

Cilento, Calabria & Sicily

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 salt pans 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

Across the strait of Messina to Sicily

This morning there'll be a final chance to wander the flowery olive groves around the hotel before driving west to catch the ferry over to Sicily. The western slopes of ten thousand foot Mount Etna will be lit by the late afternoon sun as we drive from the ferry port to the Feudo Bauly, our hotel for the entire stay on the island. 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 9, 10, 11 & 14

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 12

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 13

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 15

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 16

Return to the UK

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