

Northern Morocco

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

To Tangiers

A direct flight takes us from London to Tangier where we'll settle into the Intercontinental for the night.

Day 2

To Chefchaouen via the Taghramet

The high coastal hills east of Tangier offer wonderful views across the Straits of Gibraltar to Europe. From mid-morning onwards, depending on conditions, there's plenty of birds of prey arriving from Europe. Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, and various harriers, will all be on their way south into Africa. Yellow *Linum maritimum*, *Delphinium obcordatum* and the lovely little *Kicksia commutatum* offer colour in arid-looking coastal valleys where we'll encounter butterflies such as the Geranium Bronze and locally abundant Desert Orange-tip. At the eastern end of these hills lies a stark limestone mountain with a most exceptional flora, mostly of dwarfed prickly shrubs, including *Ulex borgiae* and *Erica australis* in yellow and purple flower respectively. The parallels with the coastal heathlands of southwestern England are marked, but of course one doesn't encounter pretty little *Viola arborescens*, the Moroccan Pearly Heath, or Zeller's Skipper, in the southwest! Southwards we'll look for Black-shouldered Kite, Black-crowned Tchagra and two forms of the Autumn Squill, before slowly rising up towards Chefchaouen.

Days 3 - 5

The Rif Mountains & Chefchaouen – Parc Nacional de Talassemrane

Chefchaouen is a delightful town beautifully situated on the edge of the Rif Mountains. Where-ever you drive from Chefchaouen it is mountainous. To the east is the Parc Nacional de Talassemrane, an area of high country that harbours most of the remaining Moroccan Fir and Atlantic Cedar forest in North Africa. In the valleys are extensive Cork Oak Forests - these harbour plenty of *Narcissus elegans* - but it will be the rare and unique habitats found on the heights of the Jebel Tissouka that will be our focus for a full day. Landrovers will take us high on the mountain. Below a wide belt of Cork Oak forest is one of the most startling displays of autumn flowers imaginable - *Merendera filifolia* carpets the ground, its little pink stars numbering in their hundreds of thousands, in fact the ground appears a hazy pink from a distance! Above we move through the Cork Oaks into a zone of Holm and Portuguese Oaks out of which loom huge moss and fern covered boulders. It's quite reminiscent of Wistman's Wood, only on a huge scale! The similarity doesn't bear close examination though for under the trees we'll find fruiting peonies, abundant Laurustinus, and,

strangely, plentiful Large Tortoiseshells. Higher still and we'll enter a wonderful landscape of Atlantic Cedars and Moroccan Firs, these mixed with *Acer granatense*, in its striking yellow autumn garb. One of the last remaining populations of wild Barbary Apes lives here and we've a good chance of seeing them as the males often use the giant boulders as lookouts. Levaillant's Green Woodpeckers, Hawfinches and Ring Ouzels are amongst the many birds up here, and the lovely North African race of the Chaffinch is common.

Another rare and perhaps unexpected habitat is found in the national park. At Akchour we can access one of the deep 'green' gorges that dissect the western slopes. Sparkling mountain streams descend through narrow defiles where the mossy boulders and fern-laden banks are dotted with blue-flowered *Centranthus battandieri*. Lovely pink *Antirrhinum billardieri* trails over Strawberry Trees and the local species of Butcher's Broom as spectacular Two-tailed Pashas buzz past. Black Perchers, the dazzling Violet Dropwing, and Migrant Spreadwings are amongst the Odonata here, and the rare lizard Timon prater is easily seen. We'll follow the Oued Laou as it descends quickly to the coast, the wetland by the sea is a marvellous spot for birds with many Audouin's Gulls and Stone Curlews on the beach. Offshore are Cory's Shearwaters and various terns, and inland we'll find plenty of Plain Tiger Butterflies and more Odonata, this time Lesser Emperors and the little damsel, *Ischnura graellsii*.

Days 6 & 7

Larache and the Littoral Atlantique.

A back road will take us cross-country, through tracts of Cork Oaks decorated with *Leucojum autumnale* and *Colchicum lusitanicum*. The estuaries, lagoons and sand dune systems of Morocco's northwest Atlantic Coast will provide us with plenty of good birds over the next couple of days. Offshore are skuas, Gannets and shearwaters. Just five minutes drive from our hotel is a fabulous wetland where we'll encounter phenomenal numbers of birds. Thousands of Glossy Ibis and Black-tailed Godwits are joined by plenty of Ruff and various herons and egrets. Purple Gallinules and Crested Coots are common, the latter numbered over a thousand on our last visit! Hundreds of Yellow Wagtails feed in marshy fields overflowed by several species of tern. Marbled Teal and Red-crested Pochard occur in small groups and at nearby Merdja Zerga we'll see vast numbers of wildfowl, and on an evening visit, African Marsh Owls coming out to hunt.

Near the Roman site of Lixus we will see the first flowers of *Iris planifolia* and the lovely *Ranunculus bullatus* adorning sand dunes where Large Psammodromus and Spiny-footed Lizard are common. Nearby, amid coastal heath, we'll find a spring around which grows the unusual green-flowered *Narcissus viridiflorus*, a rare species found sparingly along this coast. Growing with these extraordinary plants are both *Narcissus cavanillesii* and *Narcissus elegans*, as well as crocuses and colchicums. It's quite a show. Epauletted Skimmer and Blue-eyed Hawker are two of the special dragonflies that visit the spring, Spur-thighed Tortoises are abundant, and butterflies include the

African Grass Blue and Spotted Adonis Blue. We'll have the morning of Day 8 to further explore this region before catching a mid-afternoon flight out of Tangier and returning to the UK.

Day 8

Cap Spartel & Grottes d'Hercule

North of Larache it is a pleasant and short journey along the wild coastline to spectacular Cap Spartel, jutting out into the Atlantic, at the far northwestern tip of Morocco. As well as seabirds and dolphins offshore there are plenty of autumn flowers. Here aptly-named *Narcissus elegans* forms photogenic clumps amongst Mandrakes that vary from almost white to deep purple-blue in colour. One particularly spectacular bank has hundreds of delicate lilac *Crocus serotinus* in flower whilst nearby are beautiful pale blue *Hyacinthoides lingulata*, a species sure to please the photographers.

We'll visit the famous Grottes d'Hercule. These impressive caves host a population of the rare fern *Asplenium marinum*, and in nearby coastal heath, alongside a road that snakes through some fine coastal scenery, we'll see the pink stars of *Merendera filifolia*. Here too are the lovely blooms of *Narcissus cavanillesii*, a strange plant that seems somewhere between a gagea and an anemone, hardly like a daffodil at all.

We'll depart Tangier airport in the Afternoon of Day 8 on a direct flight to London.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our previous tours to Northern Morocco. 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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