

The Pyrenees

A Tour for the Alpine Garden Society

Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Toulouse and transfer to Puigcerda

Our pre-lunch arrival in Toulouse gives us plenty of time to cover the longish journey to the borders of France, Spain and Andorra. The French motorway system will make quick work of the journey to Foix where the Ariège leaves the mountains and heads for its meeting with the Garonne. Up into the mountains and through Ax-les-Thermes we'll have time to stop on the Col du Puymorens for our first taste of alpine flowers before descending into Mont-Louis, and thence to the Cerdagne Valley, our base for the next three nights. Drifts of white *Ranunculus pyrenaicus* and plentiful *Narcissus pseudonarcissus pallidiflorus* populate the Col's alpine turf, for the road reaches almost six thousand feet here. We'll likely see our first Soldanellas and brilliant blue Spring Gentians whilst *Rhododendron ferrugineum* flowers all over the hillsides.

Day 2

Val d'Eyne

The Val d'Eyne has featured long in the history of Pyrenean botanical sites. It has all the necessary features. It is easily accessible, has a long easy ascent, and of course, the primary requisite – an abundance of wonderful flowers. Our route follows a well-made track gently up a river valley, *Delphinium elatum* already in bloom. Forests and meadows are adorned with the beautiful yellow turk's-caps of Pyrenean Lilies and the lovely blue-green foliage of *Eryngium bourgatii* as well as *Aquilegia pyrenaica* and various *Phyteumas*. As the valley rises and water descends in ever more tumultuous fashion the flowers grow more varied. *Doronicum clusii* and yellow *Viola biflora*, then *Iberis sempervirens* and *Erysimum pusillum*. The beauty that is *Linaria alpina* populates the trackside and once into alpine turf we'll find *Gentiana pyrenaica* joining both Trumpet and Spring Gentians. Orchids include plenty of Elder-flowered Orchids and also *Nigritella austriaca*. Coppers and Blues are buzzing amongst the flowers now! We'll find an abundance of the bright yellow form of *Pulsatilla alpina* subspecies *apiifolia*, though these hardly match the shining yellow goblets of *Adonis pyrenaica* hereabouts.

Day 3

Valcebollère & The Cerdagne Valley

We'll spend the day exploring the environs of the village in which we are staying. Valcebollère lies below the high peaks of Salinas and Puigmal, the latter reaching almost 10,000 feet on the French/Spanish Border. Pyrenean Gentians bloom even

within the village itself whilst Red-backed Shrikes hunt for grasshoppers in the verdant gardens. Black Redstarts and Serins are common around the village. The local and very beautiful Reddish Saxifrage, *Saxifraga media*, adorns walls and rocky outcrops along the lovely Gorge de Segre whilst on the slopes above we can find the gorgeous *Pulsatilla rubra*. Descending we have the prospect of Martagon Lilies, *Polygonatum verticillaris* and the Globeflower along upper forest margins. Here we'll find varied insect life including some unusual orthoptera as well as butterflies such as Tufted Marbled Skipper, Olive Skipper, Duke-of-Burgundy Fritillary and Geranium Argus.

Day 4

Andorra

Today we'll travel through nearby Andorra and on into Spain. Though the distance to Esterri d'Aneu and the upper Rio Noguerra Pallaresa valley is not large we'll cross two passes to get there! The first takes us into Andorra where we'll spend some time on the very high Puerto d'Envalira all of 7,800 above sea level. Here we are truly in the alpine zone and we only have to step out of the minibuses to enjoy it! *Geum pyrenaicum* is common and we'll see *Gageas*, some fine *Anemone narcissiflora*, lots of daffodils and *Androsace carnea* too.

We'll continue through flower-rich meadows, often a good place to see the lovely Apollo. Delicate beauties such as Alpine Toadflax and Large-flowered Butterwort emerge from the turf with yet more gentians - here are *Gentiana verna*, *alpina* and the localised *pumila*. Nearby are the shining reds of both *Pedicularis verticillata* and *Pedicularis pyrenaica* and the tall leafy yellow-flowered spikes of *Pedicularis foliosa*.

Days 5 & 8

Aigues Tortes National Park

The magnificent scenery of the Aigues Tortes National Park and the verdant Tor Valley host a bonanza of flowers and butterflies. Aigues Tortes is one of the most beautiful of all Spain's national parks. Flower-filled meadows give way to a sublime pine-dotted vista backed by the jagged peaks of 'Los Encantats' or Enchanted Mountains. We will drive to small lakes high up amid snow patches and stunted trees. An amble into this wilderness will reveal astonishingly beautiful Alpine Snowbells and Pyrenean Buttercups as they emerge through melting snow. Cobalt-blue blooms of Trumpet Gentians shine in the sun, the pink flowers of *Primula integrifolia* line meltwater streams and the softly hairy Spring Pasque Flower adorns the shortest turf. Clouded Apollo and Piedmont Ringlets are found here and fritillaries and blues are plentiful. Chamois graze below high cliffs, the males on look out upon rocky pinnacles. Lammergeiers drifts across the sky in effortless fashion. Around the many little lakes we'll find masses of both white *alpina* and pale yellow *apiifolia* forms of *Pulsatilla alpina*, many very impressively large flowers. Uncommon *Androsace vandelli* offers small tight cushions with white flowers on the acidic rocks. *Hepatica nobilis* still flowers at this altitude

amongst Holly and Oak Ferns, little *Murbeckiella pinnatifida*, *Jasione montana*, *Globularia nudicaulis*, *Valeriana montana* and golden *Potentilla aurea*. Sometimes *Crocus vernus* subspecies *albiflorus* is still in flower by snow patches. Several species of gentians adorn marshy grassland where we can also find Vanilla Orchids, the lovely *Tozzia alpina*, and *Saxifragas clusii* and *aquatica*. As we walk along the forest and meadow paths we will see Crested Tit, Citril Finch and Crossbill whilst Golden Eagles and Goshawks soar overhead. Sturdy stands of Elder-flowered Orchids are commonplace and we'll see *Pinguicula grandiflora*, *Cardamine resedifolia* and *Erysimum duriaei* subspecies *pyrenaicum* alongside the many little streams.

Days 6 & 9

Santa Engracia and the Col de Perbes

Following the Noguerra Pallaresa river we pass through the 'Congest de Collegats', a spectacular gorge above which numerous Griffon Vultures soar. Here we'll take a look at 'Gaudi's Inspiration'. This weirdly tiered and fluted cliff-face, draped in mosses and ferns, is said to have been the inspiration behind the design for part of Gaudi's famous cathedral in Barcelona. Growing on nearby cliffs are delightful clumps of the endemic *Sarcocapnos enneaphylla*.

Pyrenean Bellflower, Common Columbine and Small Yellow Foxglove line the route up to the Col de Perbes. Near the top of the pass, growing amongst Pyrenean Hyacinth and Alpine Aster, is a fine colony of Burnt-tip Orchids, many of which stand a foot tall. Lang's Early Purple Orchid and Fly Orchid mix with variously coloured rockroses, the blue pompoms of Globularias and yellow *Argyrolobium* amid architectural box scrub. *Polygala calcarea* and *Polygala nicaeensis* are joined by Pyrenean Flax, *Jasione laevis*, *Fumana ericoides* and all sorts of *Fabaceae* in a fascinatingly varied flora. Woodlarks and Quail call from the grassy meadows while lovely pastel plumaged Ortolan Buntings sit atop the bushes. Cliffs are adorned by large rosettes of Pyrenean Saxifrage, the drooping panicles of white flowers looking like frozen waterfalls. Nearby is a damp cliff face covered in the beautiful *Ramonda myconi*.

Below La Pobla the river feeds a lake and the aromatic meadows and oak woodlands above are home to many wonderful butterflies and flowers. Here Pyrenean and Mediterranean flora and fauna merge in a glorious expression of diversity. Amongst abundant common butterflies are Spanish Purple Hairstreak, Iberian Marbled White, Chapman's Blue, Mother-of-Pearl Blue and both False Ilex and Blue-spot Hairstreaks. The warmest slopes harbour a notable variety of fritillaries (Knapweed, Marbled, Niobe and the rare Twin-spot etc.), and some rather lovely plants such as the elegant *Leuzea conifera*, blue *Catananche caerulea* and the odd bluish-pink flowers of *Coris monspeliensis*. Woodcock, Bee, Fragrant and Lesser Butterfly Orchids, both Red and White Helleborines, *Epipactis microphylla* and Violet Limodores, are a selection of the orchid species to be enjoyed. The meadows and woods are alive with small birds, most notably various *Sylvia* warblers including

Dartford, Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers, as well as Melodious Warbler, Hoopoe, Cirl Bunting and Red-backed Shrike. Egyptian Vultures, Griffon Vultures and Short-toed Eagles are common, and both Black and Red Kites will be seen. Brilliantly coloured Bee-eaters and Golden Orioles nest by the lake and here we can watch groups of blues mud-puddling by the shore.

Day 7

Puerto de la Bonaigua and the Pic d'Aneto

Today we visit alpine meadows surrounded by a wall of snow-capped ridges culminating in the majestic Pic d'Aneto. This is the highest mountain in the Pyrenees and the scene is one of true alpine splendour. Here is one of the most spectacular floral displays in the region with Black Vanilla Orchid, Elder-flowered Orchid, Great Yellow Gentian, *Astrantia major* and butterworts in great swathes across the valley floor. Deep cerise forms of the beautiful Alpine Rose grow near clumps of brilliant yellow Welsh Poppies. There are usually a few flowers of Pheasant's-eye Narcissus still in flower and also here are tall *Phyteuma pyrenaica* and stands of beautiful white St Bruno's Lilies. This is a good spot for orchids as, aside from those mentioned above, one can see Small White Orchid, Frog Orchid, *Dactylorhiza alpestris* and, looking rather like a robust version of Heath Spotted Orchid, *Dactylorhiza caramulensis*. Unusual species include Marsh Felwort, Gouan's Buttercup, green-flowered Tofield's Asphodel, *Pedicularis mixta*, and purple *Iris latifolia*, but perhaps the star of the show is the delicate pale blue-mauve of the large-flowered *Viola cornuta*. The luxuriant meadows contain a wealth of butterflies including the gorgeous Turquoise Blue, Green-underside Blue and the Queen of Spain Fritillary. Above the verdant Val d'Aran is Puerto de la Bonaigua, at over 6,500 feet a pass high in the alpine zone. Here stunning red Alpenrose flowers freely with deep pink Garland Flowers, the latter's sweet scent hanging heavily above the alpine turf. Alpine Catchfly and pink *Androsace laggeri* mix with various gentians, saxifrages and the splendid yellow mats of *Vitaliana primuliflora* subspecies *canescens*. Other little gems include *Viola pyrenaica*, *Daphne cneorum*, *Gagea fistulosa* and *Ranunculus amplexicaule*

Day 10

Via Valle de Rioumajou to Arreau

From the Spanish to the French side. Of course it isn't far as the Lammergeier flies but we'll take the journey in leisurely fashion as there's so much to see. Again we'll ascend the fabulous Puerto de la Bonaigua and thence into the Val d'Aran where masses of buddleia lining the River Garonne attracts Swallowtails, White Admirals, Cardinals and Map Butterflies. On the French side mountain slopes are carpeted in forest and as we progress to our next base at Arreau the magnificent vista of the Massif de Neouvielle and its alpine meadows and snowy peaks will unfold before us.

Inside the spectacular Rioumajou Gorge we'll follow a path alongside ice-blue cascades thundering through giant boulders amid the lush misty forest. Such habitat

is perfect for Ramondas and here we can expect to see abundant bouquets topped with the purple blooms, the same rocks splashed with white *Saxifraga paniculata* and *Saxifraga umbrosa*, and vivid green Black and Green Spleenworts. Greater Butterwort, Welsh Poppy, Spiked Pyrenean Speedwell, *Erinus alpinus*, *Pyrola minor*, *Cardamine heptaphylla*, and *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* are found along the stream edges. In the understory we'll find *Cephalanthera longifolia*, spikes of *Neottia nidus-avis* and the lovely *Moneses uniflora*. Further up the valley we'll reach subalpine turf with scattered Pyrenean Vetch as well as *Cardamine resedifolia*, *Saxifraga exarata*, and *Saxifraga stellaris*, Sulphur Clover, Lesser Butterfly Orchid, and among the wet rocky outcrops will be splendid clumps of Moss Champion.

Days 11 - 13

The Col du Tourmalet & Gavarnie

At around 6,500 feet above sea level, the Col du Tourmalet provides great habitat for Snowfinches and Alpine Chough. In fact both are common around the ski station and rather tame too! We'll visit the botanical garden close by the Col which is now becoming a veritable treasure house of alpine flowers from these mountains and has native populations of *Gentiana pumila delphinensis* and *Fritillaria pyrenaica*. On nearby rocks we can see *Androsace ciliata*.

The stunning scenery of the Cirque du Gavarnie is now famous as are its botanical treasures. Along the road up to the Pont du Gavarnie is a fabulous show of Birdseye Primrose and Large-flowered Butterwort, with patches of Moss Champion and the lovely *Primula hirsuta* adding splashes of colour. Up on the crags grow saxifrages and androsaces as well as *Potentilla nivalis* and *Ranunculus parnassifolius* - these making a wonderful picture with Spain's Ordesa National Park providing a memorable backdrop. Floriferous clumps of *Gentiana brachyphylla* will draw in the photographers who will have to work harder to get such spectacular shots of delicate *Draba aizoides* or *Chaenorhinum organifolium*. Both *Androsace villosa* and *Androsace chamaejasme* will be seen, allowing for easy comparison. Other little alpine jewels of Gavarnie and Troumouse include *Linaria supina*, *Potentilla pyrenaica*, *Saponaria caespitosa*, *Arenaria purpurascens*, *Kernera saxatilis*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Saxifraga praetermissa*, *Phyteuma charmelii*, *Narcissus requienii*, *Gypsophila repens* and *Sempervivum montanum*. The two trumpet gentians *Gentiana acaulis* and *Gentiana alpina* can be seen growing close by each other, often with *Gentiana verna* for company. Ramondas cling to dripping cliff faces and meadows are alive with beautiful flowers like the Pyrenean Columbine, pretty *Viola cornuta*, *Dianthis seguieri* and the lovely St Bruno's Lily.

Day 14

Return to Toulouse and the UK

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