

# **Nakhchivan & Eastern Turkey**

## **A Tour for the Alpine Garden Society**

### **A Greentours Itinerary**

The perfect snowy cone of Ararat dominates the landscape in the manner of those East African giants, Kilimanjaro and Kenya and indeed is nearly as high as the latter reaching almost 17,000 feet. In late spring Ararat's hinterland – the Arax Valley, Nakhchivan ('Noah's Land'), and Lake Van and its surrounding mountains – host a magnificent display of bulbous species. Our aim is to see around ten or so species of Iris, including eight fabulous oncos (twelve if you are on the pre-tour!), and a similar number of *Fritillarias*, as well as a rich variety of Tulips, *Muscaris*, *Merenderas* and the like.

### **Day 1**

#### **Via Istanbul to Nakhchivan**

We'll arrive into Istanbul at close to midnight for the connection on to Nakhchivan, and though the flight time from Istanbul is less than three hours it will after dawn when we land due to the time difference with Istanbul.

Though isolated and little-known outside its borders, Nakhchivan is benefitting from the influx of oil money in Azerbaijan and we'll see the first evidence of this as soon as we enter the enclave – the road from the airport to the capital is wide and smooth, though there's almost no traffic. We'll pass small villages, each house with gardens full of vegetables and fruit trees, whilst semi-deserts stretch off towards Iran to the south, interrupted by tranquil green cultivated landscapes. To the north are the mountains that form the border between Nakhchivan and Armenia, now with plenty of snow on the highest areas. Nakhchivan city is a pleasant place, really not much bigger than a decent sized town, with wide boulevards, plenty of space, and a most striking backdrop with views for miles all the way round, not least from the windows of our very pleasant and comfortable hotel, the 'Grand'.

### **Days 2 & 3**

#### **Nakhchivan. Batabat Valley**

After some rest at the hotel we'll start exploring the landscapes of Nakhchivan which are really quite unique. They hardly resemble the areas of Eastern Turkey we'll visit, and are perhaps more the result of a juxtaposition of the Iranian dry montane steppes, the shibliak of the Lesser Caucasus, and with just a hint of influence from the Hyrcanian Province of the Caspian hinterland too. During both days we'll explore the rich variety of habitats along the road from the city to Batabat National Park high in the mountains just fifty kilometres to the north.

In the dry steppe we'll come across our first oncocyclis Iris of the trip, the magnificent dark blooms of *Iris lycotis*. A superb cushion-forming *Saponaria* looks almost like a dionysia on the low cliffs where a particularly fine deep pink form of *Dianthus orientalis* also produces tight clumps. Spectacular red bowls of *Papaver bracteatum* and spikes of delicate many-flowered orange *Papaver persicum* line the roadside as swallowtails fly back and forth. On roadside screes are fine *Lotus gebelia*, striking pink and yellow *Onobrychus*, and smelly but pretty orange *Cleome ornithopodioides*. White-throated Robins and Pied Wheatears are typical birds at this level. There are mounds of *Salvia hydrangea* on the flowery steppe; also *Leopoldia caucasica*, mats of yellow *Scutellaria orientalis*, spires of *Eremostachys laciniata*, and many different *Alliums* and *Astragaluses*. The festoon butterfly *Zerynthia caucasica* is common, so too Eastern Orange-tip and Cardinal.

In drier side valleys we'll find gorgeous *Iris paradoxa* var *atrata*. This form of this variable iris has deep blackberry-wine furry falls and bright slightly purple-blue standards. Here are also large clumps of the pretty *Astragalus anthyloides* and starry white *Ornithogalum navaschinii*.

Suddenly *Iris imbricata* is everywhere along the roadsides. This tall many-headed yellow Iris is a spectacular sight, and we'll see many thousands of blooms. The national park protects an important forest, a beautiful place with a marvellous show of Oxlips under the oaks, and a rich flora that includes various orchids and *Pedicularis*. Above the forest are subalpine grasslands surrounding Lake Batabat. *Orchis pinetorum* blooms by the lake whilst the nearby slopes host *Fritillaria crassifolia* subspecies *kurdica* and abundant *Iris caucasica* mixing with *Muscari sosnowskyi*, an unusual form of *Muscari tenuiflorum* with pale flowers in a tight column, and the large-flowered *Arenaria dianthoides*. There are sheets of *Gagea anisanthos* and a little of the delicate *Gagea confusa* too growing with deep purple *Nonea polychroma*, and the simply stunning *Corydalis seisumsiana*. The form that grows here has white and maroon flowers that are often infused with orange-yellow, a lovely plant. We'll find *Fritillaria armena* and on drier slopes *Pulsatilla albana armena* and *Valeriana leucophaea*. Where snow has recently melted we'll find little gardens of *Ranunculus kochii*, *Scilla armena* and *Puschkinia scilloides*, and slopes descending from these will be awash with large-flowered *Ranunculus grandiflorus*, as well as *Primula macrocalyx*, *Drabas* and *Erysimums*.

## **Day 4**

### **Ararat**

This morning we'll leave Nakhchivan. Our route almost circumnavigates great Mount Ararat. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, European Bee-eaters, Rollers and Rose-coloured Starlings are all common and very colourful birds along the roadsides. Crossing the border those with an interest in birds will see all around them one of the finest wetlands in the region, unfortunately its sensitive position means the use of optics is inadvisable!

At the foot of Ararat blooms many Iris enthusiasts' Holy Grail - *Iris iberica elegantissima*. The large falls are heavily veined deep maroon, the centres almost black. These are crowned by extraordinary snowy white standards lightly touched with purple. Growing with this beauty are *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* and *Orchis coriophora*. A marshy field near one of the iris colonies is covered in the unusual sky-blue *Muscari coeleste*. Late afternoon we'll have the chance to visit the Ishak Paşa Palace which lies atop crags of deeply contorted grey, russet and ochre rocks. Above is a deep blue sky and beyond the wide valley that was once part of the Silk Route lie jumbled lava flows that have tumbled from Ararat's cone. It is a picture that has adorned many a guidebook!

## **Day 5**

### **Tendurek Pass**

Heading south over the Tendürek Pass we'll find many fine alpiners and bulbs. Rocks have fine displays of *Drabas*, whilst pink *Androsace armena* and delicate furry blue *Pulsatilla albana* flower on dry gravels where we'll find shining red (and sometimes yellow) *Tulipa juliae* and pretty *Iris caucasica*. Three species of fritillary will be in flower - widespread *pinardii*, elegant *caucasica*, and the lovely tubby yellow and dark chocolate bells of the *grossheimiana* form of *crassifolia*. One particular spot has hundreds of dark blue *Bellevalia pycnantha*, massed displays of white *Anemone narcissiflora*, the large yellow blooms of *Adonis volgensis*, five species of *Gagea*, lots of stunning Spring Gentians, and stands of the lovely black-spotted yellow Prophet Flower.

Dropping a little from the 2600m pass we'll see green meadows tinged pink by massed displays of marsh orchids and pretty *Primula auriculata* contrasting with Tendürek's black lava flows whose porous crumbly surface is still virtually devoid of vegetation. Long-legged Buzzards and Short-toed Eagles soar overhead as we enjoy a picnic by a beautiful waterfall. All around us bloom more of those fabulous *Iris iberica elegantissima*, these joined by the velvety scarlet flowers of *Phelypaea tournefortii*.

Down the road immense Lake Van comes into view. The scenery is quite breathtaking - the immense lake is encircled by range after range of beautiful snow-capped peaks and the lake's waters turn turquoise, blue, white or even reddish depending on wind and weather. Following the shoreline south we'll come across *Iris barnumae* with lovely deep purple flowers.

## **Days 6 – 8**

### **Van's southern hinterland – Guzeldere Pass, Karabet Pass, Albayrak & the Çatak Road**

The 'Tolkienesque' 17th century Kurdish fortress at Hoşap sits upon a rocky pinnacle guarding the upper entrance to the Zerneq Valley and its dry steppe. Beyond lies the

snowy Güzeldere Pass and fantastic *Iris paradoxa* var *choschab*, with falls covered in a thick layer of velvet and topped by large white standards veined a deep inky blue - truly a spectacular plant! Radde's Accentors and the local 'unspotted' race (*magna*) of Bluethroat feed amongst the pink crocus-like flowers of *Colchicum szovitsii*. *Iris pseudocaucasica* mixes with both white and the more common yellow form of recently named *Tulipa koyuncii* and with them blue *Bellevalia pycnantha* and the extremely rare *Bellevalia rixii*, found only here. Lemon-flowered stemless *Centaurea vanensis* grows on screes also inhabited by squat patches of yellow and red-eyed *Androsace villosa*. Queen of Spain and Glanville Fritillaries are common and here we shall see *Callophrys paulae* (a type of Green Hairstreak) and Dalmatian Ringlet flying amongst beautiful *Gentiana verna* and *Corydalis nariniana*.

South of Gürpınar is a huge country of sweeping mountain steppes with nary a tree in sight, nor indeed habitation, apart from a couple of small very rustic villages sheltering at the head of flowery valleys. Apricot and plum coloured *Iris sari* grows with stunning little *Astragalus nanus* and the scarlet goblets of *Tulipa sintenisii*. One population of *Iris sari* has mixed with *Iris paradoxa* to produce a bewildering and beautiful variety of forms, the flowers varying through purples and blues, plums and brick, to yellowish and ochre, each iris different from its neighbour. Nearby open slopes harbour dark purple *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* and the pink umbels of *Allium akaka* perched above pretty rounded leaves. There's a bewildering array of colourful pea flowers and the lovely blue pendent bells of *Moltkia caerulea*.

The road to Bahçesaray takes us up the 9500 foot Karabet Pass into a land covered in snow and rock and millions of *Puschkinia scilloides*, their blooms ranging from white to icy blue. Kurdish herders attend their flocks and we'll see groups of men and women, the latter in their colourful traditional costumes, all lending a helping hand with the sheep shearing. Golden Eagles and Chough soar against the great cliffs that rise from the road and by snow are Snow Finches and Shorelarks. Radde's Accentors are common! Butterflies include the pretty green and orange *Tomares romanovii*. The flowers are quite incredible. Amongst acres of the *Puschkinia* grow the pale pink to cerise goblets of *Merendera kurdica*; some are four inches across! Rare *Fritillaria minima* decorates screes with golden-yellow bells and by streams grow swathes of *Primula auriculata* and the pretty mauve-pink *Tulipa humilis*. By snow patches are *Corydalis oppositifolia* and two more species of fritillary, the butterscotch-maroon flowers of the in-aptly named *Fritillaria minuta*, and the green and purple striped bells of *Fritillaria crassifolia*. High cliffs top 12,000 feet above the pass and careful searching amongst yellow *Saxifraga kotschyi* might reveal Wallcreeper.

Along the south shore of Lake Van *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*, *Orchis pseudolaxiflora*, yellow *Pedicularis comosa* and pink *Polygala major* make a fine show in damp roadside meadows and the woods around Tatvan have some nicely accessible populations of *Paeonia mascula*.

We'll visit a site for the wonderful *Iris urumiensis*, a species with egg-yolk yellow centres to the falls and creamy standards. In a 'normal' season we'll be too early to find this one in flower, however you never know, we might just catch the first blooms!

## **Day 9** **Halkış Mountain**

The approach to Halkış Dağı takes us to the edge of the Mesopotamian lowlands. Walking up from the village on the side of Halkış Dağı we pass scattered small *Quercus brantii* trees and later hawthorns and *Quercus libani* too, a habitat very pleasing to the eye. *Orchis anatolica* and *Orchis tridentata* are common as are *Muscari* and the local *Ornithogalum sorgerae*. Black-headed Buntings are very common and we'll see Orphean Warblers and Lesser Whitethroats, Jays and Red-backed Shrikes. Our target here are the huge ghostly blooms of *Iris gatesii*, the largest, and one of the rarest of all oncocyclous irises. The blooms can be as large as fifteen centimetres in each dimension! Many bright red *Tulipa armena* grow with them and those that can go higher will find spectacular *Fritillaria imperialis* too. The village graveyard also has many *Iris gatesii*, a backup in case you are unable to reach the population on the mountain, and the graves are also adorned with some fine *Iris mesopotamica* too.

In the afternoon we'll head westwards to Gaziantep across the wheatfields and pistachio orchards now watered by the huge irrigation projects that have dammed the Tigris and Euphrates.

## **Day 10** **Ahir Dağı & the Püren Pass**

Good roads provide us with ready access to the higher parts of Ahir Dağı, a mountains that rises above the northern part of the city. By a small lake are some fine populations of *Iris kirkwoodii*, the purple-etched blooms a striking sight on barren-looking slopes. Masses of Henbane populate rough fields and on the edges of the orchards we'll find the lovely and localized *Bellevalia gracilis*. Spur-thighed Tortoises graze amongst *Papaver clavatum*, *Salvia cryptantha*, *Orobanche anatolica*, and some great patches of *Aristolochia maurorum*.

The Püren Pass is a delight. The pass is not a high one, but the scenery sublime and the flowers even more so. The deeply dissected limestone mountains are dotted with ancient junipers and cedars, both attaining a considerable size. Here we can find the large tessellated bells of *Fritillaria amana*. Pretty *Scilla melaina* pokes out from shadey crevices, along with a little *Hyacinthus orientalis* and both *Corydalis tauricola*, a delicate mauve species, and *Corydalis erdelii*. *Ornithogalum wiedemannii*, in places going into seed and showing its distinctive winged capsules, is joined by the more robust *Ornithogalum sorgerae*. Among the rocks are yellow *Saxifraga cymbalaria* and tiny white flowered *Saxifraga tridactylites*, and the umbels of *Smyrniium cordifolium*

and pretty *Geranium cinereum* subspecies *palmatipartitus*. *Globularia trichosantha* forms pleasing clumps and there's pink *Hesperis steveniana* and yellow *Hesperis campicarpa*, the latter strongly fragrant even in the daytime.

## **Day 11**

### **Flight to Istanbul and onwards**

We'll depart mid-morning from Gaziantep's airport for the flight to Istanbul and onward connections.

## **Azerbaijan Pre-tour**

### **Day 1**

#### **To Baku**

We'll arrive into Istanbul at close to midnight for the connection on to Baku, and though the flight time from Istanbul is less than three hours it will be dawn when we land due to the time difference with Istanbul.

## **Days 2 – 4**

### **The Talysh Mountains**

The Talysh Mountains provide a link between the mountains of Transcaucasia and the Alborz Mountains of Northern Iran. The lower slopes are cloaked in species-rich Hyrcanian Forest, the upper levels montane steppe with shrubby Shibliak communities; rich hunting grounds for the botanist. The mountains are cut by steep gorges and have a complex geology, both resulting in varied habitats that promote a healthy biological diversity. The area was pretty much closed in Soviet times and so the wildlife has enjoyed protection by default, and so the large mammal fauna is surprisingly rich even in the lowlands. In the valleys below our hotel the last flowers of pink *Primula woronowii* will be in bloom in lush forests that contain a rich mixture of trees including Wingnut and *Parrotia persica*. These woodlands contain many birds familiar to us in Western Europe though the raptors are much more varied with Lesser Spotted Eagles, Goshawks, Honey Buzzards, and Levant Sparrowhawks all breeding within a few kilometres of the hotel.

Fluffy white and pink heads of *Stachys iberica* mix with *Echiums*, *Onosmas* and blue *Orobanches* on the grassy slopes. We'll soon find irises. The first are likely to a beautiful relative of *Iris paradoxa*. *Iris medwedewii* has maroon and white falls covered in a thick layer of velvet and topped by blue standards veined a deep inky blue - truly a spectacular plant! Nearby is another fine oncocyclus species, or is it two? For we'll find plants that are certainly lovely *Iris lineolata* with its fine, pointed falls, but others fit very neatly within the *Iris grossheimiana* morphology. *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* is also common and we'll see a rich assortment of steppe plants such as *Tragopogon*

*crocifolius*, *Silene sperguliflora*, *Nepeta transcaucasica*, *Lappulas*, and elegant *Psephellus* species.

Higher up where Caucasian Agamas patrol the rocky outcrops in tighter turf we'll encounter *Primula macrocalyx*, some very pretty *Astragalus* species, *Puschkinia scilloides*, and the tubby tessellated bells of *Fritillaria kotschyana*. If we are lucky we'll catch the last flowers of *Paeonia mlokosewitschii*.

## **Day 5**

### **The Mud Volcanoes and flight to Nakhchivan joining main tour on Day 1**

The most impressive of Azerbaijan's famed mud volcano fields are close to the Caspian shore at Gobustan not far south of the capital. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is an extraordinary landscape. There are no less than four hundred mud volcanoes along the Caspian shore, half the world total, and many of the best are at Gobustan. Small cones have mud more or less on a continuous boil, seeping out over the surrounding landscapes, larger cones can appear extinct, but these occasionally erupt into spectacular life too, sometimes columns of fire hundreds of metres high burn for months! The site has clearly played an important part in human history for there are abundant petroglyphs, more than six thousand of them, the oldest from 40,000 years ago. Close-by we'll visit a cement works! This is one of a number of sites for *Iris acutiloba* whose distribution is very much centred on Baku. Not the most beautiful surroundings, but we'll not mind when we find the iris!

And then we'll head into the city for our afternoon flight to Nakhchivan, joining the main tour on Day 1.

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