

Croatia

Velebit and Plitvička National Park

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

To Zagreb and Plitvička

After landing in Zagreb it will take us just two and a half hours to reach the leafy confines of Plitvička's wonderful forests and the superbly positioned Lakeside Hotel from whence some of the finest walks in the national park emanate.

Days 2 – 4(am)

Plitvička National Park

The exquisite Plitvička Lakes National Park would probably be right at the top of any list of the most beautiful in Europe. Limestone mountains are dissected by deep canyons filled with turquoise lakes and pools, all cloaked in forests. Waterfalls cascade down cliffs draped in greenery.

Fortunately National Park staff in Croatia have overseen a very careful development of Plitvička over the past decades. Slatted paths have been built that allow us to walk through the most beautiful canyons, alongside waterfalls, around and even across lakes. And everywhere shining green forest frames the turquoise and blue waters. Nightingales serenade us whilst the mellow flutey notes of Golden Orioles will accompany any pre-breakfast strolls down to the lake.

Extensive stands of Beech, Fir and Spruce cloak the slopes rising from the glittering canyons. These are home to Wild Boar and Red Squirrels, Fire Salamanders and Balkan Green Lizards, Black Woodpecker and Goshawk. *Gomphus vulgatissimus* flies by the waterside whilst back under the trees are Lily of the Valley and Herb Paris. Chequered Blue, Poplar Admiral, Blue Argus, Mountain Alcon Blue and various Fritillaries, including Marbled and Twin-spot sun themselves in open glades. Hawfinch and Collared Flycatcher are quite common this verdant landscape. Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) is prolific and *Cornus* often provides the ground cover sometimes mixed with the European Bladdernut (*Staphylaea pinnata*). Two spindles *Euonymus latifolius* and *Euonymus verrucosus* are frequently seen as are White flowered *Dianthus petraeus*, *Digitalis grandiflora*, *Campanula bononiensis* and *Globularia cordifolia*. Sword-leaved Helleborines and Red Helleborines emerge from these shrubberies whilst in more open areas are nice populations of Military Orchid and Lady Orchid as well as Late Spider Orchid, Bee Orchid and Woodcock Orchid. There's both Fragrant and Short-spurred Fragrant Orchids and under all those trees plenty of Bird's Nest Orchid. The hard to spot *Arcuethobium oxycedri* parasitises juniper trees and other choice botanical highlights will include *Aristolochia lutea*, rare *Ferulago sylvestris*, equally rare *Cardaminopsis croatica*, and the elegant blue and yellow blooms of *Iris sibirica*.

Days 4(pm) - 7

Velebit National Park

For the second part of our tour we'll head to the coastal ranges of the Dinaric Alps, protected in the Northern Velebit National Park. The Velebit is famed for its endemic plants, and especially for its beautiful Silver Fir forests. In places such as the remarkable Velika Plana there are significant stands of undisturbed old-growth forests and a walk through these is a delight, the huge trunks draped in lichens and mosses, the ferny understory rich in fungi. There is a rich mammal fauna and though seeing any of Brown Bear, Wild Cat and Pine Marten will require a lot of luck we are sure to see some evidence of their presence. White-backed Woodpecker is tolerably common in the old growth and both Capercaillie and Hazel Grouse are found within these mossy groves though are not easy to find. We also hope to see Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Willow Tit, Red Crossbill and Nutcracker.

In the subalpine meadows Purple-shot Copper, Apollo and Nickerl's Fritillary float above rocky slopes adorned with *Pedicularis brachyodonta*, *Aquilegia kitaibelii*, *Campanula waldsteiniana* and delicate *Primula kitaibeliana*. The Croatian subspecies of *Sibiraea laevigata* is a tertiary relict here, this species is also found in Central Asia and China, quite a disjunct distribution! Rocks are festooned with *Campanula fenestrellata* and superlative clumps of *Edraianthus tenuifolius*. Woodland, Bright-eyed, and Mountain Ringlets fly above abundant Early Marsh Orchids in damp meadows also home to Globe Orchid and numerous Lesser Butterfly Orchids. Fritillaries are particularly abundant with Niobe, High Brown, Marbled, Pearl-bordered, False Heath, Knapweed, Glanville, Spotted and Heath Fritillary all present. Amongst a host of fine plants are *Scorzonera rosea*, *Corydalis ochroleuca*, abundant *Scutellaria alpina*, *Calamintha grandiflora*, *Androsace villosa*, *Achillea clavennae*, *Geranium macrorrhizum*, *Pseudolysimachion barbelieri*, *Lonicera borbasiana*, *Cicerbita alpina* and *Senecio doronicum*.

Over eighty per cent of the national park is covered in forest and there's a rich variety of species found here. Southern exposures have Downy Oak and Oriental Hornbeam forests, there are Black Pine and Cotoneaster forests, and even Spruce and Mountain Pine forests. Well-made trails take us through some of the most beautiful of these forests where in addition to the above species we can find Manna Ash, Montpelier Maple, Turkey Oak, Wild Service, Hop-hornbeam, Bosnian Maple, Norway Maple, Sessile Oak, Common Hornbeam, Whitebeam, Beech, Wych Elm and Large-leaved Willow. Amongst an abundance of shrubby species we'll see several *Daphnes*, including floriferous *Daphne alpina*. *Aquilegia nigrescens* is common in woods and there's beautiful stands of both *Iris variegata* and *Iris graminea*. *Allium victorialis* is impressive and we can admire no less than three lily species (or subspecies?!), *Lilium bosniacum*, *Lilium carniolicum* and deep wine-red *Lilium (martagon) cattaniae*. In mossy dells under the thickest of canopies we can find Yellow Bird's-Nest and *Orthilia secunda*.

The Velebit is remarkable for another reason. On one side of the range you drop rapidly to the Adriatic. So just an hour from temperate forests and alpine slopes we

can be sunning ourselves by the sea with Hoopoes, Red-backed Shrikes and Eastern Subalpine Warblers. Cirl Bunting, Sardinian and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, and Pallid Swifts, are also on the agenda. Butterflies at these lower levels include Scarce Swallowtail, Adonis Blue and a range of Skippers. Rocky slopes covered in aromatic plants at these lower levels host an abundance of butterflies with Balkan Marbled White, Eastern Rock Grayling, Great Sooty Satyr, Southern White Admiral and a triumvirate of Hairstreaks, Blue-spot, Ilex and Sloe, most noticeable.

Our hotel is in the lovely old medieval town of Senj and right by the sea. So after a day in the cool temperate zone high on the mountain we can enjoy the warm Mediterranean sun in the evening! The Dalmatian Wall Lizards certainly will. The town itself has more than three thousand years of human history to offer but it's the wonderful atmosphere along the sea front from the hotel that really stands out, a little like the old French Riviera with pleasant cafés and bars everywhere! Just a few hundred metres from our hotel is the 16th century Nehaj Fortress once the seat of the infamous Uskoks who were at once protectors of the Hapsburg borderlands or pillaging pirates depending on which side of the Adriatic you were on.

Day 8

To Rijeka Airport and Departure

It's only an hour to Rijeka Airport from Senj, but as it's a morning flight we'll still have to leave after breakfast! We'll no doubt have time to enjoy some yellow *Centaurea rupestris* which is common along the coast.

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