

Crete

Spili & The White Mountains

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1-8

Spili and the flowers of the Gious-Kambos Plateau, coastal Triopetra, Phaestos's ruins, snowmelt flora of Psiloritis, and Agios Ioannis

We have chosen Spili for our base because of its peaceful and friendly atmosphere as well as its superb location. We shall explore the local hillsides and will soon find ourselves amongst the flowers Crete is famous for. Anemones and Cretan Cyclamen are common whilst the odd-looking Friar's Cowl protrudes from rock crevices. The plateau of Gious-Kambos, above Spili (a ten-minute drive), is the centre-piece of the holiday. Here we shall see flowers en masse, particularly the orchids and irises, you'll take a lot of photographs here! The limestone seems to be covered in orchids everywhere you look; shocking-pink Naked Man Orchids mix with Milky Orchids and the stunning blues of *Iris cretensis* and Barbary Nut. Focusing in on the purple, we find sheets of the endemic Boryi's Orchid and the gorgeous little Four-spotted Orchid, surely one of the most delicate of its genus. Shining yellow turns out to be Sparse-flowered Orchids which are sometimes incredibly abundant. Amongst the many bee orchids the pastel shades of Sawfly Orchid are always a favourite, as are the stately spikes of Late Spider Orchid, *Ophrys heldreichii* and the sensational Rainbow Ophrys. *Ophrys fusca* is split on Crete into subspecies *creberrima*, *cressa* and *creticola*, whilst the much more obviously distinct Yellow Bee Orchid is replaced by *Ophrys sicula* and *phrygana*. Bumble-Bee Orchid and the varied and beautiful Cretan Bee Orchid are all common. Two species of Tongue Orchid, the locally abundant *Serapias bergonii* and the elegant *Serapias lingua*, bloom with rarer *Serapias orientalis* and *cordigera*, diminutive Dense-flowered Orchid and the extraordinary Widow Iris. We shall see meadows coloured red with the extremely rare and local *Tulipa doerfleri*, sweetly-scented *Narcissus tazetta* will be nearing the end of its flowering period. The subtle pink *Tulipa saxatilis* will be found in colonies on the rocks and, best of all, there is a large colony of thousands of *Fritillaria messanensis*. Hopefully we'll have time to look around and see the odd Tree Frog, Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture or Montagu's Harrier!

The Cretan countryside is dotted with tiny chapels, many of Byzantine origin. They suddenly appear amongst gnarled old olives, or as we round a bend in a quiet green lane, lined with an extraordinary variety of shrubs and fruit trees that attract butterflies such as the Cretan Festoon and Cleopatra. Maidenhair Fern and *Viola cretica* grow in the damp places, and the red data book endemic *Origanum dictamnus* on the cliffs.

From the high country above Spili there are magnificent views northeastwards where the scene is dominated by Psiloritis, ancient Mount Ida, at this season the higher slopes with plenty of snow. We'll spend a day exploring the slopes where a road allows us access all the way up to the famous Idaean Cave, in ancient times venerated as the Cave of the Goddess by Minoans and Hellenes, and in Greek times rededicated to Zeus. Many thousands of *Romulea bulbocodium* carpet our picnic site, attracting impressive bees and beetles. Blue stars of *Scilla nana* shelter under low *Berberis* with *Corydalis uniflora*. *Gagea chrysantha*, *Lithospermum incrassatum*, and diminutive *Myosotis incrassatum* find protection among rocks. Golden Eagles are seen on most visits and as well as pipits and wheatears there are plenty of Red-billed Choughs. Endemic *Arum idaeum* is just in flower some years, and we'll look for rock hugging *Prunus prostrata*, whose blooms cover a bewildering array of shades of pink. Due to the altitude, this day is weather dependant, but we have lots of other sites to visit if it is not possible.

We'll visit the valleys south of Spili where we should see at least twenty-five species of orchid as well as large numbers of *Tulipa cretica*. The extraordinary diversity is partly explained by the varying rock types, from vivid green metabasite to limestone, and partly also by quite substantial changes in altitude - all made easy by the minibus! A very confiding Lammergeier often cruises past as we picnic in this valley. A tiny Byzantine chapel sits amid ancient terraces knee-deep in orchids such as the wonderful pink and blue *Ophrys spruneri* and impressive *Ophrys episcopalis*. The orchids are incredibly varied and include *Ophrys omegaifera*, *Ophrys gortynia*, *Ophrys holoserica*, *Barlia robertiana* and *Orchis simia*... and just round the corner, *Orchis provincialis*...

We can expect to find Bug Orchid, Monkey Orchid, *Serapias orientalis* and the endemic *Ophrys cretensis* in or close by the Minoan archaeological site at Phaestos. Tracks lined with beautiful pink *Ebenus cretica* take us to through groves where Spiked Star of Bethlehem, Dragon Arum and the enigmatic Mandrake grow. Swathes of Turban Buttercups mix with *Orchis collina*, Naked Man and other orchids. *Cistus creticus* and *salvifolius*, and *Ophrys holoserica* and *Ophrys mammosa* are in fine form here. Definitely one of our favourite spots!

The hillsides and olive groves are very good for migrating birds and we hope to see both Pied and Collared Flycatchers, a variety of warblers, Serins, Golden Orioles and Black-headed Wagtails. There are many small villages set amid an enchanting landscape, and richly-frescoed Byzantine churches, one of which we will visit.

A visit to Triopetra could be taken as a chance to relax on the beach for the morning, or explore a very different habitat, where salt-pans, arid steppe, cliffs and a windswept promontory hold a long list of plants which we are unlikely to see elsewhere. The promontory here is also ideal for sea-watching for shearwaters and

various herons and Little Egrets on migration. Several unusual butterflies have been found here, such as *Pseudophilotes vicrama* and Cretan Grayling.

Days 9 – 11

Plakias – Preveli, Kotsifou & Koutaliotis Gorges & the Damnoni Peninsula

Crete's south coast is very sunny and summer will already be well on its way. The dunes at Plakias have a rich flora, and several butterflies will already be on the wing. Early morning walks here are sure to pick out migrants and a sheer and strangely smooth cliff hosts the endemic *Verbascum arcturus* and *Campanula tubulosa*. The beach and sea here are most inviting if the sun's out! Down at Preveli we can find one of the few stations for the Mediterranean's native Date Palm. Many weird and wonderful plants grow in the almost desert-like environment of the Damnoni Peninsula including some of the tiniest Barbary Nuts you will ever see! The intense lilac-blue *Orobanche lavandulacea* parasitises Pitch Trefoil by roadsides. This is a great place to see Black-eared Wheatears and Blue Rock Thrushes.

Crete's craggy limestone gorges are justly famous among connoisseurs of both scenery and flora, and we will show you the easily accessible parts of two very different ones. Griffon Vultures wheel overhead and Crag Martins zoom backwards and forwards through the narrow defiles. There is the chasmophytic (cliff-dwelling) flora to see, including such unusual species as *Linum arboreum*, two kinds of *Stachelina*, as well as a great show of one of Crete's most beautiful plants, the Cretan Arum. We will finish in a cupressus woodland with Tree Heather and Strawberry Tree and explore some tiny terraces where *Dactylorhiza romana* grows, as well as the strange parasitic *Cytinus hypocistis*. These woodlands are great for migrants such as Semi-collared Flycatchers.

Days 12 - 14

The White Mountains - Anapoli

Anapoli is a tiny village situated at 600m on a plateau at the base of the White Mountains. Nearby, an exquisite Minoan mule track zig-zags down into the beautiful Aradhena Gorge from the atmospheric abandoned village of the same name. The shady, vertical cliffs are a haven for relict, 'old endemic' species such as *Petromarula pinnata*, and the pretty white flowers of *Procopiana* mix with *Delphinium staphisagria* and spectacular Dragon Arums which are abundant here. We'll visit an arm of the Imbros Gorge where we'll find *Crepis rubra* and the huge white-flowered *Paeonia clusii*. Hawthorns attract Cirl Buntings and Wheatears.

A shepherd's track enables us to drive up to the snow line below Mount Paknes. The endemic flora contains some gorgeous alpine species such as the delicate yellow *Viola fragrans* which peeks shyly from rocky crevices, and *Gageas bohemica* and *chrysantha* growing with lovely *Lithospermum incrassatum* near snow patches. There

are spectacular displays of *Crocus sieberi*, *Scilla nana* and the gob-smacking domes of intense blue-flowered *Anchusa caespitosa*. The views and geology up here are remarkable. A path leads us to humps and domes of Prostrate Cherry flowering next to mats of wild *Aubrieta deltoidea*. The views are breath-taking with tremendously gnarled and stunted endemic Cedars against a background of stark mountains and cliffs.

Day 15

Departure

A short journey takes us back to Heraklion where we'll start our journey home.

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