

Jordan in Autumn

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Jordan

Our direct British Airways flight arrives late in the evening so we'll stay the first night in Madaba, just half an hour from the airport.

Days 2 - 4

The Northern Hills, Ajlun, Jerash and the Syrian border

The hills that form the east bank of the Jordan Valley may come as a surprise to the first-time visitor to Jordan. Covered in a beguiling mix of olive groves, terraces, villages and some rather fine indigenous forest, they have a very rich natural as well as cultural heritage. The latter of course will play a significant part on our tour and so we'll take time out to enjoy the Roman ruins at Jerash and the fairy-tale Arab-built Crusader-period castle that looms over Ajlun. However it is the flora that will take most of our attention. The hills reach around four thousand feet above sea level along their length, actually four thousand two hundred feet above the subtropical Jordan River in the valley below. These highest hills have an almost alpine component and the valley a rich mixture of Middle-eastern plants.

Ajlun, a new nature reserve protecting an area of natural evergreen *Quercus aegilops* forest, is right on the very tops of the hills. The views across the Jordan Valley to Nablus and Nazareth are spectacular. The hills have a largely European avifauna but as one descends things become more exotic with first Blackstarts and Spectacled Bulbuls, while wintering Wheatears include both Black-eared and Finsch's. Little pockets of terra rosa hold *Crocus cancellatus* and plenty of the pale goblets of *Crocus hyemalis*. *Colchicum stevenii* offers bright pink starry blooms under *Retama* and *Sarcopoterium*. Under rocks are Snake-eyed Skinks and various geckos, whilst growing amongst them are abundant and pretty *Ricotia lunaria*. Up towards the Syrian border and east of the hills the landscape changes to arid steppelands, largely cultivated for wheat but with bare-looking natural areas where wadis cut through the landscape. This rather unpromising looking terrain has some great flora! In the golden afternoon light we'll soon notice the elegant purple-lined white blooms of *Crocus aleppicus* as well as newly described *Crocus naqabensis*.

Day 5

The Dead Sea and Wadi Mujib

The transition to the desert lands is stark as one heads south along the fertile Jordan Valley, the change occurring as the land drops to a thousand feet below sea level on the east shore of the Dead Sea. We'll stop and experience the bizarre sensation of floating in these super-salty waters before continuing on south in increasingly superb scenery. Fan-tailed Ravens and Tristram's Grackles inhabit

fabulously eroded cliffs lit by the afternoon sun before we rise again into the hills passing al-Karak. Here we'll take a look at the well-preserved crusader castle, one of the finest and largest in the Middle-east. The high hills south of al-Karak are where we'll look for lovely *Crocus moabiticus*, its pretty purple-etched blooms made strident with the brilliant red stigmas and golden anthers. This is a capricious flowerer so we can only hope rather than expect! Also growing here is purple-pink *Colchicum brachyphyllum* and in sheltered spots the first *Cyclamen persicum* should be in flower. Near to A-Salt we'll look for the large golden goblets of almost stemless *Sternbergia clusiana* and the unusual Biarum pyramid with its very long curved spadix. This beautiful pinky-bluish *Crocus hermoneus* subspecies *palaestinus* is becoming a rare species but at this site it can still be seen in large numbers

Days 6 & 7

Petra and the Wadi Dana Nature Reserve

Petra is an extraordinary place. The ruins are amazing in themselves but it is the grandeur of Petra's dramatic setting that has helped to inspire its place in legend. Two millennia of winds and rain have blurred the edges of the fabulous facades but the resulting weathering of the richly hued soft sandstone has, if anything, just made the sight more awe-inspiring. We'll have a day to explore what is a very large site, and another optional day where you can return to the site on your own or join us to look more closely at the region's flora. Pretty Sinai Rosefinches will mark our progress down the extraordinary Siq, the water-worn gorge caused by tectonic movements which split the mountain in two, and which provides the entrance to Petra. As the Siq narrows to just a few metres wide we'll suddenly be confronted with the magnificence of the Treasury, an impressive façade designed to impress and it most certainly does. Emerging from the narrow passageway, one is struck by the clarity of the carving and the impressive size of the monument as well as the striking colour of the rocks. We'll spend the rest of the day exploring the site visiting the Royal Tombs, the Silk Tomb and the Temple of Winged Lions amongst many others.

There's much to enjoy of the natural world too at Petra. The landscape is sublime with the heavily eroded sandstone mountains reaching almost six thousand feet above sea level. We'll seek the bizarre succulent *Caralluma europaea* which may be in flower and ferns such as *Cheilanthes pteridioides*. Blue Rock Thrushes and Rock Martins are typical inhabitants of the narrow gorges whilst in the open are chattering pairs of Scrub Warblers. Overhead Fan-tailed Ravens seem incredibly agile considering they hardly have a tail! This is great country for reptiles. Whilst wandering the ruins a flash of blue might catch our attention as a brightly-attired male Blue Sinai Agama does press-ups on smooth Petra rocks. Rock Agamas are here too and we'll seek the local Petra Rock Lizard. Careful examination of crevices in the rocks and under stones should reveal Spotted Fan-footed Geckos.

Dana's spectacular landscape of desert wadis, and high juniper dotted hills, forms the showpiece nature reserve of the Royal Jordanian Nature Society. In the time we have here we'll be so busy we'll have little time to enjoy the incredible views

from the guesthouse that moved the Queen of Jordan when staying to remark that the views were 'ten-star'. Four and a half thousand feet above sea-level the guesthouse is near the top of Wadi Dana and from it one can see all the way down a spectacular defile that descends to the below sea-level Wadi Araba, visible in the distance, and over five thousand feet below. Scanning should reveal Nubian Ibex and hopefully Syrian Rock Hyraxes. We'll visit a forest of pine and *Juniperus phoenicea* where we'll seek the rare Tristram's Serins while Griffon and Egyptian Vultures circle over the imposing landscape along with Long-legged Buzzards. Spur-thighed Tortoises should be encountered regularly though Mediterranean Chameleons will require a sharper eye, however Dana is one of the best places to see this little master of camouflage. Patches of floribund pink *Colchicum hierosolymitanum* catch the eye amongst a sublime forest of ancient junipers where Friar's Cows poke out from rocky crevices with little *Cheilanthes* ferns. The subtle blooms of *Crocus pallasii* subspecies *hausknechtii* are difficult to spot as the flowers are well-camouflaged against the soil here.

Day 8

Wadi Rum

An incredibly scenic route drops several thousand feet through the mountains to the deserts of Wadi Araba. In a matter of an hour one descends from Petra's cool hills to the sands and salt steppes of true desert. Scattered low trees of *Acacia tortilis* and *Acacia raddeana* populate the sands, these heavily parasitized by the bright red-flowered *Loranthus acaciae* constantly attended by the shimmering Orange-tufted Sunbird. Rare Arabian Warblers frequent the acacias whilst wheatears are everywhere, especially Desert and Mourning, and other small birds will include Desert Lark and Masked Shrike. Various *Acanthodactylus* lizards scurry through the sand and under any shelter we could find the Golden Skink. Amongst shrubs of *Salvadora persica* the sands can hold the squat flowers of *Androcymbium palaestinum* if there's been any sign of rain at all in the previous weeks. *Asphodelus ramosus* lines roadsides and if conditions have been favourable *Lavandula coronopifolia*, *Kickxia spartioides* and pretty *Blepharis ciliaris* bloom alongside orange-flowered *Cleome amblyocarpa*, a striking but very smelly plant!

We'll visit Lawrence of Arabia's Spring and Nabatean rock art in the fantastic desert scenery of Wadi Rum. Brown-necked Ravens and White-crowned Black Wheatears are common, while in the sands we'll hope to find the last flowers of *Pancreatium sikenbergeri* and the Sand Gecko *Tropicolotes nattereri*. The birding is excellent with groups of Trumpeter Finches and Desert Larks as well as well as Tristram's Grackles, Sinai Rosefinches and Rufous Bushchats. Wadi Rum is home to several rare species but luck will be required to find the local pair of Verreaux's Eagles or the elusive Hume's Tawny Owls. *Hammada scoparia* is a strange woody chenopod that emerges like a miniature tree from the desert sands and at this season it can be smothered in vividly coloured blooms, and the wild water melon *Citrullus colocynthis* will have mature fruits lying in the desert like they've fallen from the sky!

Day 9

Wadi Mujib and the Madaba Hills

We'll spend the day exploring the mountains of the Jabal al-Hala along the King's Road northwards towards Madaba. Dry fields along the desert edge might have *Colchicum ritchii* and *Bellevalia desertorum*.

We'll lunch by the Wadi Mujib, Jordan's 'Grand Canyon', and whilst not as spectacular as the real thing it is certainly an impressively deep valley. We'll walk along the top where we'll find *Biarum olivieri* and the white blooms of *Colchicum crocifolium* dotting the arid but extremely beautiful landscape.

Day 10

Return to the UK

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