

Narcissi of Iberia & Morocco

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

To Malaga and Ronda

From Malaga it is just a couple of hours journey up into the mountains west of Ronda, and peaceful Benaolan, one of Andalucia's most beautiful 'white villages', perfectly situated close to the old stone town of Ronda.

Days 2 - 4

Sierra de Grazalema, Montejaque, and the Sierra de las Nieves.

The magnificent scenery of the Sierra de Grazalema Biosphere Reserve surrounds our hotel, from the River Guadiaro just below the hotel to the craggy limestone cliffs above the classic Andalucian white villages of Benaolan and Montejaque. We shall wander valleys where Cork Oaks have long been cultivated, their 'harvested' boles glowing red in the sun, while Griffon Vultures wheel overhead and Cirl Buntings and Firecrests sing above the pink Cistus Roses. Limestone crags are home to Chough, Black Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush, while brilliant Spanish Festoons and Moroccan Orange-Tips erupt periodically from our path. Cliffs are festooned with *Ornithogalum reverchonii*, a species found nowhere else in the world, bright yellow *Ranunculus rupestris* is frequent, and the first spikes of delicate pink *Orchis olbiensis* will be opening. There are acres of beautiful *Iris planifolia* while the tiny golden trumpets of *Narcissus assoanus* and the perfumed flowers of *Narcissus jonquilla* emerge from rocky fissures. A visit to Grazalema village in its magnificent mountain setting will ensure a further mix of wonderful rock plants including the localised *Narcissus cuatrecasasii*. There is even a fine colony of the lovely 'paper-white' *Narcissus papyraceus* with its heady hawthorn-like scent. *Fritillaria lusitanica* will be putting forth its tubby bells and along roadsides near Grazalema we'll find yet another daffodil, the floribund *Narcissus cordubensis*. Portuguese Dappled White flies in the bright sunshine as we photograph *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis*, *Romulea columnae* and *Fedia cornucopiae*, the last sometimes colouring olive groves pink. Our hotel is well situated for those who enjoy their plants a short walk from their bed! Just across the river is a slope with great early spring bounty. *Clematis cirrhosa* trails over the riverside bushes and rocky banks have little gardens of *Narcissus assoanus*, the plants numbered in their thousands. *Arisarum vulgare* pokes out from shadey fissures with Alyssums and *Saxifraga granulata*. Like *Narcissus*, the toadflaxes have their centre of evolution in

Iberia and the genus contains many very beautiful plants in this region. Lovely *Linaria aeruginea* flowers here along with *Linarias tristis* and *amethystea*. Under the shade of Bean Trefoil the flowers of *Aristolochia baetica* will already be open.

A scenic track takes us high into the Sierra de las Nieves. The subalpine zone has the gorgeous 'blue gorse' *Erinacea anthyllis*, amongst which grow the rich golden trumpets of *Narcissus hispanicus*, and delicate *Viola demetria*. Dartford Warblers and Black Redstarts chatter amidst all this glory and delightful Crested Tits inhabit forests of gnarled Spanish Firs. Stinking Hellebores will be in prolific flower amongst *berberis* and *Daphne laureola*. Cleopatras flutter above cushions of *Arenaria tetraquetra* and the lovely *Lavandula lanata*. The protection afforded the Spanish Ibex has worked wonders for both their population and their confidence, and now a sighting is quite likely during our visit.

The diverse geology of the Sierra de Alcaparain and the gathering influence of the Mediterranean will see us amongst a new set of flowers. The lilac form of *Romulea bulbocodium* contrasts nicely with golden *Narcissus bulbocodium* but here it will be the white *Narcissus cantabricus*, its delicate white hoops swaying in the breeze, that will take centre-stage. Very local in occurrence, this species can nevertheless be common where it occurs. This is good orchid country too with abundant Giant Orchids and we'll find our first *Ophrys tenthredinifera* and *Ophrys bilunulata*. Fan-lipped Orchid is not uncommon and we'll look for the strange aroid, *Arisarum simorrhinum*, the apex of the spathe being drawn out into an attenuated 'nose'.

We'll have a chance to visit the extraordinary old town of Ronda, maybe taking in the beautiful old Moorish Mondragon House, or perhaps shopping in the main street, before taking a look at the spectacular gorge where Chough and Lesser Kestrel wheel a few metres from us. We shall do no more than quote Stocken on its charm; "It is a favourite haunt of *Iris planifolia*....and a view from here standing amidst this lovely blue iris is unforgettable: the blend of pink almond blossom and blue skies is in complete harmony with the golden cliffs framing the foaming white torrent roaring down between them."

Days 5 - 8

To Marrakech: The High Atlas – Oukaïmeden & Tizi n'Test

Early morning on Day 5 we'll drive east for ninety minutes to Seville Airport where we'll catch a flight direct to Marrakech. Even from the airport the heady snow-bedecked heights of the High Atlas will be clearly visible and

just an hour or so after landing we'll find ourselves well into these starkly beautiful mountains.

South of Marrakech the valleys that descend from the High Atlas are a delight in early spring. Green and vibrant with fresh flowers and birds singing in the streamside willows and alders. The mountains are very high. Toubkal reaches an impressive 4167m and there's a ski-centre at Oukaïmeden which offers easy access to the alpine country all about. Crimson-winged Finches and Shorelarks forage on the damp ground by melting snow where we'll find a fantastic bright golden daffodil. The identity of this little Narcissus is under discussion – we believe it to be *Narcissus tingitanus* – but whatever, it is a little cracker! A fine form of *Colchicum triphyllum* inhabits the same turf along with abundant *Romulea bifrons*.

Chapman's Green Hairstreak overflies lovely *Erodium atlanticum* blooming among maidenhair ferns and the pink daisy *Rhodothemum atlanticum*. Limestone bluffs are home to another Narcissus, this a yellow form of delicate *romieuxii*, quite possibly the little-known *mesatlanticus* subspecies. To see its unusual and beautiful cousin, ivory Narcissus *waiteri*, we'll drive to the Tizi n'Test, the main pass to the Saharan lands beyond. This rare species flowers in the most unlikely looking spots, often with the stunning purple and yellow flowered *Polygala balansae*.

As we descend to the foothills on the south side we'll hope that *Narcissus peroccidentalis* is still in flower. This species lives on dry Sahara-facing slopes and can flower at any time between December and April so we'll just have to hope conditions are right! More certain will be some fine shows of *Gynandris monophylla*, *Asphodelus cerasifolius*, no less than three species of lavender in bloom, and some late flowers of *Dipcadi serotinum* on warmer slopes. Back in the mountains Tristram's Warbler will be taking up territory and we'll encounter Levaillant's Green Woodpeckers, both regional endemics. Atlas Geckoes bask on rocks and Spur-thighed Tortoises clunk over the rocks where we'll see *Draba hispanica* and cushions of *Arenaria pungens*. Barbary Partridges flush from our feet at regular intervals and we'll see flocks of Alpine Chough and that most beautiful of Moroccan birds, the Moussier's Redstart.

Day 9

To Sevilla and the Serra da Estrela

Mid-morning we've a flight back to Seville where we'll pick up our minibuses and make the long journey from the Rio Guadalquivir, across the northern Algarve to the Serra da Estrela, our base for the next four nights. Our hotel nestles in the hillside village of Aldeia das Dez, a National

Monument, well worth an evening wander around. The Estrela is strangely reminiscent of Exmoor, even to the extent of swathes of pink heather, though here it is *Erica australis* that colours the whole landscape, and in spring not summer!

Days 10 & 11
Serra da Estrela

A barrier of high mountains, some reaching almost six thousand feet above sea level, stretches across the heartland of Portugal. The Serra da Estrela are old-fold mountains, formed of crystalline palaeozoic rocks, and are the western-most of Iberia's great central Sierras. The tops are treeless, the brooding landscape broken by granite tors and deep glacial valleys. In early March the highest levels will have much snow and the scene will be decidedly alpine, much loved by the shining white stars of *Crocus carpetanus*. Just below we'll find *Narcissus asturiensis*, a delightful species that can form spectacular drifts. The charming little *nivalis* form of *Narcissus bulbocodium* will be just starting to bloom and in ponds we'll find the impressively large flowered water-crowfoot *Ranunculus ololeucus*. Forests of oak, chestnut and pine descend from the snows to sheltered valleys where the vegetation, if not the temperature, will seem more Mediterranean!

Daffodils are abundant throughout the Mondego Valley. We'll soon find the widespread *Narcissus bulbocodium* invariably, it seems, in company with little purple *Romulea bulbocodium*. Distinctive *Narcissus triandrus* grows with it and in places along this valley produces an easy-to-spot hybrid known as *Narcissus x consolationis*! The rather dramatic Mediterranean form of Common Storks-bill flowers with little *Ornithopus pinnatus* and *Halimium halimifolium*. As we move higher we'll hear Woodlarks and Ravens and find patches of little yellow *Viola demetria*. A third *Narcissus* joins the mix, *Narcissus scaberulus*, again forming hybrids with *Narcissus triandrus*, this time known as *Narcissus x carringtonii*. We'll find populations of the rich golden-yellow form 'Angel's Tears' of *Narcissus triandrus* in the Rio Tejo lowlands south of the Estrela. Abundant blue *Lithodoras*, here both *diffusa* and *fruticosa*, bloom amongst Tree Heather, *Daphne gnidium* and a rich variety of legumes including *Pterospartium tridentatum*, *Cytisus multiflorus* and the gorse-like *Stauracanthus boivinii*.

Day 12
The Serra de Porto de Mos

Today we'll spend the whole day travelling southeast towards our next base, on the coast not far from Lisbon. The route is not so long and we'll have plenty of chance to stop on the way. In the Rio Tejo lowlands we'll

find populations of the rich golden-yellow form 'Angel's Tears' of *Narcissus triandrus* in the Rio Tejo lowlands.

The elegant little many-flowered heads of *Narcissus calcicola* adorn the strikingly eroded rocks of the Serra de Porto de Mos and we'll visit several sites where this species blooms, some years in abundance. Also here are the tubby hoop-petticoats of *Narcissus obesus* a rather variable little *Narcissus* which enjoys rather less rigorous terrain!

Day 13

Lisbon and the Serra da Arrabida

An isolated outcrop of limestone, around fifty kilometres long, falls to the seaward in scrub-covered, botanically-diverse cliffs. The higher parts, rising to about fifteen hundred feet above sea level, are deeply eroded, the rocks pitted, fluted and flaked into bizarre shapes, and indeed the very heart of these hills are hollowed out by extensive cave systems. At lower levels we'll encounter spiny garrigue where Rosemary and Lavenders shelter from wandering grazers. This is good orchid territory with several species already in flower including the delightful Mirror Orchid and the typical form of *Ophrys fusca*. Another *fusca* relative occurs in this area, *Ophrys lupercalis*, and we'll look for the woodcock orchid-like *Ophrys picta*. Road verges and grassy slopes are thick with *Narcissus bulbocodium* and spectacular stands of *Astragalus lusitanicus* and in the pines are lovely yellow *Anemone palmata* and the green orchid *Gennaria diphylla*.

Day 14

Return to the UK

We've a direct return flight to the UK from Lisbon in the morning.

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