

Sicily

Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Catania

The western slopes of ten thousand foot Mount Etna will be lit by the late afternoon sun as we drive south from Catania's airport. Etna is still an active volcano though it is three hundred and fifty years since the town was last engulfed in lava. The town centre has since been built from blackish-grey lava blocks! Along roadsides pretty *Lathyrus clymenum* and *Antirrhinum siculum* bloom amongst Tree Spurge and white *Asphodels*, offering us a first glimpse of the local flora.

Days 2, 3 & 6

Monte Ible

The rugged gorges and abandoned limestone terraces of Monte Ible dominate the landscape to the west of Syracuse. A steady migration of Sicily's population from the mountainous interior to the coastal towns has left the terraces and dry stone-walled fields to revert to a more natural state. A situation just perfect for orchids and here we'll find very many. Ible hosts the majority of Sicilian species of bee orchid including several that are endemic to the island. Amongst masses of widespread *Ophrys fusca* and Sawfly Orchid we'll encounter beautiful *Ophrys biancae*, its large square flowers tinted yellow. Furry Mirror Orchids grow with two local specialities - endemic *Ophrys exaltata* and *Ophrys panormitana*. Naked Man Orchid thrives amongst *Anemone hortensis* and *Gladiolus italicus*, whilst upon slopes dominated by *Sarcopoterium* and *Erica multiflora* we'll encounter that most lovely of orchids, *Orchis longicornu*. The flowers of this species are very beautiful - pink sepals frame a deep plush-purple lip with a white pink-dotted centre. Another gem is the endemic *Ophrys lunulata* whose velvety labellum looks like it has been branded with batman's motif! Milky Orchids and impressive Giant Orchids mix with the lovely green and black flowers of Widow Iris whilst Green Lizards scurry away through Barbary Nuts, Pheasant's-eyes, Toothed Orchids and gorgeous *Ophrys bertolonii*.

Day 4

Valle Del Anapo & Pantalica

A disused railway line provides us with a fine path along the Valle de Anapo through maquis and Oriental Plane woodlands to the Necropolis at Pantalica. Cetti's Warblers call from shrubbery by the river and Grey Herons are common. There are plenty of orchids too - *Ophrys incubacea* is abundant and here flowers with two yellow bee orchid species, *Ophrys lutea* and *Ophrys sicula*.

Day 5

Vendicari Nature Reserve

The Vendicari Nature Reserve protects a fabulous mosaic of salt pans, saltmarshes, lagoons and coastal phrygana. Groups of Greater Flamingos wade in salt pans inhabited by Spoonbills and Slender-billed Gulls and a rich assortment of waders including Black-winged Stilts. Great and Little Egrets fish in pools amid superb saltmarsh vegetation that includes the local endemic sea lavender, *Limonium syracusanum*. Sea Holly and the lovely silvery-leaved *Medicago marina* adorn sandy shores and on limestone headlands amidst Dwarf Palms we'll see Sawfly Orchids and *Serapias cordigera*.

Day 7

Cassibile

On the stark limestone hillsides either side of the impressive gorge of Cava Grande del Cassibile are tremendous shows of irises and orchids. Pastel yellow and brown *Iris pseudopumila* adorns rocky outcrops around which are many *Ophrys* species including some fine forms of *Ophrys bertolonii*. Patches of Pink Butterfly Orchid flower with Man Orchid and here we'll encounter yet another bee orchid found only in the southernmost regions of Italy, the large-flowered *Ophrys oxyrhynchus*.

Day 8

Return to the UK

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