

Provence

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 Arrive Nice

Just inland of the Cote d'Azur's sun-kissed beaches hardly a stone's throw from the airport, is a different Provence, a land of wonderful and often surprising landscapes, and beautiful gardens and Chateaux. We'll stay in one such, the elegant Chateaux Saint Roux.

Days 2 & 3 Plaine des Maures

The Chateaux Saint Roux is a perfect base to explore the Massif des Maures, an astonishing "wooded savannah" where large red-ochre rock slabs emerge from a landscape unique in France, and which is home to a mosaic of rare ecosystems.

Nearly five thousand hectares is protected in the National Reserve of the Plaine de Maures. The combination of geographical position and diversity of habitats has endowed the Maures region with a remarkable wealth of flora. The immense savannah-forests of Cork Oaks dotted with Stone Pine and Maritime Pine, with an understory of pretty pink *Cistus albidus*, is a haven for all sorts of wonderful flora in spring. Chief among them are the tubby bells of *Fritillaria involucreta* as well as *Iris lutescens*, *Leucojum pulchellum* and delicate *Romulea rollii*. Amongst *Gladiolus dubius*, *Narcissus poeticus* and *Anemone hortensis*, the delicate *Anacamptis champagneuxii* flowers. Indeed it's a good area for orchids with Milky Orchid and Pink Butterfly Orchid as well as two nice Tongue Orchids in the shape of *Serapias strictiflora* and the wide-lipped *Serapias cordigera*. We may also find the first blooms of the *Ophrys scolopax*, and the local *Ophrys splendida*, indeed a rather splendid bee orchid!

Streams and temporary ponds constitute natural mosaic habitats that cover a small area but have many rare species particularly associated with them. There are several frog species as well as European Pond Terrapins, and unusual plants such as *Isoetes duriei*, *Ranunculus revelieri*, *Ophioglossum lusitanicum*, *Ranunculus ophioglossifolius* and *Cicendia filiformis*. Most unusual are the mesophilic chamomile lawns of Tongue Orchids with rare *Serapias neglecta* and *Serapias albia*. Growing with them are *Kickxia commutata*, *Allium chamaemoly* and *Romulea columnae*. Hermann's Tortoises like to graze them! Traditionally managed Chestnut groves are very rich in herbaceous species with beauties such as *Vicia melanops*, *Vicia laeta*, *Doronicum plantagineum* and *Tulipa sylvestris*. Cool valleys with Alders and Limes have damp undergrowth full of perhaps surprising ferns such as *Osmunda regalis*, *Phyllitis scolopendrium* and *Blechnum spicant*, all very rare in Southern France. We'll explore thermophilic cork oak forests where rare *Adenocarpus telonensis* is associated with xerophilous ridges.

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Day 4

Domaine du Rayol/Coastal Sites

The Domaine du Rayol was first created in 1910 by Parisian businessman Alfred Theodore Courmes when he built his retirement home on a promontory overlooking the Baie du Figuier. The garden's heyday was in the middle part of the 20th century when aeronautical engineer Henry Potez restored the buildings and built a staircase from the pergola down to the sea. With a staff of ten gardeners, the garden was extended and improved, and by 1948 contained nearly 400 species. However it soon fell into neglect and was abandoned by the late 1960s. In 1989 the site was acquired by the Conservatoire du Littoral, and landscape and gardens went through a thorough redesign sympathetic to the gardens themselves but also to natural coastal vegetation that is well-represented here. The Domaine du Rayol also happens to have a great bookshop.

Later in the afternoon we'll head to Saint-Aygulf, a nearby coastal area where there's a characteristic suite of halophyte species including the rare and highly endangered Jupiter's Beard *Anthyllis barba-jovis* and perhaps *Genista linifolia*.

Days 5 & 6

Prealpes de Grasse

April is a fantastic time to visit the limestone uplands of the Prealpes de Grasse, spring is late here and so we'll see the first of the year's flowers. The Grasse Prealps is a karstic massif north of the city of Grasse. Reaching a maximum of 1800m above sea level the area has a harsh climate – cold, often snowy winters, and very hot summers, a combination not conducive to forest growth. So the bare rocky slopes are largely grassland and are very floriferous. The Parc Naturel Regional de Prealpes d'Azur was created in 2012 to help protect this outstanding natural heritage. Rosy Garlic lines roadsides and Green-underside Blues fly about meadows with *Fritillaria montana* and *Gagea bohemica*. Short-toed Eagles fly overhead whilst Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail remind us of the proximity of the Mediterranean in sight below us. Sure to be a highlight of the tour (if they are yet in bloom, which they might not be) will be a slope covered in the red blooms of the rare endemic *huthii* subspecies of *Paeonia officinalis*.

The deserted slopes below the ski station hosts a diminutive form of *Tulipa australis* whilst rocky areas are home to *Erythronium dens-canis*. Many thousands of Poet's-eye Narcissus make a spectacular splash in the wet meadows along with a few *Iris graminea*. We'll explore an area of limestone pavement populated with fine examples of *Barlia robertiana* and many *Orchis mascula* growing amongst *Genista hispanica*. Some of the very fine early spring orchids here include *Orchis spitzelii*, *Orchis olbiensis*, *Ophrys arachnitiformis*, *Ophrys massiliensis*, *Ophrys virescens* and the lovely *Ophrys bertolonii*. There are many fine *Fritillaria involucreta*, a few Italian Bluebells, and abundant Grape Hyacinths. We'll watch for displaying Subalpine Warblers and butterflies including Western Dappled White and Cleopatra.

Vast plateaus are a distinctive feature of the landscape of the Grasse Prealps. The Plateau de Calern is among the finest examples of such a geological formation. It shelters a spectacular diversity of flora and fauna, with rare and endangered species such as Orsini's Viper and Short-horned Grasshopper. Lovely Crocus versicolor should still be flowering in the highest areas and so too the often brilliant pink *Colchicum bulbocodium*. No less than three species of *Gagea* also occur in the same habitat – *Gagea arvensis*, *Gagea pratensis* and *Gagea reverchonii* alongside the delightfully fluffy *Pulsatilla halleri*. Here too is the beautiful small flowered endemic subspecies of daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus provincialis*.

Day 7

Coastal sites and Massif de l'Esterel

The red cliffs and peaks of the Massif de l'Esterel rise directly behind the Mediterranean playground of Cannes. The rhyolitic rocks are volcanic in origin and the resulting deeply dissected landscape is home to woodlands of Chestnut, Hornbeam and Aleppo Pine. Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers are common and we are also likely to see Dartford Warbler and Blue Rock Thrush. There are many Wild Boar in the area and some have become habituated to people and are therefore easy to observe. In the afternoon we'll visit some small protected areas by the coast where amongst others we'll find rare *Leucojum nicaeense* which we hope will still be in flower.

Day 8

Return to UK from Nice

This morning it will be time to head to Nice Airport for the journey home, or on to Corsica with Paul...

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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