

Peloponnese (Spring)

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 to Monemvasia via Mycenae

After our evening arrival at Athens we'll spend a night near the famous canal at Corinth and then a leisurely day travelling southwards through the magnificently varied scenery of the Peloponnese. Not far from Corinth lies magical Mycenae. The walls of these ruins are immense - some 13m high and 7m thick - and are made of huge stones that the Ancients believed only the Cyclops could have moved. In spring the site hosts a wonderful display of flowers that includes the rare *Ophrys argolica*, a pretty little bee orchid found only in the Peloponnese and named after ancient Argolidha. Fields of scarlet anemones will preface our arrival at the amazing 'Rock of Monemvasia' near the Peloponnese's southeastern tip. The impressive 'rock' is joined to the mainland by a narrow causeway and the town itself is not visible from the shore as it clings to the seaward rockface. Not surprisingly the only successful invasion of Monemvasia has been by modern-day tourists though even these will not be much in evidence this early in the 'season'.

Days 3-5 Monemvasia & Lambokambos

Just north of Monemvasia lies the little paradise of Limenas Geraka. A fishing village lies on the edge of a lagoon backed by the ultramarine Mirto Sea. Meadows here hold a tremendous display of three species of tongue orchids with swarms of hybrids making identification of them a head-scratching experience! Contrasting with the stark landscapes are fields of pink gladioli while over the lagoons fly Common and Gull-billed Terns shining silver in the strong sunlight. A few miles away are abandoned terraces with some seriously good butterfly watching. Here, alongside a plethora of common species including Glanville Fritillary, Spotted Fritillary and Mallow Skipper, we'll find several much more localised butterflies such as Inky Skipper, the distinctly two-toned Powdered Brimstone and Southern Swallowtail, the rarest of Europe's mainland swallowtails, though here very common. The red haze over the fields is not from corn poppies but in fact the beautiful *Tulipa boeotica*! On the lower slopes of nearby mountains are fields coloured orange by another tulip - this time *Tulipa orphanidea* - and there are numerous orchids too with some fine specimens of the Horseshoe *Ophrys* and the brightly patterned *Ophrys*

aesculapii, this latter species named after the Greek God of Health. Fine-leaved Iris unguicularis has many mauve-blue flowers highlighted in yellow and green and is a particularly photogenic plant.

Day 6

to Messenia via Byzantine Mystra

Just an hour's drive west is the spine of the Peloponnese - The Taygetos. This wild and dramatic range is crowned by ancient Mystra overlooking the silvery-grey olive-cloaked plain of Sparta far below. Here a plethora of Byzantine churches populate the magnificent abandoned city, which at its zenith in the fourteenth century, was one of the foremost intellectual centres in Europe. Mystra is set in a natural rock garden adorned with colourful asphodels, Jerusalem Sage, poppies and stunning scarlet black-centred Anemone pavonina. Grey-leaved Campanula andrewsii is joined on old walls by violet Cymbalaria microcalyx and under shaded ruins we'll find Friar's Cowl putting forth its oddly-shaped flowers. In grasslands and pine and spruce woods we'll find a number of orchids including the lovely black and white-lipped Reinhold's Bee Orchid growing with such delights as Ornithogalum nutans, the black and green Widow Iris, and masses of pink Cyclamen repandum. Later we'll descend to our hotel on the outskirts of peaceful Koroni.

Days 7 & 8

Messenia and Pylos

The province of Messenia is at the south-western tip of mainland Greece and its strategic importance through the ages will soon become apparent when in the morning we visit gorgeous Pilos. Situated at the entrance to Navarro Bay, one of Greece's finest natural harbours, Pilos has not one but two mediaeval castles guarding the entrance. To the south are hillsides harbouring a wealth of rather special wildlife including rare butterflies like the Greek Mazarine Blue, the enigmatic Glass Lizard and very fine orchids with Ophrys attica and the plush Ophrys ferrum-equinum amongst swathes of spectacular Pink Butterfly Orchids.

Just a short drive from our hotel is a classic little corner of the Mediterranean - several small meadows abut stoney sparsely vegetated hillsides along a quiet track. Not only is it a perfect spot for a picnic but also for orchids with at least seventeen species. Multitudinous Oriental Tongue Orchids and various Orchis species are a striking sight and among them we'll soon start finding the many beautiful and often bizarre-looking bee orchid species. Delicate pink and yellow Sawfly Orchids are always a delight and furry little Bumble-Bee Orchids are easy to miss with their rather sober attire. Ophrys minoa is one of the rarer species found here.

Anemones and Tassel Hyacinths are amongst a fine flora that on these dry southern slopes will already be hosting many butterflies including the lovely Southern Festoon.

Day 9

To Kalavrita via Filia and Arcadia

We journey northwards to the rushing rivers and vivid green mountains of Arcadia. We'll make several stops en route as bee orchids are abundant and will include *Ophrys mammosa* and the handsome *Ophrys reinholdii*. Endemic Marginated Tortoises frequent little meadows where we'll encounter some beautiful butterflies. Grecian Coppers, their shimmering golden-orange wings a picture, are often seen with the orange and lemon Eastern Orange-tip as well as its dowdier relative, Gruner's Orange-tip. European Swallowtails and Southern White Admirals inhabit woods hereabouts. On high passes we'll seek *Viola hymettia* and *Fritillaria graeca*.

Day 10

Mt Chelmos

A good road takes us high onto Chelmos, a mountain renowned for its immense variety of butterflies and flowers. Though too early for the former - there will be plenty of snow still lying up here - there will be a fabulous show of the latter and with some good birdwatching too. Capricious Rock Partridges are not so difficult to see here and we'll encounter Red-backed Shrike, the beautiful Rock Thrush and Shorelark amongst others. Near the snow are thousands of beautiful *Crocus sieberi* growing with fleshy-leaved *Ranunculus brevifolius* and both *Corydalis solida* and *Corydalis parnassica*. In sheltered spots we'll encounter the rare red-flowered Asiatic borage, *Solenanthus stamineus*. Endemic *Viola chelmea* grows with yellow *Viola aetolica* and various colour forms of *Viola graeca* and a little lower down we'll see yellow *Tulipa australis*, some fine *Fritillaria graeca* and hopefully the first flowers of *Orchis pallens*.

Days 11-14

Diakopto

We'll wend our way northwards through green and vibrant Arcadia. The landscape is richly varied and always beautiful and goes a long way towards justifying its historical description as 'the poet's land of pastoral pleasure and tranquillity'. We're based for the remainder of the holiday in peaceful Diakopto. We'll explore local orchards and olive groves where a rich assortment of fauna and flora can be seen. Pink *Crepis rubra* and

lovely *Silene colorata* mix with orchids including *Ophrys sicula* and both Naked Man and Monkey Orchids. Butterflies are abundant with all three swallowtails, Southern Festoon and many different species of blues including Green-underside, Mazarine and Amanda's Blues. The rich song of Nightingales is ever-present and Sardinian Warblers sing scratchily from the olives. Balkan Green Lizards and Snake-eyed Skink are common and so too the beautifully marked Leopard Snake. The endemic lizard *Algyroides moreoticus* and Balkan Whip Snakes are found in rockier areas up the magnificent Vouraikos Gorge where a rack-and-pinion railway rises steeply to Kalavryta. There will be an option to take the train ride - a spectacular journey through tunnels with delicately carved windows and over bridges zigzagging up the narrow gorge - or alternatively you can explore the gorge on foot and by road. The cliffs are home to Lesser Kestrels, Rock Nuthatches and Blue Rock Thrushes and an exceptional flora with endemics such as *Campanula topaliana* as well as plenty of orchids including beautiful *Ophrys delphinensis*.

A fantastic landscape of pine and oak forest between a 20km long beach and a lake and backed by a 600' limestone cliff awaits us at Kalogria. Purple Herons and Little Bitterns inhabit extensive reedbeds and at this season are relatively visible as many pass through on migration. White Storks, Marsh Harriers and Glossy Ibis should also be seen along with the locally breeding Kingfishers. Pond and Stripe-necked Terrapins are common and here we can find both Hermann's and Marginated Tortoises. Nearby rocky coasts host colourful shows of Barbary Nuts and Lax-flowered Orchids.

Day 15

To Athens and the UK

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.