

The Orchids of Italy

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 oxyrhynchos*.

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*, *Mattiola* *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 andampions. 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

Flight Bari

We have a mid-morning flight direct to Bari. The rest of the day will be at leisure to explore the town or to take a rest...

Day 17

Bari's Wetlands and to Rodi Garganico

This morning we'll have the chance to explore some of the bird-rich wetlands around Bari. After lunch we'll head to the hills of the Gargano that start some forty minutes north of the town. We pass Lakes Lesina and Varano where the limestone hills of the peninsula plunge coastwards to the two pretty little white-walled towns of Peschici and Rodi Garganico.

Day 18

The North Coast

The coastline between Rodi and the stunningly situated cliff-top town of Peschici is quite beautiful. Hills covered in cistus roses and pines descend to a coast of white cliffs and small fields. Bushes of Jupiter's Beard and Tamarisk lie behind sand covered in medicks and pretty pink *Silene colorata*. Short turf on old dunes is an ideal habitat for orchids and we shall see perhaps a dozen species before lunch! Little patches of Bumble-Bee Orchids grow so thickly that they seem like grass and one has to be careful where one stands. The endemic *Ophrys garganica* and diminutive *Ophrys sicula* (a type of Yellow Bee Orchid) are hardly less common and with the spectacular large flowers of *Ophrys apulica* are two rather uncommon species, *Ophrys oestrifera* and *Ophrys incubacea*. Lunch will be taken below one of the many watch towers built to keep an eye out for marauding Turks - this one has the endemic *Campanula garganica* growing on it!

Day 19

Bosco di Spina Pulci, Lake Lesina & Cagnano

The hills rise sharply from the coast and as we reach the upper slopes the view north over the Lago di Lesina and the sea beyond is sublime. Perched atop the hills, the Bosco di Spina Pulci is an area of mixed limestone grassland and superb oak woodland. The ground flora is quite exquisite. Brilliant pink *Cyclamen repandum* is such a striking sight whilst in other areas blue *Anemone apennina* carpets the woodland floor mixed with violas and swathes of Pheasant's-eye Narcissus. Woodlarks and Mistle Thrushes and cattle laden with huge bells seem to emphasise the idyllic rural nature of this beautiful place. Still there are new orchids. The creamy-yellow spikes of Roman Orchids are a common sight and in the open areas we shall find one of the most beautiful of all the peninsula's bee orchids - the Spectacle Ophrys. The Gargano is surprisingly good for birds and the morning will see us at an excellent wetland - the Lago di Lesina. A cacophony of sound from Edible Frogs will greet us. Water Rails call frequently and Great Reed and Fan-tailed Warblers add their voices to the general din! Marsh Harriers float over the reeds and Bearded Tits are quite common. Later we will move to the hillsides above Cagnano where the panorama over the huge Lago di Varano is spectacular. The lush slopes hold lots of orchids - here we can find Spectacle Ophrys, and two specialities, the endemic *Ophrys parvimaculata* and *Ophrys archipelagi*, all growing together amongst *Lathyrus venetus* and the Mediterranean subspecies of Kidney Vetch.

Day 20

The Foresta Umbra

Today we traverse the famous Foresta Umbra en route to the south. Famous throughout Italy, the cool green beech, oak and hornbeam forest will be in early leaf and it is a delight to wander the paths across the open forest floor. Some of the trees

are huge - one roadside beech is five metres in circumference and forty metres tall. With all these trees about it is not surprising that woodpeckers are common. We should see Middle-spotted and Green Woodpeckers and with a little luck Black Woodpecker too. Collared Flycatchers which should just have arrived will be busy setting out their territories. Provence Orchid, a robust yellow orchid, blooms under these trees along with Sword-leaved Helleborines, the latter not always in flower at the time of the year. The pink flowers of *Dentaria heptaphylla* are quite striking and we shall find Spurge Laurel and Peonies before dropping towards the Carbonara Valley, its fields adorned with Wild Tulips.

Day 21

San Marco in Lamis

Swathes of Pink Butterfly Orchids grow with a rich assortment of other orchids. Green-winged Orchid and *Orchis italica* are both abundant and hybrids between the former and the butterfly orchid are common. On dry rockeries we can admire the uncommon Milky Orchid and Lady Orchid and these have Burnt-tip and Four-spotted Orchids for company. *Ophrys bertolonii* with its bright speculum set amid a dark purple-black hairy lip and set off by rich pinky-red sepals and petals is a magnificent thing. The closely related *Ophrys bertoloniiformis* will already be familiar to us but here is abundant and we shall also find the third of the triumvirate, the large-petalled *Ophrys promontorii*. Both the last two are endemic to the region! Sawfly, Yellow Bee, Early Spider and Dark Ophrys all grow amidst Asphodels, Grape Hyacinths, Rosy Garlic and lots and lots of rockroses, including the pretty white *Helianthemum apenninum*. Just a few plants of what is now known as *Ophrys lupercalis* can be found at this site.

Day 22

Manfredonia's Wetlands & Monte St Angelo

En route to the marshes and reed beds of the Vasca del Lago Salso we shall see the very rare endemic *Ophrys sipontensis*, this lovely bee orchid is only found in the vicinity of Manfredonia! The reedbed is very extensive and is home to many thousands of frogs - both Edible Frogs and Italy's own tree frog, *Hyla intermedia*. These little green frogs are very abundant as you'll hear but are not easy to find. A variety of terns fly above the reeds from which occasional Ferruginous Ducks fly. Elegantly plumed Little Egrets, Marsh Harriers, Purple Herons and various warblers will be much in evidence. Spoonbills, Glossy Ibises and Spectacled Warblers can be seen in the salt marshes by river. A little to the south are extensive salt pans with flocks of Greater Flamingos and colonies of Slender-billed Gulls looking resplendently pink in their breeding dress! In the afternoon there will be an opportunity to visit the nearby town of Monte St Angelo. The narrow streets are a delight and the 13th century Sanctuary of St Michael is a major pilgrimage centre, being the last on the "via Francigena" from France before pilgrims set sail for the Holy Land from the port of Manfredonia.

Magnificent many-flowered specimens of *Ophrys garganica* mix with the finest *Ophrys incubacea*, the two producing a wonderful selection of sometimes bizarre hybrids. Pink *Crepis rubra* and *Anemone pavonina* form a fine backdrop for stately Lady Orchids, patches of deeply coloured Four-spotted Orchids, and the unbelievably variable bright furry flowers of Bertoloni's Bee Orchid. Amongst the smaller bee orchids present are *Ophrys funerea* and the third member of the yellow bee orchid group, the tiniest among them, *Ophrys phryganae*. Green Hairstreaks are abundant as are Cirl Buntings and Stonechats. Nearby we'll search dry limestone slopes where locally rare *Serapias orientalis* and *Serapias apulica* grow with plentiful *Ophrys sicula*, Toothed, Burnt-tip and Lizard Orchids!

Day 23

Bosco Quarto

Narrow winding lanes take us up onto the Bosco Quarto amongst the stunning limestone karsts and oak forests of the Central Gargano. This area is perhaps the most sublimely beautiful in the region and certainly has the most remarkable floral show! Once again the sward is a carpet of *Anemone apennina* and *Narcissus poeticus*, but here also is *Corydalis cava* mixed with colonies of both yellow *Iris pseudopumila* and purple *Iris lutescens*. Another iris, *Hermodactylus tuberosus*, adorns open areas with its delicate green and black flowers and whole fields are turned blue or yellow by the lovely *Viola graeca*. Amazingly there's lots of orchids in all this. Swarms of purple Green-winged Orchids and yellow Elder-flowered Orchids mix with such beauties as Sparse-flowered Orchid and Spectacle Ophrys. Almond woods hold magnificent displays of Giant Orchid and Yellow Asphodel. Hawfinch, various woodpeckers and perhaps Wryneck are on the agenda while Buzzards and Montagu's Harriers drift by overhead.

Day 24

Departure

If time permits we can have another wander around the local orchid-rich fields before we depart for Bari Airport.

Or Matese Extension

Days 24 – 26

the Matese Mountains

An extension takes us to Molise, one of the smallest and most 'off the beaten track' regions in Italy, where a popular recurring joke is that "Molise doesn't exist". While very small, Molise is an area of green, rolling hills that rises from the Adriatic up to the impressive 2000+ metre peaks and ridges of the Matese Mountains bordering Campania. Fabulous high-altitude grasslands are covered with Spring Gentians, *Anacamptis morio*, *Orchis pauciflora*, *Bellevalia romana* and millions of yellow or

purple-blue *Viola eugeniae*. The gorgeous *Edraianthus graminifolius* should just be coming into bloom. Amongst a host of fine subalpine species we'll encounter the wild liquorice *Astragalus glycyphyllosi*, bright orange *Lilium bulbiferum*, *Valeriana tuberosa*, lots of *Trifolium alpestre*, pretty *Linum alpinum* and endemic *Erysimum apenninum*.

Extensive Beechwoods are full of *Dactylorhiza sambucina* and *Dactylorhiza romana*, *Anemone apennina*, *Corydalis cava*, *Cyclamen repandum* and *Scilla bifolia*... where the beech mixes with the endemic oak *Quercus dalechampii* the first *Paeonia officinalis* will be putting forth its scarlet goblets and around it a fine show of *Convallaria majalis*, *Lithospermum officinale*, *Scutellaria columnae*, and another endemic, *Iris marsica*. The Matese Mountains are largely limestone so there's plenty of orchids including rarities such as *Ophrys minipassionis* and the lovely yellow *Ophrys lacaitae*. At lower altitudes we can find *Himantoglossum adriaticum*, *Limodorum abortivum* and several species of *Serapias* growing amongst *Asphodelus macrocarpus*, *Anthericum liliago* and swathes of *Cistus creticus eriocephalus*.

Day 27

Depart from Naples

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