

The Peloponnese

Autumn Bulbs of Sparta

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Athens, transfer to Mycenae

After a late afternoon arrival in Athens we'll 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 2

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 3 & 6

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 4, 5 & 7

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 goulimy*, 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 8

Crocus cartwrightianus site & departure

In the morning we'll head over to Athens but, before catching our flight home, we'll look for *Crocus cartwrightianus*, a stunning species that flowers not so very far from the airport.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours to the Peloponnese in Autumn. 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.

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