

Greek Rhodopi

From Drama to Nestos

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrival Thessaloniki and transfer to Volakas

It is an early flight from London Gatwick or Manchester direct to Thessaloniki. We'll soon be on the way up into the wild expanses of beautiful country that are characteristic of Drama's landscapes. This is a richly varied region, a consequence of a startlingly geomorphology, and evidenced by the impressive range of flora and fauna found between the shimmering blue Aegean and snow-capped Rhodope. It'll take us a couple of hours to reach lovely Volakas, our base for the first four days of the holiday, and on this journey we'll pass coastal plains, cross poplar-lined rivers, and pass through wide flat basins between high steep-sided mountains, the limestone slopes covered in species-rich maquis. As we near the hotel we'll stop to admire gorgeous clumps of *Iris reichenbachiana*, many of them yellow, but some purple, and we'll start to find orchids too with *Ophrys mammosa* to the fore. We'll receive a fine welcome from Maria and Angelos, the Aloni's owners, and after settling in we'll have our first taste of their truly excellent dinners.

Days 2 & 4

Mount Phalakron and Mount Orvilos

The Aloni Hotel is ideally located to explore Phalakron, the highest mountain in the Greek Rhodope. Volakas makes its living these days largely as a ski-centre, and though there will still be snow on the upper reaches of the mountain the skiers are long gone and Volakas has a quiet out-of-season feel before the arrival of the summer trekkers. It is just a short drive up through the sparse *Pinus nigra* forests on to the mountains snow-streaked slopes. As the trees give way to the alpine turf we'll find totally amazing groups of huge-flowered *Pulsatilla halleri* in bloom. These meadows are also littered with tight clumps of *Viola perinensis* whose lilac and blue heads completely obscure the leaves. The local endemic *Saxifraga friderici-augusti* loves the marble road cuttings, the glaucous rosettes topped by drooping panicles of dusky red flowers. *Genista lydia* and *Astragalus monspessulanus* make yellow, blue and pink carpets on the rocks.

Amongst the magnificent pasque flowers are both yellow and magenta forms of *Dactylorhiza romana* and striking blue groups of *Gentiana verna*, yellow *Primula veris* and the striking pink whorled lousewort *Pedicularis friderici*. Here is abundant *Fritillaria drenowskyi*, the little brown and orange bells found in only a few areas on the western slopes of Phalakron.

A little higher and by the first snows large noisy flocks of Alpine Choughs will vie with Northern Wheatears and Black Redstart for our attention. Here is a colourful pastiche of *Crocus chrysanthus* mixing with blue *Scilla biflora* and both white and deep pink forms of *Corydalis solida* subspecies *incisilobata*. Rarer is the local endemic *Crocus orphei*, a lovely plant with indigo-streaked undersides to the tepals. Yellow cushions of *Draba lasiocarpa* are a pretty sight and we'll find two more rather beautiful crucifers, *Thlaspa ochroleucum* and *Thlaspi tymphaeum*. Here we'll explore a botanical heaven. Rocks are plastered with two saxifrages, the lovely red *Saxifraga sempervivum* and the striking mats of *Saxifraga ferdinandicoburgi* splattered with yellow blooms. On the reconnaissance trip we found an extraordinary orange and yellow flowered hybrid between these two species.

On the highest slopes reached by a track we'll find swathes of *Erythronium dens-canis* by snow alongside abundant *Crocus veluchensis* glowing in the sunshine. The views down to the Kato N? valley and towards the Bulgarian border to the north are sublime with wooded hills hardly broken by agriculture stretching all the way from the reservoir below to the border. Water Pipits and Shorelark feed quietly as we admire the most incredible show of *Viola perinensis*, in places this lovely little plant colours the landscape lilac-purple.

The dry slopes of Orvilos are home to much *Iris reichenbachiana* with both plum and yellow forms in fine form. Abundant Toothed Orchids make a colourful show with mats of *Globularia cordifolia* and yellow mounds of *Genista depressa*. Berger's Clouded Yellows are abundant and we'll see a good number of European Swallowtails and Scarce Swallowtails too. Queen of Spain Fritillary and the uncommon Weaver's Fritillary are found here and we'll note Sombre Tit and Cirl Buntings in scattered shrubs. One of Orvilos's prime attractions for us will be the Wild Cat. Of course, Wild Cats are secretive creatures and we certainly can't guarantee a sighting however we've found them to be more visible here than anywhere else we've been. Two sightings on the day visit last year being an example. We can but hope....

Day 3

Simida Birch Forest and the River Despatis

The Rhodope is famous for its forests, some of the most unspoilt in Europe. Simida is particularly unusual in that it is dominated by Birch, a forest type more typical of much more northerly regions. Woodpeckers and nuthatches are common and we're sure to see signs of Wild Boar. The trees will hardly be in leaf and this is the time when the woodland floor is at its best for flowers. We'll see many wonderful blooms from the unusual Red Lungwort *Pulmonaria rubra* to blue *Scilla biflora*, and from the Townhall Clock *Adoxa moshatellina* to green-belled *Fritillaria pontica*. Spectacular tall specimens of Lady Orchids nestle under hazels and oaks, alongside Birdsnest Orchids, White Helleborines and *Ophrys cornuta*. With these is the lovely *Scutellaria altissima* and dark red *Silene atropurpurea*. Magnificent

stands of the local form of Green-winged Orchid, *Orchis picta*, mix with both *Saxifraga carpetana* and *Saxifraga rotundifolia*.

We'll drop down to the River Despatis for lunch. The waters of this river are a beautiful turquoise. The steep-sided gorge has a richly varied wooded flora, part maquis and part oak woodland and birds and butterflies are plentiful, it's a great spot to enjoy a lunchtime siesta. Red-backed Shrike, Black Stork, Black Vulture and Osprey are among the birds we can enjoy here. *Haberlea rhodopensis* showers us with delicate pale mauve or ivory blooms. Rocky defiles are covered in wonderful mosaics of pink *Geranium macrorrhizum*. Bright blue-flowered *Ajuga genevensis* and pink *Anemone pavonina* colour the turf and we'll see several *Ornithogalums* and *Muscari*s. Brilliant blue-hued ground beetles and almost equally colourful Balkan Green Lizards will distract us from butterflies such as Wood Whites, Common Glider, Powdered Brimstone, Green Hairstreak, Hungarian Skipper and Adonis Blues.

Day 5

Mount Pangeio and then transfer to Stavroupoli

We'll visit Mount Pangeon – the name coming from the idea that one can see all the Aegean from the top! Though much lower than the Rhodopean Mountains Pangeon is well-separated from them and close to the coast and has an unusual and rich flora. Here we'll seek another beautiful Viola. The strange almost phlox-like pink faces of *Viola delphinantha* can be found in marble crevices (Pangeon also has schists and gneiss) in just a few places on this mountain and at only a few other localities in Greece. If *Saxifraga ferdinandi-coburgi* was not in bloom on Phalakron then likely will be here along with *Saxifraga sempervivum* and *Androsace villosa*. Olive Tree Warblers sing from the open maquis and Rufous Bushchats can be seen. This is good country for Rock Partridge, and as we enjoy *Viola grisebachii*, known only from this mountain, we might flush a covey or two. Magnificent specimens of *Ophrys mammosa* are common on the mountain's lower more Mediterranean slopes alongside more orchids such as *Ophrys reinholdii*, *Serapias bergonii*, and striking large-flowered *Serapias orientalis*. As the Turkey Oaks give way to a beautiful beech forest we'll find a truly amazing sight. Thousands and thousands of the local endemic *Paeonia saueri* flowering thickly in little clearings. We'll already have seen the lovely true-red *Paeonia peregrina* flowering amongst Sweet Chestnuts at another site. We'll find *Fritillaria pontica* as well as *Symphytum ottomanum*, and higher up *Ornithogalum nutans* and three species of Birthwort. There are orchids at these levels too including Provence Orchids and Sparse-flowered Orchid. On road cuttings are great displays of the stock *Matthiola fruticosam* with vibrant pink flowers as well as the elegant white-topped *Iberis sempervivum*.

In the late afternoon we'll transfer to Stavroupoli and our next hotel, the intriguingly-named Nemesis. This curious fake-castle style hotel is set in the most

sublime countryside with a tranquil river valley bisecting unspoilt wooded hills that looks as if little has changed since Orpheus appeared on the scene. Just outside the front gate we'll find the strange endemic *Lathraea rhodopaea*, a very different kind of Toothwort, that reaches proportions our own toothwort can only dream of!

Day 6 **Haidou Forest**

Today we'll wind our way up into the higher reaches of the national park and into a beautiful and everchanging forest with beech, spruce, pine, willow, aspen and silver birch changing places ensuring that no two forest vistas have the same composition of green. Growing on damp mossy boulders and marshy spots in the woodland is the globally endangered *Soldanella rhodopaea*, a charismatic and rather lovely little snowbell. Delicate yellow *Viola demetria* grows along verges. This is good raptor country with breeding Booted Eagles and Goshawk and has a rich mammal fauna, indeed the Balkan Lynx has recently been discovered in the area, the first time this very rare form of Lynx has been confirmed in Greece, though of course we are not likely to come across such a shy animal! We'll visit peaty streams flowing down between large granitic rocks where Round-leaved Sundew grows alongside *Anemone nemorosa* and *Ranunculus serbicus*. The first blooms of large orange flowered *Geum coccineum* may already be out alongside a delicate little *Muscari* whose identity is currently a mystery.

Day 7 **Nestos Gorge & Xanthi**

A stunning path, draped with wonderful plants, takes us along the Nestos Gorge. Cascades of pale mauve *Haberlea rhodopensis* decorate the limestone cliffs, jostling for space with both yellow and purple forms of *Iris reichenbachiana*. Nestling among them is the rare *Tulipa rhodopaea*. *Ophrys epirotica* and *Ophrys mammosa* hide behind storax and tall Asphodeline, *Orchis italica* is altogether more obvious! There's even a little *Ophrys oestriifera* here and tulips hang from the limestone above us. Egyptian Vultures drift up and down the gorge and there's a pair of Bonelli's Eagles resident here. Orphean Warblers sing melodiously, and so too Nightingales, the rich tones of these two birds a constant and beautiful accompaniment to our walk. On rocks amongst Mastic Trees, Olives and lovely pink-flowered Judas Trees, we'll find *Campanula lingulata*, *Linaria genistifolia* and *Streptoramphus tuberosus*, as well as tiny *Campanula delicatula*, little tufts of *Polygala supina* and four species of broomrape – lilac *mutelli*, showy *crenata*, abundant purplish-brown *pubescens* and also *alba*, the Thyme Broomrape. Cirl Buntings, Subalpine Warblers and Blue Rock Thrushes should be seen and Crag Martins whisk across the waters above the riverside trees where Golden Orioles add their flutey notes to the general atmosphere.

Monkey Orchids grow in the woods on the hill tops above the gorge. Here are large areas of undisturbed woodland dominated by Manna Ash and Hornbeam with occasional spires of *Cupressus sempervirens*, the Manna Ash is smothered in flower at this season and makes quite a show. We'll visit a viewpoint where a spectacular panorama unfolds before us with the Nestos snaking down through its gorge and we'll have the chance to learn how this amazing landscape came into existence. To the south we can see the Nestos reaching the sea and beyond, out in the Aegean lies the island of Thasos, a lovely place, with several endemic plants – but that's another tour for the future! Closer at hand the turf repays closer examination as there are orchids here, an isolated population of the gorgeous little *Orchis quadripunctata*, and bee orchids too. The mahogany bells of *Fritillaria graeca* are frequent and there's also *Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum*. Roadside cliffs have prominent tufts of pale yellow *Onosma heterophyllum* and fine *Iberis carnosula* with purplish flat-topped blooms.

Below the gorge the river winds its way to coast where low dunes have Yellow-horned Poppies. *Medicagos* and clovers are speckled across the sand between clumps of Sea Daffodil leaves while the fabulous Silkvine with lovely brown and yellow flowers drapes across the *Quercus hartwissiana*, a curious oak with rather huge leaves. The hinterland offers great birdwatching with at this season migrant Red-footed Falcons, Purple Herons and White Storks. Bee-eaters and Hoopoes frequent the poplar plantations by the river where we've also got a decent chance of sighting a Syrian Woodpecker or a Golden Jackal.

Day 8 Departure

After a leisurely breakfast we'll make the journey back to Thessaloniki Airport and our lunchtime departure.

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