

## Provence & Corsica

### A Southern French Odyssey

#### 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 involucrata* 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 alba*. 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 Figuiers. The garden's heyday was in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 involucreata*, 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**

### **To Corsica and Ajaccio**

Ajaccio is the island's capital and was the birthplace of Napoleon. There is a busy but picturesque harbour and the narrow streets through the pastel shaded rather higgledy-piggledy houses are a delight. We'll arrive in the afternoon and head for our hotel just along the coast on the peninsula north of the town.

## **Day 9**

### **Pointe de la Parata and the West Coast**

Square stone Genoese towers top the many promontories that jut out from the rather complicated geomorphology of the West Coast of Corsica. One such promontory ends in the Pointe de la Pineta, just 12km west of Ajaccio. Here *Narcissus tazetta* decorates rocky crevices almost to the high tide line whilst above brick pink porphyry cliffs sweep down to the sea draped with delicate blue-flowered *Convolvulus sicula*. The Pointe points to the Iles Sanguinaires, a line of four islands that form an idyllic scene stretching out into the Golfe d'Ajaccio. Audouin's Gulls fly overhead and we'll see Hoopoes and Crested Larks at the back of beaches where dunes have Dense-flowered Orchid, the stock *Matthiola tricuspidata* and lovely *Silene sericea*. On nearby rocks is the endemic *Limonium articulatum*. *Cytinus ruber* parasitizes *Cistus monspelliensis* (and other nice flora here includes Small-flowered Catchfly, Weasel's-snout, Fringed Rue, *Stachys glutinosa*, *Euphorbia pithyusa*, pretty *Vicia benghalensis* and *Succowia balearica* with its distinctive hedgehog-like fruits. Green Underside Blue, Clouded Yellow and

the endemic Corsican Dappled White will already be on the wing and we'll also see the locally common Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard and hopefully the Moorish Gecko.

We'll see many orchids on this tour and we'll start here with a fine meadow full of *Orchis morio*, *Orchis papilionacea* and two Tongue Orchids, *Serapias lingua* and *Serapias neglecta*. We'll find the tiny light blue stars of *Sedum coeruleum* above fleshy green leaves tinged red. Another tiny, unusual and beautiful plant is *Linaria flava sardoa*, a small yellow flax endemic to Corsica and Sardinia, and we'll also see *Linaria pelisseriana*, an unusual red form of *Fumaria capreolata*, and *Jasione echinata*, a Sheep's-bit only very recently added to the flora of Corsica.

In the afternoon we'll head uphill through the lovely now leafless beech woods with *Cyclamen repandum* becoming common as we go. Roadsides are covered in mats of rosy *Saponaria ocymoides*, blue *Anemone apennina* and magenta *Gladiolus segetum*, as we head into the mountains northeast of Ajaccio. It is just an hour's drive from Ajaccio to Corte and the Restonica Gorge, but we are sure to stop many times! *Orchis papilionacea* is frequent as well as *Orchis lactea*, whilst the drifts of *Asphodelus cerasiferus* are something to behold. We'll spend two of the next three days exploring the magnificent gorges that descend from the flanks of Monte Cinto, an impressive peak, and Corsica's highest mountain.

## **Days 10 & 12**

### **Restonica Gorge and the Col de Verghio**

Fabulous mounds of *Saxifraga cervicornis* adorn shaded rocks close to our hotel in the Gorges du Restonica. Tumbling down through the scenic gorge is a lovely river whose waters are one minute cascading white through giant boulders, the next lucid pools of pale turquoise, the pebbly riverbed giving hints of jade, pink and fawn; a most beautiful sight. With the river on one side of the track and carmine and white colour forms of *Cyclamen repandum* on the other, our cameras will be busy! Bulbous *Brimeura fastigata* flowers in the valley with *Allium triquetrum* and on rocks we may find *Erica terminalis* with the odd flower. *Helleborus argutifolius* has pellucid lime-green petals that seem to shine amongst the dark green rather spikey-looking foliage. Found only in Corsica and Sardinia this hellebore however occurs at all levels on the island. The cries of Yellow-billed Cough echo across the gorge walls and we'll likely see Black Redstart and Crag Martins. Giant Orchid, Lady Orchid and Man Orchid bloom on the shales at Favalello and with luck we can see the Pygmy Lizard, *Algyroides fitzingeri* here. Woodlarks sing about us as we look at some fine rockplants such as *Teesdalia coronopifolia* and the endemics *Coincya monensis recurvata* and *Barbarea rupicola*.

A little to the north we'll find lovely *Saxifraga corsica* hanging from the sheer cliffs of the Scala di Santa Regina. Above the gorge Nightingales sing in the gardens of the little village. This is Calacuccia, set by a beautiful deep-blue man-made lake in a shallow valley below the pinnacles of the northern slopes of Monte Cinto. We'll see the endemic Corsican Swallowtail here. Small blue *Lupinus angustifolius* and the pink-flushed cream flowers of *Stachys corsica* decorate the neglected stoney terraces around the village with cerise *Orchis papilionacea*. *Pancratium illyricum*,

unlike its more widespread beach-flowering cousin, can be found growing far up into the mountains, its heads of striking white flowers an impressive sight. We'll keep a watchful eye out for Lammergeier and Golden Eagle in the skies above.

Amongst dwarf junipers by the roadside on the Col di Verghio we'll find the little green-centred yellow stars of *Gagea fragifera* - there are no less than six species of *Gageas* blooming in these hills during the time of our tour. The lovely lilac *Crocus corsicus*, the outside of the flowers flushed satiny-yellow and etched with deep purple lines, forms drifts on the slopes close to the road and hidden amongst clumps of *Berberis* and *Daphne* we'll find perfect little *Viola biflora*. Descending we'll pass through an area of pines where we'll stop to look for the endemic Corsican Nuthatch, the only species of nuthatch on the island. Down the valleys are gorgeous forests of beech and freshly-leaved chestnuts in which we'll find Firecrests, Serins and more Citril Finches. Stately spikes of *Orchis provincialis* will just be coming into bloom with the local form of *Orchis mascula* (*olbiensis*), and abundant blue anemones mix with some beautiful forms of *Corydalis pumila*. Among fresh green birch woods we'll look for intense purple *Romulea requienii*. Descending further into gorges we'll see *Armeria leucocephala* and Burnt Candytuft, a species found for the first time in Corsica by our groups here.

## **Day 11**

### **The East Coast: Aleria, Inzecca Gorge & Col de Sorba.**

Today we'll do a circuit down to the east coast near Aleria and back into the mountains via the beautiful Inzecca Gorge, enjoying a great range of habitat and flora during the day. We'll start with some fine old cork oaks under which Sword-leaved Helleborine and the Tyrrhenian endemic *Ptilostemon casabonae* flower. We'll see the attractive legume *Anthyllis hermanniae* in fine flower and down on the coast, with a marvellous photogenic background of snow-capped mountain peaks we'll see Marsh Harriers and enjoy coastal flora such as various orchids, *Lathyrus angulatus*, *Biserrula pelecinus*, Sea Holly, Sea Medick and the unusual *Erodium lebelii* ssp. *maruccii*. *Cytinus hypocistus* is plentiful on the Cistuses here and will be in full flower. After lunch we'll head inland where serpentine outcrops have the endemics *Biscutella rotgesii* and *Senecio serpenticola*. We'll see *Dianthus sylvestris godronianus* and *Petrorhagia saxifraga gasparinii* and *Pancratium illyricum* is impressive here. Returning over the spectacular Col di Sorba we'll have another look for the Corsican Nuthatch.

## **Days 13 & 14**

### **Bonifacio & the Southern limestone**

Heading south we'll drop down to the coast, on the way encountering a dense maquis of *Cytisus triflorus* where *Cytinus hypocistus*'s yellow flowers glow from red bracts amongst *Cistus salvifolius* and *Cistus albidus*. The regional endemic Marmora's Warbler is frequent in this habitat alongside more widespread species such as Stonechat and Sardinian Warbler. Cirl Bunting and Blue Rock Thrushes are also frequent. *Cyclamen repandum* is a frequent sight in shaded locations; it is a very widespread plant on Corsica. Pretty *Erodium corsicum* cascades over rocks



close to the sea where we'll also find colourful displays of *Matthiola tricuspidata* and *Anchusa crispera*.

Limestone areas near Bonifacio host endemic *Morisia monanthos* and orchids. There's bee orchids such as *Ophrys corsica*, *Ophrys marmorata* and *Ophrys panormitana praecox*. There's also the gorgeous *Ophrys morisii* and *Ophrys incubacea* amongst plenty of lovely *Bellardia trixago*. The site is rich in rather special plants such as *Simethis mattiazzii* (Kerry Lily), *Ranunculus ophioglossifolius* (Adder's Tongue Spearwort), *Baldellia ranunculoides* (Lesser Water-plantain), *Isoetes histrix* (Mediterranean Quillwort), *Ranunculus revelieri* (endemic to Corsica and Sardinia) and *Erica scoparia*.

Unlike much of the Mediterranean a good percentage of Corsica's shorelines are relatively unspoilt. Impressive hummocks of *Astragalus massiliensis* (Marseille Milkvetch) and *Juniperus phoenicea* (Phoenician Juniper) the fascinating limestone habitats just along the coast east from Bonifacio. *Allium roseum* (Rosy Garlic) of the endemic *insulare* subspecies is common here and is joined by more endemics such as *Limonium obtusifolium* and beautiful *Erodium corsicum*. Also flowering here is *Morisia monanthos*, the pink-flowered *rubriflora* subspecies of Kidney Vetch, and blooming rock crevices both *Narcissus tazetta* and *Romulea requienii*.

The lagoon there attracts various waterbirds and both Small Red-eyed Damselfly and the Island Bluetail are found around its shoreline. Scarlet Darters are also common and we can see Emperor Dragonflies and Keeled Skimmers too. The rare Tyrrhenian Tree Frog is found in such spots along with the unusual Kerry Lily and several broomrapes, including beautiful richly-coloured *Orobanche sanguinea*, (Bloody Broomrape) which parasitises *Lotus cytisoides*. Blooming in the old town of Bonifaccio is the impressive *Ornithogalum arabicum*. There is a richness of quantity and colour to the displays of *Serapias* hardly matched elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Large-flowered *Serapias cordigera* is joined by *Serapias parviflora* and huge numbers of *Serapias lingua*. A perhaps surprising habitat to find a 'citril finch' in but the Corsican Finch is quite catholic in its choice of habitat and can be found at all altitudes!

## **Day 15**

### **Departure**

We'll have plenty of time for a little more local exploration as our return flight departs from the airport just outside Bonifacio.

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