

Georgia in Summer

A TOUR FOR THE ALPINE GARDEN SOCIETY

The Greater Caucasus forms a truly impressive divide between Asia and Europe, a great rampart that rises to heights much greater than the European Alps. A wild untamed region, the villages set in achingly beautiful landscapes, and the inhabitants both intensely proud and genuinely hospitable. For a small country, Georgia has a breathtaking floral diversity, a result of the extreme variations of altitude and geology, its position at a crossroads between Central Asian, Russian, Turkic and Iranian influences, and a large dose of Caucasian endemism.

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 To Tbilisi

We leave the UK in the afternoon bound for Istanbul from where we'll pick up our connection to Tbilisi, landing there early in the morning. Note that there are flights from Edinburgh, Manchester and Birmingham which follow the same routing.

Day 2 The Greater Caucasus – Gudauri

After a rather short night at the Dolabauri Hotel we'll have a late breakfast and then head north out of the capital. The impressively high snow-capped peaks of the Greater Caucasus are visible even as one drives out of Tbilisi. Within an hour we are rising steadily up the Aragvi Valley and into the heart of these great mountains. Higher than the European Alps and much less populated, this is a truly wild region. Once up into the mountains we'll pass few settlements until we reach the ski resort at Gudauri.

In late June the skiing has stopped and Gudauri's meadows and birchwoods are full of flowers. We'll have chance to wander amongst the floral finery before enjoying Gelas's fine Georgian repast at the hotel. The magnificent *Delphinium speciosum* is a star attraction and the meadows are also full of *Centaurea nigrofimbria*, *Geranium ruprechtii*, *Campanula collina*, *Campanula hohenackerii*, *Orchis pallens* and the large orange-yellow discs of *Inula grandiflora*.

Day 3 The Greater Caucasus – the Cross Pass and the Truso Valley

Above the ski centre the road quickly rises to the Cross Pass and some wonderful alpine country. Steel-blue *Swertias* and shining red Louseworts line sinuous streams that meander past little rocky bluffs that have all manner of fine alpines such as *Saxifraga pseudolaevis*, *Dryas caucasica* and mat-forming *Scutellaria oreophila*.

In the Truso Valley we'll see a phenomenon frequent in the High Caucasus. Gently trickling water deposits minerals that form yellow, white and orange terraces over the whole valley floor – an amazing sight. There are several large sulphur springs too, these bubbling up by the river. Under serpentinite cliffs is the rare *Primula darialica*. These same cliffs host *Saxifragas kolenatiana*, *moschata* and *cartilaginea* as well as Wallcreeper! The subalpine meadows have much *Isatis iberica*, *Astragalus maxima*, *Astragalus kazbeki*, and a range of bellflowers that includes *Campanula hypopolia* and *Campanula sarmatica*. We'll also find pretty bluish-lilac *Scutellaria leptostega*, *Gentianella caucasica*, the striking blue-trumpeted *Gentiana septemfida* and the unusual four-petalled *Gentiana blepharophora*.

Day 4

The Greater Caucasus – Mount Kazbek and the Darial Gorge

The geology is complex and landforms extreme, it is as if these mountains were pushed skywards just yesterday. The majestic glaciated peak of Kazbegi (5033m) rises just behind our Hotel. *Saxifraga desoulavyi* blooms with Snowdon Lily and *Sempervivum caucasicum* on rocky bluffs. *Dactylorhiza euxina* and *Dactylorhiza caucasica* bloom in wet meadows.

The inhabitants of the rustic summer village high in the Juta Valley spend only three months in their lovely summer village, the climate in the other nine months being too difficult! Many strange-looking locally hewn implements stand stacked outside the stone and wood dwellings and the wonderfully decorated haystacks will attract much attention we are sure. The range of Campanulas is unbelievable from tall *Campanula lactiflora* to delicate and lovely rock-dwelling species such as *Campanula ardonensis* that adorn rocky tracksides along these valleys. Even in the height of summer bright pink and deep purple Primulas still bloom alongside azure *Corydalis alpina*, and gorgeous yellow *Corydalis emmanuelii* and electric blue Gentians are found on the higher slopes. The lovely 'cornflower' *Psephellus dealbatus* is common in meadows where we can also see *Saxifraga repanda* while on the dry gravelly ridges we'll find *Sempervivum pumilum*, *Linaria meyeri*, *Jurinella moschus*, *Veronica petraea*, and mats of *Androsace villosa*.

The Darial Gorge is home to *Silene pygmaea*, *Allium victorialis*, *Primula ruprechtii*, and *Jurinella moschus*, as well as even more beautiful Campanulas such as *Campanula sosnowskyi*, *Campanula bellidifolia*, and the white *Campanula ochroleuca*. The delicate Twinflower, *Linnaea borealis*, is found on shadey boulders under light birchwoods along with *Dolichorhiza renifolia* and *Dolichorhiza caucasica*.

Day 5

The Greater Caucasus – Juta-Jaukhebi Massif

The Juta-Jaukhebi Massif supports all sorts of beauties such as *Pseudovesicaria digita*, the unusual *Primula bayernii*, gorgeous *Campanula petrophylla*, and various *Saxifragas* including *flagellaris*. Screes have *Lamium tomentosum* and *Scrophularia*

minima, and in the surrounding meadows rare Yellow Globe Orchids mix with brightest pink *Polygonum carneum*. There also *Sempervivum transcaucasicum* and the pretty almost stemless carrot *Symphyoloma graveolens*.

Day 6 **To Glola, Racha**

Today we'll head westwards to the lovely Racha region. Here we've some fabulous floral treats such as *Campanula rachensis*, *Daphne pseudosericea*, and the great ivory bowls of *Paeonia wittmanniana*. *Inula magnifica* is well-named, in a genus of often large-flowered plants, this one really stands out as ... magnificent! *Buxus colchica* is an interesting endemic and growing with it are other very local species such as *Scabiosa schaorica* and *Angelica tatianae*.

Days 7 & 8 **Svaneti**

In the glorious scenic mountains of Svaneti, the subalpine meadows are alive with many species of *Geranium*, *Inula* and *Salvia* as well as *Dracocephalums*, the local Jacob's Ladder *Polemonium caucasicum*, and the strange primula relative *Sredinskya grandis*. Above we'll find magnificent *Pulsatilla aurea* in the alpine zone, alongside striking *Sedum pilosum* and yellow *Chiastophyllum oppositifolium*, whilst river gravels are coated in a sheet of pink *Chamaenerion caucasicum*. Beautiful *Campanulas* are again to the fore with *suanetica* and *engurensis*. Local endemics include *Genista suanica*, *Cerastium svanicum*, *Ranunculus svaneticus*, *Heracleum sommieri*, and the less-than-attractive *Lamyropsis charadzeae*.

Svaneti is also famed for its extraordinary tower houses and we'll visit the village of Chazhashi which still has over two hundred of these strange dwellings. Between 3 and 5 stories high they have walls that lessen in thickness upwards giving rise to a distinctive tapered effect.

Day 9 **Via the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park to Bakuriani**

As we descend from the heights of the Greater Caucasus we'll enter woodlands with shrubberies of *Rhododendrons* and abundant ferns. On the cliffs are mats of *Draba bryoides*. Helleborines are abundant under Oriental Hornbeam and there are myriad flowering *Astragaluses* as well as statuesque *Eremostachys laciniata*. In the Kura valley we'll explore flowery shibliak (shrubby vegetation) where Blue Gromwell, Sainfoins and a great variety of shrubs occur before we rise up into the Lesser Caucasus.

Days 10 & 11 **The Lesser Caucasus – the Javakheti Plateau, volcanoes & lakes, and to Tbilisi**

Bakuriani is beautifully situated amongst forests of Fir and Oriental Beech and under a 2300m pass that leads out on to the endless Javakheti Plateau. Steppe Eagles, Golden Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards and Harriers are never far from sight

as we contemplate the incredible scene in front of us. Stretching away to horizons far away is a landscape all above 2000m with large lakes and shallow valleys drawing the eyes to the volcanic peaks that interrupt the rolling landscape. It looks barren but is anything but, for closer inspection will reveal lovely *Dianthus raddeanus* glowing pink from rocky outcrops where rich red *Sedum sempervivoides* blooms with clusters of deeply coloured *Campanula alpigena*. Marshy spots have *Gladiolus dzavakhetica* with *Dactylorhiza iberica*. Swathes of *Papaver orientalis* make a spectacular sight and we'll also find *Cicerbita macrophylla*, *Asphodeline taurica*, lovely pink and silver *Centaurea pulcherrima*, and striking yellow *Centaurea macrocephala*. In fact in Georgia many of the knapweeds are no longer in *Centaurea* – the impressive yellow *Grosheimia polyphylla* and smaller elegant yellow *Chartolepis glastifolia* being two examples. *Eryngium giganteum* is a beautiful plant and we'll also find *Scutellaria sosnowskyi*, clumps of *Campanula aucheri*, *Ranunculus dzavakheticus*, *Dianthus multicaulis*, and the simply gorgeous *Geranium psilostemon*.

Elegant tall *Lilium kesselringianum* produces a tremendous show alongside many beautiful Delphiniums, Foxgloves and Monkshoods in meadows still cut by hand. Here we'll also see other large forbs typical of this community such as *Heracleum wilhelmsii*, *Campanula latifolia*, *Gadelia* (formerly *Campanula*!) *lactiflora*, *Doronicum macrophyllum* and two impressive *Senecios* - *othonae* and *platyphylloides*.

During the afternoon of Day 10 we'll drive through the eastern part of the plateau enjoying more scenery and more wonderful flora before descending to Tbilisi for the end of the of the tour.

Day 12 Departure

If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

To Book a on this Holiday please fill in the booking form which you can download from www.greentours.co.uk (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post to Greentours, 8 Eliot Close, Armitage, Rugeley, WS15 4UP, UK. Tel +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Flower, bird and butterfly checklists are available.