

Sichuan

Black Primulas & Prayer Flags

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2

UK to China

After our flight we'll transfer to our hotel in Chengdu and in the afternoon visit the excellent Giant Panda breeding centre located in the city, a major centre for the conservation of these enigmatic animals.

Days 3 - 5

Wolong & the Balang Shan

Only ninety minutes or so after leaving Chengdu we'll enter the great mountains that will be our home for the rest of the trip. World famous Wolong offers a great starting point as the huge Giant Panda reserve protects a vast swathe of stunning mountain habitat as well as a base from which we can explore it. We'll soon be familiarising ourselves with the diverse woody flora of China with Hydrangeas, Deutzias, Philadelphus, elegant Acers, Wingnuts and all manner of Rosa species. Elliot's Laughingthrushes and gorgeous Mrs Gould's Sunbirds flit about these shrubs as we focus on delicate blue *Corydalis flexuosa* and the orchids *Calanthe tricarinata* and *Epipactis mairei*. Our first long-tubed lousewort, pink *Pedicularis macrosiphon*, will be the first of many, while two taller cousins, yellow *Pedicularis dunniana* and stunning pink and white *Pedicularis davidii*, are overshadowed by the impressive *Cardiocrinum giganteum*. We'll walk narrow valleys where Wallcreepers flit from wall to wall, whilst the lovely Red-billed Blue Magpie impresses with its long tail. Redstarts are everywhere, especially White-capped and Plumbeous Water Redstarts and we'll also see the pretty Daurian Redstart. Those willing to try a nightwalk might encounter Goral and Giant Flying Squirrels. In forested glades we'll find masses of rich purple *Iris chrysographes*, the flowers flecked with gold, as well as *Streptopus*, *Smilacinas* and the strange *Veratrum nigrum*.

From Wolong the road climbs up through stands of *Rhododendron balangense* and on to wonderful alpine turf with big drifts of yellow *Meconopsis integrifolia*, lovely purple *Omphalogramma vincaeflora*, yellow *Lloydia tibetica*, pink *Cardamine macrophylla*, orange *Saxifraga pseudohiruculus* and the electric blue of *Corydalis curviflora*. We'll find the diversity of *Corydalis* rather bewildering here with at least four blue species, included the suitably named *Corydalis panda* (it could have been black and white of course!), and mauve and yellow species too, the latter including the robust 'crested' *Corydalis pseudocristata*. There are colonies of *Primulas gemmifera*, *longipetala* and *sikkimensis* and our first look at the extraordinary red poppywort *Meconopsis punicea*. The lower slopes of the Balang Shan are home to an array of orchids including pink *Ponerorchis chusa*, Musk Orchids, several *Gymnadenia* species and the minute green *Androcorys*

oxysepalus, all of 2cm high! Much more impressive are the inflated purple pouches of fabulous *Cypripedium tibeticum*, as well as yellow *Cypripedium flavum*. Brown and Alpine Accentors are found among tall green veratrums and pink solomon's-seals and Himalayan Griffon Vultures cruise the thermals overhead. At the pass itself are superb displays of the scree-dwelling sky-blue *Corydalis melanocentra* and massed displays of *Primula amethystina* and *Primula dryadifolia* amongst all sorts of *Saxifragas*, *Androsaces* and *Ranunculus*. Prickly-leaved *Meconopsis rudis* will be our fifth species of *Meconopsis* on the pass here all but overshadowed by the mesmerising shows of brilliant *Corydalis pseudobarbisepala*! Large Red-faced Rosefinches are pleasingly tame and we'll see Brandt's Mountain Finch and flocks of Yellow-billed Chough.

Days 6 & 7

Danba & Luhuo

The fine yellow spires and dissect leaves of *Ligularia przewalskii* adorn roadside banks near Rilong and amongst them grow pretty little sky-blue *Gentiana pseudosquarrosa*, lots of *Arisaema consanguineum* and the lovely billowing purple and yellow *Thalictrum delavayi*. White-throated Redstarts, Chestnut Thrushes, Godlewski's Bunting and Beautiful Rosefinches are in the fields. We pass magnificent vistas dominated by the 6200m Four Girls Mountain (Siguniang Shan). The pink heads of *Paeonia veitchii* are obvious and in grassy glades we'll see lots of lovely *Primula deflexa*, a delightful species with a tight head of hanging soft purple-blue flowers. Moving down into the valleys we'll visit a low roadside cliff that holds a fine population of the gesnerid *Corallodiscus lanuginosus*, its little blue flowers held above a crinkled rosette of leaves. Here we'll find the white wands of *Eremurus chinensis*, the fine *Ceropegia mairei* with the unusual *Ceropegia mairei* with trumpet-like flowers and a strange *Primula* with secund racemes of yellow flowers, inflated calyxes and heucheria-like leaves, this being *Primula bathangensis*.

West of Danba huge valley walls hem us in and the slope are covered in verdant almost sub-tropical greenery. The lovely white *Lilium taliense* grows with abundant *Arisaemas* and *Epipactis* species whilst further up into mossy forests adorned with *Hydrangea heteromalla* and some fine flowering *Deutzias* we'll see the first striking orange flowers of *Primula cockburniana*. *Meconopsis prattii* flowers at the foot of some bouldery rubble among *Corydalis conspersa* whilst on rocks and cliffs we'll find *Roscoea alpine*. Himalayan Griffon Vulture cruise over the gorge and Large-billed Leaf Warblers and a Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher inhabit the elfin forest. Our next pass sees us in a kind of primula heaven with no less than seven species within fifty metres of the road, among them the miniature pink *Primula rhodocroa* which blooms with *Parnassia pusilla* and a tiny *Gentiana*. The scene is lit with clumps of golden yellow *Pedicularis longiflora* var *tubiformis* had the equally brilliant and compact *Caltha scaposa* which was common here. Soon we'll have our first encounters with impressive *Incarvillea mairei* among Yaks and Dzhos grazing the high open grasslands. The countryside as we near Luhou is stunning, the Tibetan villages have beautiful houses, all made from huge timbers and faced with stones, and decorated in traditional colours. Prayer flags and chortens

(stupas) became common place. The prayer flags are set in triangular patterns in this region. Himalayan Marmots, Daurian Redstarts and Elliot's Laughingthrushes will be seen when we stop to admire the gorgeous pink drumstick *Androsace spinulifera*, the black pea *Thermopsis barbata*, and stands of *Cypripedium tibeticum* and *Cypripedium calcicola*.

Days 8 & 9

Ganze & the Dzo Dala

North of Luhou roadsides are adorned with pretty pale blue *Codonopsis convolvulacea*, *Clematis tibetica* and *Clematis rehderiana* as well as *Dracocephalum forestii* and *Pedicularis verbenifolia*, a curious violet-flowered species. We'll visit a pass where the rolling grasslands stretch as far as the eye can see, studded with the jet-black outlines of yaks, and the black tents of nomadic herders. The Prayer Flag Poppy is abundant along with several other poppies including the delicate *Meconopsis lancifolia*, a lovely plant with up to three violet-blue blooms on each stem. Yellow *Corydalis linarioides* mixes with the spidery deep crimson blooms of bizarre *Primula tangutica*, green flowered *Parnassia lanceolata* and the unusual *Trollius farreri*, its petals bronze-backed. Lower down we'll explore a valley where Long-tailed Minivets and Grey-headed Bullfinches fly over *Iris polysticta*, *Iris confusa* and both *Fritillaria cirrhosa* and *Fritillaria unibracteata* these amongst spectacularly floriferous fragrant *Philadelphus purpurascens*. Ibisbills will be on the agenda as we follow a river valley to Ganze and as we approach the town we'll start to family parties of the curious Hume's Ground Jay. Ruddy Shelducks inhabit the highland ponds and we'll also see White-collared Blackbird, Kessler's Thrush and the superb Spot-winged Rosefinch.

South of Ganze is a range of high mountains, part of the Chola Shan, that separates Ganze from the Yangtze Valley and beyond, Tibet. Our route takes us gently up a long valley with Mani piles prominent, many of the stones, indeed even huge house sized boulders, covered in often intricate and sometimes colourful carving. It is hard though even for this extraordinary manifestation to draw too much attention from the sublime landscapes surrounding us as we reach a pass at around 4800m. Our gradual acclimatisation will allow us to now enjoy some of the fabulous flora and fauna to be found in this incredible spot. Blue Sheep graze on seemingly barren ridges as we wander streamsides lit by a yellow veil of *Primula sikkimensis* mixed with the purple bells of *Primula secundiflora*. The little pink *Primula stenocalyx* blooms on rocks and the tall violet *Primula limbata* adorns growing on cliffs where large blue *Paraquilegia microphylla* form spectacular cushions. Himalayan Griffon, Lammergeier and Golden Eagle soar over screes where we'll find yellow blue-tipped *Corydalis hamata*, delightful *Corydalis scaberula* and fine large yellow flowered *Corydalis dasyptera*. Here lives the stunning blue Grandala, as well as Wallcreepers and White-winged Snowfinches, the latter feeding on high gravely slopes where we can see black-centred *Ranunculus melanocentra*, and the Dalek of the plant world, the curious upside down cone of silvery hairs that is *Saussurea medusa*, the hairs almost completely concealing the leaves. Also here is another fine high alpine *Saussurea*, this time *quercifolia*, looking a little like it has just landed from outer space!

Fabulous Streaked Rosefinches. Alpine Accentors, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Blue-fronted, Black and White-winged Redstarts, and Golden Bush Robins are among a quite stunning series of alpine birds that lives amongst shrubberies of dwarf *Rhododendron* that also shelters many wonderful *Meconopsis*. Yellow *integrifolia* is again prominent and is joined by prickly *racemosa* with lovely racemes of blue flowers, the conical hanging lilac blue bells of *Meconopsis quintuplinervia* whilst on the high scree we'll find beautiful dwarfed forms of *Meconopsis racemosa* and the lovely purple with a hint of blue flowers of *Meconopsis henricii*, these providing stunning portrait shots against the snowy pinnacles beyond.

Day 10

Maniganga

Rufous-breasted Woodpecker, White-capped Water Redstarts and Hodgson's Redstarts are just some of the birds that we can see as we admire drifts of *Pedicularis tricolor* blooming in the rivers gravels along with pink wands of *Myricaria laxiflora*. Tall yellow *Pedicularis ingens* flowers with *Pedicularis szetcschuanica* and lots of the orchid *Gymnadenia emeiensis*. *Herminium alashanicum* and *Herminium monorchis* are both abundant. We'll take time out to explore one of the many picturesque local villages. Local children, very well-behaved, will likely follow us as we visit the local prayer wheel and explore the paths between the very robust houses. We'll visit a Buddhist power site where a small river disappears under a big rock only to reappear the other side. The site is covered in billowing prayer flags making it quite a spectacle. Nearing the 'wild-west' town of Maniganga, perched high on the Tibetan Plateau, we'll see Upland Buzzards hunting the abundant Black-eared Pikas which live in large colonies amongst colourful patches of *Ajuga lupullina*. We'll try a night time foray for mammals here, likely seeing plenty of foxes hopefully including the endemic Tibetan Fox, as well as the local White-lipped Deer.

Days 11 & 12

Chola Pass & Dege

Our highest pass at a whopping 4900 metres sits among the stupendous granitic mountains of the Chola Shan and we'll have two chances to experience the flora here spending the intervening night in Dege, close to the Tibetan border, where there is a traditional Tibetan press, producing an impressive output of prayer flags and banners, all by hand.

Looking to our south as we drive up we can see great glaciers hanging off the edge of the peaks. Gravelly slopes near the top are home to *Arenaria polytrichoides*, golden *Allium atrosanguineum*, lots of fine yellow and russet *Pedicularis oederi*, but the finest plant here is an ultimate alpine. The incomparable *Chionocharis hookeri* grows among stony ground and scree right beside the road, the dense domes covered in sky-blue flowers. Above the pass are fine scree where the Grandala and Tibetan Snowcock live and where, if your scree legs are good, you can see the silvery dalek that is *Saussurea simpsoniana*.

Standing about 15cm tall and columnar it is covered in long silvery hairs. It is a species that is known to occur as high as virtually any flowering plant in the Himalayas, going up to around 6000m and not occurring much lower than on this pass! Crimson-browed Finch and Black-lipped Pikas inhabit the rocky slopes down the other side of the pass where we'll also find red-flowered *Rhodiola crenulata* and the strange and beautiful *Soroaseris rosularis*. Towards Dege we'll find the strange *Platanthera fargesii* with curly lip lobes and both tall *Androsace stenophylla* and the shorter pale pink *Androsace henryi*. *Corydalis* species are abundant with pinky *ugeniana*, blue *kokiana*, yellow *dasyptera*, and *hamata* with yellow blue-tipped flowers. There's the delightful yellow *Cremantodium reniforme* as well as *Pedicularis przewalski* and *Pedicularis superba*, *Saxifraga melanocentra* in fine form and a lovely deep blue *Codonopsis*.

Day 13 To Litang

From Ganze we follow the course of the Yulong River southwards. This is a mighty river, one of the main tributaries of the Yangtze, and it travels with a ferocity that is surprising given its size. The landscape is spectacular, dropping from the high plateau grasslands around Ganze through steep sided forested lands and into gorges interrupted by more serene landscapes where man had managed to settle. The villages, and indeed individual farm houses, are striking. They are huge. Each three stories high, they look like they could withstand pretty much anything so well-built are they. We'll see unusual *Clematis delavayi* and as we rise again into slopes sparsely covered in conifers, we'll stop to look for *Cypripedium yunnanense* (may be over) as well as *Epipactis humilior*, pretty yellow and white *Pedicularis tricolour*, and the odd *Pedicularis cyathophylloides*, its large pink flowers and cupped leaf bases. Soon we'll be back up to 4000m where there are massed displays of *Primula sikkimensis*, pink *Primula hoi*, and pink and yellow louseworts. Here we'll find abundant spired lanterns of *Rheum alexandrae*, the palest lime green inflated bracts covering the flowering spikes up to a height of a metre or so. These literally appear to light up the moorland landscape. Little clumps of *Pedicularis siphonantha* shine bright cerise and there's *Iris goniocarpa* and the splendid deep pink drumsticks of *Androsace spinulifera*. Then we'll descend into Litang. Hardly the right word really for Litang is at 4000m above sea level, the highest town in Sichuan!

Days 14 - 16 Kangding & the Zhedou Shan

Before leaving Litang we'll visit one of the region's most important monasteries which dominates the town, and we'll learn little about the history of Buddhism in the region. We'll follow a road along a high ridge, between 4000m and 4500m, for a whole day, stopping frequently. Tibetan Snowfinches, Hume's Ground Jays, Shorelarks and Twite inhabit high tundra where we'll see some lovely *Pedicularis* and our first *Rheum alexandrae* amongst herds of yaks. We'll see lovely blue *Corydalis pachycentra* by streams as well as *Androsace limprichtii*, delicate *Primula blinii*, and the parasitic *Boschniakia himalaica*. Screes above the road

are home some truly amazing *Corydalis* species, one with pale blue and white flowers with black centres, these accompanied by the pink-lavender *Corydalis porphyrantha* and perhaps the cream of the group in *Corydalis benecincta*, a beautiful species with large pinkish flowers and amazing scree-coloured leaves.

On the second day in this area we'll find *Silene davidii* prominent amongst both blue and yellow *Comastomas* and lots of the lovely *Lilium lophophorum*, here in both yellow and reddish forms. Long-tailed Rosefinch and White-browed Tit-Warbler are found on this pass among lovely lavender, pink and yellow *Corydalis trachycarpa* and the raspberry-ripple ice-cream *Pedicularis decorissima*. On the main road pass over the Zhedou Shan the flowers are astonishing. Violet—blue *Meconopsis lancifolia* hover above vast pink cushions of *Androsace rigida*. Yellow *Astragalus yunnanense* grows with reddish *Hedysarums* and purple *Astragalus*. Pinky-violet *Primula dryadifolia* is common amongst a wonderful white and deep purple *Pedicularis*. Shining blue *Corydalis pseudoadoxa* is joined by yellow *Corydalis lineariloba* and there were mats of red *Sibbaldia rosea* and another *Androsace*, this time the white *zambalensis*. Below the pass we'll find the extraordinary 'black primula' *Primula euprepes*, only recently rediscovered. A flower that literally is black – one can maybe discern a touch of purple in there but.... Nearby is a mavelous display of the dark violet *Iris chrysographes*, their falls marked with gold.

We'll spend a day above Kangding around Luo Gou Haii, a lake high on the fringes of the Gongga Shan, though at no time in the day will we be able to see the majestic 7500m peak, though there are plenty of 5000+m peaks visible! The flora will continue to mesmerise. Orchids include the curley-lipped *Habenaria fargesii*, *Platanthera chlorantha*, *Ponerorchis chusua*, white *Gymnadenia emeiensis* with stout flowerheads, and the similar but smaller and pale pink *Gymnadenia crassinervis*. Amongst the *Ericaceous* shrub *Lyonia villosa* we'll look for the impressive *Notholirion bulbiferum*. We'll see *Primula watsonii*, another of the capitate headed violet-blue group, delightful yellow lipped and purple beaked *Pedicularis torta* as well as lots of the improbably orange *Primula cockburniana*. Pink Geraniums and yellow *Ligularias* are scattered amongst large blue *Corydalis trifolia* and lots of white *Parnassias*. Tall multi-tiered *Pleurospernum*s resemble a wedding cake! Higher and we'll find *Cypripedium tibeticum* among lots of *Primula dryadifolia*. Amongst a beautiful mat of mosses and lichens is *Cassiope pectinata* and we'll find the diminutive orchid *Ponerorchis brevicarata*. Birds up here include Rufous-breasted Accentors, White-winged Grosbeak, White-tailed Rubythroat and Blue-fronted Redstarts.

Day 17 To Chengdu

The journey Chengdu will take much of the day but still offers plenty of interest. The lush subtropical lower valleys are full of misty fern gardens that contain many wonderful new flowers, however time for stops will be limited! Orange turk's-caps were hang from roadside cliffs, these *Lilium davidii*, as we leave Kangding whilst lower down the valley we'll see the gargantuan white funnel flowers of *Lilium*

sargentiae. These blooms were fully twenty centimetres long and with up to half a dozen flowers on each two metre tall stem are an arresting sight. Further still and we'll see the clear yellow blooms of *Lilium brownii*. We'll pass *Dendrobiums* and beautiful purplish *Hydrangeas*. Fabulous Chinese Peacock Swallowtails fly along the roadsides. We'll stop at Luding to take a look at the 18th century suspension bridge, the last place east of Tibet where Mao's Red Army could cross the mighty Dadu River without making a thousand mile detour.

Day 18

Return to the UK

Our international flights leave Chengdu in the morning.

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