

Crete

Itinerary

Days 1, 2, 5 & 10

Spili and the Gious-Kambos

We have chosen Spili for our base because of its peaceful and friendly atmosphere as well as its superb location. We shall explore the local hillsides and will soon find ourselves amongst the flowers Crete is famous for. Anemones and Cretan Cyclamen are common whilst the odd-looking Friar's Cowl protrudes from rock crevices. The plateau of Gious-Kambos, above Spili (a ten minute drive), is the centre-piece of the holiday. Here we shall see flowers en masse, particularly the orchids and irises, so bring plenty of film! The limestone seems to be covered in orchids everywhere you look; shocking-pink Naked Man Orchids mix with Milky Orchids and the stunning blues of Iris cretensis and Barbary Nut. Focusing in on the purple, we find sheets of the endemic Boryi's Orchid and the gorgeous little Four-spotted Orchid, surely one of the most delicate of its genus. Shining yellow turns out to be Sparse-flowered Orchids which are sometimes incredibly abundant. Amongst the many bee orchids the pastel shades of Sawfly Orchid are always a favorite, as are the stately spikes of Late Spider Orchid, Ophrys heldreichii and the sensational Ophrys iricolor. Yellow Bee Orchid, Bumble-Bee and Cretan Bee Orchid are common as are two species of Tongue Orchid, the diminutive Dense-flowered Orchid, and the extraordinary Widow Iris. We shall see meadows coloured red with the extremely rare and local Tulipa doerfleri, and lined with white where the sweetly-scented Narcissus tazetta will be nearing the end of its flowering period. The subtle pink Tulipa saxatilis will be found in colonies on the rocks and, best of all, there is a large colony of thousands of Fritillaria messanensis. Hopefully we'll have time to look around and see the odd Tree Frog, Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture or Montagu's Harrier!

Day 3

Mili and Arkadi Monastery

Today we will go to the hills overlooking the north coast and the village of Mili, set deep in a shady gorge. The village is now deserted as a result of a government instigated evacuation during the 1960's. The stone archways, turrets and millstones are overgrown with twisted vines and interlaced with now redundant irrigation channels. There is an extraordinary variety of shrubs and fruit trees attracting butterflies such as the Cretan Festoon and Cleopatra. Maidenhair Fern and Viola cretica grow in the damp places,

and the red data book endemic *Origanum dictamnus* on the cliffs. In the afternoon we visit tranquil Arkadi Monastery, scene of one of the most important episodes in Crete's long history of resistance. Beautifully situated in the foothills of Psiloritis, the local area is rich in plants and butterflies and we shall look for Serins and Golden Orioles in the vicinity.

Day 4 Mourne to Drimiscos

We should see at least twenty five species of orchid as well as large numbers of *Tulipa cretica* today as we explore a cross-section of the valley below Spili. The extraordinary diversity is partly explained by the varying rock types, from vivid green metabasite to limestone, and partly also by quite substantial changes in altitude - all made easy by the minibus!

Our picnic site here has played host to a very confiding Lammergeier during past years. In the afternoon we will be in a tranquil valley, with a small archaeological site and a tiny Byzantine chapel as well as ancient terraces knee deep in orchids such as *Ophrys spruneri*, *Ophrys gortynia*, *Ophrys holoserica*, *Barlia robertiana* and *Orchis simia*... and just round the corner, *Orchis provincialis*...

Day 5 Damnoni Peninsula and Plakias

Many weird and wonderful plants grow in the almost desert-like environment of the Damnoni Peninsula including some of the tiniest Barbary Nuts you will ever see! The intense lilac-blue *Orobanchaeaceae* parasitises Pitch Trefoil by roadsides, while cliffs above hold the unusual *Ebenus cretica*. This is a great place to see Black-eared Wheatears and Blue Rock Thrushes. The dunes at Plakias have a rich flora, and a sheer and strangely smooth cliff which hosts the endemic *Verbascum arcturus* and *Campanula tubulosa*. The beach and sea here are most inviting if the sun's out!

After lunch we will visit fields full of *Tulipa doerfleri* surrounded by orchid-rich limestone slopes on the Gious-Kambos.

Day 6 Agia Triada and Faestos

There will be a chance to look around these two Minoan sites as well as adjacent hillsides and olive groves. We can expect to find Bug Orchid,

Monkey Orchid, *Serapias orientalis* and the endemic *Ophrys cretensis*. Paths lined with beautiful pink *Ebenus cretica* take us through meadows where Spiked Star of Bethlehem, Dragon Arum and the enigmatic Mandrake grow.

On our way home we will stop to admire beautiful swathes of Turban Buttercups mixed with Naked Man and other orchids. Venus's looking Glass line the trackside, and *Ophrys holoserica* and *Ophrys mammosa* are in fine form here. Definitely one of our favourite spots!

Day 7

Viglotopi and Half Day Rest

This site really is a little piece of heaven. Only a short drive from Spili we will spend the morning in a natural amphitheatre carpeted with many species of orchids, Pink Butterfly Orchids being one of the more common and obvious ones. A wet flush below a tiny chapel is full of Lax-flowered Orchids that drive the photographers wild! For those who have seen enough orchids, the slopes behind the chapel provide a natural rock garden. The afternoon is free to relax in Spili or explore further.

Day 8

Amari Valley

An exploration of the beautiful Amari Valley, conducted under the shadow of the snow-capped peak of Psiloritis. There are fields full of orchids including some very showy Pink Butterfly Orchids, Fan-lipped Orchids, Giant Orchids and a large colony of *Ophrys doerfleri* with an exceptional range of colour and pattern. *Ophrys candica* is one of the rarer species we hope to show you today. The hillsides and olive groves are very good for migrating birds and we hope to see both Pied and Collared Flycatchers, a variety of warblers, Golden Oriole and Black-headed Wagtails. There are many small villages set amid an enchanting landscape, and richly-frescoed Byzantine churches, one of which we will visit.

Day 9

Limestone Gorges

Crete's craggy limestone gorges are justly famous among connoisseurs of both scenery and flora, and today we will show you the easily accessible parts of two very different ones. Griffon Vultures wheel overhead and Crag Martins zoom backwards and forwards through the narrow defiles. There is the chasmophytic (cliff-dwelling) flora to see, including such unusual species as *Linum arboreum*, two kinds of *Staehelina*, as well as a

great show of one of Crete's most beautiful plants, the Cretan Arum. We will finish in a cupressus woodland with Tree Heather and Strawberry Tree and explore some tiny terraces where *Dactylorhiza romana* grows, as well as the strange parasitic *Cytinus hypocistis*. These woodlands are great for migrants such as Semi-collared Flycatchers.

Day 10

Triopetra and the Gious Kambos

Triopetra could be taken as a chance to relax on the beach for the morning, or to botanise in a very different habitat, where salt-pans, arid steppe, cliffs and a windswept promontory hold a long list of plants which we are unlikely to see elsewhere. The promontory here is also ideal for sea-watching for shearwaters and various herons or Little Egrets on migration. Several unusual butterflies have been found here, such as *Pseudophilotes vicrama* and Cretan Grayling.

The afternoon will find us exploring a limestone knoll, where the orchids somehow find space to grow between thousands of *Fritillaria messanensis*.

Days 11 & 12

Anapolis

Anapolis is a tiny agricultural village situated at 600m on a plateau at the base of the White Mountains. Nearby, an exquisite Minoan mule track zig-zags down into the beautiful Aradhena Gorge from the atmospheric abandoned village of the same name. The shady, vertical cliffs are a haven for relict, 'old endemic' species such as *Petromarula pinnata* and the pretty white flowers of *Procopiana* mix with *Delphinium staphisagria* and spectacular Dragon Arums which are abundant here.

A shepherd's track enables us to drive up to the snow line below Mount Paknes. The endemic flora contains some gorgeous alpinines such as the delicate yellow *Viola fragrans* which peeks shyly from rocky crevices, and *Gageas bohemica* and *chrysantha* growing with lovely *Corydalis uniflora* near snow patches. There are spectacular displays of *Crocus sieberi*, *Scilla nana* and the gob-smacking domes of intense blue-flowered *Anchusa caespitosa*. The views and geology up here are remarkable.

Days 13, 14 & 15

The Omalos Plateau

One of the side gorges of the Imbros Gorge will provide a wonderful break on our journey to the Omalos. *Crepis rubra* and the huge white flowered *Paeonia clusii* grow here, and hawthorns attract Cirl Buntings and

Wheatears. We can walk out onto the Omalos Plateau (1050m above sea level) from our comfortable hotel. All colours of *Anemone coronaria* are scattered amongst the *Daphne sericea*, *Arum idaeum* and purple-pink *Tulipa bakeri*, the latter found only on this plateau. A path leads us to humps and domes of Prostrate Cherry flowering next to mats of wild *Aubrieta deltoidea*. The views are breath-taking with tremendously gnarled and stunted Cedars against a background of stark mountains and cliffs. These woods are home to the rare endemic Hooded Helleborine and those amazing cliffs are the habitat for the Kri-Kri, the endemic Cretan Wild Goat. We will visit a spring-fed lake where we can look for birds such as Night Heron and Red-rumped Swallow, and Tavronitis river mouth, which is a magnet for migrating birds such as Squacco Heron and Red-footed Falcons.

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.