

## Sicily & Sardinia

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1

##### Arrive Catania

The western slopes of ten thousand foot Mount Etna will be lit by the late afternoon sun as we drive south from Catania's airport. Etna is still an active volcano though it is three hundred and fifty years since the town was last engulfed in lava. The town centre has since been built from blackish-grey lava blocks! Along roadsides pretty *Lathyrus clymenum* and *Antirrhinum siculum* bloom amongst Tree Spurge and white Asphodels, offering us a first glimpse of the local flora.

#### Days 2, 3 & 6

##### Monte Ible

The rugged gorges and abandoned limestone terraces of Monte Ible dominate the landscape to the west of Syracuse. A steady migration of Sicily's population from the mountainous interior to the coastal towns has left the terraces and dry stone-walled fields to revert to a more natural state. A situation just perfect for orchids and here we'll find very many. Ible hosts the majority of Sicilian species of bee orchid including several that are endemic to the island. Amongst masses of widespread *Ophrys fusca* and Sawfly Orchid we'll encounter beautiful *Ophrys biancae*, its large square flowers tinted yellow. Furry Mirror Orchids grow with two local specialities - endemic *Ophrys exaltata* and *Ophrys panormitana*. Naked Man Orchid thrives amongst *Anemone hortensis* and *Gladiolus italicus*, whilst upon slopes dominated by *Sarcopoterium* and *Erica multiflora* we'll encounter that most lovely of orchids, *Orchis longicornu*. The flowers of this species are very beautiful - pink sepals frame a deep plush-purple lip with a white pink-dotted centre. Another gem is the endemic *Ophrys lunulata* whose velvety labellum looks like it has been branded with batman's motif! Milky Orchids and impressive Giant Orchids mix with the lovely green and black flowers of Widow Iris whilst Green Lizards scurry away through Barbary Nuts, Pheasant's-eyes, Toothed Orchids and gorgeous *Ophrys bertolonii*.

#### Day 4

##### Valle Del Anapo & Pantalica Necropolis

A disused railway line provides us with a fine path along the Valle de Anapo through maquis and Oriental Plane woodlands to the Necropolis at Pantalica. Cetti's Warblers call from shrubbery by the river and Grey Herons are common. There are plenty of orchids too - *Ophrys incubacea* is abundant and here flowers with two yellow bee orchid species, *Ophrys lutea* and *Ophrys sicula*.

#### Day 5

## **Vendicari Nature Reserve**

The Vendicari Nature Reserve protects a fabulous mosaic of salt pans, salt marshes, lagoons and coastal phrygana. Groups of Greater Flamingos wade in salt pans inhabited by Spoonbills and Slender-billed Gulls and a rich assortment of waders including Black-winged Stilts. Great and Little Egrets fish in pools amid superb salt marsh vegetation that includes the local endemic sea lavender, *Limonium syracusanum*. Sea Holly and the lovely silvery-leaved *Medicago marina* adorn sandy shores and on limestone headlands amidst Dwarf Palms we'll see Sawfly Orchids and *Serapias cordigera*.

### **Day 7 Cassibile**

On the stark limestone hillsides either side of the impressive gorge of Cava Grande del Cassibile are tremendous shows of irises and orchids. Pastel yellow and brown *Iris pseudopumila* adorns rocky outcrops around which are many *Ophrys* species including some fine forms of *Ophrys bertolonii*. Patches of Pink Butterfly Orchid flower with Man Orchid and here we'll encounter yet another bee orchid found only in the southernmost regions of Italy, the large-flowered *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos*.

### **Day 8 Flight from Catania to Cagliari**

We have a morning flight which takes us direct to Cagliari on the island of Sardinia. As we touch down at Cagliari's international airport we'll likely see our first wildlife before disembarking - Greater Flamingoes feeding in the brackish lagoons alongside the airport! It is just a forty minute drive up to our agriturismo near the village of Turri and so we'll be settled into our rooms and still have time for a stroll before dinner. *Anemone hortensis*, Rosy Garlic and the lovely *Lathyrus clymenum* may be our first flowers in the olive groves and terraces across the road, and we'll soon find our first orchids. The large *Ophrys lutea* is the commoner of the 'yellow bee' types on this island and it grows near the hotel along with *Ophrys incubacea* and some fantastic Pink Butterfly Orchids.

### **Days 9 & 10 Giara de Gesturi**

From the Su Massau we'll make the short trip to the 'lost world' of the Giara di Gesturi. The landscape is as unexpected as it is strangely beautiful. Outcrops of pinky-black basalt emerge from marshy meadows and vast dwarf Cork Oak woodlands on plateaux that are two thousand feet above sea level. Prehistoric 'nuraghi' indicate man's long association with the region and these structures, rather pyramid-like in appearance, give the Giara an added air of otherworldliness. We'll soon find early-flowering orchids such as *Orchis lactea*, *Romuleas* and in places *Ranunculus*

*ophioglossifolius*. There are many pools and these are the favoured habitat of Tyrrhenean Tree Frogs and Tyrrhenean Painted Frogs. The endemic *Pancratium Illyricum* will hopefully be in flower nearby.

## **Days 11 & 14**

### **Sinis**

Two thousand hectares of dunes and lagoons is often, rather inaccurately, referred to as Sardinia's 'desert'. There is indeed plenty of sand - and we'll see such plants as *Aristolochia navicularis*, *Silene colorata* and *corsica*, *Mattihola Matthiola tricuspidata*, *Thymelaea tartonraira*, *Brassica tournefortii*, *Linaria sardoa* and **rare** *Helianthemum caput-felis*. Black-winged Stilts and Avocets are amongst a host of waders and on the nearby coast we'll encounter the rare Audouin's Gull. In the salt marshes a highlight will undoubtedly be the strange *Cynomorum coccineum*, parasitic on various chenopods. The dunes have a very good maritime flora with two species of *Dorycnium*, *Astragalus boeticus* and the lovely Barbary Nut joining the more usual medicks, stocks and champions. Under nearby pines we'll find the little green *Gennaria diphylla* and many very fine orchids. The very beautiful *Orchis longicornu* is a frequent sight and we'll see *Neotinea maculata*. Bee Orchids are very varied, and as well as the commoner species we'll encounter *Ophrys subfusca* and *Ophrys morisii*.

## **Day 12**

### **Cala Mosca & the Molentargius Marshes**

Cagliari itself has some wonderful wildlife sites practically within the city limits. The little headland of Cala Mosca has a rich flora along its pleasant trails. Shrubby *Globularia* drapes over banks where pink Weasel's-snout and orange-yellow *Fumana thymifolia* offer their blooms for inspection. Lovely little *Campanula erinus* is common and we'll find pretty *Convolvulus sicula* and *Succowia balearica*. Small groups of Corsican Finches, now generally split from Citril Finch, frequent this area. Butterflies will already be on the wing and amongst the Clouded Yellows and Cleopatras we'll pick out the occasional Corsican Dappled White. Stretching east from the headland are the Molentargius Marshes, one of Europe's top birding sites with nearly two hundred species recorded. Plentiful waders, gulls, terns and egrets will do a grand job if they can drag our attention away from the huge numbers of Greater Flamingoes. The locals call them the 'Esercito Inglese', the English Army, a reference to their ordered pink ranks!

## **Day 13**

### **Domusnovas and the Sa Duchessa Valley**

The hills and the valleys of the Fluminese provide excellent plant-hunting possibilities. A fine mixture of habitats have plenty of the typical flowers of the area such as Kidney Vetch and Friar's Cowl, Cretan Hounds-tongue and Honeywort, Star Clover and *Allium triquetrum*, *Saxifraga corsica*, *Cyclamen repandum* and *Genista corsica* and

the lovely deep red Asparagus Pea. Southern Festoons are a colourful sight and Sardinian Warblers scold red-eyed from spiny Calicotome. Fabulous furry Mirror Orchids are commonplace and there are Man Orchids, *Orchis provincialis* and *Serapias lingua* to keep photographers occupied. This is a remarkable area for bee orchids. As well as widespread Sawfly Orchid there's *Ophrys eleonora* with glowing lips of blue and purple, endemic *Ophrys chestermannii* with large velvety flowers, and the gorgeous grey, purple and pink oval-lipped *Ophrys morisii*.

Towards the coast lies a pinewood where the impressive flowers of the tongue orchids *Serapias cordigera* will impress. Violet Limodores will be about to flower and in the driest spots blooms the unusual bulb *Simethis mattiazii*. The bizarre latticed Stinkhorn emerges through pine needles

## **Day 15**

### **Laconi & Ortuabis**

As the land rises towards the impressive Monti del Gennargentu the scenery becomes ever more impressive. Partially wooded slopes are decorated with yellow *Anemone palmata* and the pretty little stars of *Romulea requienii*. Spring will barely have arrived yet already a bee orchid is blooming up here, the recently described *Ophrys ortuabis*, a species named after this very locality, as well as *Ophrys lepida*. Below are terraces with Giant Orchids, *Morisia monanthos*, *Ornithogalum corsicum* and *Gagea granatellii*. Everywhere we'll encounter the lovely pastel shades of Milky Orchids and unobtrusive little Bumblebee Ophrys. We'll visit the magnificently situated little-visited Nuraghi Adoni. Partially restored it provides a remarkable insight into the little-known stone-age culture that created it. *Ophrys eleonora* and Giant Orchids are frequent but it is the endemic Peony *Paeonia morisii* that offers a particularly breath-taking display.

## **Day 16**

### **Return to UK**

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