

# Israel

## A Greentours Itinerary

### Day 1 To Tel Aviv

We'll arrive into Tel Aviv's International Airport in the evening and drive the short distance to the Leonardo Beach Hotel.

### Day 2 Poleg & Mount Carmel

The large and beautiful brown/purple shiny blooms of *Iris atropurpurea* will be our first target. This rare iris inhabits the coastal dunes at Poleg, protected after a long battle led by Israel's Greens and the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel, who successfully fought off a developer wishing to turn one of the last unspoilt coastal habitats in the far east of the Mediterranean becoming a luxury residential area. This is Israel's earliest flowering *Oncocyclus* iris and it will depend on the season whether we see it in flower or not, but there's plenty else to see even if not. There's the tall blue *Scilla hyacinthoides* and endemic *Allium tel-avivense*, whilst the highly scented *Retama raetam* bushes will be showered in small white flowers attracting Palestinian sunbirds. The Dor Natural Reserve protects a rocky coast which in spring is carpeted with flowers such *Anthemis leucanthemifolia*, the stunning blue *Alkanna tinctoria*, the yellow *Allium erdelii*, and a highlight will be thousands of *Tulipa agenensis sharonensis* growing in the rocks only few meters from the water line. Migrant Pelicans, Spoonbills, Lapwings and Marsh Harriers stopover on the damp fields inland.

After lunch we'll head up on the slopes of nearby Mount Carmel. This mountain is covered in Mediterranean scrub rich in Orchids and bulbous plants. Terraces and open hillsides are at this season coloured with the Turban Buttercup, a spectacular red species, as well as the equally red *Tulipa agenensis*. We'll also visit a reserve to see the only location of *Orchis punctulata* on this mountain. Then have an hour's drive through the Jezreel Valley toward our hotel in Kibbutz Nir-David, situated at the edge of the Jordan Valley under Mt. Gilboa

### Day 3 Mount Gilboa & Mount Yonna

Mount Gilboa in Lower Galilee is a favoured spot amongst Israeli's as in summer the green hills provide welcome relief from the hot sun. In March it is a quiet and peaceful base from which to explore some great countryside. The lush gardens of our hotel, the Kibbutz Nir-David, will start the day off with many birds such as White-throated Kingfishers, Rose-ringed Parakeets, and noisy Spectacled Bulbuls. The wide river that

crosses the Kibbutz is full of enormous St. Peter's Fish (Tilapias), Catfish and impressively large Silver Carp that are used to being fed!

Near Nazareth we'll find wonderful *Iris bismarckiana*, its white, purple-lined standards lighting up the slopes of Mount Yonna. Many tulips and Anemone will be in bloom as well as the orange color form of *Asphodeline lutea*. The pools and the trees of nearby Gan Hashlosha act as a magnet to large numbers of migrant birds passing through with abundant warblers joined by more colourful bee-eaters, Rollers and Hoopoes. The fishponds that occupy much of the Harod Valley will see us notching up plenty of migrant waterfowl, waders and herons whilst the nearby ridges guide flocks of migrant Steppe Buzzards already making their way north. One of these limestone ridges culminates in Mount Gilboa and here we'll find prolific clumps of the impressive dark purple-pink flowers of *Iris haynei*.

Later in the afternoon we've an hour and a half's drive to Mt. Hermon stopping en route for a nice colony of *Fritillaria persica*, the green form that used to be called *Fritillaria libanotica* in the past.

## **Days 4 & 5**

### **Golan Heights, Mount Hermon and Upper Galilee**

The next two days will take us into Upper Galilee and the southern slopes of Mount Hermon. This is perhaps the most scenic part of Israel with the Golan Heights rising above the Sea of Galilee and the land to the north reaching Israel's highest point, on the snow-streaked shoulders of majestic Mount Hermon. We'll be based at Rimonim Hermon, beautifully situated close to Israel's best-preserved Crusader Castle Qal'at Nimrod, which we'll visit. An indication of the wildness of the surrounding area will be heard at night around our hotels for there are still Wolves in the area and many Golden Jackals some of which come round the grounds looking for scraps after dark. Lush valleys and maquis at lower levels are home to many orchids including the lovely *Orchis galilaea*, a beautiful species whose substantial blooms have flowers of green or pink. We'll also see several bee orchids with the various forms of *Ophrys umbilicata* joined by *Ophrys bornmuelleri* and *Ophrys transhyrcana*. *Arum palaestinum* and purple-spotted *Arum dioscoridis* are common constituents of the flora here along with the open trumpet-shaped blue bells of *Ixiolirion tataricum* and the last blooms of *Cyclamen coum*. We'll stop for lunch in the near Druze village of Mas'ade, where we can try the best Falafel in the region as well as Labane cheese and Humus. Moving up into the black soils of the Golan we'll stop by a small bog hosting the only Israeli population of *Dactylorhiza romana* blooming alongside *Romulea ramiflora*. Further along we'll meet yet another extremely rare Iris, the white-topped *Iris hermona* and our Iris list will increase further with the yellow flowered *Iris grant-dufii*, another rarity, unusual in that grows in damp conditions. An extraordinary vivid magenta color form of *Anemone coronaria* is found here.

On magical Mount Hermon are richly-hued forms of *Hyacinthus orientalis* and the simply stunning *Iris lortetii*. Fine blue-starred *Scilla hyacinthoides* is not uncommon. On the lower slopes is a grove of ancient *Pistacia atlantica* trees that have been growing since Ottoman times, and under them the unusual *Aristolochia bottae*. We'll seek a number of particularly beautiful orchids including the gorgeous *Orchis galilaea*. The elegant tongue orchid *Serapias levantina* is widespread and we'll look for various *Ophrys* and rare *Anacamptis israelitica* and its natural hybrid with the common *Anacamptis papilionacea*. *Eremurus spectabilis* produces wands of yellow-green often growing with red *Tulipa agenensis*. Closest to the snows we'll find *Gageas* and *Ornithogalums* as well as *Scilla libanotica* and diminutive *Romulea nivalis*. We'll not ignore the birdlife as this area gives us a good chance to see the rare Syrian Serin whilst the valley floor below forms one of Israel's most important wetlands. Once the northernmost of the lakes fed by the River Jordan, Hula was drained in the 1950s however a remnant was soon protected as the Hula Natural Reserve and this fabulous spot hosts abundant birdlife. We'll see various herons and waterfowl, Marsh Harriers, Graceful Warblers, Penduline Tits and many migrant species. Papyrus reaches its northernmost limit at Hula and the reserve is also an exceptional place for reptiles such as Stripe-necked Terrapin and Mediterranean Chamaeleon. White Storks will likely be migrating north in numbers.

## Day 6

### The Jordan Valley and Dead Sea

We'll start the day at the Baptism site at Yardenit on the Jordan river not far south of its outlet from the Sea of Galilee. Continuing south we'll visit Mount Sartaba where there is a nice selection of *Alliums* such as *Allium qasiunense*, white-flowered *Allium palaestinum* and tall, showy *Allium aschersonianum*, and later in the journey near Jericho we'll see the only blue flowering *Allium* in the region, *Allium ascalonicum*.

The transition to the desert lands is stark as one heads south along the fertile Jordan Valley, the change occurring south of Jericho as the land drops to a thousand feet below sea level on the shores of the Dead Sea. Fan-tailed Ravens and Tristram's Grackles inhabit fabulously eroded canyons that descend to the turquoise waters of the Dead Sea.

In the hills on the western shore of the Dead Sea lies Kibbutz Ein-Gedi Botanical Garden. Ein Gedi is well-known to birdwatchers but its status as the 11<sup>th</sup> wonder of the world, awarded by the National Geographic Society owes more to the botanic garden which houses a vast collection of date palms and other *Areceae*, tropical and desert flora within its ten hectares. Uniquely for a botanic garden it is inhabited with around five hundred people living within its bounds.

We'll stay overnight on the shores of the Dead Sea and have a chance to experience the bizarre sensation of floating in these super-salty waters.

## Days 7 & 8 Negev Desert

In the morning there will be another chance to read your newspaper while sitting calmly in the Dead Sea! Then we'll head to Masada where King Herod built palaces in the last century BC on the north side of the mountain thousands of feet above the salty waters below. It must have been an effort to do the building work then but for us a cable car takes the strain! The site is incredibly situated on the flat top of a mountain. There are actually two palaces on the mountain top, Herod the Great. Around the site Tristram's Grackle will come and eat from your hand if you offer a piece of bread. Fan-tailed Ravens are only slightly less friendly.

The Negev Desert, unsurprisingly, hosts the largest tract of wilderness left in Israel. This is a great place for desert birds as well as mammals and reptiles and in March has a most marvelous and unexpected flora. Along roadsides we'll see the very showy *Cistanche tubulosa*, a large yellow-flowered plant that parasitises chenopods, and we'll also find *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* and strange *Dipcadi erythraeum*. Bizarre *Eminium spiculatum* is easy to miss in Mamshit Sands, but not the tomato-red *Tulipa systola* shining boldly in the bright sun. Less showy *Tulipa biflora* grows with *Gynandris monophylla* whose tiny iris flowers bloom for only four early-afternoon hours each day. Here are three more stunning *Oncocycclus* Irises, the bright clear purple *Iris mariae* and two almost black species, the well-named *Iris atrofusca*, and the recently-described *Iris hieruchamensis*, together putting on an unforgettable show. *Helianthemum vesicarium* varies in colour from pure white to the deepest magenta and *Bellevalia eigii* and *Bellevalia desertorum* burst forth from rocky clefts.

Our base in the heart of the desert at Mitzpe Ramon is ideal not only for the flora but also for other desert wildlife. Mitzpe Ramon is perched on the edge of the huge Ramon Crater, an impressive landscape in itself. Desert Larks and White-crowned Black Wheatears are obvious on the cliffs whilst the towns greenery attracts various flycatchers, warblers and the Palestine Sunbird as well as Bulbuls and Little Green Bee-eater. Raptors and vultures are plentiful in the area with Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Long-legged Buzzard, Barbary Falcon and Lanner all quite easy to see. Moving further out into the desert we'll see quintessential desert birds such as Sand Partridge, Cream-coloured Coursers and various Sandgrouse. The crater itself forms a large uninhabited area of desert that has received full protection and so is home to many of the larger (and smaller) mammals that are now rare in much of the Middle-East. Wolves, Striped Hyenas and Caracal are present but are extremely difficult to see, however we hope to see Gazelle and have a very good chance of seeing the elegant Nubian Ibex that are not so shy here.

## **Day 9**

### **Jerusalem Botanic Gardens & the Armon Hanaziv promenade**

Jerusalem Botanic Garden has marvelous displays of plants from similar climates round the world and their South African and Australian sections are not only well put together but at this season will be in full bloom. The garden also specializes in breeding many of the endangered plants of Israel and we hope to get the chance to see some of their work.

After lunch in the Gardens restaurant we'll head to the Armon Hanaziv promenade to view Jerusalem's. Armon Hanaziv translates as the Commissioner's Palace. The name is a bygone era, when the British High Commissioner's house was down the road! The promenade, which is about A kilometre long is at the southern edge of the city, viewing northwards, and gives a full panorama of new Jewish Jerusalem, the Old City, Mount Zion, and the three valleys which surround ancient Jerusalem - Tyroppean, Hinnom and Kidron. Beyond the Old City to the north is French Hill and Mount Scopus. To the East you can see the Mount of Olives, with its three hallmark towers on the crest, and beyond it the Judean wilderness. Later we'll head into the Old City itself and finish the day up on the Mount of Olives.

## **Day 10**

### **Departure**

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