

Provence

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 Arrive Nice

Just inland of the Cote d'Azur's sun-kissed beaches hardly a stone's throw from the airport, is a different Provence, a land of wonderful and often surprising landscapes, and beautiful gardens and Chateaux. We'll stay in one such, the elegant Chateaux Saint Roux.

Day 2 Plaine des Maures

The Chateaux Saint Roux is a perfect base to explore the Massif des Maures, an astonishing "wooded savannah" where large red-ochre rock slabs emerge from a landscape unique in France, and which is home to a mosaic of rare ecosystems.

Nearly five thousand hectares is protected in the National Reserve of the Plaine de Maures. The combination of geographical position and diversity of habitats has endowed the Maures region with a remarkable wealth of flora. The immense savannah-forests of Cork Oaks dotted with Stone Pine and Maritime Pine, with an understory of pretty pink *Cistus albidus*, is a haven for all sorts of wonderful flora in spring. Chief among them are the tubby bells of *Fritillaria involucrata* as well as abundant *Iris lutescens*, *Leucojum pulchellum* and delicate *Romulea rollei*. Amongst *Gladiolus dubius*, *Narcissus poeticus* and *Anemone hortensis*, the delicate *Anacamptis champagneuxii* flowers. Indeed it's a good area in particular for orchids with Milky Orchid, Provence Orchid and Pink Butterfly Orchid as well as two nice Tongue Orchids in the shape of *Serapias strictiflora* and the wide-lipped *Serapias cordigera*. We may also find the first blooms of the *Ophrys scolopax*, and the local *Ophrys splendida*, indeed a rather splendid bee orchid!

Streams and temporary ponds constitute natural mosaic habitats that cover a small area but have many rare species particularly associated with them. There are several frog species as well as European Pond Terrapins, and unusual plants such as *Isoetes duriei*, *Ranunculus revelieri*, *Ophioglossum lusitanicum*, *Ranunculus ophioglossifolius* and *Cicendia filiformis*. Most unusual are the mesophilic chamomile lawns of Tongue Orchids with rare *Serapias neglecta* and *Serapias alba*. Growing with them are *Kickxia commutata*, *Anthericum liliago*, *Allium chamaemoly* and *Romulea columnae*. Hermann's Tortoises like to graze them! Traditionally managed Chestnut groves are very rich in herbaceous species with beauties such as *Vicia melanops*, *Vicia laeta*, *Doronicum plantagineum* and *Tulipa australis*. Cool valleys with Alders and Limes have damp undergrowth full of perhaps surprising ferns such as *Osmunda regalis*, *Phyllitis scolopendrium* and *Blechnum spicant*, all very rare in Southern France. We'll explore thermophilic cork oak forests where rare *Adenocarpus telonensis* is associated with xerophilous

ridges. Both *Tuberaria guttata* and *Tuberaria lignosa* are found along quiet forested roads where we'll also encounter Nettle Tree Butterfly and the lovely Southern Festoon flying amongst *Biscutella cichoriifolia*, *Genista pilosa*, *Ornithogalum angustifolium* and the elegant *Aristolochia rotunda*.

Day 3

Sainte Baume

The limestone ramparts of Sainte Baume lie only twenty kilometres as the Alpine Swift flies from the Mediterranean yet the feeling here is more of the mountains of central Europe. Lovely *Hepatica nobilis* blooms in the woodlands that adorn the less precipitous slopes, the ridge itself reaching 1147m above sea level. On the rocks are *Iberis saxatilis* and delicate open cushions of *Saxifraga fragosoi*. Under the trees we can find *Geum sylvaticum*, *Astragalus incanus*, *Euphorbia flavicoma*, *Muscari neglectum* and *Ophrys fusca*, whilst more open grassy and rocky areas have *Aceras anthropophorum*, *Dactylorhiza sambucina* and *Muscari neglectum*. Here it is Spanish Festoon that will draw admiration for its complex and beautiful patterns, and other butterflies include Baton Blue and the yellow and orange Moroccan Orange-tip.

Day 4

Hyeres and Toulon

Today we'll explore the Toulon and Hyeres area. This area is really Mediterranean with hot summers and warm winters, indeed it is famed as an area that grows palms really well. *Cistus* love these conditions and there is still much natural and semi-natural vegetation in the area dominated by *Cistus albidus*, *Cistus monspeliensis*, *Cistus salvifolius*. Orchids punctuate the open areas, in particular the Giant Orchid, *Himantoglossum robertianum*, which is very common, and so too the tongue orchid *Serapias neglecta*.

We'll visit the Saint Bernard Park in Hyeres. The Vicomte de Noailles, a patron of the arts but also a passionate botanist, designed this terraced garden with exotic and Mediterranean species. Species that tolerate the heat particularly well stand side by side with garrigue plants (rockroses, *cistus* and rosemary). The garden is teeming with life, and the breathtaking sea view adds an extra dimension.

Day 5

Domaine du Rayol

The Domaine du Rayol was first created in 1910 by Parisian businessman Alfred Theodore Courmes when he built his retirement home on a promontory overlooking the Baie du Figuiers. The garden's heyday was in the middle part of the 20th century when aeronautical engineer Henry Potez restored the buildings and built a staircase from the pergola down to the sea. With a staff of ten gardeners, the garden was extended and improved, and by 1948 contained nearly 400 species. However it soon fell into neglect and was abandoned by the late 1960s. In 1989 the site was acquired by the Conservatoire du Littoral, and landscape and

gardens went through a thorough redesign sympathetic to the gardens themselves but also to natural coastal vegetation that is well-represented here including the Violet Birds-nest Orchid. The Domaine du Rayol also happens to have a great bookshop.

Days 6

Prealpes de Grasse

April is a fantastic time to visit the limestone uplands of the Prealpes de Grasse, spring is late here and so we'll see the first of the year's flowers. The Grasse Prealps is a karstic massif north of the city of Grasse. Reaching a maximum of 1800m above sea level the area has a harsh climate – cold, often snowy winters, and very hot summers, a combination not conducive to forest growth. So the bare rocky slopes are largely grassland and are very floriferous. The Parc Naturel Regional de Prealpes d'Azur was created in 2012 to help protect this outstanding natural heritage. Rosy Garlic lines roadsides and Green-underside Blues fly about meadows with *Fritillaria montana* and *Gagea bohemica*. Short-toed Eagles and Griffon Vultures fly overhead whilst Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail remind us of the proximity of the Mediterranean in sight below us. Sure to be a highlight of the tour (if they are yet in bloom, which they might not be) will be a slope covered in the red blooms of the rare endemic *huthii* subspecies of *Paeonia officinalis*, but swathes of lovely Hepatica are much more certain!

The deserted slopes below the ski station hosts a diminutive form of *Tulipa australis* whilst rocky areas are home to *Erythronium dens-canis*. Flowering in damp meadows we find *Ranunculus gramineus* and lovely *Primula marginata* along with a few *Iris graminea*. We'll explore an area of limestone pavement populated with fine examples of *Himantoglossum robertianum* and many *Orchis mascula* growing amongst *Genista hispanica*. Some of the very fine early spring orchids here include *Orchis spitzelii*, *Orchis olbiensis*, *Ophrys arachnitiformis*, *Ophrys aranifera massiliensis*, *Ophrys virescens* and the lovely *Ophrys bertolonii*. There are many fine *Fritillaria involucrata*, a few Italian Bluebells, and abundant Grape Hyacinths. We'll watch for displaying Subalpine Warblers and butterflies including Western Dappled White, Cleopatra and Spring Ringlet. Western Green Lizards bask in spring sunshine close to cover. Sheltered by shrubs are lovely *Corydalis solida* and more orchids in the shape of both *Ophrys provincialis* and *Ophrys exaltata arachnitiformis* as well as lovely Green-winged Orchid, *Orchis morio*.

Vast plateaus are a distinctive feature of the landscape of the Grasse Prealps. The Plateau de Calern is among the finest examples of such a geological formation. It shelters a spectacular diversity of flora and fauna, with rare and endangered species such as Orsini's Viper and Short-horned Grasshopper. Lovely *Crocus versicolor* should still be flowering in the highest areas and so too the often brilliant pink *Colchicum bulbocodium*. No less than three species of *Gagea* also occur in the same habitat – *Gagea arvensis*, *Gagea pratensis* and *Gagea reverchonii* alongside the delightfully fluffy *Pulsatilla halleri*. Here too is the beautiful small flowered endemic subspecies of daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus provincialis* and the candytuft *Iberis linifolia*. Other fine plants up here include *Aristolochia*

pallida, *Erysimum nevadense collisparsum*, *Potentilla cinerea*, *Helianthemum apenninum*, *Globularia bisnagarica*, *Globularia repens*, and *Valeriana tuberosa*.

Day 7

Lower Tinee Valley

Ascelaphids are a common sight flying above the rich thermophilous slopes of the lower Tinee Valley. Even at this time of year there are plenty of butterflies enjoying the richly aromatic Mediterranean flora that covers the valley sides. Highlights will be Berger's Clouded Yellow and Black-eyed Blue. The purple and pink blooms of *Buglossoides purpureocaerulea* are prominent and there's much else to be enjoyed including *Coriaria myrtifolia*, *Fumana laevipes*, *Globularia alypum*, *Teucrium montanum*, *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis*, and the local form of *Helianthemum nummularium* which is pink!

Day 8

Depart from Nice or Massif de l'Esterel

This morning it will be time to head to Nice Airport for the journey home, or on to Corsica with Paul...

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