

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

Travelling along the Croatian coast we'll no doubt have time to enjoy some yellow *Centaurea rupestris*. Then we'll head into Italy and after picking up some of the group from Venice Airport we rise up into the mountains the beech and hornbeam forests soon give way to flower-filled meadows and spruce forests, and we start to see the wonderful limestone battlements of the higher mountains. It'll take us under two hours from Venice Airport to reach the little settlement of Claut.

En route to the Dolomiti Friulane we'll stop at a leafy lane near Vajont where the myriad flowers and butterflies of northeast Italy will immediately make quite an impression on us. We'll soon encounter numerous Dark Red Helleborines as well as Lesser Butterfly Orchids amongst a host of fine woodland flowers such as attractive *Teucrium montanum*, *Centaurea jacea*, *Hieracium staticifolium*, *Bupthalmum salicifolium*, *Peucedanum venetum*, *Verbascum chaixii austriacum*, *Valeriana wallrothii*, Swallow-wort, and the ever-lovely Wood Pink. Apollos float along dry slopes covered in their foodplants, stonecrops, and we'll also see Pearly Heath, Marbled White, Large Wall Brown, and Woodland Brown. We've a decent chance of encountering the impressive Poplar Admiral here. Spiked Bellflowers are an impressive sight, and there's more orchids in the shape of Fly Orchid and Red Helleborine too! A little further along we'll stop at a site for the very rare *nemoralis* race of Fen Orchid. This robust form is found in woodland rather than fens and is known from only half a dozen sites in the northeast Italy.

Days 9 - 11

The Dolomiti Friulane: Cimoliana & Passo Duran

The Dolomiti Friulane is a very rich area on the edge of Dolomites' main ranges. The landscape is sublime with limestone pinnacles rising above woodlands and meadows full of often beautiful flowers and butterflies. *Cyclamen purpurascens* populates woodlands where we'll encounter some lovely *Aquilegias*, bright *vulgaris*, lustrous *atrata* and the lovely regional endemic *Aquilegia einseleana*. *Monotropa hypopitys* hides in the shade of beeches where we'll also find orchids such Dark Red Helleborine, Twayblade and Red Helleborine. Three fine black and white butterflies will hold centre stage, White Admiral, Southern White Admiral and the elegant Hungarian Glider, and in glades we'll see Silver-washed Fritillary, Wood White and the Woodland Brown. Willow Gentian may just be opening its blue trumpets along woodland rides where we'll also encounter the Lady's Slipper Orchid – you'll probably only see one of these two in flower as they rarely bloom at the same time! The distinctive pink *Crepis froelichiana dinarica*, an endemic subspecies, blooms with *Anemone trifolia* and this is a good area to see Duke of Burgundy Fritillaries and we're likely to encounter a good number today.

Large Chequered Skipper and False Heath Fritillary fly in meadows dotted with *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and both Fragrant and Short-spurred Fragrant Orchids, these across the road from our hotel. Early morning is a good time to look for Roe Deer or Chamois in these same meadows.

A little higher up we'll find mountainsides covered in a rich tapestry of flowers such as *Cerastium subtriflorum*, *Petrorhagia saxifraga*, *Dianthus sternbergii*, *Silene saxifraga* *Arenaria huteri*, *Sedum rupestre* and *Gentiana utriculosa*, whilst rocky outcrops are home to *Senecio abrotanifolius*, *Centaurea dichroantha*, Edelweiss and the wonderful Devil's Claw. A classic amongst alpine plants, the Devil's Claw nestles in deep limestone crevices, its amazing pink and blue claws in flowerheads the size of a child's fist. Another highlight will be the fine yellow day lily, *Hemerocallis lilio-asphodelus*, endemic to just a few sites in the area.

During the afternoon of Day 3 we'll make our way over Monte Pelmo to the Val Pettorina, just an hour to the northwest, our home for the remainder of the holiday. We have chosen this base with great care so as to ensure minimal travelling times to some of the finest flower sites in the region. Within half an hour's drive of our hotel are the superb alpine meadows, forests and crags of the ridge along the top of the Val d'Ampezzo, and the exquisite Monte Pelmo. Fine alpine turf just yards from the road is covered in a multi-coloured floral display rivalling that found anywhere in Europe. Beautiful sky-blue *Campanula barbata* mixes with the dark red wine coloured local variant of Black Vanilla Orchid, *Nigritella rhellicani* and the brilliant blues of the trumpet gentians, *Gentiana acaulis* and *Gentiana clusii*. Mountain White Orchid, Frog Orchid and Pink Globe Orchid also grow in as fine a mixture of alpine orchids as you could wish to see. Wet patches hold bright red-pink *Dactylorhiza alpestris*, butterworts, deep blue flowers of the rare *Gentiana bavarica* and red-black *Pedicularis recutita*, while waving in the breeze are the candyfloss heads of cotton grass. Gorgeous Apollos float over these gentle slopes

and dark ringlets erupt from under our feet as we walk. Many species of these difficult-to-identify butterflies are found in the area including Woodland, Blind, Common Brassy and Almond-eyed Ringlets. The rather prosaically named Alpine Blue is common here; its distinctive underside may come into focus as we peer closely at the pretty flowers of *Androsace alpina*. The loud calls of Alpine Choughs echo from the surrounding cliff faces, competing with the piercing whistles of Alpine Marmots which are so common here that we should be careful to avoid putting a foot down one of their holes!

Day 12

Passo di Giau & Posalz

Beautiful alpine turf littered with colourful flowers stretches gently up to the bulk of the Nuvolau, a huge buttress sitting atop the ridge. There are stunning views down to Cortina in the valley below. Initially the turf is on acidic soils and we'll find abundant Alpine Pasque Flowers and *Geum montanum* as well as a few *Androsace obtusifolia*. Amid many Trumpet Gentians are *Ranunculus montanus* and *Ranunculus kuepferi*, and we'll see Frog Orchids, *Daphne striata*, *Ajuga pyramidalis* and *Veronica alpina*. Alpine Toadflax, a fabulous mosaic of purple and orange, grows with the bright golden-yellow of *Potentilla aurea* and the intense pink cushions of Moss Campion, providing an irresistible palate for the photographer!

Reaching the limestone the bright pink Alpenroses change from *ferrugineum* to *hirsutum*, while further along we'll find the Creeping Azalea and the stunning Dwarf Alpenrose. The diminutive Bird's-eye Primrose is common and we shall find *Primula halleri* and maybe the bright yellow *Primula auricula* will still be in bloom. Cliffs are home to some of the finest of all alpine plants. Reddish-pink *Potentilla nitida*, an unusual colour for a cinquefoil, grows amidst some lovely saxifrages. Encrusting blue-grey rosettes growing flush against rock faces with sprays of delicate creamy flowers are *Saxifraga caesia*, and we shall also find *Saxifragas crustata*, *aizoides* and the beautiful *oppositifolia* amongst others. Decorating mats of *Dryas octopetala* are *Achillea clavennae*, Mossy Sandwort, *Pedicularis rosea*, *Paederota bonarota*, *Phyteuma sieberi*, *Viola biflora*, *Draba dubia*, *Valeriana saxatilis*, and *Helianthemum alpestre*. The slopes here are dotted with *Pinus cembra* and among them we'll see *Ranunculus hybridus* and wet flushes covered in Bird's-eye Primrose.

We shall wander along forest tracks where Serins, Crossbills and Crested Tits are common. Gamebirds are a feature of the local forests, but we shall be lucky to see any of Hazelhen, Black Grouse or Capercaillie. These woods have a very fine flora too - the almost Black spikes of *Phyteuma zahlbruckneri* and the dark wine-coloured flowers of *Aquilegia atrata* are two particularly noteworthy species. The mossy forest floor is home to the lovely One-flowered Wintergreen and growing with them are two unusual orchids, the Coralroot Orchid and the Single-leaved Bog Orchid! The beautiful Titania's Fritillary floats around meadows and woodland glades near the hotel and here we shall see the greatest variety of butterflies, from Nickerls' and False Heath Fritillaries, to Scarce Coppers, Large Blues, Amanda's Blues and the plentiful Alpine Heath.

Day 13

Marmolada & Sottoguda

To the west is the magnificent glaciated peak of Marmolada, rising to some 11,000 feet. We will spend a day exploring the rich slopes on either side of the beautiful Lago de Fedaia. The views across the lake to Marmolada's glacier, only a couple of thousand feet above us to the south, are really spectacular. The slopes by the lake are covered by a lovely mixture of *Rhododendron hirsutum*, the delicate Windflower or Mountain Avens and Alpine Butterwort, and there's even a few Coralroot Orchids. Impressive shows of Lesser Wintergreen and the gorgeous blue and white flowers of Alpine Clematis grow amongst this colourful display. For those that wish we can catch a chairlift up to the edge of the glacier. What appears to be barren limestone rock from below, not so different in colour from the glacier, is, on closer inspection, decorated with some fine alpine flowers. As we ascend we'll pass *Silene acaulis*, *Gentiana clusii* and *Gentiana orbicularis*. Little purple patches are revealed to be the pretty little *Thlaspi rotundifolia* whilst clusters of blue are the rare *Gentiana terglouensis*. Other tiny high alpine gems include *Arabis caerulea*, *Arabis bellidifolia*, *Arabis alpina*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Saxifraga sedoides* and *Petasites paradoxus*. Small Tortoiseshells are typically a high altitude butterfly here and we might also see Alpine Grizzled Skipper too.

Valleys below the chairlift contain some of the more spectacular flowers and butterflies the Dolomites has to offer. One particular meadow has swathes of huge Martagon Lilies, Orange Lilies and the delicate white bells of St Bruno's Lilies. Yellow Alpine Leeks mix with pink Alpine Sainfoin, white and mauve Alpine Milk-Vetch and masses of the Globeflowers to magical effect. Rocks here are home to the uncommon Short-spurred Fragrant Orchid and we may also see Small White Orchid and *Primula halleri*. The Moonwort Ferns here are exceptionally large. Butterflies include various skippers and ringlets as well as the beautiful Asian, Marsh and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries.

Later in the day we'll visit the gorge at Sottoguda. This is another chance to see the enigmatic Devil's Claw. The same cliffs are festooned with *Saxifraga crustata*, together with fine *Paedarota bonarota*, *Kernera saxatilis* and *Rhamnus pumila*. Beautiful waterfalls cascade down the sides of the gorge and we'll likely find the scarce fern *Cystopteris montana* growing around them and Ladies Slipper Orchids too.

Day 14

The Val San Lucano

Today will see us lower in the mountains amongst woodlands and meadows, the latter in places bright with fabulous shows of Orange Lilies. Both Oak Fern and Beech Fern decorate the woodland floor where Herb Paris, *Chrysosplenium alternifolium*, *Streptopus amplexifolius* and the lovely One-flowered Wintergreen blooms. On boulders we'll find Yellow Wood Violets and Alpine Clematis. On the nearby river gravels are *Papaver aurantiacum*, *Parnassia palustris*, *Gypsophila repens*, *Pritzelago alpina*, *Saxifraga rotundifolia*. and the very local endemic crucifer *Rhizobotrya*

alpina. There's also almost black-flowered *Phyteuma ovatum* and extremely robust forms of *Campanula latifolia*.

We'll take our picnic at a lovely spot by a lake in the San Lucano valley. *Lonicera alpigena* and Dark Red Helleborine flower under very impressive sheer cliffs that rise up on each side of the narrow verdant valley whilst Arran Browns and Woodland Brown will be flying. Rising up over the Duran Pass we'll find roadsides lined with striking pink *Linum viscosum* and here we'll search for the uncommon Thor's Fritillary.

Day 15

Fedaia

Today we'll visit the Refugio at Fedaia. This has staggering views across to the Marmolada and a complex series of peaks beyond. Right by the Refugio the predominantly igneous rock outcrops are home to *Leucanthemopsis alpina*, *Draba siliquosa*, *Draba aizoides*, *Arabis alpina*, *Linaria alpina*, *Androsace obtusifolia*, and Alpine Toadflax. *Gentiana brachyphylla* is sure to be a highlight, though it might quickly be outshone by that most beautiful and charismatic of alpine plants, the King of the Alps, which is extremely numerous up here. Growing on the same acidic rocks are much *Saxifraga exarata*, *Minuartia recurva*, *Silene exscapa* and *Polygala alpina*. Alpine Choughs are numerous and we'll see plenty of Water Pipits and Black Redstart as well as a few Alpine Accentors.

The curious Spotted Gentian is common here. Other classic alpiners include much superb *Geum reptans* and *Ranunculus glacialis*. *Saxifraga oppositifolia* carpets gravels with purple flowers and we'll also see *Saxifraga depressa*, *Astragalus alpinus*, Alpine Clubmoss, Fir Clubmoss, Snowdon Lilies, fine cushions of pink *Androsace alpina* and butter-yellow *Androsace vitaliana*. Chamois graze alpine turf dotted with abundant Early Purple Orchids and numerous Alpine Pasque Flowers. Dewy Ringlets, Mountain Green-veined Whites, and Woodland Ringlets fly above cascades of bright pink *Primula minima*. By snowmelt we'll encounter the delicate *Soldanella pusilla* whilst open tundra has *Minuartia sedoides* in fine form, as well as Trumpet Gentians and Net-leaved Willow.

Day 16

Fontanafredda & Staulanza

We'll spend the day exploring forested tracks at mid-altitudes. Highlights will include Lesser Twayblade, Lady's Slipper Orchid, One-flowered Wintergreen, Verticillate Lousewort, Dragonmouth and *Anemone trifolia*.

As we enjoy magnificent views of Pelmo and Civetta we'll pass through some large open meadows boasting a great floral variety including Globeflowers, the very attractive orange *Crepis aurea*, Small White Orchids, and *Arnica montana*. Butterflies include Bright-eyed Ringlet, Large Blue and Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Along the wooded sections of the track we'll find *Clematis alpina*, much *Phyteuma orbiculare* and some fine Alpine Sow-thistle, while Nutcrackers are a frequent sight.

One glorious flowery slope supports lots of *Gentianella germanica*, Alpine Asters, a good number of Burnt-tip Orchids, fine *Campanula barbata*, beautiful *Traunsteinera globosa*, Chives and Rock Soapwort. Black Vanilla Orchids are rather common in short turf and there's also *Pedicularis elongata* in flower. Wet flushes are clothed in many Alpine Marsh Orchids and the cottony heads of *Eriophorum angustifolium*.

Our last stop of the day will see us enjoying a nice colony of Marsh Helleborines and here there are a few plants of Limestone Woundwort too.

Day 17

Falzarego, Valparola & Andraz

The Falzarego Pass, beloved of luxury car photo shoots, is a glorious spot where we'll see sheets of *Rhodothamnus chamaecistus* in flower and rock gardens decorated with special alpine plants such as brilliant *Gentiana terglouensis*, delicate *Saxifraga androsacea*, *Anemone baldensis*, *Ranunculus hybridus*, *Armeria alpina*, and *Thlaspi alpestre*. Striking blue *Gentiana bavarica* mixes with Chives and many fine *Pedicularis rostratocapitata* by the shores of a small lake. Boulders here have some fine Edelweiss and this is a spot where we'll be able to find the very special little orchid *Chamorchis alpina* flowering amid much *Papaver aurantiacum*. We'll visit Andraz Castle, surrounded by fine meadows which are home to many marmots as well as a good colony of Large Blues.

Day 18

Transfer to Venice and Depart for the UK

One last chance at enjoying the local meadows before we depart for Venice and our flight back to the UK.

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