

The Pontic Alps

Magical Lazistan

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 - 3

The Zigana Pass, Altindere National Park and Sumela Monastery

The Eastern Pontic Alps rise steeply from the Black Sea's shores and have shaped the history and climate of the region, offering as they do, a substantial barrier to the south. Trabzon was first settled by Milesians and Arcadians in around 700BC and became the Kingdom of Pontus, ruled by kings most of whom were called Mithridates! Since, Trabzon has led a mostly secluded history, only occasionally involving itself in outside events. During the 1800s much of its trade was conducted with Britain and it became thought of as a romantic trading outpost in the English-speaking world.

Trabzon's mountainous hinterland would keep us happy for weeks let alone just four days, so much beautiful flora and unusual fauna is there. The wide altitude range, rich variety of rock types, and position at a crossroads of floral regions combine to provide us with a flora of almost unparalleled variety outside of the tropics. The lower valleys are a haven to some wonderful flowers in late May, most notably a number of rare and little known orchids. Hazel groves and hay meadows are where we shall find the rare and beautiful Steven's Orchid, a little like our own Military Orchid, and the mysterious Hooded Orchid whose single purple-shot leaf is often the first indication of its presence. Also known as *Steveniella satyroides*, this unique orchid has purple-brown and lime-green flowers set in a tight spiral. Amongst clumps of bright pink *Polygala major* and swathes of yellow rattle grow the woodcock orchid-like *Ophrys cornuta*, the strange green and brown flowered *Ophrys caucasica* and the rich velvety purple *Ophrys bremifera*. As we admire Toothed Orchids, Sword-leaved Helleborines and Monkey Orchids, Scarlet Rosefinches, the males resplendent in their bright red spring plumage, whistle 'I love you' from the hazel bushes! The incredible *Aristolochia pontica*, a foot-tall birthwort, has hairy purple saxophone-shaped flowers! Up a side valley cloaked with hornbeam and Oriental Beech we find the famous Sumela Monastery, built directly into a cliff and surely in one of the most spectacular settings in Turkey. Rushing streams are home to Dipper and Grey Wagtail and the woods resound to the loud calls of Green Warblers. We shall take a walk up to the monastery and take a look at the wonderful murals inside - and at the many gorgeous plants in the meadows on the way up.

In days gone by it was a long haul up winding cart tracks to the many high passes that straddle the main divide high above Trabzon. Now, however, one can take the spanking new main road up the Maçka Valley and be on the snowy Zigana Pass in

just an hour! The stunning scenery up here is a great backdrop for the shining yellow flowers of *Rhododendron luteum* which light up the scene. Water Pipits and Snowfinches are never far away in alpine meadows where fragrant *Daphne glomerata* grows amid swathes of pink *Colchicum szovitsii* and striking mauve goblets of *Crocus aereus*. Amongst park-like meadows dotted with spruce trees grow *Dactylorhizas euxina* and *urvilleana* and two of the region's most beautiful flowers, *Aquilegia olympica* and *Geranium psilostemon* - meadows of the latter are simply one of the most glorious sights in all of nature.

Days 4 & 5

The Ovit Pass & Anzar Yayla

Just east of Trabzon we will stop by the shore of the Black Sea to admire the rare *Serapias feldweggiana*, a most beautiful tongue orchid with large two-tone flowers. This grows amongst multitudes of pink and white cistus roses! Then we will head to the heights of the Ovit Pass. For the next two nights we'll be based at the delightfully situated Genesis hotel set just below the treeline amongst a tremendous show of yellow and purple as the Rhododendrons are at the height of their flowering season. Just half an hour drive up the main road takes us to over 8,000 feet and into the highest part of the Pontic Alps, the western end of the Kaçkar massif. Well above the treeline, the spectacular mountains hereabouts will still be swathed in snow. The eerie curlew-like calls of the magnificent Caspian Snowcock descend from the snowy ridges whilst a little careful searching could reveal Alpine Accentors and Wallcreepers even at road level. The rare Caucasian Salamander inhabits boggy pools lined by *Swertia iberica* and the carnivorous *Pinguicula balcanica*. Rich pink and white blooms of *Corydalis oppositifolia* accompany *Fritillaria latifolia* and the glowing blue stars of *Gentiana verna* on snow-burnt alpine turf. Amazing shows of rich blue *Muscari aucheri* stretch up towards the snow from not yet inhabited yaylar, or summer villages, and amongst these we'll encounter patches of pale blue *Scilla winogradowii* and the delightful *Gentiana pyrenaica*. We'll spend a day visiting the fabulous Anzar Yayla. Forests on the way up have fabulous shows of Rhododendrons and we'll find orchids here – Sword-leaved Helleborines are plentiful but there are also a few *Cephalanthera epipactoides* and the local *Dactylorhiza pontica* will be a choice find. Further up slopes are carpeted in flowers and highlights here include *Crocus aereus*, swathes of *Scillas*, and the gorgeous little *Iris histrioides*.

During our stays here we'll offer an early morning where we'll look for Brown Bear and also Caucasian Blackcock.

Day 6

The Çoruh Valley to Yaylarlar

Today we follow the course of the magnificent Coruh River, one of the world's great 'white-water' rivers, downstream to Yusufeli – the town now resurrected above the waters of the new dam. However first, on the way down into the valley we'll stop

amongst a mass of peonies blooming on a slope with a rich diversity of beautiful plants. Though it is just 150 kilometres we'll take all day as there is so much to see along this route. Magnificent multi-coloured cliffs, scree and gorge sides dominate the scenery, yet the barren-ness is everywhere softened by lines of white-stemmed *Populus uzbekistanica*, and plots of land where rice, wheat and vines jostle for valuable watered land. The gorge below Ispir is a famed spot amongst birdwatchers for all four Turkish vulture species and we can reasonably expect to see Egyptian, Griffon and Black Vultures, as well as hopefully Lammergeier. The rocks have beautiful clumps of *Campanula sorgeae*. The unusual damselfly *Epallage fatima* looks more like a dragonfly as it sits on riverside *Cynanchum*, its wings held wide open. The flora is exceptionally rich. We'll find a range of poppy species, *Saponaria prostrata*, the lacerated pink petals of *Dianthus orientalis* and the first of a number of Çoruh endemics, the deep blue flowered borage *Paracaryum artvinense*. The roadsides are frequently adorned with colourful herbaceous species including *Centranthus longifolius*, the two purple sages *Salvia nemorosa* and *Salvia verticillata*, and the creamy-white lupin-like *Sophora alopecuroides*. Wherever these meet some water there are stands of mint and butterflies - very many butterflies. The lovely silvery Blue Argus is a frequent visitor to these spots along with Short-tailed Blue, Mazarine Blue and Eastern Brown Argus. Skippers are plentiful with good variety with notable species being Orbed Red-underwing Skipper and Yellow-banded Skipper. Nettle Tree Butterflies frequently descend to mud-puddle whilst the flowers attract Cardinals and Large Wall Browns. We'll stop by the old Georgian castle at Peterek and the Seljuk bridge Sellukbağları Köprüsü where we can admire tall *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* and *Orchis palustris* as well as the hoyo-like climber *Periploca graeca*.

Days 7 & 8

Yaylalar and Lake Tortum

The valleys above Yusufeli rise into the very heart of the Kaçkar Massif, the highest mountains in the northeast of Turkey (with the exception of Ararat!). Little roadside meadows full of aromatic vegetation attract many butterflies such as Amanda's Blue and Osiris Blue, Marsh Fritillary and Powdered Brimstone, and Sooty Copper and the stunningly orange Scarce Copper. If we are lucky we might find an Ionian Emperor on the wing and very probably a Southern White Admiral or two.

We'll pass through delightful Barhal. Each house has a large garden full of walnuts, cherries, peaches and other fruit trees, indeed, later in the year, when *Colchicum speciosum*'s pink goblets abound and the trees are heavy with fruit, the villagers find it hard keeping the Brown Bears off their bounty! Now though Barhal basks in spring sunshine and its shady gardens and streams offer instead a wonderful flora and incredible variety of butterflies and we've a chance of Ibex and Wallcreeper in the steep-sided valleys here. Further uphill we'll reach Yaylalar, on the tree line, and in summer home to families that bring their grazing animals up from the valleys, and nowadays, in equal measure, plenty of trekkers and climbers. Snowbanks have a fine

snowmelt flora with *Scilla winogradowii* and *Fritillarias* as well as *Ornithogalums*, *Gageas*, *Corydalis* and *Muscaris*. Red-fronted Serins are common and we've a very good chance of seeing Brown Bear feeding on the slopes above us as well as Chamois. The impressive goblets of recently described *Tulipa gumusanica* bloom in meadows alongside a fine form of *Fritillaria pinardii*.

Below Yusufeli the river carves an immense gorge through the Pontic Alps. We will drive through this great defile to beautiful Tortum Lake. Stands of the extremely localised *Iris taochia* grow by roadsides. Its large flowers come in striking purples, yellows and a most unusual apricot! Mounds of cerise-pink *Acantholimon*s mix with patches of intense yellow *Scutellaria orientalis* and the lovely endemic pea *Chesneya elegans*. The Coruh Gorge is particularly rich in *Campanulas* and one of the sights of the holiday will be 'cushions' of the fantastic white flowers of *Campanula coruhensis* clinging to roadside cliffs. This species is found nowhere else in the world - indeed the Coruh Valley holds more endemic plants than anywhere else in Turkey. Pink Kurdish Helleborine and rare metre-tall Eastern Marsh Helleborines are just two of the orchids to be seen. The gorge acts as a suntrap and we can expect to see plenty of butterflies with highlights being Purple-shot and Fiery Coppers, the beautiful little *Tomares callimachus*, Nettle-tree Butterfly and blues such as the Little Tiger Blue, Iolas Blue and Loew's Blue, the latter being the commonest blue in this area.

Day 9

Artvin

A little further down the valley is Artvin, perched on a bluff high above the Çoruh River. Above the town we can reach subalpine meadows and pine forests within half an hour. The slopes are a blaze of yellow and purple-pink where *Rhododendrons luteum* and *ponticum* mix in a fantastically colourful show. By stands of *Helleborus orientalis* is beautiful *Orchis picta*, and one of the region's rarest and least known orchids, the magnificent *Orchis caucasica*. Common Rosefinches whistle sweet nothings as we photograph the pretty brick-red pea *Lathyrus rotundifolius* subspecies *miniatus*. *Dactylorhiza urvilleana* and *Serapias feldweggiana* are both common and with them the sheer luxuriance of the Adders-tongue Ferns will surprise those of you familiar with this usually diminutive fern. Clouded Apollos float over colonies of purple-pink *Gladiolus kotschyanus* waving in the breeze and on the woodland verges are butterfly orchids, wintergreens and the large pink flowers of *Paeonia mascula*.

Flocks of Common Crossbills fly over as admire fine colonies of Herb Paris, Solomon's seal and both Long-leaved Helleborine and Red Helleborine (*Cephalanthera rubra*). Barbara Cartland-pink *Silene armeria* decorates roadside banks. En route to Şavşat we'll look for the large-flowered Eastern Chatterbox Orchid, also known as *Epipactis veratrifolia*. This tall orchid grows on wet cliffs by the road, a rare habitat indeed.

Days 10-12

The Sahara National Park

For something completely different we head for the high Cam Pass and the oddly-named Sahara National Park near the border with Georgia. The landscapes here are reminiscent of the Swiss Alps on one side of the mountainous divide and like the montane steppes of Central Asia on the other. It is quite a contrast. The forests are home to Black Woodpeckers and Mountain Chiffchaffs while the ground flora includes Georgian and Pinewood Orchids in abundance! Close to our hotel we will find magnificent clumps of the rare *Paeonia wittmanniana*, whose huge primrose-coloured orbs are displayed only for a few fleeting days over the fresh green triternate foliage. Traditional pastoral agriculture and hay meadows hand-cut in late July mean that here we have thousands of square miles of superb subalpine and alpine habitat where Red-backed Shrikes and Corncrakes can breed without the pressures of modern farming. Damp flushes in the meadows hold a variety of marsh orchids. Both *Dactylorhiza osmanica* and *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* are common, growing alongside the lovely *Veronica gentianoides* and apricot-coloured *Rhyncocorys orientalis*. The Cam Pass rises to 8,500 feet and looks rather like a Scottish moorland on top. Snowfields cover the highest areas and from them gentle streams meander across the moorland. As we reach the far side of the pass an incredible panorama of Eastern Turkey's and Armenia's montane steppes stretches out before us - vast flat valley floors more than 6,000 feet above sea level and rolling hills covered in steppe and dotted with stands of Scot's Pine. Here we can marvel at the greatest show of snowmelt flowers we have ever seen. Beautiful mahogany-purple bells of *Fritillaria latifolia* shine almost red against the sun, their two-inch cuboid flowers nodding against glaucous foliage. Drifts of *Scilla roseni* colour the landscape powder blue so thick do they grow. Delicate bright blue *Scilla sibirica armena* grows amongst rocks with pink *Androsace albana*, yellow and blue forms of *Viola altaica* and stunning *Arnebia pulchra*. The little known *Iris (aphylla) furcata* was recently re-discovered here, though for sheer beauty the swarms of the lovely yellow-flowered juno, *Iris caucasica*, take some beating! One side of a stream is carpeted in Oxlips and the other in Cowslips! Gorgeous *Pulsatilla albana*, its deep steel-blue flowers on softly-hairy stems, grows with the bright blue stars of *Gentiana verna*. Tall pink *Primula auriculata* and shiny yellow *Caltha polypetala* line streams through meadows teeming with *Ranunculus grandiflorus* and the glorious azure *Bellevalia forniculata*. Phew - this really is a show!

Eventually we will have time to draw breath and perhaps appreciate some of the birdlife. Amongst the flowers are lovely Red-fronted Serins and plenty of Water Pipits and Whinchats. Crimson-winged Finches, Twite and Rock Thrushes are not uncommon and around Ardahan we shall see Cranes, newly arrived at their breeding grounds. Lakes on the Armenian border are home to breeding Velvet Scoters, Red-necked Grebes and both Dalmatian and White Pelicans. Scots Pine woodlands hold breeding Lesser Spotted and Booted Eagles and we should watch for Short-toed Eagles, Montagu's Harriers, Long-legged Buzzard and perhaps a Saker if we are lucky! Wild Cats are sometimes seen close to our accommodation.

Day 13

Sarikamis

The wild high country of the Kars Plateau is sparsely populated even by Turkish standards, yet in spring and summer the landscape could hardly have a more pleasing aspect. Rounded mountains are covered in a flowery montane steppe, interrupted occasionally by lakes and more extensively by dark green islands of Scots Pine forest. It is the long and exceptionally cold winters, the most extreme in Turkey, that keep the humans at bay!

Our hotel is situated on the edge of one such woodland, the trees widely spaced and so with a fine ground floral with lots of *Muscari armeniacum* and *Primula veris*. Lesser Spotted Eagles are frequent overhead and we can expect to see many other raptors in this area. Montane steppe close to the hotel hosts a tremendous snowmelt flora. There's large stands of yellow *Iris caucasica* and both *Ornithogalum wiedemanni* and *Ornithogalum oligophyllum* are common alongside pale yellow *Centaurea cheiranthifolia*, pink *Erigeron caucasicus*, some very fine *Primula elatior* subspecies *pallasii*, and massed pink *Polygala anatolica*.

Dry ridges are ablaze with colourful Astragaluses including pale creamy *Astragalus fragrans*, and pink-purple *Astragalus hirticalyx* as well as *Astragalus alyssoides* and *Astragalus globosus* too! Rounded cushions of *Androsace villosa*, the leaves totally obscured by a mat of white, yellow or red-centred flowers, are quite magnificent. Amongst these are a taller species, milky *Androsace intermedia*. There are fantastic clumps of short-stemmed large-flowered *Campanula aucheri* as well as *Polygala alpestris*, orange *Papaver lateritium*, *Aster alpinus*, and clumps of the very fine white *Salvia pachystachys*. Riverside meadows are full of the rich purple marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* and lots of pretty blue *Muscari aucheri* mixing with *Muscari neglectum* and sky-blue *Bellevalia forniculata*. *Fritillaria michailovskyi* with its gorgeous deep mahogany bells widely tipped with gold, will probably be over, but in the same places we will find fine displays of satin-smooth *Tulipa juliae* and the dark bells of *Fritillaria armena*. Those that fancy a little night-time Brown Bear watching can join an optional trip to the local dump where the bears gather in some numbers!

Day 14

Departure

We depart mid-morning from Ağrı Airport, having driven along valleys full of buttercups, interrupted here and there by patches of pink orchids, and with White-winged Black Terns and Calandra Larks often in the air. Not so very far from the airport after we've passed colourful fields full of cornflowers, poppies and *Wiedemanian multifida* we'll meet a lovely sight – a bank of stunning *Iris iberica* subspecies *elegantissima*. These fabulous irises are an amazing sight and here grow

with the velvety red parasitic *Phelypaea tournefortii*, a fine way to say goodbye to a most beautiful part of Turkey.

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