

Flowers & Wildlife of Galilee & The Negev

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 To Haifa

We'll arrive into Tel Aviv's International Airport and then drive to Ein Harod, just a couple of hours northeast and on the edge of Lower Galilee.

Day 2 Nazareth and Mount Gilboa

Ein Harod is a favoured spot amongst Israeli's as in summer the green hills provide welcome relief from the hot sun. In March it is a quiet and peaceful base from which to explore some great countryside. Terraces and open hillsides are at this season coloured with the Turban Buttercup, a spectacular red species, as well as the equally red *Tulipa agenensis*. Arums are prolific and there are several *Allium* species, whilst *Narcissus tazetta* puts on quite a show. Near Nazareth we'll find wonderful *Iris bismarckiana*, its white, purple-lined standards lighting up the slopes. The pools and the trees of nearby Gan Hashlosha act as a magnet to large numbers of migrant birds passing through with abundant warblers joined by more colourful bee-eaters, Rollers and Hoopoes. The fishponds that occupy much of the Harod Valley will see us notching up plenty of migrant waterfowl, waders and herons whilst the nearby ridges guide flocks of migrant Steppe Buzzards already making their way north. One of these ridges culminates in Mount Gilboa and here we'll find prolific clumps of the impressive dark purple-pink flowers of *Iris haynei*.

Days 3-5 Golan Heights, Mount Hermon and the Upper-Galilee

The next three days will take us into Upper Galilee and the southern slopes of Mount Hermon. This is perhaps the most scenic part of Israel with the Golan Heights rising above the Sea of Galilee and the land to the north reaching Israel's highest point, on the snow-streaked shoulders of majestic Mount Hermon. We'll be based at Rimonim Hermon, beautifully situated close to Israel's best-preserved Crusader Castle Qal'at Nimrod. Lush valleys and maquis at lower levels are home to many orchids including the lovely *Orchis galilaea*, a beautiful species whose substantial blooms have flowers of green or pink. We'll also see several bee orchids with the various forms of *Ophrys umbilicata* joined by *Ophrys bornmuelleri* and *Ophrys transhyrcana*. *Arum palaestinum* and purple-spotted *Arum dioscoridis* are common constituents of the flora here along with the open trumpet-shaped blue bells of *Ixiolirion tataricum*.

On magical Mount Hermon are richly-hued forms of *Hyacinthus orientalis* and some gorgeous Irises; white-topped *Iris hermona* and the simply stunning *Iris lortetii*. Fine

blue-starred *Scilla hyacinthoides* is not uncommon and we'll seek a number of particularly beautiful orchids including the gorgeous *Orchis galilaea*. The elegant tongue orchid *Serapias levantina* is widespread and we'll look for various *Ophrys* and *Anacamptis israelitica* and its natural hybrid with the common *Anacamptis papilionacea*. *Eremurus spectabilis* produces wands of yellow-green often growing with red *Tulipa agenensis*. Closest to the snows we'll find *Gageas* and *Ornithogalums* as well as *Scilla libanotica* and diminutive *Romulea nivalis*. We'll not ignore the birdlife as this area gives us a good chance to see the rare Syrian Serin whilst the valley floor below forms one of Israel's most important wetlands. Once the northernmost of the lakes fed by the River Jordan, Hula was drained in the 1950s however a remnant was soon protected as the Hula Natural Reserve and this fabulous spot hosts abundant birdlife. We'll see various herons and waterfowl, Marsh Harriers, Graceful Warblers, Penduline Tits and many migrant species. Papyrus reaches its northernmost limit at Hula and the reserve is also an exceptional place for reptiles such as Stripe-necked Terrapin and Mediterranean Chamaeleon.

Day 6

The Jordan Valley and Dead Sea

The transition to the desert lands is stark as one heads south along the fertile Jordan Valley, the change occurring south of Jericho as the land drops to a thousand feet below sea level on the shores of the Dead Sea. Fan-tailed Ravens and Tristram's Grackles inhabit fabulously eroded canyons that descend to the turquoise waters of the Dead Sea. We'll stay overnight in this unique terrain and have a chance to experience the bizarre sensation of floating in these super-salty waters.

Days 7-9

Negev Desert

The Negev Desert, unsurprisingly, hosts the largest tract of wilderness left in Israel. This is a great place for desert birds as well as mammals and reptiles and in March has a most marvelous and unexpected flora. Along roadsides are the tall yellow-flowered spikes of *Fritillaria libanotica* and we'll also find *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* and strange *Dipcadi erythraeum*. Bizarre *Eminium spiculatum* is easy to miss in the sands, but not the tomato-red *Tulipa systola* shining boldly in the bright sun. Less showy *Tulipa biflora* grows with *Gynandris monophylla* whose tiny iris flowers bloom for only four early-afternoon hours each day. Here are three more stunning *Oncocyclus* Irises, the bright clear purple *Iris mariae* and two almost black species, the well-named *Iris atrofusca*, and the recently-described *Iris hieruchamensis*, together putting on an unforgettable show.

Our base in the heart of the desert at Mitzpe Ramon is ideal not only for the flora but also for other desert wildlife. Mitzpe Ramon is perched on the edge of the huge Ramon Crater, an impressive landscape in itself. Desert Larks and White-crowned Black Wheatears are obvious on the cliffs whilst the towns greenery attracts various

flycatchers, warblers and the Palestine Sunbird as well as Bulbuls and Little Green Bee-eater. Raptors and vultures are plentiful in the area with Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Long-legged Buzzard, Barbary Falcon and Lanner all quite easy to see. Moving further out into the desert we'll see quintessential desert birds such as Sand Partridge, Cream-coloured Coursers and various Sandgrouse. The crater itself forms a large uninhabited area of desert that has received full protection and so is home to many of the larger (and smaller) mammals that are now rare in much of the Middle-East. Wolves, Striped Hyenas and Caracal are present but are extremely difficult to see, however we hope to see Gazelle and have a very good chance of seeing the elegant Nubian Ibex that are not so shy here.

During the afternoon of Day 9 we'll travel back to Tel-Aviv and spend a night there before departing the next morning.

Day 10 Departure

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