

# Crete and the Peloponnese in Autumn

## Mediterranean Autumn

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1

##### Arrival and to Kolymbari

After arriving at Hania airport we will have a forty minute drive to Spilia before settling into our rooms for the night. We have five nights at this lovely hotel, which has two pools. Some nights we will eat in, and some nights we will drive five minutes into Kolymbari to eat at the excellent seafront tavernas.

#### Day 2

##### The Rhodopou Peninsula and coastal sand dunes

After breakfast we will drive a few minutes to a small village, from where we will walk up a small tarmac road with *Cyclamen graecum* subspecies *graecum* by the roadside and in amongst the olives. The village verges have (cultivated) *Sternbergia lutea*. Following a shady track in amongst some fine pine trees we will hope to find numerous *Cyclamen graecum*, *Prospero autumnale* and *Ranunculus bullatus* flowering on the track amongst the pine needles, and our first pale pink *Colchicum pusillum* and white globes of *Allium chaemaespathum*. Lunch will be at a hidden taverna with an excellent menu in a small cove with excellent swimming and snorkelling here for those that care to. We may well return to this magical spot for an evening meal at sunset one of the days! In the afternoon we shall walk on quiet roads and amongst olive groves on Rhodopou Peninsula. Hopefully autumnal rains will have brought out magnificent displays of *Cyclamen graecum*, often mixed with blooms of *Narcissus serotinus*. Late afternoon there will be the opportunity to walk on coastal sand dunes to admire the sweetly scented Sea Daffodils, and other dune flora such as Sea Holly *Eryngium maritimum*, and grey-green hummocks of Spiny Knapweed. Hopefully we can take a look at one of the last few Loggerhead Sea Turtle nests of the season.

#### Day 3

##### Elaphonissus via Topolia Gorge

En route to Elaphonissus we will drive through superb Oriental Plane woodlands and colourful areas of maquis dominated by *Erica manipuliflora* and fruiting Strawberry Trees *Arbutus unedo*. Further on, the woodland changes to Calabrian Pine and then phrygana dominated by endemic *Verbascum spinosum* and strongly-scented *Coridothymus capitatus*. At Elaphonissus we will enter the land of the sun worshipper and after a short walk through lilos and sunbeds we will cross over the sand bar onto the Natura 2000 protected island. Here, amongst peaceful dunes and stony outcrops, is an outstanding flora. Gnarled *Juniperus*

*oxycedrus* subspecies *macrocarpa* offer some shade. Sea Spurge and *Pancratium maritimum* dominate the dunes, some showing white, headily-scented flowers and some in fruit, the shiny black seeds forming drifts in places. There are local specialities here including *Silene succulenta* and *Limonium elaphonesiacum*, Golden Samphire, and the sea spurge *Euphorbia paralias*. The shallow turquoise waters and pink sands make it another superb place for a swim or to at least walk through the shallows! Lunch will be nearby, a picnic in the shade of a grove of Calabrian Pines. This can be a good area for Cretan Graylings and Cardinals. On the return we will stop to walk above the village of Topolia. Here, on well-made paths, we shall ascend to a large cave inside which are huge stalactites and stalagmites, and a small chapel to Agia Sofia. This is a good place for Maidenhair Fern and chasmophytes. A second stop is for a short path up to a white church. Here we will find thick patches of the beautiful *Cyclamen confusum* and fresh stands of *Narcissus serotinus*. Other species here include scented Myrtle, *Aristolochia sempervirens*, *Osyris alba* with red berries, and the little endemic onion *Allium tardens*.

#### **Day 4**

##### **The Omalos Plateau and Agia Lake**

Today we pass through Plane and Chestnut woodlands as we head up to the Omalos Plateau. We will have a pleasant stop at the fresh-water springs of Agia Lake, where we can see birds such as Kingfisher, Teal, Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Pintail, Little Egrets and Marsh Harriers. Once up on the plateau we will find pink *Colchicum cretense*, as well as pink-striped *Crocus laevigatus*. It is a good place to look for Lammergeier as well as Stonechat, Whinchat and Blue Rock Thrush. There are a number of architectural thistles flowering at this time of year, such as Red, Yellow, and Cretan Star Thistles. Trees of note include the ancient twisted *Cupressus sempervirens* and the endemic *Zelkovia abelicea*, Cretan Maple *Acer sempervirens* and Kermes Oak *Quercus coccifera*.

#### **Day 5**

##### **Sirikari Gorge and Polyrhinia**

Today we will take the lovely gorge walk from the village of Sirikari. Beautiful mixed deciduous woodland host a range of ferns and fungi beneath Almond-leaved Pear, Strawberry Tree, and *Quercus ilex*. There are many fruit trees here also, dripping with fruit; orange, pomegranate, fig and lemon. The track takes us past a series of splendid views down to a dry stream bed lined with Oleander and Plane trees. *Cyclamen hederifolium* is everywhere, emerging from cracks in limestone or among the fallen Plane leaves. There are numerous *Sternbergia sicula* and *Dictamnus creticus* flowers on the cliffs. As the gorge opens out, the turf becomes dotted with large *Bellis sylvestris* and *Ranunculus bullatus*. Birds in this setting will of course include Griffon Vultures, Ravens and Kestrels; Cetti's Warblers are common. The more open grasslands attract butterflies – Common and Little Blue, Speckled Wood, Painted Lady, Clouded Yellow and Swallowtail. By the packhorse bridge are picnic benches and we will have our packed

lunches here. Towards the end of the walk we may find *Colchicum pusillum*, before arriving at the village of Polyrhinia, where we will stop for drinks and have time to explore. Originally an 8th century Dorian colony from the Peloponnese, Polyrhinia (meaning many lambs) boasts a wealth of ancient Venetian and Roman remains including Roman cisterns, aqueducts, a Venetian defensive structure referred to as the Acropolis, a necropolis, and remains of a Byzantine Fort. The church and other buildings incorporate all sorts of reused Roman and Greek Masonry.

## **Day 6**

### **A Scenic Drive to Anopolis via Georgiopolis and the Kotsifou Gorge**

Our first stop will be at the spring-fed River Almiros, where Marsh Harrier, Kingfisher and a variety of ducks and egrets can be seen. Nearby is an excellent little site for Autumn Ladies Tresses. The Kotsifou Gorge is a spectacular little gorge, and we shall take a walk down the road to get close to chasmophytes such as *Origanum dictamnus*, *Sternbergia sicula*, *Clematis cirrhosa*, and the endemic *Allium callimischon* subsp *haemostictum* with red spots on the petals. The peculiar little *Biarum davisii* can be found here. Shrubs include *Stachilina fruticosa* and Tree Euphorbia. This is a great gorge to see Griffon Vultures, Ravens and maybe Golden Eagle or Lammergeier. After lunch in a fantastic taverna where we can go into the kitchens to choose from seething vats of wonderful Cretan dishes, we will search a North-facing slope in a beautiful valley for *Crocus laevigatus*. Driving along the coast road, we will later turn inland and make our way up twenty-three hairpin bends to the rural village of Anopolis. A last stop will be in some tiny ancient walled fields which host thousands of wonderful *Colchicum macrophyllum*.

## **Day 7**

### **Anopolis and Arendaina Gorge**

We will start with a walk into the abandoned village of Arendaina just a few kilometres from Anopolis, along the spectacular but surprisingly easy ancient kalderimia (cobble mule track) which was the only way to reach the village until 1986 when a bailey bridge was built. A short but stunning walk, which will take us quite a while as plants like *Biarum davisii*, *Colchicum pusillum*, *Sternbergia sicula*, *Narcissus obsoletus*, *Prospero autumnale*, *Prunus prostratus*, *Acinos alpinus* and *Thymus leuchotrichus* will catch our attention. On the far side of the gorge we will make our way through the abandoned (in the 1950's) village of Arendaina, admiring the sweeping arches of what must have been beautiful houses. Erhard's Wall Lizards are common, and Griffon Vultures fly under the bridge. *Colchicum macrophyllum* flowers along the top of the gorge near the tiny café where we will have well-earned drinks and maybe a Sfakion pie. In the afternoon we will take a short walk up to a chapel with spectacular views over the sea and the fishing harbour of Loutro, as well as the surrounding mountains and wall systems of ancient Anopolis.

## **Day 8**

### **To Athens and Kefalari**

After a last morning enjoying the beautiful scenery around Anopolis we'll head to Chania Airport for our early afternoon flight to Athens. From there we'll head west and cross the Corinth Canal and then settle into the lovely Arxontiko Kefalari, a restored 19th century mansion set 800m up in the hills above Mycenae.

## **Day 9**

### **Mycenae**

We'll spend the morning visiting famous Mycenae. The walls of these ruins are immense - some 13m high and 7m thick - and are made of huge stones that ancients believed only the Cyclops could have moved. Pale purple-blue *Scilla autumnalis* colours the turf and walls host the unusual *Allium callimischon*.

In the afternoon we'll head southwards through Arcadia, the poet's land of pastoral pleasure and tranquillity. Crocuses will already be decorating roadsides and we'll see our first patches of yellow *Sternbergia sicula* en route to the Mani Peninsula.

## **Days 10 & 13**

### **Sparta and The Taygetos**

Many crocuses and other bulbs are found in the stunning landscapes surrounding the Taygetos Mountains. It will not be long before we encounter lovely pink *Cyclamen hederifolium* and *Crocus hadriaticus* in both its bluish-mauve form and the more common white form, both having short feathery markings on the exterior of the 'tube'. Limestone slopes hold colonies of the gorgeous 'melantherus' subspecies of that most polymorphic of Crocuses, *Crocus biflorus*. These have elegant dark stripes on the outer petals and distinctive black anthers. The Taygetos is one of the premier botanical sites in South-eastern Europe, and in autumn as in spring, there is much to draw the flower enthusiast. Most notable will be the unusual sweetly-scented snowdrop, *Galanthus reginae-olgae*. This delicate species grows near to ancient Mystra, where a plethora of Byzantine churches populate the magnificent abandoned city, which at its zenith in the fourteenth century, was one of the foremost intellectual centres in Europe. Mystra has a wonderful view over the plain of Sparta. Higher still in these spectacular mountains we can find the lovely small pale stars of *Crocus cancellatus* which flower amongst Grecian Firs in a landscape which seems to resemble more that of the Canadian Rockies than southern Greece. Shorelarks and Chough serve to emphasise the montane nature of this spot!

## Days 11, 12 & 14

### The Mani Peninsula

Gythio is a delightful and fascinating base for exploring the Mani, an area well-known for its beautiful floral displays and for its strange towering architecture. The landscape is a harsh but intensely beautiful one, with autumn tints of greys, yellows and russets backed by the wonderful blue Aegean Sea. This fishing village has several good tavernas that we can enjoy in the evenings. Not surprisingly, locally caught fish is both excellent and on all the menus! Within walking distance from our hotel is a lighthouse set upon a rocky promontory where one can find both pink and white forms of *Cyclamen graecum*. It is the glorious displays of crocuses and colchicums that have drawn us to this region. Sheets of crocuses adorn earthen banks and rocky fields. The pure shining white *Crocus boryi* is abundant. It has white anthers and indeed seems so much a 'snow crocus' that it comes as a surprise to learn that another species bears that Latin epithet - *Crocus niveus*. This large white species is often tinged with lilac. Perhaps the most beautiful of all the Peloponnesian crocuses is lovely *Crocus goulimyii*, beloved of alpine gardeners, its wide open mauve-purple flowers grow in great clusters at the base of rocks and walls. We may find the rare Marginated Tortoise amongst groups of bright golden-yellow *Sternbergia lutea* whilst Black Redstarts, Sardinian Warbler and Blue Rock Thrush call in the background. To the east lies Monemvasia and some of the finest displays of crocuses. As well as even greater shows of by now familiar species, we can find new species such as *Crocus laevigatus* and the delicately scented white flowers of *Narcissus serotinus*. Gorges near Kardamili are in good colchicum country and with pale pink *Colchicum cupanii* will be bright *Colchicum parlattoris* and more *Crocus boryi*. Rare *Colchicum sfikasianum* has recently been described from this region and we'll take you to see one of the few known populations. Western Rock Nuthatches call from the rocks and walls where we'll be able to photograph pretty *Campanula versicolor*. Butterflies are often plentiful in this suntrap, with Long-tailed and Lang's Short-tailed Blues common and the occasional bright orange Plain Tiger as well! During the afternoon of Day 7 we'll head northwards again stopping for the night back at the Arxontiko Kefalari close by Mycenae.

## Day 15

### *Crocus cartwrightianus* site & departure

In the morning we'll head over to Athens but, before catching our flight home, we'll look for *Crocus cartwrightianus*, a stunning species that flowers not so very far from the airport.

A general note - It should be noted that the numbers of autumn bulbs in flower are dependent on rain fall in the proceeding days, though usually it is possible to find at least a few blooms of all these species even if rainfall has been scant.

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