

Delphi & The Southern Pindhos

Autumn Bulbs of Greece

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Athens. Transfer to Mount Parnassos

A motorway takes us swiftly through Athens's great conurbation and soon we'll be in open country. Indeed just an hour from the city's outskirts we'll find one of the sights of the trip. An unprepossessing hill close to the road looks nothing special until we get up close to it, then the brilliant splashes of pink and bright yellow will become apparent. It is a truly amazing sight, for in autumn flowers are often spread thinly on dry earth, yet here we'll have a display to rival those fabulous spring flowerscapes that the Eastern Mediterranean is famed for. The chief supplier of colour here is a magnificent population of *Sternbergia sicula*, some of the clumps have fifty goblet shaped blooms nestled in the dark green leaves, and the clumps go on and on, carpeting field edge and limestone rocks alike. Pink *Cyclamen hederifolium* blooms are almost as frequent! Much harder to spot but nonetheless not uncommon is the unusual *Biarum tenuifolium*. This strange little aroid has a slender pale dark purple spadix longer than the narrow spathe which is dark purple at the base shading to lime green at the tip!

Days 2 – 4

Mount Parnassos & Delphi

The Koutsourou Monastery perches high on a hill overlooking the Gulf of Corinth and the mountains of the Northern Peloponnese beyond. Blue Rock Thrushes and Western Rock Nuthatches are the common birds and Red Admirals and Clouded Yellows are superabundant. Pretty spires of *Campanula trachelium* with their peculiar starry flowers grow on the rocks close to the monastery while on the surrounding slopes are autumn blooms decorating a patchwork of dry fields, rocky outcrops and garrigue-covered slopes. Chief among them are Crocuses. The local form of *Crocus cancellatus*, here subspecies *mazziaricus*, comes in a variety of shades but typically with a hint of blue, whilst the ivory-coloured tepals of *Crocus hadriaticus* are offset by striking bright orange-red stigmas. Scattered here and there are singles and groups of *Colchicum cupanii*, the bright pink stars topped with grey anthers.

Nestling at the foot of a high cliff on the slopes of Mount Parnassos, Delphi looks out over a sea of olives in the Itea Valley to the Gulf of Corinth and the Peloponnese beyond. It is a sublime location for one of the finest classical sites in Greece. Cliffs loom over the amphitheatre and an impressive stadium whose 'pitch' is littered with *Colchicum cupanii* and a little dark purple-pink *Colchicum bivonae*. Still flowering in between the rocks by the amphitheatre is *Campanula topaliana* subspecies *delphica* whilst above are colonies of *Sternbergia lutea* showering limestone outcrops with gold. We'll head into nearby Arachova for a

sport of lunch in a restaurant in the central square that also serves some very fine teas. The shops along the picturesque streets are many and varied, ideal for a spot of shopping.

The road that takes one up onto the high bare slopes of Parnassos itself passes through a wide band of Grecian Fir forest. Mistle Thrushes fly across the road and Goldcrests are common in the firs, whilst wintering flocks of finches and buntings feed in open areas where there are spectacular views of ridge after blue forested ridge west across Mount Giona to the province of Evrytania. Big flocks of Alpine Chough wheel above the deserted ski stations and Alpine Accentor, Shore Lark and Snowfinch search out tidbits around the lifts. The strange little *Sternbergia colchiciflora* is difficult to spot here, but just a little below, where junipers crowd the edges of the fir forest, deep magenta-pink *Colchicum boissieri* blooms amidst the most sublime scenery.

Days 5 & 6

Karpenisi - The Southern Pindhos

We'll move westwards along the Mornos Valley, stopping by the reservoir where deep pink tessellated *Colchicum bivonae* blooms close to the road. Shaley slopes above the road are covered in a magnificent display of *Epilobium fleischeri*. This robust willowherb forms dense clumps a metre high, covered in a mass of pink flowers, each around 2cm across.

Parnassos's sister mountains, Vardousia and huge Giona, dominate a fantastically wild and beautiful region, their skirts ruffled by ridges cloaked in Greek Fir and Chestnut, and cut by tremendous gorges. Cyclamens produce fine shows under woods home to White-backed and Black Woodpeckers. The lower slopes have rich forests of oak mixed with *Acer platanoides*, *Platanus orientalis*, *Cotinus coggygria* and hawthorns, and under these are plenty of diminutive Autumn Ladies Tresses. Autumnal maquis is a colourful sight, the open ground between the red, tawny and gold bushes are dotted with the white stars of *Crocus hadriaticus*, but as we head west we'll find it replaced by the endemic *Crocus robertianus* blooming under the oaks of the Southern Pindhos. Rock Partridges shout from rocky promontories we'll find the rather worryingly-named *Colchicum confusum*.

Day 7

To Mount Parnitha National Park via the Sperchios Delta

Returning towards the capital we'll be very close to Athens when we turn off for Mount Parnitha National Park. This is a beautiful little spot, so close to the urban sprawl of Athens, yet here we find tranquil autumn landscapes among woodlands of *Abies cephalonica*, *Fraxinus ornus* and *Quercus ilex*. Both *Cyclamen graecum* and *Cyclamen hederifolium* are found along the quiet lanes and as well as by now familiar autumn crocuses we'll find *Colchicum lingulatum*.

Day 8

Crocus cartwrightianus site & departure

In the morning we'll head over to Athens's where we'll spend some time looking for *Crocus cartwrightianus*, a stunning species that flowers not so very far from the airport.

Later in the afternoon 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 goulimyi*, 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 back up to Athens but, before catching our flight home, we'll again look for *Crocus cartwrightianus*, just in case we missed it the first time!

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