², is situated, is one of the largest and most important lowland tropical forest protected areas in Mesoamerica; it contains one of the northernmost, truly large remaining areas of mature tropical forest in the Americas. As such, it is the site of a tremendous amount of conservation effort by the Guatemalan government and by many international governmental and non-governmental agencies, including: US Agency for International Development, Wildlife Conservation Society, CARE International, The Nature Conservancy, and many others, including several European governmental and non-governmental agencies, not to mention several local Guatemalan government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Conservation efforts within the Maya Biosphere Reserve are truly on the forefront of global efforts to protect remaining tropical forests. The Reserve also makes extraordinary efforts to meet the needs of local people while conserving forested wildlands.

For every member of ESA who participates, Betchart Expeditions will make a contribution to a local conservation organization.

With Leadership by an excellent naturalist this will be an exceptional experience!

**Itinerary**

**Day 1 Fri Jan 3**  
FLY TO GUATEMALA CITY

Take flights from home to Guatemala City Airport “La Aurora”. Meet your guide and transfer to our Hotel (1 night). Welcome briefing and dinner. (D)

**Day 2 Sat Jan 4**  
GUATEMALA CITY TO FLORES & TIKAL ANCIENT MAYA RUINS

Today we will have a 1-hour flight to Flores, then transfer to our Lodge (4 nights) to begin our exploration of Tikal National Park.

Guided walk to some of the main sites of the ancient Maya ruins at Tikal. With history stretching back to approximately 900 BC, there are an estimated 3,000 buildings in the 16 square km central part of the ancient city alone. Many structures are available to visit, with others still awaiting excavation. Enormous trees still shroud Tikal's buildings, which cluster in groups reached by wide causeways meandering through the tropical forest, home to toucans, six species of parrots, Ocellated Turkeys, Howler Monkeys, Coati and countless other creatures.

The Great Plaza is the heart of ancient Tikal. The Temple of the Grand Jaguar (Temple I) and the Temple of the Masks (Temple II) loom like a pair of colossal bookends on opposite sides of the Great Plaza, a large area ringed by terraces, palaces and ball courts. Dozens of stone pillars known as stelae, each paired with a
circular altar, stand here in rows. Carvings and glyphs commemorating important dates and deeds of Tikal's rulers adorn many of these weathered monoliths. Advances of the past few decades now allow the interpretation of dates and facts recorded in these carved glyphs. (B,L,D)

**Day 3 Sun Jan 5  TIKAL NATIONAL PARK**

Tikal is, of course, one of the crown jewels of Mayan archaeology, and our visit here will thoroughly explore that theme. In addition, it is one of the absolute best places to immerse oneself in Neotropical lowland forest, via the miles of ancient causeways that allow one to amble leisurely beneath the forest canopy, in search of birds, mammals, lizards, an astonishing array of insect life, and the forest vegetation itself.

In this morning’s guided walk below the forest canopy, we’ll be alert for many North American breeding birds that winter in the millions here in the extensive forests of the Yucatan Peninsula—Worm-eating Warblers that search atop the wide fan-shaped leaves of chest-tall understory palms, flipping over the dead leaves collected there, in search of the arthropod morsels that lurk within—American Redstarts flashing their flamboyant colors higher up in the canopy—Summer Tanagers with their frequent, mechanical “ticka-ticka-tick” calls that announce themselves to experienced North American birders.

Throughout our time at Tikal, we’ll be on high alert for raiding columns of the army ants Eciton burchelli and E. hamatum—when we find a colony, we’ll keep tabs on it, to thoroughly exploit the astonishing observations afforded. Birding an army ant raid is among the most exciting birding one can find, as a host of otherwise difficult to observe birds, such as several woodcreeper species patrol the front of the ant swarm, darting down to snap invertebrate prey fleeing from the ants. Black-faced Antthrushes patrol the periphery, flipping over dead leaves that shelter the fleeing insects, lizards, and other small creatures routed by the ants. Those equipped for close-up photography should find ample opportunity to photograph the ants themselves, and perhaps associates such as tachinid flies that oviposit on fleeing insects, or beetles and others that actually live within the ant colony, chemically and behaviorally concealing their non-ant identity from their hosts.

Resident bird species include raucous flights of Mealy Parrots, White-crowned Parrots, White-fronted Parrots, Red-lored Parrots, Brown-hooded Parrots and Aztec Parakeets that commute low over the canopy between fruiting trees where they forage, and many raptor species that are restricted to lowland tropical forest, for example the Ornate Hawk-eagle, among the world’s most stately raptors, which stalks tinamous, guans, and squirrels below the canopy. (B,L,D)

**Day 4 Mon Jan 6  TIKAL NATIONAL PARK**

Continue our exploration of this biologically rich region, steeped in history from the Maya culture of the past many thousand years, to the inroads of selective mahogany logging over the past two centuries, to the origin of the Wrigley chewing gum empire, to the allspice in our Thanksgiving pumpkin pies and palm fronds adorning our floral arrangements. We will learn about each of these forest product industries, and their importance to local participants in traditional “forest society”.

A high point will be an early morning trek to, and climb to the upper levels of, Temple IV, whose view over the surrounding sea of forest is incomparable. You may recognize it from a fleeting scene in the original Star Wars movie—as robed elders paced, awaiting the Death Star’s ascent above the horizon. Here, the incomparable dawn chorus of the Bright-rumped Attila will bring the forest to life as shreds of fog dissolve, bringing the surrounding canopy surface into view. As the air warms, bringing the forest’s sweet odor to life, we’ll see various parrots commuting over the canopy, and various raptor species making their dawn territorial circuits above the forest. This is a morning you will never forget.

Some nights will feature an optional post-dinner adventure in the dark, prowling by headlamp on forest trails. We will walk in the forest understory, waiting in silence to hope for a sighting of some mammals — anything from a tiny brocket deer to a Philander Opossum, an armadillo, or an oversized rodent, the Paca or Agouti. We will inspect tree trunks and foliage closely under head lamps, hoping for a view of the many nocturnal insects, scorpions, and potentially tree frogs, many nocturnal, arboreal snake species, and so on. Spiders are a possibility as well, which we will discover by their surprisingly brilliant eyeshine. (B,L,D)
Day 5  Tue Jan 7  TIKAL NATIONAL PARK

The Maya Biosphere Reserve is on the cutting edge of attempts to save remaining tropical forest wildlands throughout the globe. As a land protection category that provides hopefully inviolate core areas for strict nature protection, along with multiple-use areas where local people may continue long-practiced forest extraction practices in a sustainable fashion, the huge protected area within which Tikal National Park is embedded, is a case study in present-day efforts to save remaining nature around the planet. Many US-based (and some European) conservation NGOs have large programs in this area, to aid the Guatemalan government in protecting this globally-important tropical forest wildland.

At all points during our explorations of Tikal, we will watch for classical examples of tropical ecology, often involving coevolution between plants and insects, arms races between insects and their predators, and so on. There will be ample opportunity for photographers to build a portfolio on such topics. Examples include the stinging *Pseudomyrmex* ants that protect certain *Acacia* species from herbivores and climbing vines, benefitting in turn from nectar and housing provided by the latter—and certain flycatchers that nest preferentially in such ant-protected trees, also deriving protection from the stinging ants. Leaf-cutter ants are another conspicuous phenomenon that we can observe and photograph. Photography, including macrophotography, will be a strong possibility throughout the trip.

At some point we will learn about how the special properties of water, derived from the high electronegativity of oxygen compared to that of hydrogen—can enable one to survive when lost in the vast forests of the Yucatan Peninsula, where surface water is rare during the severe dry season, since rain sinks quickly into the porous limestone underfoot. There is a vine one can drink from…if you understand the special properties of water. (B,L,D)

Day 6  Wed Jan 8  TIKAL - GUATEMALA CITY & optional HIGHLANDS EXTENSION

Those who are up for pre-dawn exploration will be out before first light, in an effort to hear the Collared Forest-falcon, ghostlike in the pre-dawn dark, proclaim its territory by loud calls that echo through the silent forest—“OWW!...OWW!...OWW!...Oh, ow, ow, ow...OWWW! .....OWWW! .....OWWW!”

Meanwhile, it’s much smaller congener, the Barred Forest-falcon may be heard, sounding much like a distant Chihuahua barking in the understory. The understated “Hoot, hoot!” of the Blue-crowned Motmot will echo from all points of the compass. (B)

Transfer to Flores Airport for a short flight to Guatemala City. Hotel (1 night). Flights depart Guatemala City to Home on Day 7, Thursday, January 9, 2025.

or join the optional post trip HIGHLANDS EXTENSION

Upon arrival at Guatemala City airport, transfer through lush rural vistas to the World Heritage City of Antigua, our base for the next three nights. Hotel (3 nights).

Situated 1,500 m above sea-level, in the forested hills of the central highlands, Antigua is one of the oldest and most beautiful cities in the Americas. Its setting is majestic, nestled between three dramatic volcanos: Agua, Fuego and Acatenango. Fuego (Fire) has been erupting since the 16th century and is easily recognizable by its plume of smoke and the red glow is projects against the night sky from its 3,700+m peak. The cobblestone streets, sprays of bougainvillea bursting from crumbling ruins, pastel facades under terra cotta roofs and of course, the volcanoes make Antigua a stunning town and excellent base for exploring this biologically rich region.

Thur Jan 9  CHICHICASTENANGO HIGHLAND MARKET

Visit the colorful market town of Chichicastenango, located in the western highlands. A trading center for the Maya, “Chichi” is still serving Indian villages from the neighboring highlands twice a week (Thursday & Sunday). The traditional local market has expanded from necessities to textiles and other handcrafts.

We might enjoy a hike up a pine-clad trail to the hilltop where Pascual Abaj (Sacrifice Stone) sits. This shrine to the Maya earth god Huyup Tak'ah (Mountain Plain) is a stone-faced idol amid a circle of squat
stone crosses in a clearing. Said to be hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years old, local people still revere it, visiting regularly with offerings in thanks and hope for the earth's continuing fertility.
If time allows, we will return to Antigua via Lake Atitlan, a massive water filled volcanic crater. (B)

Fri Jan 10    ANTIGUA

Explore Finca El Pilar, a private nature reserve with more than 390 hectares of cloud forest just outside of Antigua. The park is dedicated to the conservation of the region's biodiversity and teeming with wildlife including amphibians, reptiles, insects and, most famously, birds with more than 200 species spotted including Emerald Toucanets and Black Hawks - Eagles. There are also three refreshing spring water pools.

Finca Filadelfia just north of Antigua is a working shade coffee plantation comprised of 300 hectares from the valley at 1600 meters, up to the highest mountain at 2450 meters. Of that, 100 hectares are planted with coffee and the balance is planted with forestry trees plus a natural ecological reserve at the top. A network of trails and small roads gives access to all kinds of habitat within the finca. Transportation to the different areas is provided with Finca Filadelfia's own oldtimer but well-maintained Unimog trucks. On the lower forest edge there is a pergola which allows stunning views to the three surrounding volcanoes on clear days. The area below 2000 m is now being partially reforested with pine and cypress plantations. Fragments of broadleaf forest have been protected along the bottom of small valleys. (B)

Sat Jan 11    ANTIGUA - HOME
Transfer to Guatemala City Airport after breakfast (40 km appx 1hr 45 min). Take afternoon flights home. B

Please Note: This Daily Itinerary is a guide only and is subject to change in the best interests of all group members should circumstances dictate.

ESAs receives a contribution for every ESA member booked which will support ESA’s general operations and programs.

COSTS & CONDITIONS

Expedition Fee: $3,995 per person twin share, + $395 in-tour air Guatemala City/Flores RT, (plus air fare from home to Guatemala City RT). Air Fares Are Subject to Change until ticketed. Limited single accommodations are available for a supplement of $795.

Expedition Fee Includes: Land transport; group airport transfers; accommodations twin share; meals as indicated; entrance fees; tips to local guides and drivers; leadership, administration.

Expedition Fee Does Not Include: International Air Fares; in-tour air flights Guatemala City/Flores, RT (quoted separately); independent transfers; some meals; gratuities to expedition leaders; personal items such as laundry, phone calls, beverages at meals, alcoholic beverages, snacks; or personal insurance.

Optional Highland Extension: $1,795 per person twin share. Singles are encouraged to share; limited singles are available for $450 additional. Includes group transfers, tours as indicated, 3 nights hotel, breakfasts, 1 dinner, group entrance fees; tips to local guides & drivers; leadership, administration.

What to Expect: This expedition is for travelers who would like to explore the biodiversity and cultural heritage of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala. A special highlight will be staying at a nature lodge inside the Tikal National Park. The experience of getting up and going to bed inside the park, inside this huge chunk of the northernmost tropical moist forest in the Americas is not to be missed! This is a rich experience with wonderful opportunities to explore the reserve with an excellent naturalist. The group will walk 4-5 km on uneven nature trails most days. Walks will be at a leisurely pace suitable for discovery, and enjoying the natural and cultural heritage of the area. Typically, temperatures are in the 80's at Tikal and springlike in the highlands (60's - 70's). The expedition will be a tremendous experience for travelers who
relish the opportunity to enjoy rich ecological experiences. You will see monkeys, birds, and other wildlife in the forest. (No smoking in vehicles, during lectures, or meals please.)

**Air Fare & Airline Ticketing:** Please phone Terri at Betchart Expeditions, (800) 252-4910 for information about suggested flights to Guatemala City. Betchart will ticket all passengers on the in-tour flights Guatemala City/Flores, RT. AIR FARES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE UNTIL TICKETED.

**Accommodations:** At a comfortable first class hotel in Guatemala City. To maximize our experience, we will stay at the comfortable, but rustic Jungle Lodge inside the Tikal National Park. The lodge operates on generator power and park regulations only allow a limited schedule. Rooms have a ceiling fan, night light and power outlet, but there are several hours during the day, and all night where the generator is off due to park regulations.

**Reservations, Deposits & Payments:** To reserve a place on this expedition, please mail a check in deposit of $500 per person with the completed reservation form to: Betchart Expeditions Inc., 17050 Montebello Road, Cupertino, CA 95014-5435. **Balance of land fee is due** October 1, 2024

**Cancellations & Refunds:** The initial deposit is refundable until 90 days before departure, less a handling fee of $250 per person. There is no refund for any cancellation after the 90-day period unless your space can be resold; then a $250 per person handling fee applies. No refunds are made for unused services. Air fare is non-refundable, non-transferable.

**Questions, Reservations, Deposits, and Payments:** To reserve your place, please phone Terri at Betchart Expeditions Inc. (800) 252-4910 or (408) 867-4973 or email: betchartTerri@gmail.com

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**RESERVATION**

YES! I/We want to join the Tikal National Park Expedition, January 3 – 8, 2025 offered by ESA and Betchart Expeditions Inc. Please reserve _____ space(s) on the expedition; _____ spaces on the Highlands Extension January 8 – 11, 2025. As a deposit, I/we have enclosed a check for $__________ ($500 per person for Guatemala, $250 per person for the Highlands Extension), payable to Betchart Expeditions Inc. Trust Account.

Name ___________________________ Age ________ Sex ________

Name ___________________________ Age ________ Sex ________

Street Address __________________________________________________________

City ___________________________ State ________ Zip ____________

Email __________________________ Phone: __________________________

Please reserve _____ double _____twin or _____ single accommodations. Membership: ____ ESA

**Mail Res Form & Deposit Check to:** Betchart Expeditions, 17050 Montebello Rd, Cupertino CA 95014

**Responsibility:** Betchart Expeditions Inc., the Ecological Society of America, act only as agents for the passenger with respect to transportation and hotels, and exercise every care possible. However, we can assume no liability for injury, damage, delay, loss, accident or irregularity in connection with the services of any airplane, ship, motorcoach, or any other conveyance used in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. We cannot accept any responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, acts of God, or other causes beyond our control. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. We reserve the right to substitute another leader of similar expertise or reserve the right to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case the entire payment will be refunded with no further obligation on our part. The right is also reserved to decline to accept or retain any person as a member of the tour. No refund will be made for the unused portion of any tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The price of the program is based on current tariffs and rates, and is subject to change. Any tariff, exchange rate, or fuel increases will be passed on to participants. Baggage is carried at the owner’s risk entirely. It is under stood that the air ticket when issued shall constitute the sole contract between the passenger and the airline concerned. The airlines concerned are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their plane or conveyance. © 2024 Betchart Expeditions Inc. All rights reserved.

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