

# Northern Greece

## A Greentours Itinerary

### Days 1 & 2

#### Vergina, Mount Skopos and Grevena

After our evening arrival at Thessaloniki's airport we'll head west for an hour to lovely little town of Vergina where we'll have a chance to see the Macedonian Royal Tombs before settling into the lovely little Aigon Hotel for the night. Mount Skopos lies just a couple of hours to the west and we'll spend much of the day enjoying the exceptional flora and fauna of one of Greece's last significant areas of dry steppe. Montagu's Harriers quarter juniper dotted slopes that are home to plum or yellow *Iris reichenbachii* which sit just proud of a turf that contains many marvellous plants from *Ophrys mammosa* to clumps of yellow *Linum elegans* and from bright pink *Anemone pavonina* to the strange *Saxifraga grisebachii*. Dalmatian Ringlets are quite common here.

### Day 3

#### The Bourazani area

Heading west over the Pendelofoss Pass we'll see a magical display of orange *Tulipa orphanidea* decorating small cornfields along an exceptionally scenic drive. The local speciality *Ophrys grammica* is common in dry riverbeds where it mixes with *Iberis pruitii*. We'll lunch at the lovely Bourazani, our base for the next week. Backed by meadows and mixed woodland and set above the pretty Aaos River this fine hotel has mountain views all about. The afternoon will see us on one of many enjoyable local walks - a watermill where they wash carpets is just up the road and en route are abundant *Orchis morio* and the stunning *Ophrys helenae*. The tall spikes of velvety red-purple unmarked flowers are unique among European bee orchids. Red Squirrels and woodpeckers are in riverside trees and overhead soar Short-toed Eagles and White Storks.

### Day 4

#### Mount Smolikas

High on Smolikas, Greece's second highest mountain, are meadows coloured a vibrant yellow by swathes of the local 'columnae' subspecies of Cowslip, interspersed with patches of blue *Anemone apennina*. Curiously, the Black Pine that dominates the lower slopes gives way to Beech woods higher up where we can look for Black Woodpeckers and watch the skies for occasional Honey Buzzards and Golden Eagles. Rock Thrushes sing from prominent perches and Queen of Spain Fritillaries flutter amongst the masses of flowering *Helleborus cyclophyllus*. Yellow Elder-flowered Orchids are common and we shall see some lovely salmon-red forms too. Frilly-sepaled *Orchis ovalis* grows amidst grape hyacinths and the pretty green and brown

bells of *Fritillaria thessala*. The road takes us a little higher where leopard-spotted trunks of the Panzer Pine emerge from snowpatches where we can enjoy one of the sights of the Pindhos - tight groups of glowing purple-pink *Crocus veluchensis* mixed with bright blue *Scilla bifolia*. Rare *Crocus cvijicii* offer their golden goblets up to our cameras amidst patches of charming *Corydalis bulbosa*. Permanent pools host Great Crested and Alpine Newts, the males of the latter a picture in their bright orange and blue breeding dress. An even more striking amphibian occurs a little lower down in pools lined with the butterwort, *Pinguicula crystallina*. When disturbed these Yellow-bellied Toads curl up their feet and expose their belly exhibiting the brilliant yellow-orange pattern there-on - enough to make anyone take a step backwards!

## **Days 5 & 7**

### **The Vikos Gorge & The Papingos**

The magnificent limestone Towers of Papingo and the thousand metre deep Vikos Gorge are part of a scenery as magnificent as anywhere in Europe. At Mikro Papingo we park the minibuses under a plane tree by a picturesque church before walking along cobbled streets past vines overhanging the high walled gardens. Deep-eaved gateways allow us a glimpse into the tranquil old mansions typical of the Zagorahori, the distinctive villages that give such atmosphere to this region. Balkan Rock Lizards and blue-headed Dalmatian *Algyroides* sun themselves on garden walls. Mats of beautiful *Saxifraga marginata* covered in creamy-white flowers adorn a truly remarkable limestone 'karst' where crevices are decorated with the perfect mauve flowers of *Ramonda serbica* and the strange red *Saxifraga stribnyi*. Another of the villages, Monodendron, has a lovely taverna beneath 'the one tree' which will host us for lunch and later we'll walk along a cobbled street or 'kalderimi' to a monastery perched on the precipitous walls of the Vikos Gorge. The views are sensational! Cliffs are home to *Asphodeline lutea* and superb *Fritillaria graeca*. Alpine Swifts and Red-rumped Swallows course back and forth in the band of blue sky visible through native Horse Chestnuts and Hop Hornbeams.

## **Day 6**

### **A Secret Place!**

We've promised to keep the exact location of this marvellous spot a secret! So - amid idyllic meadows and oaks... are hundreds of deep blood red *Paeonia peregrina* forming just part of a richly varied flora - an unforgettable sight. Single peonies mix with a variety of orchids and vetches and then merge into thick swathes smothered in the spectacular blooms. Under the trees are splashes of white, the large flowers of Bastard Balm looking like snapdragons from afar. Stately Lady Orchids grow in dry meadows with Burnt-tip Orchids, these dark-topped beauties grow to a surprising stature here. Under the trees are elegant Sword-leaved Helleborines and fine specimens of the Violet Birdsnest Orchid. The distinctive and rare *Ophrys epirotica* grows under the oaks, the pretty brown-lipped flowers are strongly yellow edged and

seem to glow in the gloom. Pale *Ophrys hebes* flowers with these and so too the only recently described *Ophrys leucophthalma*. A chapel hidden amongst the oak woods offers a choice picnic spot. Middle-spotted and Lesser-Spotted Woodpeckers join Nuthatches in the oaks around it whilst Scarce Swallowtails and overwintering Large Tortoiseshells fly through the glades - you'll want to live here!

## **Days 8-10**

### **Nidri & the Amvrakikos Gulf**

The Amvrakikos Gulf is one of Europe's largest and most intact remaining wetlands. Purple Herons, Little Bitterns, Dalmatian Pelicans, Glossy Ibis and Spoonbills feed in flooded fields, these hosting *Orchis palustris* and Flowering Rush. A limestone knoll decorated in Love-in-the-mist and lustrous *Ophrys ferrum-equinum* and *Ophrys spruneri* offers a great view out over reedbeds and marshes where we can watch Ruff and Marsh Harriers amid swathes of Lax-flowered Orchids. Down by beautiful Nidri a deep bay is surrounded by woodland and abandoned terraces where Hermann's Tortoises are common. Here one can enjoy such beauties as *Ophrys cornuta*, *Ophrys phryganae*, *Ophrys mammosa*, Bug Orchid and various *Serapias* including *politisi*. Lunch by the water's edge will see us admiring Southern White Admirals and strikingly marked Southern Swallowtails as well as European and Scarce Swallowtails.

## **Days 11, 12 & 14**

### **Metsovo and the Katara Pass**

We stay in the delightful old Vlach capital of Metsovo. Originally shepherds, the Vlach, who incidentally don't speak Greek but rather a Romance dialect, became wealthy because of their position occupying a pass on a major trade route. Botanists have long-regarded this as a wealthy area too, as the 1705m Katara Pass gives easy access to large tracts of fine alpine countryside. Hundreds of thousands of *Fritillaria montana* flower with swathes of yellow Cowslips and blue Muscaris. Their bells range from greeny-brown through a panoply of dark pastels to striking deep burgundy - a spectacular sight! Not to be outdone, some very robust *Fritillaria graeca* grows near our hotel and on the Katara's serpentine screes the dwarf endemic *Fritillaria epirotica* grows with the beautifully scented *Daphne blagayana*.

## **Day 13**

### **Monasteries of Meteora**

These extraordinary monasteries perched on chaotic rock pinnacles are quite simply one of the most amazing sights in Europe. Just over an hour's drive east of the pass the huge rocks loom out of a wooded landscape rich in butterflies and flowers, the latter including the gorgeous Reinhold's Bee-Orchid. Chough and Crag Martins enjoy the vertical aspects of the landscape whilst maquis is home to Black-eared Wheatears, Red-backed Shrikes and Orphean Warblers. Raptors are plentiful with

Egyptian Vultures quite common and Levant Sparrowhawk displaying above remnant Oriental Plane forests. Legend has it that St Athanasios flew up to the rocks on the back of an eagle and founded the first of the many monasteries. It is difficult to conceive of any likelier story when you study the smooth vertical rock faces - most of the Meteora routes are graded 'advanced' by modern-day rock climbers with high-tech climbing gear!

## **Day 15**

### **Return to the UK**

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