



Gageas fistulosa and confusa are common along with Corydalis, Sibbaldia and celandine-like Ranunculus kochii. Primula auriculata forms pink lines along water courses and on drier slopes is the cowslip-like Primula macrocalyx. The rich alpine turf has so much in flower at this season with Pedicularis and Ornithogalum sintenisii joining Muscari neglectum and the unusual yellow form of Pulsatilla albana. Descending on the drier side of the pass we'll encounter a whole different range of plants. To start with there's beautiful ivory white Paeonia wilmottiana. Tulipa biflora's little yellow-centred white stars are found amongst Hypericums, Silene spergularifolia and many beautiful Astragalus species. There's huge red Papaver orientalis types, abundant and varied Scorzonerias, delicate Androsace septentrionalis, Violas, and the lovely almost stemless Jurinella moschus pinnatisecta. Overhead soar Short-toed Eagle and long-legged Buzzard and butterflies already on the wing include Clouded Apollo and Adonis Blue.

We'll visit one of Iran's highest peaks the Kuh-e Sabalan where the scene will still be very snowy! Near the snows are many flowers including Merenderas, Gageas and the ice-coloured Iris pseudocaucasicus. Lower down we'll find the 'Prophet Flower' Arnebia pulchra, its rich yellow blooms have a black spot that fades gradually after they open. Rindera lanata and Leontice leontopetalum are common and we'll look for the uncommon Iris demawendica, sometimes included as a form of Iris barnumae, though whatever its name this purple-blue Iris is a real treat.

## Days 8 & 9 Zanjan

Our route takes us south through the mountains to the town of Zanjan. The landscapes are largely wide open montane steppe which where not too over-grazed can be very rich in often spectacular flowers. The tall white-flowered spires of Eremostachys laciniata dot the landscape and amongst the many impressive umbellifers (Prangos, Ferulas, Ferulagos, Heptapteras - there are so many...!) we'll find both Ornithogalum brachystachys and floriferous Ornithogalum cuspidatum. Muscari caucasicum and Bellevalia longistyla blooms with Fumana and Adonis species and we'll soon find the wonderful scarlet velvety blooms of Phelypaea tournefortii, a 'broomrape' that is parasitic on knapweeds. Bee-eaters and Isabelline Wheatears are common in lower areas where we'll find the pale blue or even sometimes white Iris spuria musulmanica. Less obvious, even close up, are the narrow pale blue blooms of Iris songorica. We'll soon have our first encounter with the altogether lovelier Iris meda. This oncocyclus iris has usually large butterscotch blooms sitting on such tiny stems they barely lift the flowers above the ground.

The road to Gilvan is a very productive area with abundant tulips, these being *Tulipa humilis* and *Tulipa systola/stapfii*, this latter group being very confusing. Whatever their name, they are impressive bright red tulips! The green and brown striped hanging bells of *Fritillaria olivieri* inhabit wet flushes where purple spikes of *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* are abundant and look particularly fine with deep blue *Bellevalias* and the bright yellow of several buttercup species. On nearby hillsides are impressive yellow flowered *Alceas*, lovely *Linarias*, and one of the star plants of Northwestern Iran, *Iris acutiloba lineolata*. This is another oncocyclus iris and though its flowers may not have the stature of some others in the group, the extraordinary shape of the flowers render them uniquely beautiful. The almost white flowers are lined with deep purple and the falls and standards are, in the most extreme examples, drawn into long points, the result a shape quite unlike any other iris.

Day 10

To Takab via Takht-e Suleiman

En route to Takab we'll visit Takht-e Suleiman which means the 'Throne of Solomon', one of the most important sacred sites in Iran. Its setting must certainly have inspired the mythic imagination of the archaic mind. Situated in a small valley, at the centre of a flat-topped stone hill rising twenty meters above the surrounding land, is a small lake of mysterious beauty. Brilliantly clear, but dark as night due to its depth, the lake's waters are fed by a hidden spring far below the surface. Places like this were thought to be portals to the underworld, and the abode of earth spirits. Inhabited since at least the 1st millennium BC, Takht-e Suleiman is home to one of the four sacred fires of Zoroastrianism that functioned for nearly a thousand years through the Achaemenian, Parthian, Sassanian dynasties. Between 500AD and 600AD it was a major centre of pilgrimage. Nearby we'll see the spikes of lovely *Eremurus olgae* with their many large white flowers as well as *Bellevalia longipes* and *Bellevalia pycnantha*.

Days 11 & 12

Takab and Bijar

Takab is well-known to Iranians for its spring flowers. Above Bader Loo are many *Iris meda* with some strange forms that are indicative of hybridisation. But with what!? There are Syrian Woodpeckers and Penduline Tits in willows and Moustached Warbler and Great Reed Warbler singing in the reedbeds. The nearby Chehartagh Pass has abundant *Corydalis verticillaris* and delicate *Gagea dshungarica* growing amongst the thousands of *Puschkinias*. The next high ground, the Chichakloo Pass, has more colonies of *Fritillaria olivieri*. On rocky ground

above are tiny *Fritillaria zagrica*, the flowers such a deep browny-purple that they look almost black. Each tepal slightly yellow-tipped. Mounds of pink *Onobrychis* attract the local green hairstreak *Callophrys suaveola*. Other butterflies include Sooty Copper, Glanville Fritillary and the tiny Gruner's Orange-tip. We'll explore mountains towards Bijar where Chukar erupt from under our feet as we walk amongst *Eremurus spectabilis* and *Bellevalia longistyla*. Other birds include Ortolan Bunting, Finsch's Wheatear, Western Rock Nuthatch and White-throated Robin.

Days 13-15

Qazvin

The beautiful orange males of *Colias aurorina* fly above a semi-arid mountainscape where we'll see *Allium rubellum*, bright red *Roemeria hybrida* and deep purple *Gladiolus atrovioleaceus*. The fine purple heads of *Allium scabriscapum* are an impressive sight. Eastern Rock Nuthatches called loudly from rocky ravines and we'll find Desert and Short-toed Larks. The bright blue bells of *Ixiolirion tartaricum* are a common sight and we'll encounter plenty of butterflies including the brilliant lemon and orange Eastern Orange-tip. Scarce Swallowtails and Peak White are joined by Zephyr Blues, Gerhard's Black Hairstreak, Marsh Fritillary and the diminutive skipper *Pyrgus melotis*. There are some fine colonies of *Iris meda* and we'll again see plenty of tulips with *Tulipa montana* appearing in both yellow and red forms. Afternoon of Day 14 we'll return to Tehran before flying back to the UK on Day 15.

Or...

Isfahan Extension

Days 14-17

Isfahan

In the evening of Day 14 you'll fly to 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 the Zayande River and perhaps enjoy a chai in one of the many tea houses which are so popular in Persian society. In the evening of Day 16 you'll return to Tehran and fly back to the UK early on Day 17.

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](mailto:enquiries@greentours.co.uk).