

# Lake Van

## A Greentours Itinerary

### Days 1 & 2

#### Istanbul To Dogubeyazit

An early evening arrival in Istanbul will give us chance to rest at the Durusu Club Hotel in pleasant countryside just fifteen minutes drive from the International Airport so very convenient for our early morning flight across the Anatolian Plateau to Van. The scenery around Van is quite breath-taking - 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. Already we'll be enjoying Irises and the first three species of fritillary in flower - widespread *pinardii*, elegant *caucasica*, and the lovely tubby yellow and dark chocolate bells of the *grossheimiana* form of *crassifolia*.

As we descend from the high Tendürek Pass, the perfect snowy cone of Ararat rises before us. It 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. Amidst the only trees for miles around and beneath limestone crags our hotel enjoys unparalleled views of Ararat's magnificence. The garden offers protection to many migrants, and the crags above are the haunt of Imperial Eagles, Lanner and many fine plants such as the blue lily-like *Ixiolirion tataricum*.

### Day 3

#### Ararat's Hinterland

At the foot of Ararat blooms many Iris enthusiasts' Holy Grail - *Iris iberica*. 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*. The multi-coloured rocks of the Tuzluca badlands provide a stunning backdrop to the rich green fields of the Aras Valley. Rollers and Bee-eaters line wires and flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings congregate in gorges adorned with beautiful flowers such as *Ornithogalum shelkovnikovii*, *Lagotis stolonifera* and the lovely pink *Amberboa moschata*.

### Day 4

#### Ishak Paşa Palace

The Ishak Paşa Palace 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! There is much fauna and flora to see too. Amongst these arid-looking rocks flower shining red (and sometimes yellow)

*Tulipa juliae* and the pretty juno *Iris caucasica*, and we should find one of Turkey's rarest birds, the Mongolian Trumpeter Finch.

## **Day 5**

### **Ahlat via Volcanoes and Waterfalls**

Returning south over the Tendürek Pass we'll see green meadows tinged pink by massed displays of marsh orchids and pretty *Primula auriculata* contrasting with Tendurek'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 irises, these joined by the velvety scarlet flowers of *Phelypaea tournefortii*. Saker Falcons hunt along the ridge behind and Egyptian Vultures nest nearby. Rock Sparrows, and in some years, Pale Rock Sparrows, are abundant and it won't take long to locate Great Rock Nuthatches as their strident calls echo from the cliff-faces. Butterflies congregate by a tiny stream - Pontic Blue, Southern Comma and the local *Polyommatus fatima* are just some we should see. Along Van's north shore we'll stop amongst fields covered in orchids next to still waters that hold the reflection of mighty Suphan Volcano, Turkey's third highest mountain.

## **Day 6**

### **Nemrut Dağı**

The ash-covered slopes of Nemrut Dağı, an extinct volcano, rise gently to the crater rim where delicate furry blue *Pulsatilla albana* flowers. A road takes us down to the crater floor where black-tented encampments of nomadic herdsmen sit by an impossibly blue lake. Velvet Scoter have forsaken their usual Arctic home to breed here! Georgian and Pinewood Orchids add splashes of colour to dwarf aspen woodlands whilst pale yellow *Iris caucasica* and the narrow maroon bells of *Fritillaria assyriaca* inhabit a crazy landscape of shiny obsidian boulders where we'll find White-throated Robins and Finsch's Wheatears.

## **Days 7 & 8**

### **Tatvan's Oak Woodlands**

Dwarf oak woodland shelters Red-backed and Masked Shrikes and a variety of butterflies including both Eastern and Grüner's Orange-tips and the intricately-patterned festoon *Zerynthia deyrollei*. The caterpillars of the festoon feed on *Aristolochia bottae* which is now in flower along with deliciously fragrant *Daphne oleoides kurdica* and bright pink-red *Lathyrus roseus*. The impressive blooms of *Paeonia mascula* flower with Kotschy's Helleborine, Komper's Orchid, *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*, *Orchis pseudolaxiflora*, yellow *Pedicularis comosa* and pink Polygala major make a fine show in damp roadside meadows.

## Day 9

### Hoşap Castle and Güzeldere Pass

The 'Tolkienesque' 17th century Kurdish fortress at Hoşap sits upon a rocky pinnacle guarding the upper entrance to the Zerneke Valley. A dry valley here regularly has all three of the rare Eastern Turkish seedeaters, so Grey-necked Bunting, Mongolian Trumpeter Finch and even Trumpeter Finch itself. Beyond lies the snowy Güzeldere Pass and fantastic *Iris paradoxa*, 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*. Some miles over the pass we'll leave time to visit a site for the exquisite yellow *urumiensis* form of *Iris barnumae* – our fourth *Oncocyclus* *Iris* species of the tour!

## Day 10

### Akdamar Island

Snow-capped mountains descend steeply into the lake near Gevas,. There's no need for a washing machine here, the lake's soda content is so high it cleans clothes in an instant. It has rather the same affect on the waterbirds - the Coots have white wingbars! A boat takes us to Akdamar Island and its tenth century church, built by the kings of Vaspurkan. Well-preserved frescoes show various biblical stories including David and Goliath and Jonah and the Whale, and are considered among the great masterpieces of Armenian art. Needless to say there's plenty of masterpieces in the natural world too - the bee orchid *Ophrys transhyrcana* and some highly active colonies of Armenian Gulls and Night Herons among them! Nearby open slopes harbour dark purple *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* and the pink umbels of *Allium akaka* perched above pretty rounded leaves. Stunning *Iris sari*, a variably plum-coloured iris, blooms among a bewildering array of colourful pea flowers and the lovely blue pendent bells of *Moltkia caerulea*.

During two or three of the days when we stay in Van area we'll offer early morning pre-breakfast trips so that keen birdwatchers amongst can see the exceptionally varied birdlife at South Van Marshes and in particular the Dönemeç Delta. Rollers 'roll' around us as we look out over the reeds and open water of the rivermouth where a variety of ducks includes Marbled Duck and Ferruginous Duck as well as Garganey. Eurasian Bitterns, rare in Turkey, boom as we watch all three marsh terns, various egrets and herons, Spur-winged Plovers, and a rich assortment of waders.

Waders are also prominent at South Van Marshes where we often encounter a rarity or two. *Orchis pseudolaxiflora* (and a few *Orchis palustris*) in places colours the marsh pink as we enjoy the several pairs of beautiful Citrine Wagtail and tease out the Paddyfield Warblers from the various other *Acrocephalus* warblers present!

## Day 11

### Karabet Pass

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 scree 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.

## Day 12

### Bendimahi and Van Kalesi

Van's waters have risen by an astounding two metres in the past decade yet there remain extensive wetlands at Bendimahi. Marsh and Montagu's Harriers quarter fields backing onto reeds which are home to many pairs of Bearded Tits and noisy Great Reed Warblers. *Iris spuria* grows amongst some excellent steppe flowers as we head towards Van's 'Rock' and the ancient Urartian Citadel there-on where cuneiform inscriptions date from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

## Day 13

### Erçek Gölü

The lovely deep purple flowers of *Iris barnumae* bloom with both *Bellevalias longistyla* and *fominii* on dry rocky slopes inhabited by Grey-necked Buntings and Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Shallow Lake Erçek has a fantastically rich birdlife with perhaps a thousand Greater Flamingoes on show and with them White Storks and large numbers of ducks including Ruddy Shelducks, Red-crested Pochard and Garganey. Citrine Wagtails and Moustached Warblers occupy bulrush marshes. Male White-headed Ducks point their swollen blue bills skyward as they display in reedy roadside ponds. Damp steppe beyond the lake stretches in the distance covered in a pink haze from

literally millions of *Orchis pseudolaxiflora*, yet another extraordinary botanical sight in a region thick with them!

## **Day 14**

### **Return to the UK**

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