

Vercors

Gateway to Provence

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1, 2 & 4

Col de Mezelier & Qautre Montagnes

Only an hour out of the airport we'll leave the Rhone Valley behind and enter the Vercors, a vast area of meadow, forest and limestone mountains that encapsulates the French landscape at its very best. This is a marvellous region for orchids with over sixty species recorded in the national park. We'll see them crowding roadside verges and are sure to stop several times en route to the hotel! Rocky outcrops along the road are like a rock garden. Blue *Globularia bisnagarica* combines with pink *Anthyllis montana* and yellow *Helianthemum canum*, *Potentilla neumanniana* and *Alyssum alyssoides*, to give a fine show. There's also the stunning blue *Gentiana angustifolia* and Saxifrages are represented by *Saxifraga paniculata*, *Saxifraga tridactylites* and *Saxifraga bulbifera*.

The next morning we'll drive to the beautiful meadows on the Col de Mezelier. Impressively large Lady Orchids mix with many perfect Military Orchids and under shade we'll see magnificent spikes of Purple Birdsnest Orchid. White flaxes mix with numerous Fly Orchids and beautiful *Ophrys drumana* - a bee orchid found only in this area. Sword-leaved Helleborines, Lesser Butterfly Orchids, Man Orchid, and Fragrant Orchid are all common and there are fine shows of Pyramidal Orchids. There are many *Ophrys fuciflora*, rarer is the little *Ophrys araneola*. We can also see both Violet Limodores and Burnt-tip Orchids.

Honey Buzzards and Black Kites soar overhead. Red-backed Shrikes watch for prey from crab apples, the myriad grasshoppers, crickets and beetles keep them well fed. Numerous Knapweed and Provencal Fritillaries visit pink *Centaureas* whilst blues are everywhere with the silvery-blue hues of Provence Chalk-hill and brilliant Adonis to the fore.

Days 3 & 5

Haut Plateaux and Font d'Urle

A panorama of the snow-capped Alps forms a splendid backdrop to the Vercors' famed Haut Plateaux, an entrancing mosaic of subalpine meadows, karst and Mountain Pine Forests. One of Western Europe's foremost wilderness areas - its importance such that it is the largest nature reserve in Continental France. Coral Reefs that flourished in the Cretaceous Period formed limestone that underlies meadows at their magnificent best in May and June. Swathes of Oxslips, Cowslips and both colour forms of Elder-flowered Orchids sit side by side with Wild Tulips,

Pulsatilla alba, Martagon Lily and Mezereon. Rocky outcrops host architectural houseleeks whilst in higher meadows we'll find *Erythronium dens-canis*, Poet's Narcissus, Spring Gentian, *Gentiana clusii* and Alpine Snowbell. The birdlife is no less exciting with Alpine Chough, Citril Finch and Crested Tit, with Black Grouse, Crossbill, Ring Ouzel and Firecrest likely too.

Bare earth close to recent snow-melt has both purple and white forms of *Crocus albiflorus*. Nearby meadows are white with the flowers of *Ranunculus kuepferi* whilst other meadows are dominated by various yellow flowers such as *Ranunculus montanus*, *Geum montanum*, *Trollius europaeus*, *Potentilla aurea*, and *Barbarea vulgaris*. The beautiful Horned Pansy turns large areas purple and we'll see a few *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* and the thick-set *Orchis pallens*. Alpine Pasque Flower are common and beautiful and both *Cardamine heptaphylla* and *Cardamine pentaphyllos* are numerous on the roadsides. Lily-of-the-Valley is abundant under the trees and we'll also see Alpine Coltsfoot, the beautiful *Rosa pendulina*, and much *Kernera saxatilis* on the roadside rocks. The last stop of the day will see us admiring Military Orchids!

Days 6 & 7

The Gateway to Provence - Diois and the Gervanne Foothills

From the high Col de Rousset the aspect to the south is markedly Mediterranean. Below lies the now tranquil Drome River and behind the impressive Glandasse Massif. This is the Gateway to Provence. Venus-looking Glass, Pinks and Rampions decorate gorge walls where Camberwell Beauties bask with their velvety wings wide open. Green Lizards scurry through dry meadows that host a marvellous butterfly fauna with Swallowtails and Scarce Swallowtails a-flutter on ox-eye daisies. Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, Berger's Clouded Yellow and Provencal Short-tailed Blue fly amongst Daisy-leaved Toadflax and a magnificent display of Lady and Monkey Orchids. Short-toed and Golden Eagles soar above steep-walled ravines where in shaded woodlands we'll encounter Birdsnest Orchid, Sword-leaved Helleborines and *Ophrys fuciflora*. The sought-after Lady's Slipper is here, its magnificent flowers shining forth from floriferous banks.

The butterworts *Pinguicula grandiflora* is numerous and very impressive and in the same habitat we'll find Frog Orchid, Alpine Bartsia, Marsh Marigold, Water Mint, Alpine Thrift, and Mountain Cornflower. In nearby woods we'll search for the diminutive Coralroot Orchid and the rare *Orchis spitzelii*. Gentians are common as is *Polygala calcarea* and a final highlight on the way back to the hotel will be lovely *Phyteuma charmelii* in flower on the roadside cliffs.

Day 8 Departure

We'll depart for Lyon Airport but en route there'll still be new orchids and meadow flowers.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours to Vercors. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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