

The Pyrenees

Itinerary

Days 1, 2, 5 & 7

Aigues Tortes National Park & Tor

The magnificent scenery of the Aigues Tortes National Park and the verdant Tor Valley host a bonanza of flowers and butterflies. Aigues Tortes is one of the most beautiful of all Spain's national parks. Flower-filled meadows give way to a sublime pine-dotted vista backed by the jagged peaks of 'Los Encantats' or Enchanted Mountains. We will drive to small lakes high up amid snow patches and stunted trees. An amble into this wilderness will reveal astonishingly beautiful Alpine Snowbells and Pyrenean Buttercups as they emerge through melting snow. Cobalt-blue blooms of Trumpet Gentians shine in the sun, the pink flowers of *Primula integrifolia* line meltwater streams and the softly hairy Spring Pasque Flower adorns the shortest turf. Clouded Apollo and Piedmont Ringlets are found here and fritillaries and blues are plentiful. As we walk along the forest and meadow paths we will see Crested Tit, Citril Finch and Crossbill whilst Golden Eagles and Goshawks soar overhead. Chamois graze below high cliffs, the males on look out upon rocky pinnacles. The magnificent Lammergeier is an awesome sight as it drifts across the sky in effortless fashion. Near our hotel, the Tor Valley winds up towards the heights on the Andorran border, and is a lepidopterist's heaven! Expect to see over a hundred species of butterfly during the first week - weather permitting. The tracks above Alins are quite mesmerising. On a sunny day it is possible to see seventeen or eighteen species of fritillary along here! Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail join them and the velvety Camberwell Beauty as they all sip salts from puddles along the track. In meadows the burnished-metal hues of several species of copper are shown off to good effect on the exquisite blooms - few butterflies can be more beautiful than the 'gordius' race of Purple-Shot Copper. These flower-rich meadows are also a good place to see Apollo, often perching photogenically on the large yellow blooms of Goatsbeard. Amongst the many unusual species of butterfly we hope to show you is the extremely localised Bog Fritillary which exists only in a few scattered colonies in the Pyrenees. Delicate beauties such as Alpine Toadflax and Large-flowered Butterwort emerge from the turf with yet more gentians - here are *Gentiana verna*, *alpina* and the localised *pumila*. Nearby are the shining reds of both *Pedicularis verticillata* and *Pedicularis pyrenaica* and the tall leafy yellow-flowered spikes of *Pedicularis foliosa*.

Days 3 & 6

Santa Engracia & the Col de Perbes

Following the Noguerra Pallaresa river we pass through the 'Congest de Collegats', a spectacular gorge above which numerous Griffon Vultures soar. Here we'll take a look at 'Gaudi's Inspiration'. This weirdly tiered and fluted cliff-face, draped in mosses and ferns, is said to have been the inspiration behind the design for part of Gaudi's famous cathedral in Barcelona. Below La Pobla the river feeds a lake and the aromatic meadows and oak woodlands above are home to many wonderful butterflies and flowers. Here Pyrenean and Mediterranean flora and fauna merge in a glorious expression of diversity. Both Swallowtails will soon be dismissed as commonplace as the Black-veined Whites, Cleopatras, Clouded Yellows, Nettle-tree Butterflies and brilliantly coloured Moroccan Orange-Tips. Our sights will soon be fixed on less frequently encountered species such as the gorgeous Spanish Purple Hairstreak. Other sought after butterflies here are Iberian Marbled White, Chapman's Blue, Mother-of-pearl Blue and both False Ilex and Blue-spot Hairstreaks. The warmest slopes harbour a notable variety of fritillaries (Knapweed, Marbled, Niobe and the rare Twin-spot etc.), and some rather lovely plants such as the elegant *Leuzea conifera* and the lovely blue *Catananche caerulea*. Woodcock, Bee, Fragrant and Lesser Butterfly Orchids and Red Helleborine are a selection of orchid species to be enjoyed. The meadows and woods are alive with small birds, most notably various *Sylvia* warblers including Dartford, Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers, as well as Melodious Warbler, Hoopoe, Cirl Bunting and Red-backed Shrike. Egyptian Vultures, Griffon Vultures and Short-toed Eagles are common, and both Black and Red Kites will be seen. Brilliantly coloured Bee-eaters and Golden Orioles nest by the lake and here we can watch groups of blues mud-puddling by the shore.

Pyrenean Bellflower, Common Columbine and Small Yellow Foxglove line the route up to the Col de Perbes. Near the top of the pass, growing amongst Pyrenean Hyacinth and Alpine Aster, is a fine colony of Burnt-tip Orchids, many of which stand a foot tall. Lang's Early Purple Orchid and Fly Orchid mix with variously coloured rockroses and the blue pompoms of *Globularias* amid architectural box scrub. Woodlarks and Quail call from the grassy meadows while lovely pastel plumaged Ortolan Buntings sit atop the bushes. Cliffs are adorned by large rosettes of Pyrenean Saxifrage, the drooping panicles of white flowers looking like frozen waterfalls. Nearby is a damp cliff face covered in one of the most beautiful and exotic of Pyrenean flowers, *Ramonda myconi*.

Day 4

Pic d'Aneto

Today we visit alpine meadows surrounded by a wall of snow-capped ridges culminating in the majestic Pic d'Aneto. This is the highest mountain

in the Pyrenees and the scene is one of true alpine splendour. Here is one of the most spectacular floral displays in the region with Black Vanilla Orchid, Elder-flowered Orchid, Great Yellow Gentian, *Astrantia major* and butterworts in great swathes across the valley floor. Deep cerise forms of the beautiful Alpine Rose grow near clumps of brilliant yellow Welsh Poppies. There are usually a few flowers of Pheasant's-eye Narcissus still in flower and also here are tall *Phyteuma pyrenaica* and stands of beautiful white St Bruno's Lilies. This is a good spot for orchids as, aside from those mentioned above, one can see Small White Orchid, Frog Orchid, *Dactylorhiza alpestris* and, looking rather like a robust version of Heath Spotted Orchid, *Dactylorhiza caramulensis*. Unusual species include Marsh Felwort, green-flowered Tofield's Asphodel and purple Iris *xiphioides*; but perhaps the star of the show is the delicate pale blue-mauve of the large-flowered *Viola cornuta*. The luxuriant meadows contain a wealth of butterflies including the gorgeous Turquoise Blue, Green-underside Blue and the Queen of Spain Fritillary. Above the verdant Val d'Aran is Puerto de la Bonaigua, at over 6,500 feet a pass high in the alpine zone. Here stunning red Alpenrose flowers freely with deep pink Garland Flowers, the latter's sweet scent hanging heavily above the alpine turf. Alpine Catchfly and pink *Androsace laggeri* mix with various gentians, saxifrages and the splendid yellow mats of *Vitaliana primuliflora*.

Day 8

Via the Val d'Aran to Arreau

From the Spanish to the French side. Of course it isn't far as the Lammergeier flies but we'll take the journey in leisurely fashion as there's so much to see. Again we'll ascend the fabulous Puerto de la Bonaigua and thence into the Val d'Aran where masses of buddleia lining the River Garonne attracts abundant butterflies. Both Swallowtails are abundant and we'll see White Admiral and hopefully the Map Butterfly. This is a wonderful spot for the larger fritillaries with abundant Dark Green and High Brown as well as Silver-washed and the impressive Cardinal. The landscape changes imperceptibly until we reach the deep valley of the Neste d'Aure. The mountain slopes are now carpeted in forest and as we progress up to our next base at Arreau the magnificent vista of the Massif de Neouvielle and its alpine meadows and snowy peaks will unfold before us.

Days 9 & 10

Neouvielle Nature Reserve

This is some of the wildest and most beautiful countryside anywhere in the Pyrenees. Neouvielle means 'persistent snow' and the magnificent high country around Lac de Cap de Long and the Lac d'Oredon encompasses several ten thousand foot peaks that will still have a good

covering of the white stuff. Chamois and Ptarmigan inhabit the crags and screes above the lakes. Alpine Accentors are not uncommon up here and we'll see Ring Ouzels and Rock Thrushes too. Butterflies range from an array of coppers, Weaver's Fritillary and Water Ringlet on the lower slopes to Apollo, Gavarnie Blue and Yellow-spotted Ringlet in the highest alpine meadows. Over 1250 flower species have been recorded here - an incredible diversity! Several species of gentians adorn marshy grassland near the lakes where we can also find Vanilla Orchids, the lovely *Tozzia alpina* and *Saxifragas clusii* and *aquatica*. Magnificent Beech and Silver Fir forests are adorned with the beautiful yellow turk's-caps of Pyrenean Lilies and the lovely blue-green foliage of *Eryngium bourgatii*.

Days 11-13

Gavarnie & the Col du Tourmalet

At around 6,500 feet above sea level, the Col du Tourmalet provides great habitat for Snowfinches and Alpine Chough. In fact both are common around the Ski Station and rather tame too! The stunning scenery of the Cirque du Gavarnie is now famous as are its botanical treasures. Along the road up to the Pont du Gavarnie is a fabulous show of Birdseye Primrose and Large-flowered Butterwort, with patches of Moss Campion and the lovely *Primula hirsuta* adding splashes of colour. Up on the crags grow saxifrages and androsaces as well as *Potentilla nivalis* and *Ranunculus parnassifolius* - these making a wonderful picture with Spain's Ordesa National Park providing a memorable backdrop.

We'll descend past Ramondas clinging to dripping cliff faces and thence through meadows alive with beautiful flowers like the Pyrenean Columbine, pretty *Viola cornuta*, *Dianthis seguieri* and the lovely St Bruno's Lily.

Day 14

Return to Toulouse and the UK

Trip reports are available from our reconnaissance trip to Sichuan. 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.