

The Anatolian Diagonal

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Istanbul

Early in the evening we'll arrive in to Istanbul's gleaming new airport and transfer to Sultanahmet where we'll settle into the Turcoman Hotel, a stone's throw from the Blue Mosque.

Days 2 & 3

Erzincan & Esence (Keşiş) Tepe

We've a nine o'clock departure from Istanbul Airport so we'll have to be up good and early. The flight to Erzincan takes around an hour and a half so it'll be mid-morning before we land. Erzincan sits in a flat fertile basin watered by the upper reaches of the River Euphrates but immediately to the north rises 11,500 foot Esence (or Keşiş) Tepesi whilst to the south the snowy north-facing slope of the equally high Munzur Mountains glisten in the sun.

After settling in to our hotel and having lunch we'll venture along the main road westwards where we'll reach our first 7,000 foot pass (Sakaltutan) of the tour, hardly much above valley level in this part of the world! Our first glimpse of the rich flora at the northern end of the Anatolian Diagonal will comprise some choice bulbs such as the elegant chequered bells of *Fritillaria crassifolia*, pink *Colchicum szovitsii*, and in marshy meadows the unusual pale sky-blue *Muscari coeleste*. We may catch the last of the tauri form of *Crocus biflorus* blooming near melting snow and certainly lovely *Scilla siberica* and *Ornithogalum oligophyllum*.

Our second day in the Erzincan area will see us exploring the mountains immediately to the north of town. The geology and landforms are exceptionally varied. Unusually, serpentinite rocks form the bulk of these mountains and as a consequence the flora contains many unusual species. *Fritillaria armena* and *Fritillaria latifolia* are two of the choicest bulbs of the high montane steppes of Sipikor Mountain less than twenty kilometres north of Erzincan. Beautiful yellow *Iris danfordiae* is known from these hills though we haven't yet found a site! *Bellevalia pycnantha* lines streamsides with deepest blue, contrasting with creamy *Primula elatior* subspecies *pallasii*. On the other side of the road delicate lilac *Ricotia aucheri* decorates the serpentinite slopes of Pöske Mountain where we'll look for the last flowers of *Iris persica*.

Lovely compact forms of yellow *Iris caucasica* flower with *Muscari bourgaei* and the architectural *Muscari massayanum*. The little yellow stars of *Gageas gageoides*, *bulbifera* and *granatelli* mix freely with *Corydalis rutifolia*, *Ranunculus brachylobus*, furry *Pulsatilla albana*, and a bewildering variety of *Aethionemas* and *Arabis* species. Borages are well-represented and many, such as *Noneas*

caspia, pulla and stenosolen, *Rindera albida* and *Rindera lanata*, and the strange spikes of *Solenanthus stamineus*, are flowering at this season. Lower down we'll find pretty *Lathyrus tukhtensis*, golden *Linum mucronatum* and deep purple *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*.

Days 4 & 5

Ovacik and the Eastern Munzur Mountains

An optional early morning visit will take us to Altintepe, an impressive Urartian site twenty kilometres from Erzincan. Surrounding marshy areas have the diminutive *Typha minima*, *Glaux maritima*, both *Hyoscyamus niger* and *Hyoscyamus pusilla*, and an abundance of halophytic species. Ruddy Shelduck look a picture in bright sunlight and we'll see Black-winged Stilts, abundant Black-headed Yellow Wagtails and Harriers, Montagu's and hopefully Pallid, winging their way northwards.

After breakfast we'll move southwards into the Munzur Mountains. In contrast to the largely serpentinite mountains north of Erzincan, these mountains are largely limestone, though with extensive igneous intrusions too. Nestling in the crooked arm of the southward turning Euphrates River, many of the Munzur's peaks are over 10,000 feet, and an extraordinary forty-five plants species are confined to the extensive forests and expansive alpine pastures. The forests include relict patches of Scots Pine and some naturally occurring walnut woodlands. The bright red goblets of *Tulipa armena* are a frequent sight and along the quiet wooded lanes we'll find huge-flowered *Glaucium grandiflorum*, tall yellow *Eremurus spectabilis*, *Fritillaria whittallii*, delicate *Paracaryum cristatum*, and amazing spires of silver-hairy leaves topped with a large rounded head of purple-pink flowers – these the difficult-to-pronounce *Tchihatchewia isatidea*. Above the forests are meadows in the subalpine zone where *Ranunculus constantinopolitanus*, *Ornithogalums* and the tall *Solenanthus circinnatus* line bubbling brooks. Gravelly slopes are home to the gorgeous pink tessellated bells of *Fritillaria alburyana*, endemic *Paracaryum corymbiforme*, *Hyacinthella acutiloba*, and *Ranunculus unguis-cati* and *Ranunculus munzurensis*, both endemic buttercups. Higher still, near the snows, we'll come across ice-blue *Puschkinia scilloides*, and rocky outcrops that hold *Draba bruniifolium*, *Aethionema diatrophis* and endemic *Viola bocquetiana*.

Day 6

Elaziğ via Kuruca Pass

Today we'll travel southwards, then, before heading toward Elaziğ, we'll make a detour to the east and the Kuruca Pass. *Orchis pinetorum* and fine relatively tall forms of *Iris caucasica* are visible from the roadside and we'll also find *Bellevalia longistyla* and the tall white spikes of *Asphodeline taurica*. *Alkanna pseudotinctoria* and *Erysimum thrysoides* are two of the choice plants in the shrubberies here. Masked Shrikes are common and Chukar occasionally fly up in front of us. An uphill walk takes us up into a zone where we can see such beauties as *Iris reticulata*, *Fritillaria armena*, bright green-leaved *Fritillaria minuta*, *Hyacinthus orientalis*, as well as *Allium kharputense*, *Astragalus nanus* and *Merendera trigyna*.

Days 7 - 9

Kemaliye and the Western Munzur Mountains

We'll re-enter the Munzur today, our route following the Euphrates north out of Keban Lake to Kemaliye, our base for three days of exploration of the rugged western part of this impressive range. The subalpine slopes above Kemaliye have perhaps the finest shows of snowmelt flora anywhere in the Middle-east, with dense displays of pink *Colchicum szovitsii*, yellow *Caltha polypetala* and brilliant blue *Scilla sibirica*. Unbelievable groups of *Iris reticulata* bloom in profusion whilst *Muscari armeniacum* and *Muscari azureum* shower slopes with blue. *Hyacinthus orientalis* subspecies *chionophyllus* produces a memorable show with yellow *Eranthis cilicicus* (hyemalis) and the luscious glossy blackish bells of *Fritillaria armena*. The variety of snowmelt bulbs is also impressive, for as well as the great displays of the preceding species, we'll also encounter patches of *Ranunculus kochii*, pale pink *Colchicum triphyllum*, some lovely colour forms of *Corydalis erdelii* and an abundance of *Gageas* including *fibrosa* and *taurica*. Slopes down by Kemaliye itself have *Bellevalia sarmatica* as well as some fine forms of *Tulipa armena*. On rocks we'll find pretty little *Scilla mesopotamica*. Golden Eagles and both Griffon and Black Vultures soar above the peaks, and looking nearer at hand we should keep an eye out for ibex which are still quite frequently encountered in these beautiful mountains.

An undoubted highlight here will be a visit to valley containing one of the westernmost natural colonies of the magnificent *Fritillaria imperialis*. A quite long walk takes us through forest to scrubby slopes with abundant *Salvia multicaulis* interrupted by impressive *Bellevalia longipes*, and clumps of perfect Crown Imperials.

Days 10 & 11

Malatya

So having already seen an abundance of spring bulbs including many fritillaries and irises it is perhaps fitting that the tour should draw towards a close with an *Iris* of great beauty and distinctive form. Only discovered in the past couple of years, this beauty is still to be named! It inhabits one of several easily reachable passes in the Malatya area, a region with somewhat drier mountains than those we've explored thus far. Semi-arid slopes where Black-eared and Finsch's Wheatears will already be nesting are home to abundant *Aethionemas*, little purple *Noneas* and the lovely lemon-hued *Leontice leontopetalum*. The beautiful *Iris sari* throws up impressive blooms that vary from apricot to plum. The highest parts of these passes are home to yet another little fritillary, the tiny *Fritillaria pinardii*, as well as *Puschkinias* and *Violas*.

Day 12

Return to the UK

or...

Nemrut Dağı Extension

Day 12

Ziyarettepesi Pass

The first of two longish days travelling. It will take us around three hours to attain the Ziyarettepesi Pass from Malatya but the journey will be well worth it – not least for a chance to see the bizarre *Eminium intortum* en route. Rough roadside fields, in places surrounded by a fine yellow flowered dog rose, have *Erysimum thyrsoideum*, *Moltkia intermedia* and more of the fabulous *Tchihatchewia isatidea* flowering amongst the abundant *Stachys lavendulifolia*, *Matthiolas* and rather unobtrusive *Lallemantia persica*. The pass itself has a wonderfully varied flora quite different from areas we have already covered. The dark strongly white tipped blooms of *Muscari anatolicum* bloom with *Hyacinthella acutiloba*, almost stemless *Ranunculus kochii*, *Gageas*, more confusing *Ornithogalums*, and *Colchicum triphyllum*. Our prize here will be *Fritillaria aurea*, its tubby yellow bells covered in neat chequering. There's another fritillary here that also has yellow blooms, this being *Fritillaria assyriaca* though in truth most are the more usual dusky purple-brown. Hopefully both *Crocus biflorus* subspecies *taurica* and the yellow *Crocus danfordiae* will still be bloom near the snow. Another highlight here will be the lovely deep purple *Iris stenophylla* also appearing locally in a white form.

Days 13 & 14

Adiyaman & Nemrut Dağı

Iris sari blooms close by Nemrut Dağı, a mountain with fantastic views over the Mesopotamian plain. Topped with a fifty metre high tumulus and surrounded by colossal statues of Commagene deities, the extraordinary hierotheseion (royal burial precinct) of Antiochus I is one of the most amazing historical sites in Turkey. We'll spend a day exploring both the archaeological site itself and the surrounding dry hillsides were bright red *Tulipa armena* blooms with lovely *Rindera lanata* and the pink and white flowered golden-drop *Onosma alboroseum*. The festoon butterfly *Zerythnia deyrollei*, is frequent here, indicating that *Aristolochias* must be a frequent component of the vegetation. Dalmatian Ringlets are quite common and we'll likely encounter the diminutive but incredibly pretty little vernal copper, *Tomares nesimachus*. Fields near our hotel are home to stands of *Cephalanthera kurdica*, the blue bells of *Ixiolirion tataricum* and lots of *Gladiolus kotschyanus*. Rocky limestone outcrops are where we'll find *Erysimum purpureum* and little *Scilla leepii*, whilst on the highest parts we'll find *Fritillaria pinardii* flowering amongst mounds of pink-flowered *Onobrychis cornuta*.

Day 14

Return to the UK from Adiyaman

If you would like to ask about any aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.