

## The Maritime Alps

### Spring in Mercantour

#### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Days 1, 2 & 4

#### Valdeblore, St Martin du Vesubie and the Parc National du Mercantour

Departing Nice Airport we'll soon find ourselves rising above the urban sprawl of the Cote d'Azur. The influence of the Mediterranean, shining blue not far below us, will readily be felt in the Lavender and Helichrysum covered slopes where Marsh Fritillaries, Moroccan Orange-tip and the lovely Southern Festoon will be flying. Nightingales and Ortolan Buntings sing as we encounter our first orchids en route to Valdeblore. We'll stop and enjoy a spectacular display of *Saxifraga callosa*, the white plumes cascading from the rocks like mini waterfalls.

Valdeblore sits at the junction of montane and Mediterranean influences, and which predominates depends very much on which side of the valley you are on. North-facing slopes are thickly forested and in May just the first flowers of *Hepatica* enliven the scene, however the south-facing slopes offer a complete contrast, alive with flowers. The attractive pink *berteroanum* form of Common Rockrose mixes with *Argyrolobium zanonii* and Tassel Hyacinth amongst bushes of Mediterranean Buckthorn and Terebinth. Alpine Swifts course overhead as we admire Monkey Orchids, Sword-leaved Helleborines and the bee orchids *Ophrys araneola* and *Ophrys fuciflora*. The gorgeous *Lilium pomponium* may just be putting forth its brilliant blooms and there's a colourful display from Bastard Balm, Purple Gromwell, Alpine Calamint, and St. Bernard's Lily. Duke of Burgundy Fritillaries are not infrequent.

Higher up we'll find Lady Orchids and Dark Columbines just coming into flower in stunning meadows where Chamois are both common and easy to watch we'll see lots of *Ranunculus kuepferi* and *Soldanella alpina*. Two regional endemics are *Gentiana ligustica* and the *cavillieri* subspecies of *Viola calcarata*. There's *Pulmonaria picta* and *Crocus albiflorus*, and above all, the marvellous tessellated yellow bells of the *moggridgei* variety of *Fritillaria tubaeformis*. If the road to the Col de Lombardie is open we'll have the chance to see purple *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and the much more local but equally red *Saxifraga retusa augustana* on rocks by the pass.

The hamlet of Le Boreon provides an ideal starting point for walks in the Parc National du Mercantour, and we'll also visit another splendid trail that takes us towards the Madone de Fenestre. Above the treeline we'll see Northern Wheatears and Rock Thrushes. *Pulsatilla alpina* graces the slopes in perfect fresh flower and we'll find abundant *Scilla bifolia*, *Androsace adfinis* and, if we are lucky, *Primula hirsuta* among the rocks. Clumps of *Primula latifolia* decorate a waterfall lower down, and in the valleys we'll see blue *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis*,

Greater Butterfly Orchid and the architectural umbellifer *Molopospermum peloponnesiacum*, as impressive for its name as its looks!

### **Day 3** **Prealpes de Grasse**

May is a fantastic time to visit the limestone uplands of the Prealpes de Grasse. Upland it is compared to the coast, but it is much lower than the Mercantour, and so spring is well-advanced here. Rosy Garlic, Galactites, local *Serratula nudicaulis* and *Urospermum* line roadsides and Chapman's Blues fly about meadows with Elder-flowered Orchids in both colour forms. Short-toed Eagles fly overhead whilst Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail remind us of the proximity of the Mediterranean in sight below us. Sure to be a highlight of the tour will be a slope covered in the red blooms of the rare endemic *huthii* subspecies of *Paeonia officinalis*.

The very local Spring Ringlet is found on the deserted slopes below the ski station amongst a flowery show of *Valeriana tuberosa*, *Ornithogalum umbellatum*, and *Anthyllis montana*. These cool slopes host a diminutive form of *Tulipa australis* whilst rocky areas are home to *Viola rupestris* and *Iberia saxatilis*. Many thousands of Poet's-eye Narcissus make a spectacular splash in the wet meadows along with fine populations of Broad-leaved Marsh Orchids and Greater Spearwort, and some years a few Green-winged Orchids. Though uncommon we should find the local *Ophrys provincialis*. Another we'll seek is *Ophrys drumana*, a stunning Bee Orchid whose velvety red lip has a shining bluish shield-shaped mark in the centre. Black-eyed, Baton and the neatly marked Chequered Blue will be seen amongst Common Rockrose and the local *Globularia bisnagarica*. We'll explore an area of limestone pavement populated with fine examples of *Barlia robertiana* and many *Orchis mascula* growing amongst *Genista hispanica*. There are many fine *Fritillaria involucreta*, a few Italian Bluebells, and abundant Grape Hyacinths. Before heading up to the higher hills and our hotel we'll have time to watch displaying Subalpine Warblers and more butterflies, these including Western Dappled White, Berger's Clouded Yellow and Cleopatra.

### **Day 5** **To Casterino via the Roya Valley**

Impressive patches of *Hepatica* decorate the woodland floor as we pass through the Veusbie Valley en route to Sospel where Green-underside Blue flies amongst *Helianthemum italicum*, attractive *Linum austriacum collinum*, and *Buglossoides purpureocaerulea*. The village of Saorge perches impressively above the Roya Valley, and on the rocks here we'll find the beautiful endemic *Potentilla saxifraga* in fine flower, and much *Campanula rotundifolia*. *Ornithogalum gussonei* is common by a streamside chapel where we'll also see a great variety of flora including Fly Honeysuckle, *Asplenium fontanum* on the rocks, lovely yellow *Viola biflora*, *Saxifraga cuneifolia* and *Saxifraga rotundifolia* beside the stream.

## Days 6 & 7

### Casterino, Tende and the Gorge della Reina

Casterino is stunningly situated. Even around the hotel we'll find tulips, some fine *Gentiana verna*, *Geranium macrorhizum* and pretty *Erica carnea* in flower, as well as Green-underside Blue and Camberwell Beauty. Above Casterino, vociferous Alpine Marmots comment on our progress through the fine shows of Elder-flowered Orchids and *Viola calcarata*, the latter in a range of colour combinations. Roadside banks have some nice patches of *Clematis alpina* and as the road rises to the snow there's plenty of Alpine Squill, and both yellow and white Alpine Pasque Flowers blooming.

Just across the border is the Alpi Maritimi in the Italian province of Cuneo. The meadows and woods of the lower valleys have much striking *Silene flos-jovis*, *Cynoglossis barrelieri*, Yellow Anemones, the curious Asarabacca, as well as a healthy population of *Muscari botryoides*. A wooded path, lined with Alpine Buckthorn, *Polygala chamaebuxus*, *Pedicularis gyroflexa* and *Lathyrus vernus* takes us along an ever-narrowing valley. Butterflies include Queen-of-Spain Fritillary and Dingy Skipper, and Southern Small Whites are often seen in the vicinity of one of their foodplants, Perennial Candytuft. Early Dog Violets are numerous and there is a good selection of ferns on the boulders such as Limestone Fern and Holly Fern. As the Gorge della Reina narrows we'll find lots of flowering *Primula marginata* and *Saxifraga callosa*.

The slopes on the Italian side of the Col de Tende boast perhaps the finest floral show of the tour. Both Trumpet and Spring Gentians colour patches of turf deep blue, whilst Oxlips shower large areas pale yellow, and white is provided by *Ranunculus kuepferi*. Elder-flowered Orchids are numerous, as are Long-spurred Pansies, here in both yellow and purple forms. With abundant *Corydalis solida* is a little *Corydalis intermedia*. Alpine Chough and Water Pipit inhabit the upper slopes where *Crocus albiflorus* still blooms along with abundant *Soldanella alpina*. *Gagea minima* is common and we'll see both *Gagea fragifera* and *Gagea villosa*. Woodland edge holds *Pulmonaria picta*, Mezereon, both *Cardamine pentaphyllos* and *Cardamine heptaphylla*, and *Anemone ranunculoides*. By the Col itself the shows of pretty *Primula marginata* on the rocks just has to be seen to be believed.

## Day 8

### Departure

After our last night in Casterino we may have some time to further explore the alpine slopes before descending to the Mediterranean and Nice Airport where we'll catch our flight back to the UK.

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