

Jordan

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Jordan

Our direct British Midland flight arrives late in the evening so we'll stay the first night in Madaba, just half an hour from the airport.

Days 2 - 5

The Northern Hills, Ajlun, Jerash and the Syrian border

The hills that form the east bank of the Jordan Valley may come as a surprise to the first-time visitor to Jordan. Covered in a beguiling mix of olive groves, terraces, villages and some rather fine indigenous forest, they have a very rich natural as well as cultural heritage. The latter of course will play a significant part on our tour and so we'll take time out to enjoy the Roman ruins at Jerash, the wonderful situation of Roman Pella, and the fairy-tale ruins of the Arab-built Crusader period castle that looms over Ajlun. However it is the fauna and flora that will take most of our attention. The hills reach around four thousand feet above sea level along their length, actually four thousand two hundred feet above the almost subtropical Jordan River in the valley below. The hills have a largely European avifauna but as one descends things become more exotic with first Blackstarts and Spectacled Bulbuls, and then White-throated Kingfisher and Little Green Bee-eater. The same is true of the flowers with the highest hills having an almost alpine component and the valley a rich mixture of Middle-eastern plants.

Ajlun, a new nature reserve protecting an area of natural evergreen oak forest, is right on the very tops of the hills. The views across the Jordan Valley to Nablus and Nazareth are spectacular. Rugged limestone rocks are at this season covered in flowers and the mix of blue Muscaris, white Ornithogalums, orange Lathyrus bletharicarpus and pink Anatolian Orchids is quite enchanting. Warblers and Thrushes sing as overhead groups of Buzzards and Levant Sparrowhawks migrate north, flocks of White Storks too. Under rocks are Snake-eyed Skinks and various geckos. Amongst abundant pink *Linum pubescens* we'll find the lovely *Tulipa agenensis*. A few miles away are fields where the yellowy-green bells of *Fritillaria persica* are a common sight among *Hypecoums* and abundant *Gagea commutata*. The forests at Dibben, another protected area, are rich in orchids such as Pink Butterfly Orchid, the lovely *Orchis galilaeae* and the bee orchids *Ophrys transhyrcana*, *Ophrys umbilicata* and rare *Ophrys flavimarginata*. Limestone terraces hold abundant *Hyacinthella nervosa* and a quite wonderful show of *Cyclamen persicum*. We'll often see terraces and fields covered in a red haze produced by a triumvirate of stunning flowers, all with rather similar sized flowers each of intense scarlet. Sometimes all grow together – Turban Buttercup, *Anemone pavonina* and *Adonis palaestina*, the later two looking uncannily alike. Down near Pella we'll find fields of blue where *Lupinus varius* dominates,

interrupted occasionally by patches of lilac-pink *Lupinus palaestina* and stands of the dark flowered Bear's Breach *Acanthus syriacus*. Our first encounters with the magnificent black irises will be in this area. First perhaps a clump or two but eventually, as we walk up a track through a most scenic valley there will be an abundance of rich dark blooms. The size of *Iris atrofusca*'s flowers are impressive with some individual blooms perhaps 10cm cubed. They vary from pale plum-coloured to almost black and are a most arresting sight. The flora is particularly varied here with new plants at every turn, beautiful *Muscari pulchellum*, abundant *Ornithogalum montanum* and the sky-blue *Scilla hyacinthoides* among them.

Up towards the Syrian border and east of the hills the landscape changes to arid steppelands, largely cultivated for wheat but with bare-looking natural areas where wadis cut through the landscape. This rather unpromising looking terrain has some great flora and fauna! In the golden afternoon light we'll notice a blue sheen caused by thousands upon thousands of the little Barbary Nut iris. And rather harder to pick out until one is closer up will be the altogether larger *Iris bostrensis*, another of the black irises. This is the rarest of these magnificent *Oncocyclus* irises in Jordan. It is an altogether different plant from *atrofusca*, with blooms both differently shaped and coloured, the blackish blooms imbued with a hint of yellow. Desert Fritillaries and Eastern Bath Whites are common and we'll see many Wheatears including Black-eared and Finsch's.

Day 6

The Dead Sea and Wadi Mujib

The transition to the desert lands is stark as one heads south along the fertile Jordan Valley, the change occurring as the land drops to a thousand feet below sea level on the east shore of the Dead Sea. We'll stop and experience the bizarre sensation of floating in these super-salty waters before continuing on south in increasingly superb scenery. Fan-tailed Ravens and Tristram's Grackles inhabit fabulously eroded cliffs lit by the afternoon sun before we rise again into the hills passing al-Karak. Here we'll stop and take a look at the well-preserved crusader castle, one of the finest and largest in the Middle-east. The high hills south of al-Karak are where we'll look for yet another black iris, the lovely *Iris petrana*.

Day 7

Wadi Dana Nature Reserve

Dana's spectacular landscape of desert wadis, and high juniper dotted hills, forms the showpiece nature reserve of the Royal Jordanian Nature Society. We've an afternoon and a morning here and we'll be so busy we'll have little time to enjoy the incredible views from the guesthouse that moved the Queen of Jordan when staying to remark that the views were 'ten-star'. Four and a half thousand feet above sea-level the guesthouse is near the top of Wadi Dana and from it one can see all the way down a spectacular defile that descends to the below sea-level Wadi Araba, visible in the distance, and over five thousand feet below. Scanning from the guesthouse's balcony should reveal Nubian Ibex and on a nightwalk and

an early morning walk (both optional!) we'll hope for more mammals, certainly Syrian Rock Hyraxes, maybe a Rüppell's Fox and you never know, maybe even Syrian Wolf or Caracal both of which are sometimes seen near the guesthouse. We'll visit a forest of pine and *Juniperus phoenicea* where we'll seek the rare Tristram's Serins amongst a rich flora that includes mounds of yellow *Helianthemum sancti-antonii* and pink *Helianthemum vesicarium*. Griffon and Egyptian Vultures circle over the imposing landscape along with Long-legged Buzzards and hopefully Steppe Eagles. Spur-thighed Tortoises should be encountered regularly though Mediterranean Chameleons will require a sharper eye, however Dana is one of the best places to see this little master of camouflage.

Days 8 & 9

Petra and the Jabal al-Kara'a

Petra is an extraordinary place. The ruins are amazing in themselves but it is the grandeur of Petra's dramatic setting that has helped to inspire its place in legend. Two millennia of winds and rain have blurred the edges of the fabulous facades but the resulting weathering of the richly hued soft sandstone has if anything, just made the sight more awe-inspiring. We'll have a day to explore what is a very large site, and another optional day where you can return to the site on your own or join us to look more closely at the region's fauna and flora. Pretty Sinai Rosefinches will mark our progress down the extraordinary Siq, the water-worn gorge caused by tectonic movements which split the mountain in two, and which provides the entrance to Petra. As the Siq narrows to just a few metres wide we'll suddenly be confronted with the magnificence of the Treasury, an impressive façade designed to impress and it most certainly does. Emerging from the narrow passageway, one is struck by the clarity of the carving and the impressive size of the monument as well as the striking colour of the rocks. We'll spend the rest of the day exploring the site visiting the Royal Tombs, the Silk Tomb and the Temple of Winged Lions amongst many others.

There's much to enjoy of the natural world too at Petra. The landscape is sublime with the heavily eroded sandstone mountains reaching almost six thousand feet above sea level. Almonds and the lovely white-blossomed *Moringa peregrina* protrude from fissures in the rock. We'll seek the bizarre succulent *Caralluma europaea* which should still be in flower. Golden Henbane is a common component of the chasmophytic flora along with various *Centaureas*, Judean Viper's Bugloss and surprisingly ferns such as *Cheilanthes pteridioides*. Blue Rock Thrushes and Rock Martins are typical inhabitants of the narrow gorges whilst in the open are migrant groups of Ortolans and Cretzschmar's Buntings, and chattering pairs of Scrub Warblers. Overhead Fan-tailed Ravens seem incredibly agile considering they hardly have a tail!

This is great country for reptiles. Whilst wandering the ruins a flash of blue might catch our attention as a brightly-attired male Blue Sinai Agama does press-ups on smooth Petra rocks. Rock Agamas are here too and we'll seek the local Petra

Rock Lizard. Careful examination of crevices in the rocks and under stones should reveal Spotted Fan-footed Geckos.

An incredibly scenic route drops several thousand feet through the mountains to the deserts of Wadi Araba and Faydan at the foot of the Dana Reserve. In a matter of an hour one descends from Petra's cool hills to the sands and salt steppes of true desert. Scattered low trees of *Acacia tortilis* and *Acacia raddeana* populate the sands, these heavily parasitized by the bright red-flowered *Loranthus acaciae* constantly attended by the shimmering Orange-tufted Sunbird. Rare Arabian Warblers frequent the acacias whilst wheatears are everywhere, especially Desert and Mourning, and other small birds will include Desert Lark and Masked Shrike. Various *Acanthodactylus* lizards scurry through the sand and under any shelter we could find the Golden Skink. The strange pale spires of parasitic *Cistanche tubulosa* poke through the sands and in sheltered spots we'll find pretty *Blepharis ciliaris*.

Day 10

The Jabal al-Hala and Madaba

We'll spend the day exploring the mountains of the Jabal al-Hala en route to Madaba, the journey is not a long one so much of the day will be spent in the field. Many pretty plants such as Violet Horned Poppy, Yellow *Adonis dentata* and banks of lovely blue and white *Convolvulus siculus* adorn dry terraces. Montagu's and Pallid Harriers will be seen migrating north, indeed raptor passage is likely to be a major feature of the day with abundant Buteos as well as Black Kites and Bonelli's Eagle's all on the move. We'll lunch by the Wadi Mujib, Jordan's 'Grand Canyon', and whilst not as spectacular as the real thing it is certainly an impressively deep valley. We'll walk along the top enjoying the bird life, raptors and Chukar to the fore, as well as a quite wonderful flora, as here we can see the deep red goblets of *Tulipa systola* as well as the Black Iris itself, *Iris nigricans*, which blooms in rich dark profusion along field edges.

Day 11

Return to the UK

Wadi Rum Extension

Days 10 - 13

Wadi Rum

Those on the extension to Wadi Rum will continue on south on the last full day of the main tour. Wadi Rum provides a quintessential desert experience at the Bedouin-style Bait Ali Desert Camp in cool well-equipped chalets amid desert scenery of supreme beauty. The surrounding sand flats are separated by towering sandstone mesas. Vegetation is sparse with patches of white-flowered *Retama raetum* offering cover for the migrants such as Orphean, Upcher's and Olivaceous

Warblers. The birding is excellent with groups of Trumpeter Finches and Desert Larks as well as well as Tristram's Grackles, Sinai Rosefinches, Rufous Bushchats and striking White-crowned Black Wheatears. Wadi Rum is home to several rare species but luck will be required to find the local pair of Verreaux's Eagles or the elusive Hume's Tawny Owls. We'll visit the Red Sea coast at nearby Aqaba where we'll see White-eyed Gulls, Namaqua Doves, and very many migrant waders and passerines. The Snorkelling here is excellent too. During Day 14 we'll travel back north to Madaba taking in the sites in the Jabal al-Hala and Wadi Mujib along the way – see Day 10 above

Day 14
Return to the UK

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