

# The Dolomites

## Wildlife at Leisure

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1

#### To Pecol di Zoldo Alto

Barely an hour after our afternoon arrival in Venice we will reach Belluno, the gateway to the Dolomites. The next hour takes us high into the mountains and to our hotel. As we rise up the Valle di Zoldo the beech and hornbeam forests soon give way to flower-filled meadows and spruce forests, and we start to see the wonderful limestone battlements of the higher mountains. Our hotel, the beautifully sited Albe, lies below the impressive Marmolada, spearing into sky above the gorgeous Val Pettorina.

#### Days 2, 3, 5 & 6

#### Monte Pelmo, Monte Civetta, and Cortina's Valle d'Ampezzo

We have chosen our base with great care so as to ensure minimal travelling times to some of the finest flower sites in the region. Within a short drive of our hotel are the superb alpine meadows, forests and crags easily accessed from road passes over the shoulders of Monte Nicolau and Monte Pelmo. Fine alpine turf just yards from the road is covered in a multi-coloured floral display rivalling that found anywhere in Europe. Beautiful sky-blue *Campanula barbata* mixes with the dark red wine coloured local variant of Black Vanilla Orchid, *Nigritella rhellicani* and the brilliant blues of the trumpet gentian *Gentiana clusii* and the local *tergestina* form of the Spring Gentian. Its peak time for these most classical of alpine flowers and we'll encounter at least a dozen species during the trip varying from the tall yellow, dark-spotted spikes of *Gentiana punctata* to the tiny blue *Gentiana nivalis* and from the Willow Gentian of woodland rides to the Bladder Gentian of alpine bogs. Near the latter Mountain White Orchid, Frog Orchid and Pink Globe Orchid bloom in as fine a mixture of alpine orchids as you could wish to see. Wet patches hold bright red-pink *Dactylorhiza alpestris*, butterworts, deep blue flowers of the rare *Gentiana bavarica* and red-black *Pedicularis recutita*, while waving in the breeze are the candyfloss heads of cotton grass. Slopes are a fantastic floral carpet of milkworts, *Achillea oxyloba*, Moonwort, thymes, Alpine Aster, milk vetches, and some wonderful louseworts including *Pedicularis verticillata* and *Pedicularis elongata*. Apollos float over these gentle slopes and dark ringlets erupt from under our feet as we walk. Many species of these difficult-to-identify butterflies are found in the area including Woodland, Blind, Common Brassy and Almond-eyed Ringlets. The rather prosaically named Alpine Blue is common here; its distinctive underside may come into focus as we peer closely at the pretty flowers of *Androsace alpina*. The loud calls of Alpine Choughs echo from the surrounding cliff faces, competing with the piercing whistles of Alpine Marmots which are so common here that we should be careful to avoid putting a foot down one of their holes! Two species of Alpenrose, their bright pink flowers dominating the rocky forest floor, are a

magnificent sight, while higher up grow Creeping Azalea and the stunning Dwarf Alpenrose. Alpine Toadflax, a fabulous mosaic of purple and orange, blooms with the bright golden-yellow of *Potentilla aurea*, providing an irresistible palate for the photographer! Cliffs are home to some of the finest of all alpine plants. Reddish-pink *Potentilla nitida*, an unusual colour for a cinquefoil, grows amidst some lovely saxifrages. Encrusting blue-grey rosettes growing flush against rock faces with sprays of delicate creamy flowers are *Saxifraga caesia*, and we shall also find *Saxifraga exarata* and *Saxifraga aizoides*. The distinctive Devil's Claw, a classic amongst alpine plants, nestles in deep limestone crevices, its amazing pink and blue claws in flowerheads the size of a child's fist. We've found a colony at the base of a cliff so getting to them is easy and flowering along the path to this spot is the Dark Red Helleborine.

We shall wander along forest tracks where Serins, Crossbills and Crested Tits are common. These woods have a very fine flora too - the dark spikes of *Phyteuma betonicifolium* and the dark wine-coloured flowers of *Aquilegia atrata* are two particularly noteworthy species. The mossy forest floor is home to the lovely One-flowered Wintergreen. Titania's Fritillary floats around meadows and woodland glades near the hotel and here we shall see the greatest variety of butterflies, from Nickerl's, Assmann's and False Heath Fritillaries, to Scarce Coppers, Large Blues, Amanda's Blues and the plentiful Alpine Heath.

#### **Days 4 & 7**

#### **Marmolada and the Passo Pordoi**

To the west is the magnificent glaciated peak of Marmolada, rising to some 11,000 feet. We will spend a day exploring the rich slopes on either side of the beautiful Lago de Fedaiia. The views across the lake to Marmolada's glacier, only a couple of thousand feet above us to the south, are really spectacular. The slopes by the lake are covered by a lovely mixture of *Rhododendron hirsutum*, the delicate Windflower or Mountain Avens and Alpine Butterwort. Impressive shows of Lesser Wintergreen and the gorgeous blue and white flowers of Alpine Clematis bloom in this colourful display. For those that wish we can catch a chairlift up to the edge of the glacier. What appears to be barren limestone rock from below, not so different in colour from the glacier, is, on closer inspection, decorated with some fine alpine flowers. Purple patches are revealed to be the pretty little *Thlaspi rotundifolia* whilst clusters of blue are the rare *Gentiana terglouensis*. Valleys below the chairlift contain some of the more spectacular flowers and butterflies the Dolomites has to offer. One particular meadow has swathes of huge Martagon Lilies, Orange Lilies and the somewhat more delicate white bells of St Bruno's Lilies. Yellow Alpine Leeks mix with pink Alpine Sainfoin, white and mauve Alpine Milk-Vetch and masses of the Globeflowers to magical effect. Butterflies include various skippers and ringlets as well as the beautiful Asian Fritillary.

We will spend a day exploring one of Europe's great botanical hotspots, the Passo Pordoi. Nearly seven thousand feet above sea-level, this pass is set amid some of the most spectacular scenery anywhere in the Alps with the vertical ramparts of the Sella Group just a stone's throw to the north and the pinnacles of the Sasso

Lungo to the west. With dolomitic rocks and both acidic conglomerates and porphyrites within half an hour's potter of the road we are in for a real treat here. Among the gentians are *Gentiana brachyphylla* in solid blue patches up to a foot in diameter - perhaps the flower photo of the holiday would be these with the Marmolada's glacier for a backdrop! Equally stunning are large cushions of the bright yellow *Vitaliana primuliflora*. Other beauties include *Ranunculus glacialis*, clear-yellow Rhaetian Poppy, cushions of *Androsace alpina* so covered in flowers that one can't see any foliage, the lovely *Aquilegia einseleana*, and plenty of saxifrages. Rocks are home to *Paederota bonarota* and occasional patches of Edelweiss. Spare some time for the fauna too - Alpine Marmots are common while the birdlife is quite excellent with very approachable Alpine Choughs and Snowfinches and a very good chance of seeing Alpine Accentors. Even up above the pass level there are butterflies to be seen and it is here that Dewy Ringlets and the distinctive Mountain Green-veined White float across the slopes.

## **Day 8**

### **Depart for the UK**

One last chance at enjoying the local meadows before we depart for Venice and our flight back to the UK.

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