

# Corsica

## A Mountain in the Sea

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1

#### To Corsica and Ajaccio

Ajaccio is the island's capital and was the birthplace of Napoleon. There is a busy but picturesque harbour and the narrow streets through the pastel shaded rather higgledy-piggledy houses are a delight. We'll arrive in the afternoon and head for our hotel just along the coast on the peninsula north of the town.

#### Day 2

#### Pointe de la Parata and the West Coast

Square stone Genoese towers top the many promontories that jut out from the rather complicated geomorphology of the West Coast of Corsica. One such promontory ends in the Pointe de la Pineta, just 12km west of Ajaccio. Here *Narcissus tazetta* decorates rocky crevices almost to the high tide line whilst above brick pink porphyry cliffs sweep down to the sea draped with delicate blue-flowered *Convolvulus sicula*. The Pointe points to the Iles Sanguinaires, a line of four islands that form an idyllic scene stretching out into the Golfe d' Ajaccio. Audouin's Gulls fly overhead and we'll see Hoopoes and Crested Larks at the back of beaches where dunes have Dense-flowered Orchid, the stock *Matthiola tricuspidata* and lovely *Silene sericea*. On nearby rocks is the endemic *Limonium articulatum*. *Cytinus ruber* parasitizes *Cistus monspelliensis* (and other nice flora here includes Small-flowered Catchfly, Weasel's-snout, Fringed Rue, *Stachys glutinosa*, *Euphorbia pithyusa*, pretty *Vicia benghalensis* and *Succowia balearica* with its distinctive hedgehog-like fruits. Green Underside Blue, Clouded Yellow and the endemic Corsican Dappled White will already be on the wing and we'll also see the locally common Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard and hopefully the Moorish Gecko.

We'll see many orchids on this tour and we'll start here with a fine meadow full of *Orchis morio*, *Orchis papilionacea* and two Tongue Orchids, *Serapias lingua* and *Serapias neglecta*. We'll find the tiny light blue stars of *Sedum coeruleum* above fleshy green leaves tinged red. Another tiny, unusual and beautiful plant is *Linaria flava sardoa*, a small yellow flax endemic to Corsica and Sardinia, and we'll also see *Linaria pelisseriana*, an unusual red form of *Fumaria capreolata*, and *Jasione echinata*, a Sheep's-bit only very recently added to the flora of Corsica.

In the afternoon we'll head uphill through the lovely now leafless beech woods with Cyclamen repandum becoming common as we go. Roadsides are covered in mats of rosy *Saponaria ocymoides*, blue *Anemone apennina* and magenta *Gladiolus segetum*, as we head into the mountains northeast of Ajaccio. It is just an hour's drive from Ajaccio to Corte and the Restonica Gorge, but we are sure to stop many times! *Orchis papilionacea* is frequent as well as *Orchis lactea*, whilst the drifts of *Asphodelus cerasiferus* are something to behold. We'll spend two of

the next three days exploring the magnificent gorges that descend from the flanks of Monte Cinto, an impressive peak, and Corsica's highest mountain.

### **Days 3 & 5**

#### **Restonica Gorge and the Col de Verghio**

Fabulous mounds of *Saxifraga cervicornis* adorn shaded rocks close to our hotel in the Gorges du Restonica. Tumbling down through the scenic gorge is a lovely river whose waters are one minute cascading white through giant boulders, the next lucid pools of pale turquoise, the pebbly riverbed giving hints of jade, pink and fawn; a most beautiful sight. With the river on one side of the track and carmine and white colour forms of *Cyclamen repandum* on the other, our cameras will be busy! Bulbous *Brimeura fastigata* flowers in the valley with *Allium triquetrum* and on rocks we may find *Erica terminalis* with the odd flower. *Helleborus argutifolius* has pellucid lime-green petals that seem to shine amongst the dark green rather spikey-looking foliage. Found only in Corsica and Sardinia this hellebore however occurs at all levels on the island. The cries of Yellow-billed Cough echo across the gorge walls and we'll likely see Black Redstart and Crag Martins. Giant Orchid, Lady Orchid and Man Orchid bloom on the shales at Favalello and with luck we can see the Pygmy Lizard, *Algyroides fitzingeri* here. Woodlarks sing about us as we look at some fine rockplants such as *Teesdalia coronopifolia* and the endemics *Coincya monensis recurvata* and *Barbarea rupicola*.

A little to the north we'll find lovely *Saxifraga corsica* hanging from the sheer cliffs of the Scala di Santa Regina. Above the gorge Nightingales sing in the gardens of the little village. This is Calacuccia, set by a beautiful deep-blue man-made lake in a shallow valley below the pinnacles of the northern slopes of Monte Cinto. We'll see the endemic Corsican Swallowtail here. Small blue *Lupinus angustifolius* and the pink-flushed cream flowers of *Stachys corsica* decorate the neglected stoney terraces around the village with cerise *Orchis papilionacea*. *Pancratium illyricum*, unlike its more widespread beach-flowering cousin, can be found growing far up into the mountains, its heads of striking white flowers an impressive sight. We'll keep a watchful eye out for Lammergeier and Golden Eagle in the skies above.

Amongst dwarf junipers by the roadside on the Col di Verghio we'll find the little green-centred yellow stars of *Gagea fragifera* - there are no less than six species of *Gageas* blooming in these hills during the time of our tour. The lovely lilac *Crocus corsicus*, the outside of the flowers flushed satiny-yellow and etched with deep purple lines, forms drifts on the slopes close to the road and hidden amongst clumps of *Berberis* and *Daphne* we'll find perfect little *Viola biflora*. Descending we'll pass through an area of pines where we'll stop to look for the endemic Corsican Nuthatch, the only species of nuthatch on the island. Down the valleys are gorgeous forests of beech and freshly-leaved chestnuts in which we'll find Firecrests, Serins and more Citril Finches. Stately spikes of *Orchis provincialis* will just be coming into bloom with the local form of *Orchis mascula (olbiensis)*, and abundant blue anemones mix with some beautiful forms of *Corydalis pumila*. Among fresh green birch woods we'll look for intense purple *Romulea requienii*. Descending further into gorges we'll see *Armeria leucocephala* and Burnt Candytuft, a species found for the first time in Corsica by our groups here.

## Day 4

### The East Coast etc: Aleria, Inzecca Gorge & Col de Sorba.

Today we'll do a circuit down to the east coast near Aleria and back into the mountains via the beautiful Inzecca Gorge, enjoying a great range of habitat and flora during the day. We'll start with some fine old cork oaks under which Sword-leaved Helleborine and the Tyrrhenian endemic *Ptilostemon casabonae* flower. We'll see the attractive legume *Anthyllis hermanniae* in fine flower and down on the coast, with a marvellous photogenic background of snow-capped mountain peaks we'll see Marsh Harriers and enjoy coastal flora such as various orchids, *Lathyrus angulatus*, *Biserrula pelecinus*, Sea Holly, Sea Medick and the unusual *Erodium lebelii* ssp. *maruccii*. *Cytinus hypocistus* is plentiful on the Cistuses here and will be in full flower. After lunch we'll head inland where serpentine outcrops have the endemics *Biscutella rotgesii* and *Senecio serpicola*. We'll see *Dianthus sylvestris godronianus* and *Petrorhagia saxifraga gasparinii* and *Pancratium illyricum* is impressive here. Returning over the spectacular Col di Sorba we'll have another look for the Corsican Nuthatch.

## Days 6 & 7

### Bonifacio & the Southern limestone

Heading south we'll drop down to the coast, on the way encountering a dense maquis of *Cytisus triflorus* where *Cytinus hypocistus*'s yellow flowers glow from red bracts amongst *Cistus salvifolius* and *Cistus albidus*. The regional endemic Marmora's Warbler is frequent in this habitat alongside more widespread species such as Stonechat and Sardinian Warbler. Cirl Bunting and Blue Rock Thrushes are also frequent. *Cyclamen repandum* is a frequent sight in shaded locations; it is a very widespread plant on Corsica. Pretty *Erodium corsicum* cascades over rocks close to the sea where we'll also find colourful displays of *Matthiola tricuspidata* and *Anchusa crispa*.

Limestone areas near Bonifacio host endemic *Morisia monanthos* and orchids. There's bee orchids such as *Ophrys corsica*, *Ophrys marmorata* and *Ophrys panormitana praecox*. There's also the gorgeous *Ophrys morisii* and *Ophrys incubacea* amongst plenty of lovely *Bellardia trixago*. The site is rich in rather special plants such as *Simethis mattiazii* (Kerry Lily), *Ranunculus ophioglossifolius* (Adder's Tongue Spearwort), *Baldellia ranunculoides* (Lesser Water-plantain), *Isoetes histrix* (Mediterranean Quillwort), *Ranunculus revelieri* (endemic to Corsica and Sardinia) and *Erica scoparia*.

Unlike much of the Mediterranean a good percentage of Corsica's shorelines are relatively unspoilt. Impressive hummocks of *Astragalus massiliensis* (Marseille Milkvetch) and *Juniperus phoenicea* (Phoenician Juniper) the fascinating limestone habitats just along the coast east from Bonifacio. *Allium roseum* (Rosy Garlic) of the endemic *insulare* subspecies is common here and is joined by more endemics such as *Limonium obtusifolium* and beautiful *Erodium corsicum*. Also flowering here is *Morisia monanthos*, the pink-flowered *rubriflora* subspecies of

Kidney Vetch, and blooming rock crevices both *Narcissus tazetta* and *Romulea requienii*.

The lagoon there attracts various waterbirds and both Small Red-eyed Damselfly and the Island Bluetail are found around its shoreline. Scarlet Darters are also common and we can see Emperor Dragonflies and Keeled Skimmers too. The rare Tyrrhenian Tree Frog is found in such spots along with the unusual Kerry Lily and several broomrapes, including beautiful richly-coloured *Orobanche sanguinea*, (Bloody Broomrape) which parasitises *Lotus cytisoides*. Blooming in the old town of Bonifaccio is the impressive *Ornithogalum arabicum*. There is a richness of quantity and colour to the displays of *Serapias* hardly matched elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Large-flowered *Serapias cordigera* is joined by *Serapias parviflora* and huge numbers of *Serapias lingua*. A perhaps surprising habitat to find a 'citril finch' in but the Corsican Finch is quite catholic in its choice of habitat and can be found at all altitudes!

## **Day 8 Departure**

We'll have plenty of time for a little more local exploration as our return flight departs from the airport just outside Bonifacio.

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