

Cilento & Calabria

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Naples and transfer to Coastal Campania

We'll land at Naples Airport and drive south passing the lovely Sorrento Peninsula before reaching the wild coastal mountains of Cilento. Olive groves close by our quiet rural hotel will already be alive with colourful anemones. Wands of ivory *Bellevia romana* emerge from the anemone throng and there's much *Cerinthus major*. Paths wander through maquis replete with flowering Tree Heather with an understory of *Prasium majus* and a rich variety of flowers including *Allium roseum* and the last blooms of the unusual Widow Iris *Hermodactylus tuberosus*.

Day 2

Cilento Mountains & Palinuri boat trip

Three east-west mountain ridges form the backbone of the spectacular landscapes of Cilento. The stunning landscapes and the cultural history combine to justify Cilento's status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park protects much of this sublime landscape – it is Italy's second largest national park. The mountains are impressive. Monte Bulgheria reaches over 4000 feet above sea-level before dropping precipitously to the deep blue Tyrrhenian Coast. White cliffs hug beautiful crescents of sand, unreachable by anything but boat.

Virgil's Aeneid recounts how Palinurus, the helmsman of the Trojan Aeneas's ship was singled out for sacrifice off this coast to ensure the safe passage of all on board, he was drugged by the god of sleep and thrown overboard and the beach of Cilento took his body. Today, one of the Europe's most unusual and beautiful Primula's honours Palinurus's name. Decorating the coastal cliffs above those same beaches *Primula palinuri* is perhaps one of Europe's most unusual wild flowers. Large umbels of bright yellow flowers top a rosette of large lime green leaves in cracks in the cliff, an arresting and beautiful site. It has an extremely restricted distribution in coastal areas of the Southern Tyrrhenian Sea. A fantastically architectural mini-forest of *Euphorbia dendroides* cloaks the slopes and drapes from the cliffs.

And there are orchids. Particularly prevalent in the area is *Dactylorhiza romana*, but there are many bee orchids too including Bumble-Bee Orchid, Early Spider Orchid and the lovely *Ophrys exaltata*.

We'll take a boat trip from Marina di Camerota along this most scenic of coasts to a secret place where we'll see the very best displays of the Primula along with the rare *Fritillaria messanensis* subspecies *gracilis*, a recently described form which is known

from only three sites. Tufts of white *Iberis semperflorens* are a fine sight amongst the strawberry trees. At this season you can see the strawberry trees in fruit and in flower!

Day 3

To Riace in Calabria via the Pollino Massif

We'll start our journey to Calabria along quiet lanes through the higher mountains that offer wonderful views down to brilliant blue Tyrrhenian Sea. Here amongst lovely open woodlands of Turkey Oaks, Beech, Downy Oaks, Manna Ash, Hornbeam and Sweet Chestnut we can find plentiful *Helleborus foetidus* as well as *Anemone hortensis* and *Romulea bulbocodium*. Stands of *Viburnum tinus* are smothered in white blooms, making for a perfect picture with the green and grey mountain slopes and the cobalt sea below. Golden Eagle is a rare resident of these mountains though they'll be obvious in the skies at this season and we can also see Rock Partridge which is still tolerably common in the area.

Red Kite and Egyptian Vulture soar over the extensive beech forests of the Pollino Massif. The area is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is protected by Italy's largest national park. We may see Black Woodpeckers in the impressive beech trees and are sure to see the symbol of the park, the rare Bosnian Pine.

Day 4

Stilo

Renowned as one of the most beautiful village in all of Italy (and there's a fair bit of competition for that accolade) Stilo has spectacular views over the Ionian coastline. We'll spend the day exploring both the village itself and the wildlife rich olive terraces that surround it.

Days 5, 6 & 7

Aspromonte National Park and Saline Joniche

Calabria is arguably the most remote and least developed region of Italy cut off from the rest of the peninsula by the Pollino Massif which rises to over 2000 metres above sea level on one side and by the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Sea on the other. This makes this rugged and wild peninsula more isolated even than Sicily itself! Calabria was also the part of Italy longer and more closely connected to the Byzantine Empire, and in the Aspromonte National Park people in the mountain villages still speak a Greek dialect. Calabria is still pretty unknown to orchid enthusiasts from abroad, however there's a small but very active local community of experts, and we'll visit some of their 'secret' sites in the area, led there by Luigi Torino, a physicist by occupation who is now arguably the most knowledgeable orchid specialist of Calabria. The South of Calabria has much in common wildlife and orchids-wise with Sicily, and we'll see perhaps 30 taxa (species and hybrids) of orchids, plus a wide variety of other Mediterranean flowers and wildlife of early Spring.

There are wonderful shows of *Anacamptis morio* and we'll find the altogether more refined *Anacamptis longicornu*. The Green-winged Orchids hereabouts sometimes hybridise with Pink Butterfly Orchids, the resultant hybrid being named as *Anacamptis x gennarii*. There's lovely Milky Orchid in abundance and with Man and Pink Lady Orchids we can find the delicate *Orchis brancifortii*. Not surprisingly it is with the Bee Orchids that we'll find the most exquisite variety. Amongst more widespread species such as *Ophrys tenthredinifera*, *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys lutea* and *Ophrys sicula* we'll find so many that are much more local such as *Ophrys passionis*, *Ophrys exaltata* and *Ophrys brutia*. There's a local form of Dull Bee Orchid known as *Ophrys obaesa*, large-flowered *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos*, *Ophrys gracilis*, and the brightly coloured *Ophrys apulica*.

We'll also visit the saltpans at Saline Joniche where we can see an abundance of wetland species such as Black-winged Stilts, White-winged, Whiskered and Sandwich Terns, Zitting Cisticolas and migrant waders such as Temminck's Stints and Kentish Plovers.

Day 8

Departure, or on to Sicily with Stefano

This morning there'll be a final chance to wander the flowery olive groves around the hotel before departing from the local airport in Reggio Calabria. Or one can continue with Stefano on to the Sicily tour!

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