

Cacti of Argentina

A Tour for the Alpine Garden Society

Day 1

Depart UK

Days 2 & 3

Córdoba, Villa Carlos Paz and Tanti

After a morning arrival in Buenos Aires we'll catch a short internal flight to Córdoba where we'll be based for the next two nights. A landscape far older than the youthful Andes, the rolling country of the Central Hills is dissected by winding watercourses that have cut deep gorges. The predominant vegetation is Hill Chaco, a dry open 'forest' dominated by trees such as *Schinopsis hankeana*, *Fagara coco* and the Pepper Tree. Higher are grasslands with scattered *Maytenus boaria* and *Polylepis australis*. There are endemic lizards, frogs, toads, snakes and even the Achala Red Fox, and very many plant species that are unique to the area. Around Villa Carlos Paz and Tanti we'll find *Cleistocactus baumani*, whose strange orange-red tubular flowers spread horizontally from the stem, and the incredibly long-spined *Stetsonia coryne*. The diversity is impressive. We'll encounter *Trichocereus lamprochlorus*, widespread *Gymnocalycium schickendantzii*, *Cereus forbesii*, and the lovely red-centred white blooms of *Gymnocalycium quehlianum*. There are plenty more with *Gymnocalycium capillaense*, *Trichocereus candicans*, and the lovely *Notocactus submammulosus* whose large papery blooms vary from white to orange and yellow to red! We'll see Brushland Tinamou, Spot-winged Falconet, Many-colored Chaco-Finch and Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper among more cacti such as *Gymnocalycium mostii*, the impressively large yellow-orange flowers of *Lobivia aurea* and *Opuntia salmiana*.

Days 4 & 5

La Rioja

We travel westwards across the great Salinas to La Rioja, home to an endemic bird, the Salinas Monjita, and even a recently discovered rodent that exists only around salt flats. This is the Salinas Rat, whose latin name, *Salinoctomys loschalchalerosorum* commemorates a local folk music group called Los Chalchaleros!

Near La Rioja the land changes to more diverse habitats where we'll encounter cacti such as *Tephrocactus articulatus* which has strangely-shaped ice-coloured flowers, *Tephrocactus oligacanthus* and the knobbly *Tephrocactus alexanderi* with lovely pale pink blooms. Walks in the brushy terrain will yield *Pyrrhocactus sanjuanensis*, *Gymnocalycium acorugatum*, and white or yellow flowers erupting from the elegant columns of *Trichocereus strigosus*. There are saguaro-like *Trichocereus terscheckii* with large and abundant white blooms as well as exquisite *Parodia mesembrina* var. *juanensis* with globular balls of spines overtopped by a brilliant yellow bloom. Around Chilecito we'll find an entirely different mix of

species with floriferous *Gymnocalycium stellatum*, the rarely flowering barrel-cactus *Denmoza rhodacantha*, *Tephrocactus aoracanthus* with long flexuous spines, *Trichocereus cabreræ* and sinuous *Pterocactus kuntzei* with its large papery apricot flowers. Occasionally we'll see the Gaucho Salteno. These horsemen proudly keep their traditional ways and lead a simple life under the vast Argentinean skies, and they clearly know their cacti too as they ride with thick winged chaps, protection against this extraordinary natural vegetation.

Days 6 & 7

Catamarca

Between La Rioja and Catamarca lies Villa Mazán, home to *Soehrensia formosa* which in flower is a thing of brilliance, its scarlet blooms obvious from afar. We'll look for *Pyrrhocactus bulbocalyx*, *Tephrocactus articulatus* var. *papyracanthus*, *Trichocereus vatteri*, and the strikingly blue-green *Cereus aethiops* with palest pink flowers. We'll find rare *Gymnocalycium rodantherum*, *Trichocereus pseudocandicans* with blooms of coral, and the gorgeous *Gymnocalycium mazanense* whose architectural white spines and many large pink-shaded ivory blooms are the essence of a perfect cactus. We'll visit El Rodeo, in the Sierra de Manchao, where the higher peaks reach up over 4400m. This rocky, rolling landscape has plenty of cacti, especially *Gymnocalycium* species and we'll see at least three of these, the intriguingly-named *ferrarii*, *baldianum*, and the striking *carminanthum*. There's also *Echinopsis leucantha* and the arching columns of *Echinopsis grandiflora* topped with abundant pink or red flowers!

Days 8 & 9

Ruinas de Quilmes

Near Tafi del Valle we'll take a look at the important archaeological site of Parque de los Menhires where numerous stone blocks bear hieroglyphs and carved faces. Nearby we'll find orange-red flowered *Lobivia schreiteri*, *Trichocereus schickendantzii*, the fabulous *Soehrensia bruchii*, orange-flowered *Opuntia quimilo*, and *Rhipsalis tucumanense*, commonly known as the Mistletoe Cactus. Above, on the 3000m El Infiernillo Pass (The Little Hell!) the beautiful Andean Hillstar buzzes between flowers and as we descend we'll find streams, crags and cliffs inhabited by Grey-hooded Parakeet and White-winged Cinclodes. Fields of *Trichocereus* cacti now become dominant with White-fronted Woodpecker and Chaco Puffbird inhabiting them. The strange Burrowing Parrot prefers the Creosote-Bush dominated valley floor. The pre-Colombian culture, whose settlement is now known as Ruinas de Quilmes, were known as the Diaguitas-Calchaquies and they resisted Spanish occupation for decades. They were expert farmers and are known to have domesticated the Guanaco and Llamas. Nearby we'll visit the hills around Cafayate and Angastaco where we expect to see *Maihueniopsis glomerata*, a species whose spines can seem bigger than the plant itself. We'll also encounter *Tephrocactus weberi*, *Opuntia sulphurea*, the flattened *Gymnocalycium spegazzini*, and brilliant yellow or orange flowered *Acanthocalycium thionanthum*.

Days 10 & 11

Salta & Santa Rosa de Tastil

Driving northwards towards the City of Salta we pass through San Martin and into the Los Cardones National Park. The park is named after the giant columnar *Trichocereus pasacana*, a cactus that reaches 3m in height and 300 years of age! In complete contrast is the tiny, and well-named, *Blossfeldia liliputana*. These little beauties have white flowers set on top of a plant less than an inch across at maturity! We will see perfectly rounded *Gymnocalycium saglionis* with its strongly recurved spines, lovely *Parodia cabracorralensis* and hairy *Cleistocactus smaragdiflorus*. We'll see *Gymnocalycium delaetii*, *Echinopsis silvestrii*, another species that comes in many colours, *Trichocereus angelesii*, and the stunning *Cleistocactus hyalacanthus* whose tall white-hairy columns support abundant tubular pink flowers. Little is better in the cacti world than the extraordinary *Rebutia senilis*. This beauty has a squat round body with great arcing flowers reaching up in a ring round the best specimens - these usually red, but sometimes yellow or orange. Andean Condors are particularly numerous and we'll see an abundance of other birds, Scribble-tailed Canastero, Andean Tinamou and Brown-capped Tit-Spinetail among them.

Past Santa Rosa de Tastil the Andean peaks rise sharply. Here some reach the heady and very snowy heights of 6000m! There are plenty more cacti on the lower slopes of these great peaks with some of very local distribution, among them *Pyrrhocactus umadeave*, *Lobivia chrysantha*, *Parodia faustiana* whose columns are topped by so many orange stars, *Maihueiopsis minuta* and *Maihueiopsis boliviana*.

Day 12

Yungas Cloudforest

Today we go from Salta to Reyes, in the Province of Jujuy. Cacti of course live in dry arid areas. Well at least most of them! There are species that prefer damper environs and even some epiphytic species, and near Reyes, in the distinctive and beautiful humid Yungas Cloudforest, we'll find some of these strange cacti. The delicate hanging *Rhipsalis cereuscula* is one. Other local specialities include *Trichocereus fabrisii*, fantastic orange-flowered *Parodia chrysacanthion*, and orange-garlanded *Rebutia jujuyana*. The birdlife is quite unusual too. We'll see some very beautiful species such as the Blue-crowned Trogon and the lovely hummingbirds Red-tailed Comet and Blue-capped Puffleg. Along alder-lined streams we'll look for Rufous-throated Dipper, Torrent Duck, Red-faced Guan and Spot-breasted Thornbird.

Days 13 & 14

Quebrada de Humahuaca

The "Quebrada de Humahuaca," is set in one of the most spectacular landscapes in South America. It is a three hundred kilometre long valley that links Argentina to Bolivia and it passes through habitats as diverse as wet Yungas Cloudforest and

cold Altiplano Desert. We'll follow the old Inca road along the valley, and will see at regular intervals ancient buildings, stone carvings, and other remnants of the great Empire of the Sun.

On our way to La Quiaca, on the border with Bolivia, we will visit the picturesque village of Purmamarca. The seventeenth century houses nestle at the base of the Cerro Siete Colores (Mountain of Seven Colours). The local church has very unusual cactus woodwork! The village square holds several Algarrobo Trees from which hang Ligaria plants, a hemi-parasitic species with striking red flowers. These attract numerous Hummingbirds including White-sided Hillstar, Sparkling Violetear and the spectacular Giant Hummingbird. In nearby gorges and gullies we'll find plenty of cacti with *Austrocylindropuntia vestita*, *Gymnocalycium saglionis* var. *tilcarensis*, red-flowered *Tunilla soehrensii* and the stunning large orange blooms of *Lobivia haematantha*. Rusty-vented Canastero, Mountain Parakeet and Streak-fronted Thornbird are some of the birds of this cactus-rich zone.

Above Humahuaca the road climbs to around 3300m and onto the barren plains and mountains of the Altiplano, also known as the Puna. Cacti of the Puna are highly adapted to the harsh climate and soil conditions. We'll look for *Puna subterranea*, the almost stone-like *Yavia cryptocarpa*, *Maihueniopsis ferocior*, lovely pinky-orange flowered *Rebutia pygmaea*, the tall hairy spires of *Oreocereus celsianus*, *Neowerdermannia vorwerkii*, and *Maihueniopsis nigrispina*. We'll visit Laguna de Pozuelos National Park where we'll find the three Flamingo species, Chilean, Andean and Puna, all feeding together, a quite magical sight. Andean Condors soar over this marvelous wilderness landscape as we watch herds of Vicuna grazing with the occasional Darwin's Rhea for company. Giant, Horned and Andean Coots are specialities of these high lakes and with them we'll find Andean Goose and Puna Plover. We'll look for the gorgeous Least Seedsnipe and both Ornate and Puna Tinamous, as well as Mountain Caracara and the Puna Miner!

Day 15

Pucará de Tilcara

Today we will drive from La Quiaca to Jujuy, having one more chance to cross the Quebrada de Humahuaca. We'll visit the ruins of Pucará de Tilcara and the nearby botanical gardens which have, of course, a great variety of cacti!

Days 16 & 17

Return to the UK

An internal flight takes us to Buenos Aires, to connect with our homeward flight, arriving into the UK on Day 17.

To ask about any aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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