

# The Alps

## ***The Dolomites, the Central Italian Alps & the Maritime Alps***

### **A Greentours Itinerary**

#### **Day 1**

#### **Arrive Venice and transfer to Claut**

As we rise up into the mountains the beech and hornbeam forests soon give way to flower-filled meadows and spruce forests, and we start to see the wonderful limestone battlements of the higher mountains. It'll take us under two hours from Venice Airport to reach the little settlement of Claut.

En route to the Dolomiti Friulane we'll stop at a leafy lane near Vajont where the myriad flowers and butterflies of northeast Italy will immediately make quite an impression on us. We'll soon encounter numerous Dark Red Helleborines as well as Lesser Butterfly Orchids amongst a host of fine woodland flowers such as attractive *Teucrium montanum*, *Centaurea jacea*, *Hieracium staticifolium*, *Bupthalmum salicifolium*, *Peucedanum venetum*, *Verbascum chaixii austriacum*, *Valeriana wallrothii*, Swallow-wort, and the ever-lovely Wood Pink. Apollos float along dry slopes covered in their foodplants, stonecrops, and we'll also see Pearly Heath, Marbled White, Large Wall Brown, and Woodland Brown. We've a decent chance of encountering the impressive Poplar Admiral here. Spiked Bellflowers are an impressive sight, and there's more orchids in the shape of Fly Orchid and Red Helleborine too! A little further along we'll stop at a site for the very rare *nemoralis* race of Fen Orchid. This robust form is found in woodland rather than fens and is known from only half a dozen sites in the northeast Italy.

#### **Days 2 & 3**

#### **The Dolomiti Friulane: Cimoliana & Passo Duran**

The Dolomiti Friulane is a very rich area on the edge of Dolomites' main ranges. The landscape is sublime with limestone pinnacles rising above woodlands and meadows full of often beautiful flowers and butterflies. *Cyclamen purpurascens* populates woodlands where we'll encounter some lovely *Aquilegias*, bright *vulgaris*, lustrous *atrata* and the lovely regional endemic *Aquilegia einseleana*. *Monotropa hypopitys* hides in the shade of beeches where we'll also find orchids such Dark Red Helleborine, Twayblade and Red Helleborine. Three fine black and white butterflies will hold centre stage, White Admiral, Southern White Admiral and the elegant Hungarian Glider, and in glades we'll see Silver-washed Fritillary, Wood White and the Woodland Brown. Willow Gentian may just be opening its blue trumpets along woodland rides where we'll also encounter the Lady's Slipper Orchid – you'll probably only see one of these two in flower as they rarely bloom at the same time! The distinctive pink *Crepis froelichiana dinarica*, an endemic subspecies, blooms with

*Anemone trifolia* and this is a good area to see Duke of Burgundy Fritillaries and we're likely to encounter a good number today.

Large Chequered Skipper and False Heath Fritillary fly in meadows dotted with *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and both Fragrant and Short-spurred Fragrant Orchids, these across the road from our hotel. Early morning is a good time to look for Roe Deer or Chamois in these same meadows.

A little higher up we'll find mountainsides covered in a rich tapestry of flowers such as *Cerastium subtriflorum*, *Petrorhagia saxifraga*, *Dianthus sternbergii*, *Silene saxifraga*, *Arenaria huteri*, *Sedum rupestre* and *Gentiana utriculosa*, whilst rocky outcrops are home to *Senecio abrotanifolius*, *Centaurea dichroantha*, Edelweiss and the wonderful Devil's Claw. A classic amongst alpine plants, the Devil's Claw nestles in deep limestone crevices, its amazing pink and blue claws in flowerheads the size of a child's fist. Another highlight will be the fine yellow day lily, *Hemerocallis lilio-asphodelus*, endemic to just a few sites in the area.

During the afternoon of Day 3 we'll make our way over Monte Pelmo to the Val Pettorina, just an hour to the northwest, our home for the remainder of the holiday. We have chosen this base with great care so as to ensure minimal travelling times to some of the finest flower sites in the region. Within half an hour's drive of our hotel are the superb alpine meadows, forests and crags of the ridge along the top of the Val d'Ampezzo, and the exquisite Monte Pelmo. Fine alpine turf just yards from the road is covered in a multi-coloured floral display rivalling that found anywhere in Europe. Beautiful sky-blue *Campanula barbata* mixes with the dark red wine coloured local variant of Black Vanilla Orchid, *Nigritella rhellicani* and the brilliant blues of the trumpet gentians, *Gentiana acaulis* and *Gentiana clusii*. Mountain White Orchid, Frog Orchid and Pink Globe Orchid also grow in as fine a mixture of alpine orchids as you could wish to see. Wet patches hold bright red-pink *Dactylorhiza alpestris*, butterworts, deep blue flowers of the rare *Gentiana bavarica* and red-black *Pedicularis recutita*, while waving in the breeze are the candyfloss heads of cotton grass. Gorgeous Apollos float over these gentle slopes and dark ringlets erupt from under our feet as we walk. Many species of these difficult-to-identify butterflies are found in the area including Woodland, Blind, Common Brassy and Almond-eyed Ringlets. The rather prosaically named Alpine Blue is common here; its distinctive underside may come into focus as we peer closely at the pretty flowers of *Androsace alpina*. The loud calls of Alpine Choughs echo from the surrounding cliff faces, competing with the piercing whistles of Alpine Marmots which are so common here that we should be careful to avoid putting a foot down one of their holes!

## **Day 4**

### **Passo di Giau & Posalz**

Beautiful alpine turf littered with colourful flowers stretches gently up to the bulk of the Nuvolau, a huge buttress sitting atop the ridge. There are stunning views down to

Cortina in the valley below. Initially the turf is on acidic soils and we'll find abundant Alpine Pasque Flowers and *Geum montanum* as well as a few *Androsace obtusifolia*. Amid many Trumpet Gentians are *Ranunculus montanus* and *Ranunculus kuepferi*, and we'll see Frog Orchids, *Daphne striata*, *Ajuga pyramidalis* and *Veronica alpina*. Alpine Toadflax, a fabulous mosaic of purple and orange, grows with the bright golden-yellow of *Potentilla aurea* and the intense pink cushions of Moss Campion, providing an irresistible palate for the photographer!

Reaching the limestone the bright pink Alpenroses change from *ferrugineum* to *hirsutum*, while further along we'll find the Creeping Azalea and the stunning Dwarf Alpenrose. The diminutive Bird's-eye Primrose is common and we shall find *Primula halleri* and maybe the bright yellow *Primula auricula* will still be in bloom. Cliffs are home to some of the finest of all alpine plants. Reddish-pink *Potentilla nitida*, an unusual colour for a cinquefoil, grows amidst some lovely saxifrages. Encrusting blue-grey rosettes growing flush against rock faces with sprays of delicate creamy flowers are *Saxifraga caesia*, and we shall also find *Saxifragas crustata*, *aizoides* and the beautiful *oppositifolia* amongst others. Decorating mats of *Dryas octopetala* are *Achillea clavennae*, Mossy Sandwort, *Pedicularis rosea*, *Paederota bonarota*, *Phyteuma sieberi*, *Viola biflora*, *Draba dubia*, *Valeriana saxatilis*, and *Helianthemum alpestre*. The slopes here are dotted with *Pinus cembra* and among them we'll see *Ranunculus hybridus* and wet flushes covered in Bird's-eye Primrose.

We shall wander along forest tracks where Serins, Crossbills and Crested Tits are common. Gamebirds are a feature of the local forests, but we shall be lucky to see any of Hazelhen, Black Grouse or Capercaillie. These woods have a very fine flora too - the almost Black spikes of *Phyteuma zahlbruckneri* and the dark wine-coloured flowers of *Aquilegia atrata* are two particularly noteworthy species. The mossy forest floor is home to the lovely One-flowered Wintergreen and growing with them are two unusual orchids, the Coralroot Orchid and the Single-leaved Bog Orchid! The beautiful Titania's Fritillary floats around meadows and woodland glades near the hotel and here we shall see the greatest variety of butterflies, from Nickerls' and False Heath Fritillaries, to Scarce Coppers, Large Blues, Amanda's Blues and the plentiful Alpine Heath.

## **Day 5**

### **Marmolada & Sottoguda**

To the west is the magnificent glaciated peak of Marmolada, rising to some 11,000 feet. We will spend a day exploring the rich slopes on either side of the beautiful Lago de Fedai. The views across the lake to Marmolada's glacier, only a couple of thousand feet above us to the south, are really spectacular. The slopes by the lake are covered by a lovely mixture of *Rhododendron hirsutum*, the delicate Windflower or Mountain Avena and Alpine Butterwort, and there's even a few Coralroot Orchids. Impressive shows of Lesser Wintergreen and the gorgeous blue and white flowers of Alpine Clematis grow amongst this colourful display. For those that wish we can catch

a chairlift up to the edge of the glacier. What appears to be barren limestone rock from below, not so different in colour from the glacier, is, on closer inspection, decorated with some fine alpine flowers. As we ascend we'll pass *Silene acaulis*, *Gentiana clusii* and *Gentiana orbicularis*. Little purple patches are revealed to be the pretty little *Thlaspi rotundifolia* whilst clusters of blue are the rare *Gentiana terglouensis*. Other tiny high alpine gems include *Arabis caerulea*, *Arabis bellidifolia*, *Arabis alpina*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Saxifraga sedoides* and *Petasites paradoxus*. Small Tortoiseshells are typically a high altitude butterfly here and we might also see Alpine Grizzled Skipper too.

Valleys below the chairlift contain some of the more spectacular flowers and butterflies the Dolomites has to offer. One particular meadow has swathes of huge Martagon Lilies, Orange Lilies and the delicate white bells of St Bruno's Lilies. Yellow Alpine Leeks mix with pink Alpine Saintfoin, white and mauve Alpine Milk-Vetch and masses of the Globeflowers to magical effect. Rocks here are home to the uncommon Short-spurred Fragrant Orchid and we may also see Small White Orchid and *Primula halleri*. The Moonwort Ferns here are exceptionally large. Butterflies include various skippers and ringlets as well as the beautiful Asian, Marsh and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries.

Later in the day we'll visit the gorge at Sottoguda. This is another chance to see the enigmatic Devil's Claw. The same cliffs are festooned with *Saxifraga crustata*, together with fine *Paedarota bonarota*, *Kernera saxatilis* and *Rhamnus pumila*. Beautiful waterfalls cascade down the sides of the gorge and we'll likely find the scarce fern *Cystopteris montana* growing around them and Ladies Slipper Orchids too.

## **Day 6**

### **The Val San Lucano**

Today will see us lower in the mountains amongst woodlands and meadows, the latter in places bright with fabulous shows of Orange Lilies. Both Oak Fern and Beech Fern decorate the woodland floor where Herb Paris, *Chrysosplenium alternifolium*, *Streptopus amplexifolius* and the lovely One-flowered Wintergreen blooms. On boulders we'll find Yellow Wood Violets and Alpine Clematis. On the nearby river gravels are *Papaver aurantiacum*, *Parnassia palustris*, *Gypsophila repens*, *Pritzelago alpina*, *Saxifraga rotundifolia*, and the very local endemic crucifer *Rhizobotrya alpina*. There's also almost black-flowered *Phyteuma ovatum* and extremely robust forms of *Campanula latifolia*.

We'll take our picnic at a lovely spot by a lake in the San Lucano valley. *Lonicera alpigena* and Dark Red Helleborine flower under very impressive sheer cliffs that rise up on each side of the narrow verdant valley whilst Arran Browns and Woodland Brown will be flying. Rising up over the Duran Pass we'll find roadsides lined with striking pink *Linum viscosum* and here we'll search for the uncommon Thor's Fritillary.

## Day 7

### Fedaia

Today we'll visit the Refugio at Fedaia. This has staggering views across to the Marmolada and a complex series of peaks beyond. Right by the Refugio the predominantly igneous rock outcrops are home to *Leucanthemopsis alpina*, *Draba siliquosa*, *Draba aizoides*, *Arabis alpina*, *Linaria alpina*, *Androsace obtusifolia*, and Alpine Toadflax. *Gentiana brachyphylla* is sure to be a highlight, though it might quickly be outshone by that most beautiful and charismatic of alpine plants, the King of the Alps, which is extremely numerous up here. Growing on the same acidic rocks are much *Saxifraga exarata*, *Minuartia recurva*, *Silene exscapa* and *Polygala alpina*. Alpine Choughs are numerous and we'll see plenty of Water Pipits and Black Redstart as well as a few Alpine Accentors.

The curious Spotted Gentian is common here. Other classic alpiners include much superb *Geum reptans* and *Ranunculus glacialis*. *Saxifraga oppositifolia* carpets gravels with purple flowers and we'll also see *Saxifraga depressa*, *Astragalus alpinus*, Alpine Clubmoss, Fir Clubmoss, Snowdon Lilies, fine cushions of pink *Androsace alpina* and butter-yellow *Androsace vitaliana*. Chamois graze alpine turf dotted with abundant Early Purple Orchids and numerous Alpine Pasque Flowers. Dewy Ringlets, Mountain Green-veined Whites, and Woodland Ringlets fly above cascades of bright pink *Primula minima*. By snowmelt we'll encounter the delicate *Soldanella pusilla* whilst open tundra has *Minuartia sedoides* in fine form, as well as Trumpet Gentians and Net-leaved Willow.

## Day 8

### Fontanafredda & Staulanza

We'll spend the day exploring forested tracks at mid-altitudes. Highlights will include Lesser Twayblade, Lady's Slipper Orchid, One-flowered Wintergreen, Verticillate Lousewort, Dragonmouth and *Anemone trifolia*.

As we enjoy magnificent views of Pelmo and Civetta we'll pass through some large open meadows boasting a great floral variety including Globeflowers, the very attractive orange *Crepis aurea*, Small White Orchids, and *Arnica montana*. Butterflies include Bright-eyed Ringlet, Large Blue and Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Along the wooded sections of the track we'll find *Clematis alpina*, much *Phyteuma orbiculare* and some fine Alpine Sow-thistle, while Nutcrackers are a frequent sight.

One glorious flowery slope supports lots of *Gentianella germanica*, Alpine Asters, a good number of Burnt-tip Orchids, fine *Campanula barbata*, beautiful *Traunsteinera globosa*, Chives and Rock Soapwort. Black Vanilla Orchids are rather common in short turf and there's also *Pedicularis elongata* in flower. Wet flushes are clothed in many Alpine Marsh Orchids and the cottony heads of *Eriophorum angustifolium*.

Our last stop of the day will see us enjoying a nice colony of Marsh Helleborines and here there are a few plants of Limestone Woundwort too.

## Day 9

### Falzarego, Valparola & Andraz

The Falzarego Pass, beloved of luxury car photo shoots, is a glorious spot where we'll see sheets of *Rhodothamnus chamaecistus* in flower and rock gardens decorated with special alpine plants such as brilliant *Gentiana terglouensis*, delicate *Saxifraga androsacea*, *Anemone baldensis*, *Ranunculus hybridus*, *Armeria alpina*, and *Thlaspi alpestre*. Striking blue *Gentiana bavarica* mixes with Chives and many fine *Pedicularis rostratocapitata* by the shores of a small lake. Boulders here have some fine Edelweiss and this is a spot where we'll be able to find the very special little orchid *Chamorchis alpina* flowering amid much *Papaver aurantiacum*. We'll visit Andraz Castle, surrounded by fine meadows which are home to many marmots as well as a good colony of Large Blues.

## Day 10

### to Borno

A scenic route along the shores of Lake Iseo takes us into the Bergamasche Alps, where we'll stop in a gorge and start our holiday with some choice wildlife. Black Woodpecker is often seen here and there'll be plenty of butterflies visiting the roadside flowers, notably Purple Emperor, Blue-spot Hairstreak and Pearly Heath. Dark Red Helleborines grow along the lanes here and we'll see *Telekia speciosissima* and *Corydalis lutea*, both local endemics. Then we'll continue up into the mountains and settle into our lovely little hotel in Borno.

## Day 11

### Brescian Prealps

Though only in the 'Prealps' the Brescian Prealps are marvellously wild. We'll visit the impressively flowery southern parts of the Adamello Natural Park. The stately *Molopospermum peloponessiacum* is an impressive sight and we'll see fine *Gentiana punctata*, and abundant blooms of *Phyteuma hedraianthifolium*, *Phyteuma betonicifolium* and *Pedicularis ascendens*. We'll also see *Stemmacantha rhapontica* in perfect flower. Mountain Clouded Yellows are noticeable here and we can expect to see Alpine Blue, Common Brassy Ringlets, and Alpine Heath. Orchids were quite a feature. The Short-spurred Fragrant Orchid is numerous, with Pink Globe Orchids, Mountain White Orchids, Frog Orchids and abundant *Nigritella rhellicani*, and there's even a few *Nigritella rubra* for company.

In the morning we'll have seen much *Rhododendron ferrugineum* flowering on the acidic rocks, with *Pedicularis recutita*, Alpine Rose, and Mountain Avens too. In the afternoon it'll be the turn of *Rhododendron hirsutum* as we'll now find ourselves on calcareous rocks. The superb *Saxifraga hostii rhaetica* cascades superbly from cliff faces. We'll find the beautiful Dark Columbine in the woodland alongside Nodding Wintergreen and *Pyrola minor*. Purple-edged Copper and Woodland Ringlet fly above damp meadows full of lovely plants such as Globeflower and Wolfsbane,

Yellow Gentian and the endemic *Centaurea rhaetica* whose fine feathery bracts make this a particularly attractive knapweed.

## Day 12

### Bergamasche Orobieenne Alps

Today we'll visit the Pizzo Arera, and the 'path of flowers', set in the impressively vertical looking Orobieenne Alps. Here we'll find *Linaria tonzigii*, a very rare endemic toadflax, and the beautiful endemic *Viola dubyana*. That symbol of alpine flowers, Edelweiss, blooms here, and *Pedicularis gyroflexa* is common. Both *Globularia nudicaulis* and *Globularia cordifolia* will be in flower alongside Alpine Poppies. Almond-eyed Ringlet, Mnestra's Ringlet, and Dewy Ringlets fly together on flowery alpine turf populated with such species as *Silene pusilla*, *Valeriana saxatilis*, *Linum alpinum*, *Pedicularis ascendens*, *Athamanta cretensis*, *Achillea clavennae*, and *Crepis kernerii*. Some of the Alps' more beautiful but widespread flowers put on a marvellous show up here notably *Saxifraga caesia*, Golden Cinquefoil, *Gentiana clusii*, *Pulsatilla alpina*, *Dryas octopetala*, *Cyclamen purpurascens* and *Linaria alpina*. Silky Ringlet of the distinctive *triopes* form, with three forewing ocelli, is found here too. Alpine Newt and Crested Newt are found in a large pond where the muddy shores attract various blues and whites. Water Pipit, Black Redstart, Northern Wheatear, and Alpine Chough are typical of these higher slopes.

Walking down the road we'll find fine *Saxifraga hostii rhaetica* and the stately *Stemmacantha rhapontica*, abundant in lower pastures. Honey Buzzards soar over forest where the tracks are alive with butterflies such as Chalk-hill Blue, Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, White Admiral, Dark Green Fritillary, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Large Wall Brown, and Tufted Marbled Skipper. Martagon and Orange Lilies bloom prolifically while widespread subalpine meadow species such as Great Masterwort, *Laserpitium peucedanoides*, *Digitalis grandiflora*, *Digitalis lutea*, *Phyteuma scheuchzeri* and *Anthericum ramosum* make a startling sight.

## Day 13

### the Gavia Pass

An exciting and tremendously scenic road with fine views of waterfalls, scree slopes and snow covered peaks leads us up to the Gavia Pass. On the way up we'll stop for beautiful *Phyteuma globulariifolium*, as well as *Pedicularis kernerii* and *Pinguicula leptoceras*. The meadows are particularly good for butterflies and we can expect Lesser Mountain Ringlet, Almond-eyed Ringlet, Silky Ringlet, and Swiss Brassy Ringlet which is not uncommon. We'll look for the pretty burnet moth *Zygaena purpuralis* and a new flower will be *Primula glutinosa*.

At the pass itself, at 2650m, lovely *Primula daonensis* will be in flower and we'll see *Gentiana verna*, *Gentiana brachyphylla*, and *Gentiana nivalis* too. Damp hollows are home to colonies of Shepherd's Fritillaries, and we've a good chance of Small Apollo

and Glandon Blue. *Eriophorum scheuchzeri* fleck these boggy flushes with miniature fluffy white clouds, tiny pools of blue are *Gentiana bavarica*. *Saxifraga seguieri* was in fine flower and cushions of *Minuartia sedoides* were covered in green flowers. *Soldanella pusilla* is found on this pass in impressive numbers by the large snow patches alongside *Ranunculus glacialis*, *Trifolium alpinum*, and *Antennaria carpatica*. Snow Finches fly about the ridgetops where Alpine Ibex pose in classic fashion. In the afternoon we'll descend to our small family run hotel which has beautiful rooms, and superb food served in a dining room with a great atmosphere and good service.

## **Days 14 - 17**

### **Stelvio National Park**

A road takes us up to the 2758m Stelvio Pass and offers access to an amazing alpine wonderland! Amongst rocks and gravels close to the road we can find fine *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, endemic *Saxifraga aphylla*, *Saxifraga exarata*, Alpine Poppies, the pale blue *Arabis caerulea*, *Arabis alpina*, and *Pritzelago alpina*. Below the pass a slope covered in *Ranunculus glacialis* makes a stunning display with *Gentiana bavarica* and *Geum montanum*. Here Mountain Clouded Yellows, Marsh Fritillary, and Mountain Fritillary are the typical butterflies of the grassy slopes. We'll also see Purple-edged Copper, Mountain Alcon Blue, Swiss Brassy Ringlet and both Large Grizzled Skipper and Silver-spotted Skipper. There's a good chance of finding Cynthia's Fritillary and Grisons Fritillary as well as Alpine Grayling. High calcareous rocks on the way to a beautiful and wild alpine lake host *Saxifraga vandellii* (may be over but will still be impressive), *Saxifraga adscendens*, *Oxytropis lapponica*, *Viola calcarata*, *Primula farinosa* and *Gentiana clusii*. Silky Ringlets fly over screes where we'll find *Ranunculus alpestris*, *Papaver aurantiacum* and lots of *Saxifraga caesia*.

We'll explore the Val Viola which has a toll road that leads up to the border with Switzerland. We think of eyebrights as little white flowers but here is the beautiful yellow *Euphrasia minima*, and other fine plants in this valley include *Sempervivum wulfenii*, the distinctive *Hieracium intybaceum*, both *Gentiana utriculosa* and *Gentiana bavarica*. Shimmering orange Scarce Coppers are an arresting sight and among the blues is the uncommon Cranberry Blue as well as a whole swathe of species such as Large, Idas, Silver-studded, Mazarine, and Chalkhill Blues. Arran Browns and Large Ringlets will be numerous, and we've a good chance of Asian Fritillary here.

For something a little different we'll take a look at the acidic bog flora of Oja Bog. *Parnassia palustris*, *Sanguisorba officinalis* and *Drosera rotundifolia* rise above the sphagnum. Purple Emperors visit this spot, settling on the track and we'll see both Heath and Dark Green Fritillaries nectaring on thistles. The spotted orchids *Dactylorhiza cruenta* and *Dactylorhiza lapponica* will both be in flower.

*Saxifraga bryoides*, *Saxifraga seguieri* and Mountain Crowberry are characteristic plants of acidic slopes on the passes of Livigno. The *glacigenita* form of Marsh



Fritillary and the burnet *Zygaena exulans* will be flying. *Primula latifolia*, *Primula integrifolia* and *Primula hirsuta*, and all three hybrids between these species occur here, though they may not all be in flower.

An option during one of these days will be a lengthy excursion in search of the very local endemic Little Fritillary. We'll head over the border into Switzerland and to a pass above the Inn Valley, where scree slopes and snow-capped peaks tower over fine alpine pasture. Last year we found at least eight Little Fritillaries here and another great species in Small Apollo. The rare orchid *Chamorchis alpina* is also found here and other highlights of the day will be *Dactylorhiza majalis*, *Pinguicula alpina*, and *Gagea fragifera*, as well as great displays of *Primula integrifolia*.

## **Day 18**

### **To Valdeblore in the Maritime Alps**

Today we'll descend from the delights of the High Alps and follow the Val Camonica down to the busy Milan tangenziale before heading south west, into Piemonte and the shores of the Mediterranean. As the sun starts to wane and the Cote d'Azur's sun-worshippers start to think of leaving the crowded beaches we'll head northwards into the impressive mountains just inland, where our road snakes up the Tinee valley, and in just over an hour we will have climbed over a low col to Valdeblore, our base for the next five nights of the tour.

## **Days 19 & 20**

### **Rimplas, Valdeblore & the Col St.Martin**

We have chosen Valdeblore as our base for this superb mountain holiday as it has easy access to wonderful Mercantour National Park and because at Valdeblore the influences of both the mountains and the Mediterranean merge to produce a tremendously rich fauna and flora. This tour offers perhaps the widest diversity of butterflies to be seen in any comparably sized area of Europe with more than 110 species expected in the week, and it is the area around Valdeblore itself which is perhaps richest of all! Sunny south-facing hay meadows and terraces are covered in aromatic labiates such as marjoram and thyme and in these we'll find Skippers such as Silver-spotted and Safflower, and a multitude of Fritillaries including Knapweed and Spotted. Fields around the hotel contributed many to the last tour's impressive tally of 124 species! As Orphean Warblers sing from copses of hazel and hornbeam we will find ourselves admiring blues such as Idas, Mazarine, Damon, Escher's and the localised Meleager's Blue. The Arran Brown will be amongst the first of very many species of Ringlet that we will encounter over the next week. The strikingly-marked Great-banded Grayling tarries on paths whilst the startling eye-spots of a huge brown butterfly and nearby the mat black uppers of another initially confuse us into thinking that there are two more species present. These are female and male Great Sooty Satyrs, and here they are numerous, enjoying the warm sunny slopes draped in figs, brambles, bright Carthusian Pinks and a great variety of campanulas. They are joined

by a number of their brethren - Oriental Meadow Brown, Dusky Meadow Brown and Dusky Heath amongst them. We shall see some of southern Europe's most spectacular butterfly species here, amongst them Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Large Tortoiseshell, Southern Comma, Southern White Admiral and if we are lucky the beautiful Lesser Purple Emperor. On the north-facing slopes the scene is very different. Here we'll encounter thick forests where Martagon Lilies poke through the dark green lacinate foliage of Stinking Hellebores. Under trees are fine Dark Red Helleborines and in deep shade the strange Yellow Bird's-nest.

## **Day 21**

### **Madone de Fenestre & Gordolasque Valleys**

We'll start with the lovely endemic *Lilium pomponium* today though it is late in the season for this species and it is not always still in flower at this season. Piedmont Ringlet flies here and we can also see Bath White, Green Hairstreak, and Queen-of-Spain Fritillary. Crossbills feed above us as we admire *Silene saxifraga*, *Galium obliquum*, *Hypericum coris* and the lovely *Viola valderia*.

At the upper end of the Gordolasque Valley valley is a very pleasant short walk amid fine alpine scenery, alongside a rushing stream, with beautiful flowery meadows alive with butterflies. Among the plants are *Trifolium badium*, *Minuartia capillacea*, *Spergularia rubra*, *Saponaria ocymoides*, *Dianthus carthusianorum*, *Dianthus furcatus*, *Armeria alpina*, *Hypericum montanum*, *Malva moschata*, *Erigeron atticus* and *Erigeron acer*. Purple-edged Coppers are common here. *Geranium macrorrhizum* blooms on roadsides lower down where we can also find the scarce *Orobanche salviae* parasitic on *Salvia glutinosa*.

After lunch a drive takes us down the Vesubie valley, and then up to the village of Utelle. Species such as *Psoralea bituminosa*, *Convolvulus cantabrica*, *Osyris alba* and *Asparagus acutifolius* show the Mediterranean influence in this area. We'll see the large ant lion *Palpares libelluloides* with its distinctive fluttery flight. Safflower, *Carthamus lanatus* and *Coriaria myrtifolia* are in flower. We'll pass through the impressively situated village of Utelle before going over a low col and returning to the Tinee valley.

## **Day 22**

### **Col de Turini**

Junipers and Lavender dominate a rich Mediterranean flora that includes a multicoloured flax show - blue *Linum austriacum collinum*, pink *Linum viscosum*, white *Linum tenuifolium* and yellow *Linum strictum*! Cleopatras are numerous.

We'll take a look at wooded areas near Sospel where Deadly Nightshade flowers along the track. A tremendous number of butterflies live here, both in terms of numbers and species. Among the Fritillaries are High Brown, Queen-of-Spain, Marbled, and Heath. Little, Large, Mazarine, Amanda's and Escher's Blues mud-puddle together and we'll also see Large Grizzled Skipper and Red-underwing Skipper visiting damp patches on the track. *Eryngium campestre* here is the food plant of the scarce *Zygaena sarpedon*, a burnet

moth, and is parasitised by many *Orobanche lavandulacea*. Flowering brambles attract a multitude of butterflies with large numbers of Marbled Fritillaries, as well as Twin-spot Fritillary, Comma, and both Sloe and Ilex Hairstreaks.

## Day 23

### The Col de Lombarde and Val Santa Anna

On the north side of the Mercantour National Park is the wonderful Col du Lombardie, a high road pass which straddles the Italian border and allows us to drive all the way up to 7,500 feet. The views in both directions are magnificent, with several small lakes adding intense blues to the landscapes on the Italian side. Along ridge-top paths we will find ourselves in the company of some of the finest fauna and flora in the Alps. Our main quarry in the plant line will be the 'Ancient King'. This regal inhabitant of high-altitude granite cliffs is known only from this part of the Maritime Alps and can best be described as a bit of an oddball! The rosettes of concentric rings of bright green leaves cling tightly to cliff faces, often almost folded double where they grow in a shady fissure. This strange plant puts forth flowers only very infrequently – some years we have seen, others we don't. Damp areas of alpine turf hold Butterwort, and a range of beautiful flowers such as Grass of Parnassus, Mountain White Orchid, *Veronica allioni*, *Pedicularis rostratospicata* and Tofield's Asphodel. The fragrant *Achillea erba-rota* grows with grey-leaved *Adenostyles leucophylla* and intense blue *Veronica fruticans*. We may encounter locals collecting the *Achillea* as the fragrant flowers are prized as an aromatic addition to a local alcoholic brew! Below are meadows where both Large and Small Yellow Foxgloves flower together. The lovely vanilla orchid *Nigritella corneliana* is sometimes abundant and Trumpet Gentians and *Viola calcarata* make a lovely show.

The butterflies here are great! The beautiful Cynthia's Fritillary, the males white marked with red and black, can be found amongst the swathes of cotton grass while the bright lemon and black uppersides of Mountain Clouded Yellow will vie with Apollos for our attention. We should look for Yellow Mountain Saxifrage which is the foodplant of the uncommon 'gazeli' race of Small Apollo which can be seen flying at this season. By now we will have seen plenty of Heath, Provençal and False Heath Fritillaries so it will be a chance to get to know three more species which are common on this pass, namely Meadow, Shepherd's and Grison's Fritillaries. It is possible to see no less than eight species of ringlet here including the local False Mnestrá, Western Brassy, and Yellow-spotted Ringlets. Alpine Choughs chatter amongst cliffs home to yellow *Viola biflora* and the beautiful blue and purple orbicular heads of *Phyteuma charmelii*. We might also see deep-blue *Gentiana rostanii* and *Sempervivum arachnoideum* may still be in flower. Citril Finches, Water Pipits, Wheatears and Black Redstarts frequent the fringes of the tree line.

The Santa Anna valley is a superb place, bursting with flowers. *Lychnis flos-jovis* provides splashes of vivid pink, we'll see robust *Campanula spicata*, many fine clumps of *Scutellaria alpina*, large-flowered *Lamium garganicum*, *Silene saxifraga*, the lovely *Viola valderia*, *Pedicularis tuberosa*, and *Centaurea nervosa* with beautiful feathery bracts. This is a great

area for rampions – we'll see *Phyteuma betonicifolium*, *Phyteuma michelii*, and the beautiful dark *Phyteuma ovatum*. Lilies will include St. Bruno's and St. Bernard's, as well as the Orange Lily. Almond-eyed Ringlets and Purple-shot Coppers fly over the the flowery meadows and we've a chance of finding Lesser Spotted Fritillary, a scarce butterfly in the Alpes Maritime. We'll descend on the Italian side to Limone where we'll based for the next three nights.

## **Day 24**

### **Col de Tende: Italian and French sides**

As we drive up to the pass we'll stop at an old attempt at a tunnel, made as early as 1615, where the wonderfully cool cave has abundant cascading *Saxifraga callosa*. Surrounding woodland edge has much Alpine Sow-thistle and the local umbellifer *Trochiscanthes nodiflora*, and here we'll get our first taste of the rich butterfly fauna with Piedmont Ringlet, Purple-edged Copper and Osiris Blue. Ruined nineteenth century forts are a feature of the col, and around these we'll find *Dianthus carthusianorum* and beautiful *Scutellaria alpina* as well as *Saxifraga aspera* and *Linaria supina*. As Short-toed Eagles soar overhead we'll go a little higher and find the endemic *Allium narcissiflorum*, both *Silene saxifraga* and *Silene campanula*, endemic *Dianthus subacaulis*, and *Dryas octopetala* may still be in bloom. There are extensive meadows dotted with lovely *Nigritella corneliana*. Nearby is a productive mud-puddling spot where amongst others we'll find Ripart's Anomalous Blue, Almond-eyed Ringlet, Dingy Skipper, and a selection of fritillaries.

## **Day 25**

### **Entracque (the Gorge della Reina)**

The lovely Gorge della Reina in Entracque is famed for its rare *Primula allionii* in spring but in summer it is also a wonderful place full of fine flowers and butterflies. As we explore the rich mix of habitats along a nice easy track we'll note *Scabiosa holsericea*, *Odontites luteus*, tall *Digitalis lutea* and impressive *Astragalus glycyphyllos*. The butterflies are exceptionally diverse. Two particularly uncommon species we'll look for here are the two skippers Foulquier's Grizzled Skipper and Tufted Marbled Skipper. There's also Southern Small White, Rock Grayling, Dusky Meadow Brown, Purple-shot Copper, Mountain Alcon Blue, Baton Blue, Amanda's Blue, Turquoise Blue, Chalk-hill Blue and many species of Fritillary including Weaver's Fritillary, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Knapweed Fritillary, Lesser Spotted Fritillary. A fitting finale to a holiday that show-cases one of Europe's biodiversity hotspots.

## **Day 26**

### **To Turin and Departure**

After our last night in Limone we'll descend to Turin Airport where we'll catch our flight back to the UK.

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