

Iran

The Zagros

Itinerary

Days 1-4

Shiraz - Persepolis & Bamu

Less than an hour's drive from Shiraz lies Persepolis, the ruined summer capital of the Achaemenian Empire. This magnificent complex was started around 2500 years ago by Darius the Great. Burnt to the ground by Alexander the Great, the site was only rediscovered during the 1930's. Great pillars and staircases litter the huge pedestal on which the palace was built. The carvings which adorn much of palace are of the highest quality depicting peoples from many tribes and races bringing tribute to the ancient rulers of Persia. Mythical beasts are well represented with some excellent Homas (a beast with an eagle head) and many double-headed bulls and horses. Some fabulous carvings of Lions devouring bulls are found throughout the complex and Darius can be seen killing a winged Lion with his sword. Around the tombs can be found a variety of wheatears including Red-tailed, Hume's, Black-eared and Mourning. Pale Rock Sparrows pass through in small flocks and we'll probably hear the strident call of Eastern Rock Nuthatches before we see them.

Nearby are the great cliff-tombs of Nasht-e Rostam, believed to be those of Darius I, Artaxerxes, Xerxes I and Darius II. Casting our eyes sideways we'll see patches of yellow on the cliffs - the beautiful long-tubed *Dionysia diapiensifolia*. Pretty pink *Gladiolus persicus* and blue *Gentiana olivieri* grow on a high pass adorned with *Dionysia revoluta*. White-cheeked Bulbuls and tiny Plain Leaf Warblers flit from juniper to daphne. Shiraz's vineyards are still in operation and a walk up behind one such will take us to see rare *Dionysia sarvestanica* and the lovely pink bells of *Fritillaria gibbosa*.

Set in a wide valley bordered by steep-sided mountains, Lake Maharlu is a serenely beautiful place. Greater Flamingos feed in the shallow waters and it may come as a surprise to see numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes spinning on the open water. On the shore are a variety of waders including many White-tailed Plovers and in reeds by Barmshur Springs we'll encounter Clamorous Reed Warblers and a variety of migrants. A night drive in nearby Bamu National Park will be very productive for those interested in mammals with numerous Goitred Gazelle, foxes, Wild Boar, and possibly Leopard and Striped Hyena, our 2007 group being treated to prolonged views of three of the latter!

Day 5

The Dinar Massif

The landscape changes dramatically as we head north. The cliff-sided massifs and wide valleys of the southern Zagros are replaced by a land of majestic peaks culminating in the 4404m Dinar Mountain. Valleys are now carpeted in oak forest and inhabited by Middle-spotted Woodpeckers and White-

throated Robins. Blooming in partial shade are stately Steven's Orchids, Violet Limodores and *Ophrys transhyrcana*. The local endemic *Dionysia termeana* grows on wet cliffs and in the woodlands below, the beautiful *Eremurus persicus*.

Days 6-8

Semirom, Hanna and Pashmaku

So far we will have come across only yellow-flowered *Dionysias* and so it will no doubt be with great pleasure that near Semirom we'll encounter a pink one. In fact not just one but three pink ones! The relatively widespread but sensationally beautiful *Dionysia bryoides* flowers below a waterfall whilst on a strange tufa-like rocks above the town itself is the recently described *Dionysia mozaffarianii*. The third of the 'pink-uns' is the lovely grey-green foliaged 'encrusting' *iranshahrii* flowering with yellow *Dionysia revoluta*. Yellow *Tulipa biebersteiniana* flowers in poplar woods and above are slopes with thousands of the scarlet goblets of the red form of *Anemone biflora*, surely one of Iran's finest flowers. By the lake at Hanna we'll see fabulous *Iris lycotis*, an *oncocyclus* iris so dark it is almost black! Above are acres of lovely *Tulipa systola* with long red tepals backed by greyish-green. The strange aroid *Eminium lehmanni* grows with *Arum elongatum*. *Aristolochia olivieri* and *Bungea trifida* offer a glimpse into obscurer botanical worlds. Wolves and Golden Jackals are not uncommon and both have been seen on our recent tours here.

Days 9-11

Chelgerd

The surprisingly modern and comfortable hotel that will be our base for the next few days has come into existence to serve a growing market of well-off Iranians who travel all the way from Tehran to see Chelgerd's fabulous 'Flower Fields'. The flowers in question are of course *Fritillaria imperialis* and the show is really quite wonderful. Kilometre after kilometre of road is lined with plants - growing on dry mountain slopes (not fields of course - these are thoroughly natural) with *Fritillaria persica* and *Bellevalia longistyla*. In parts they are the dominant ground vegetation! Streams are lined with deep blue *Bellevalia pycnantha* and possibly the most beautiful of all Iranian frits, *Fritillaria reuteri*. Each plant has up to four or five tubby mahogany and golden yellow bells. Lammergeier and Long-legged Buzzard cruise overhead and migrating Bee-eaters are a feature. Above the village of Analujeh lies a colony of *Dionysia caespitosa* and on terraces above a rushing river flowers *Dionysia*-like *Primula gaubeana*. Chelgerd is 2100m above sea-level and at this season the snow is hardly far above. A tarmac road takes us high into this almost Arctic landscapes where Shorelarks and Snow Finches feed around vast snowfields edged with *Merenderas* and *Corydalis*.

The Koohrang Valley is full of majestic scenery with the 4200 metres Zard Kuh rising its snowy bulk above a deep river canyon home to the large flowered purple-pink *Dionysia archibaldii* and beautiful golden *Corydalis rupestris*. By a road cutting we'll find the tiny orange flowers of recently re-discovered *Dionysia zagrica* and the altogether larger *Dionysia bolivarii*. Impressive

cushions of *Dionysia lamingtonii* decorates cliffs and roadside boulders between which we'll encounter *Fritillaria straussii* and ice-blue *Puschkinias*.

Days 12 & 13
Aligoudarz and Shulabad

Bright yellow cushions of *Dionysia haussknechtii* decorate limestone gorges south of Aligoudarz. A host of wonderful bulbs will likely put even this beauty in the shade. Crown Imperials flower vigorously on marly hillsides with the unusual striped *Fritillaria chlororhabdota* which has only recently been described. Plentiful and varied gageas (a feature of the Zagros) mix with pale pink and white *Tulipa humilis* and bright yellow patches of *Leontice leontopetalum*. Southward will take us over high mountains towards Shulabad. By snow patches is a fine form of *Iris reticulata* and the tiny yellow-tipped bells of *Fritillaria zagrica*. At the base of cliffs are magnificent patches of the *Dionysia* and *Viola pachyrhiza*, and over the pass, the newly named *Dionysia crista-galli*.

Days 14 & 15
Isfahan

In the seventeenth century there was a saying along the lines of 'Isfahan is half the world' and when you see the beautiful buildings which made Isfahan the zenith of Islamic architecture, it is difficult to disagree. Three hundred years later they still retain their perfection. The clarity of the mountain air is intense and as the day goes by you can see the blue tiles of the famous mosques changing hue by the hour. The Masjed-e Emam could rightly claim to be the most magnificent mosque in all of Islam. The thirty-metre tall entrance portal is a wonder, the perfection enhanced by two high minarets. The main dome is a staggering piece of architecture with, of course, an immense blue-tiled roof. The Portal looks out over the Emam Khomeini square. One of the largest in the world it has played host to polo games! All around the square is a huge bazaar which is well worth exploring - there are many bargains to be had here! We shall also take a look at the atmospheric bridges which cross Zayande River and perhaps enjoy a chai in one of the many tea houses which are so popular in Persian society. Those preferring to see more flora and fauna can take advantage of an optional daytrip to the semi-deserts of Gavekhoni where highlights should include *Linaria michauxii*, Grey *Hypocolius* and Iran's only endemic bird, Pleske's Ground Jay.

Trip reports are available from previous trips. If you would like to see a copy, or to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please contact us on 01298 83563 or email on enquiries@greentours.co.uk.