

Crete in Autumn 2024

A Greentours Trip Report

Led by Fiona Dunbar



Day 1 Sunday 13th October

To Spilia; Kolymbari shoreline and Gonia Monastery

Our first day at the lovely Spilia Village! I met Barbara and Carol as they arrived by taxi from their pre-tour few days staying in the Venetian Harbour area of old Hania, before heading to the airport to collect Gail and Janet. All went smoothly. There was an hour to wash up and change before we gathered for an afternoon trip to nearby Kolymbari. A brief walk on the beach allowed us to stretch our legs and examine a small area of dunes, sadly a habitat uncared for on Crete. Despite this, we saw a good population of fruiting Sea Daffodil, (*Pancratium maritimum*) and with a dozen or so in bud or flower, large, delicate white flowers emerging impossibly from the sand. Their seeds, littering the sand like chips of charcoal, mixed with pieces of pumice washed ashore from Santorini. Prickly Saltwort (*Salsola kali*), Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) and *Thymelaea hirsuita* were all in rather understated flower. Small whites and Common Blues were on the wing. There was one Loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) nest marked with sticks; it is the date on the stick indicated it had been laid in July and the hatchlings would have left many weeks ago, no signs of tracks remained.

There was an onshore breeze to cool the 28 degrees, but it was very pleasant to escape into the cool and calm of Gonia Monastery, founded at this position in the 17th century it played a pivotal role in local history. It has always been a shelter for the rebels of Crete and, thus, it was destroyed many times by the various conquerors including the Turks twice - there is a cannon ball lodged in the wall from the last attack in 1867. The Germans also attacked and the abbots, often at the forefront of rebellion against the invaders, fought in the Battle of Crete in the second world war. Much to be admired were the views over the bay, and the huge storage jars or pithoi planted with luxurious succulents and towering, scented basil. Returning to the hotel there was time for a rest or a dip in the pool before gathering for supper at the taverna on the square where we shared various starters and had traditional Sunday roast lamb. Several Scops Owls called as we left, some for a walk round the village or some for their rooms for the night.

Day 2 Monday 14th October

Marathocefala and the Rhodopou Peninsula

Our day began with an excellent buffet breakfast before meeting at 9 for a very short drive to Marathocefala. Right by where we parked the van were clumps of *Cyclamen graecum* in all shades of pink, and tall spikes of Sea squill (*Drimia maritima*) some forcing their way through the tarmac. Cicada instar shells were abandoned on the bases of the Calabrian Pine trees. Sharp-eyed Gail quickly spotted a Short-tailed Blue and a Raven mobbing a falcon. *Smilax aspera* scrambled over shrubs and trees such as Wild Olive, Kermes Oak (*Quercus coccifera*), Mastic tree (*Pistacia lentiscus*), Thorny Burnet (*Sarcopoterium spinosum*), and Jointed Pine (*Ephedra campylopoda*) – the latter unusual in being the only plant to release scent to attract pollinators regulated by the full moon. As we turned off onto a smaller track into the an area of Calabrian Pine we noted more flowers – flowering *Verbascum sinuatum*, Fennel (*Ferulago nodosa*), fruiting bramble (*Rubus sanctus*) the green flowered *Allium chaemaespathum* and the first of many Stink Aster (*Ditrichia graveolens*). At one point, a lovely Red-veined Darter, caused quite a stir as it alighted on a dead spike of this species. Cyclamen carpeted the ground in places, and we examined and then replaced a couple of corms that had been exposed by digging. They flowered in the path too, and here with leaves clearly displaying the variety of pattern possible in this species. Great Tit, Robin and later Wren flitted through the bushes and our first Swallowtail flew past. Walking out into an olive grove we reached a lone limestone boulder with cyclamen growing out of the side, the corm exposed. In this more open area we had views over the hills all the way to the coast. On the return walk Janet spotted a lovely example of the tiny *Narcissus obsoletus* growing with tiny red *Euphorbia dimorphocaulis* and a Red-veined Darter landed allowing a great view. Walking further up the hill was productive, with more Swallowtails, a pure white form of *Cyclamen graecum* and a wonderful Swallowtail caterpillar feeding on fennel. A Sparrowhawk flew overhead. Our morning ended with a walk round the cave church of Saint John (Yannis) before driving on to the west side of the Rodopou peninsula for lunch at a wonderful isolated taverna in a small cove. A Cretan Grayling had its territory here, and after an excellent lunch of salads and small pies, we spent a couple of hours swimming and snorkelling in the turquoise waters. Janet and I swam round to a cave where inside we could see a small colony of Pallid Swifts in the gloom. Turning the other way we could see the sunlight streaming in through the blue water and the towering limestone lip of the cave, amazing. Back on the beach, Gail had rested in the shade and we gathered here or swam again. Fish were plentiful in the waters, with Rainbow Wrasse and baby Sea Bream. A Little Egret flew past.



Driving on round the peninsula we stopped at a road cutting where I knew we could see some extraordinary fossils in the rocks. Difficult to work out at first, cross sections of large bony starfish were everywhere like strange bony mouths in the rock.

One final stop was for an area with golden seedheads of dried Wild Leek. *Cyclamen graecum* clumps were again scattered, and a real highlight was a Golden Eagle. Gail put us onto an obliging Willow Warbler flitting through the open scrub.

Finally, before returning to the hotel we visited an ancient olive tree in Vouves. Still flourishing and producing a good crop of olives, it is estimated to be a minimum of 2 and possibly as much as 4 thousand years old, with a base diameter of over 12 m.

Returning to the hotel we had an hour to change and shower before gathering for an excellent supper at the taverna.

Day 3 Tuesday 15th October

Elaphonisi and Topolia Gorge

The journey to the south coast passed through some fantastic scenery. Olive groves gave way to deciduous forest with Sweet Chestnut, Plane and White Oak, then colourful maquis with Strawberry tree. The road passes along the stunning Topolia Gorge, and then we began the descent to the coast. Here was classic spiny phrygana dominated by endemic thyme *Thymus capitatus* *Verbascum spinosum* and *Satureja thymbra*. On nearing the coast we dropped into an arid open area with scattered Calabrian Pine woodland.

On reaching Elaphonisi we parked and walked down to the sand bar that joins the island to the mainland through the beach bars and sun worshippers. Numerous Cardinal Fritillaries and Red darters were on the wing. We had a superb view of Eleanora's Falcon overhead, the first of three seen today. This year the sand bar was breached. Gail decided not to cross. Whilst on the mainland she added Clouded Yellow, Meadow Brown and Plain Tiger



to the list as well as Migrant Hawker. The rest of us waded across, which was fun, and walked round the edge of the island of next to dunes dominated by *Pancratium maritimum* largely in fruit, but with plenty enough still in flower to get good photos. There were numerous Red Darters. We examined the many shells on the beach as one does, and the pink sand that Elafonisi is famous for, formed from pelagic foraminifera shells. Tusk shells and Topshells were some that we found. Also impressive were large mats of Golden Samphire (*Inula crithmoides*) and Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*), Beach Euphorbia (*Euphorbia paralias*) Cottonweed (*Otanthus maritimus*) and the sticky, sand-covered leaves of rare *Silene succulenta*. More distant were large purple cushions of *Thymus capitatus* and magnificent old trees - endemic *Juniperus oxycephalus ssp macrocarpa*.

We wanted to swim again and settled down by some rocks to change. Janet and I had invested in goggles this morning so could join in with the snorkelers. The algae covered rocks were home to many fish, Rainbow Wrasse, little shoals of Goatfish with yellow tails, shoals of tiny silver fish, various silver and black ones. I was very pleased to see a Mediterranean Parrotfish and a scarlet Peacock Worm.

It was time to return across the sand bar and make our way back to the car via the loos and showers. A short drive back along the coast brought us to a shady area of Calabrian Pine where I prepared the picnic whilst the group wandered under the trees. There were around a dozen Plain Tigers and nearly as many Cardinal Fritillaries as well as Cretan Grayling and Red Admiral.



We broke the return journey with a view stop by Topolia Gorge. A pair of Griffon Vultures put in an appearance, and later a Raven. We persevered to find a place in the extensive strawberry tree and oak woodland where we could stop to get a good look at the strawberry trees which were in fine fruit – there are not many laybys! The verge was dominated by Thyme and Lesser Calamint (*Calamintha nepeta*). Janet pointed out a little Wall Lizard basking in the sun, and we tried eating the ripe but uninspiring Strawberry Tree Fruit. The name unedo is meant to refer to eating only once!

Our last stop of the day was for a short walk up to a church. *Cyclamon confusum* decorated the slopes, with shorter, wider flowers and more pronounced auricles than *graecum*, and seed pods that coil tightly to reach the ground. A dozen or so *Narcissus obsoletus* grew scattered by the path beneath the *Ballota psuedodictamnus*, Holm Oak and Mastic trees. Outside the church wall grows a fine scented Myrtle (*Mertus communis*). Sitting on the top of a small outcrop, the church looks out over the valley of Topolia and was backed by hillsides cloaked in oak and Tree Euphorbias (*Euphorbia dendroides*) which glowed in the afternoon light. Janet and I put in considerable effort in to reaching some gorgeous clumps of cyclamen on the steep, scrubby slopes, with some success!



For supper this night we drove the 5 minutes into Kolymbari to a fish restaurant for some local fish and had some beautifully grilled Sea Bream. As every night, the Scops Owls were calling as we returned to the hotel.



Today we donned walking boots and having stopped at the bakery to collect still hot pies we drove to the top of the Sirikari Gorge. The spectacular views as we drove were full of limestone outcrops towering over gorges and of the distant Gramvousa and Rhodopu peninsulas and were spectacular. Very helpfully everyone carried their own pies and having topped up water bottles we set off down into the gorge.

We picked our way carefully down the track that begins by dropping steeply into the gorge through an area of mixed woodland with White Oak (*Quercus pubescens*), Turpentine Tree (*Pistacia terebinthus*), Holm Oak (*Quercus coccifera*) Strawberry Tree () and Spiny Pear (*Pyrus spinosa*). All along the trail tall flowers of *Bellis sylvestris* and grew *Calamintha cretica* and a small flowered *Thymus leucotrichus*, and *Satureja thymbra* grew amongst the phrygana dominated by *Ballota pseudodictamnus* and *Phlomis fruticosa*. *Sacopoterium spinosum* and *Thymus capitus*.

The first clumps of beautiful *Cyclamen hederifolium* appeared in the walls and were to be with us for the rest of the walk. Very varied in colour, from palest pink to pale streaked with magenta, and many dark pink forms, the displays were a delight. Butterflies were fairly frequent, with many Cretan Graylings, Small White, European form of Speckled Wood, and the odd Red Admiral.

We reached a farm house which is in the process of being restored from ruins, and the track takes us through trees with edible offerings; olive, lemon, orange and walnut, then follows along the phrygana gorge side before dropping down to the edge of the dry riverbed filled with ancient Plane trees. Along this stretch we had superb views of Griffons, at first at the top of the cliffs which towered above us on both sides, but then they began flying over much, much lower – we thought their might be a dead something bringing them in near the farm buildings. We were lucky with the weather and had a good breeze and some cloud, but it was still pleasant to take breaks and admire the view. Plants came in patches, often for no apparent reason, so there was the area where Gail found Salad Burnet leaves, the area where there were scattered *Narcissus obsoletus* like little stars, and the area where golden yellow Autumn crocus *Stenbergia sicula* appeared. First 30 m away on a boulder, then when you started looking round they were 10 m away, until we finally looked by our feet and there was one by the path.



We were ready for lunch, and as luck would have it had just reached the picnic tables or at least planks balanced on rock walls by a drinking water source. Janet and I explored the dry riverbed, like a fairy grotto of cyclamen and ancient plane trees. Maidenhair, Rustyback and Asplenium ferns grew from the limestone boulders, and on top were more Autumn crocus, all mixed with more beautiful Cyclemen. Janet spotted our first *Colchicum pusillum* of the trip – usually we would have seen them at other sites but it has been a very dry year, Again, once having seen them, they were scattered all around. A wet flush by the path was indicated by more maidenhair fern, and again having stopped to look, *Origanum dictamnus* was in full flower a few metres above us, another

species fond of damper spots.

I think we were all flagging a bit by this point, but still enjoyed the small ancient stone bridge and the goats grazing in trees and with various sized brass bells on collars round their necks. At the end or beginning of the gorge there is an old chapel with an outdoor picnic area built for use for the local village and we rested there before tackling the climb to Polyrhinia. The golden grasses and wild leek heads were pleasant on the way up although it is steep! At the Old Cafeneon we were met by the owners friend who made us mountain teas and homemade lemonade and cakes which the group enjoyed whilst I took a taxi to scoop Gail up from the picnic spot and then collect the minibus. We again had a fantastic meal in the local taverna to round the day off.

Day 5 Thursday 17th October

Agia Lake, Omalos Plateau and a rural route home

We picked a breezy day to head up to the Omalos Plateau, altitude 1080 m. En route we broke the journey at Agia Lake but the strong wind was not helpful. However we had flocks of House Martins and huge patches of Squirting Cucumber which we helped squirt with great glee. *Heliotropium europeum* was in good flower. On the lake itself were a few Coots, a couple of Little Grebes and some Ferruginous ducks at a distance near a Little Egret and a number of Cormorants. Gail's find of a Lang's Short-tailed Blue was very obliging and a highlight.

Onwards and upwards to the Omalos, with herds of sheep and some view stops on the way. Once on the plateau it all looked very dry, not surprisingly. We drove slowly on round the plateau checking for crocus and colchicum in the fields as we went. We pulled over and found our first *Crocus laevigatus* fresh cream flowers with purple streaked outer petals and orange-yellow anthers, fully open in the sun. *Colchicum creticum* were scattered throughout. The architectural, dried thistles were noteworthy with a few still in flower, most dried to a golden yellow – Field eryngo, (*Eryngium campestre*) and *Carlina corymbosa* amongst them. The trees were a mix of *Acer creticum*, and *Zelkovia abelicea*, both endemic to the White Mountains, as well as Hawthorn and Holm Oak. The high winds produced one or two dust devils and seemed to be keeping the Griffon Vultures low – we had great views of these and Ravens. Flowering *Scolymus hispanicus* (Spanish Oyster Plant) and pink flowered Restharrow (*Ononis spinosa*) along the roadside. We stopped to get a good look at some endemic Zelkovia and also because 40 – 50 Griffon Vultures suddenly gathered very low down near

the top of the Samaria Gorge. We watched with delight for some time before they gained altitude and moved off.

For lunch we went to the Neo Omalos hotel where they kindly served us mountain teas and cake as we tucked into our picnic at their tables.



Eventually it was time to set off home, pausing for a lovely flock of Goldfinches and Linnets right next to us. More view stops, and a stop in an area of Chestnut woodland brought us to a bend in the road with a wet flush. A lovely lush display of *Woodwardia radicans*, Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) and Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum capillis-vernus*) liverworts as well as Black Spleenwort (*Asplenium nigrum*), Male Fern and a little Bracken were well worth admiring, in this little corner of mixed Plane, Chestnut and Strawberry Tree woodland.

Stopping again for a wonderful display of *Stenbergia lusia* in a garden we really had some luck – Gail and Barbera briefly spotted a Two-tailed Pasha flying by! Another lucky stop for me to send a text to another leader – we were right by an old fashioned Charcoal kiln smoking gently from vents all around; something I had never seen before.

Day 6 Friday 18th October

Transfer to Anapolis via the Niatos Plateau

After breakfast we briefly met up with Oron who was collecting some euros from me and we were on our way to Anapolis at 9.30. I decided to stop at the wetlands at Georgiopolis. Having navigated the new road junction we reached a viewing spot where clear blue spring water bubbles up and forms a lake. It proved quite productive with Ferruginous and Tufted Duck, a lone Teal, Grey Heron Cormorant, Little Grebe, Coot and Moorehen – and a flash of Kingfisher for Janet. The scrub and trees had been cleared in places along the road to allow better viewing of the waters which was nice. Plants included a scattering of Autumn Ladies Tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*) and *Clematis cirrosa* just coming into flower.

Having followed the coast road, we turned in and crossed the island via the Imbros Gorge. Great mounds of flowering *Clematis* clambered over olive trees by the road. Turning off we took the narrow winding road up to the Niatos Plateau, with erm, breathtaking views from every corner! Parking at the plateau we explored the area; a doline of red earth surrounded by barren limestone hills and outcrops. The cloud and wind of earlier disappeared, the sun came out. We saw no one else here at all. By the van were a scattering of *Colchicum cretensis* which were common and widespread on the plateau, and blue flowers of Spiny Chicory (*Cicorium spinosum*) which we had seen being

gathered by the roadside earlier this morning. Janet spotted a Dartford Warbler, and there were very



many Ravens. Barbara spotted some cyclamen flowers – a great find – this was the high altitude *Cyclamen candicum*. We found only a scattering of flowers, and some that were over but the thick leaves were wonderful in themselves with a tremendous variety of pattern and colour. In the same area around a limestone outcrop the trees were a mixture of *Acer cretica*, *Cypressus sempervivions ssp horizontalis*, Holm Oak and a scattering of Poplar. A threshing circle indicated that this plateau has been cultivated for a long time, hard to say



how long. Tucked into a rock behind this was *Paeone clusii* (another Cretan endemic) in fruit. It was time to move on, though we of course stopped for the cluster of tiny cream and purple *Crocus pumilus* which I had found just before Barbara stole the limelight with the Cyclamen. The tiny cream and purple flowers with orange anthers had opened beautifully in the sun. We wound our way cautiously down the track, regained the main road and tarmac and drove along the scenic Imbros Gorge before reaching stunning views of the sea below and the bays of the north coast towards Plakias.

We arrived at Anapolis and sat down at the taverna immediately for a late lunch. All our food had been good on this trip but Popi is an exceptional cook and her Gigantes (oven baked giant butter beans in tomato and olive oil) were mouth-watering.

We then were shown our rooms (which all share a balcony overlooking the mountains) and there was time for unpacking and a rest. At 4.30 we reconvened for a local walk. We started by a new little shrine planted up with flowering garden plants. It was a butterfly haven and we saw Cardinal Fritillary, Painted Lady, Brown Argus, Lang's Short-tailed Blue and a pretty Mallow Skipper in a few minutes. Strolling on through past old field systems which now were mostly limestone boulder with terra rosa patches between, Janet soon spotted the first *Colchicum macrophyllum*. As we walked further we found many more despite signs that many had been grazed off recently, pale pink, deep cerise and all shades in between.



The group walked back to the hotel and there was time to rest and wash and brush up before eating another superb selection of traditional Greek dishes cooked by Popi.

Day 7 Saturday 19th October

Arendaina Gorge and Anopolis surrounds

A swift pre-breakfast walk did not produce any birds, but we did watch the sun colour the tops of the mountains pink. A simple breakfast of bread and home-made jams, yoghurt and honey, fresh orange juice and tea and coffee was next, and then the 2 k drive to Arendaina. Just as we were parking Gail spotted a pair of Stonechats which were briefly joined by a Sardinian Warbler. The small chapel which marks the far side of the gorge was only a few hundred metres away, but we would be taking the ancient Kalderimi down one side of the gorge and up the other to reach it. The term kaderimi dates back to the Turkish occupation of Greece but the road itself may be much older; they run along Roman or Venetian road lines and are built in such a way that two pack horses can safely pass This was the only way into Arendaina until the Bailey bridge was built in the '60's. Around the top of the path we found a couple of delightful *Biarum davisii*, tiny arum flowers that emerge directly from the ground. One was sitting under a tiny stone arch in a very mouse-like way. Stenbergias were tucked into crevices, with lots of



Ranunculus bulbosus and scattered *Delphinium staphisagria* seedlings. Towards the bottom of the gorge the vegetation changed as we reached cooler, shadier areas. There were rosettes of sedums, *Rosularia serrata*, Roman Nettle (*Urtica pilulifera*), tiny *Cheilanthes acrostica* and Rustyback ferns (*Asplenium ceterach*). Shrubby chasmophytes included the cliff dwelling mullein *Verbascum arcturus* and *Ptilostemnon chamaepeuce*. Figs and Quercus, Juniper and Black Pine grew from the cliffs. Walking down the narrow gorge it was cool and narrow, and before long we reached a point where the Bailey bridge could be seen high above the gorge. I was very pleased with a little patch of flowering *Origanum dictamnus*. Working our way up the other side of the gorge, Carol pointed out a vigorous fig tree growing out of the cliff, the exposed root of which snaked down 5 m at least towards the promise of water at the bottom of the gorge. Autumn Squill and wall lizards were noted on the way up the other, sunnier side. Reaching the top, our walk took us through the largely abandoned village of Arendaina, which was clearly a prosperous village in its time with large stone houses which commonly featured impressive stone arches. Now, other than one or two buildings which are renovated, the ruins are home to a herd of goats. The ancient olive groves are still tended of course, and bee hives set out.

Cold drinks at the tiny café next to the bridge, and time to look for the *Colchium macrophyllum* growing on the rocks at the top of the gorge, which I found, but more interesting were the pair of Blue Rockthrushes and three Pied Flycatchers. Walking over the bridge is an experience in itself, and on by the road were flowering Friars Cowl, *Narcissus obsoletus*, *Colchicum creticum* and *pusillum*, and lots of *Ranunculus bulbosus*.



Lunch was home made lentil soup back at the taverna, then sorting out boarding passes for tomorrow and a rest before heading out again. Agia Katarina has fabulous views over the Aegean Sea, the small harbour of Loutro reachable only by sea or on foot, and the footprint of the buildings, small field systems and terraces of Ancient Anapolis. Barbara and Carol walked back to our taverna, Janet walked a longer route along part of the kaderimi which goes down to Loutro.

Day 8 Sunday 20th October To the airport and home, or onto the Peloponnese

An uneventful but scenic drive to the airport, via the Venetian Harbour of Hania to drop Barbara and Carol at their hotel, and then Janet for her flight. Gail and I had time for a short visit to the monastery of Agia Triada with its serene courtyard and beautiful pithoi planted with succulents, before taking our flight to Athens to join the Peloponnese tour.

