

The Italian Alps

The Dolomites & the Cottian Alps

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Venice and transfer to Claut

As 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 2 & 3

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 rivaling 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 4

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 5

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 Fedaiia. 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 Avena 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 6

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 7

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 8

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 9

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 species 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 10

To The Cottian Alps

One last chance at enjoying the local meadows before we depart for our journey across the base of the Alps to the Cottian Alps and our lovely accommodation 'il Mulino delle Fucine', a small livestock and organic fruit and aromatics farm, nestled amid the greenery of the Val Varaita in the heart of the Cuneo Alps.

Days 11 - 17

Valle de Varaita, Colle di Sampeyre and Monte Cugulet, Colle del'Agnello, Colle de l'Izoard, Casteldelfino and Monte Viso

The week will see us enjoying meadows, woodlands and alpine areas equally rich in both butterflies and flowers.

First the butterflies. We can expect around 120 species during the week. The variety of habitats and the altitudinal variation in a comparatively small area facilitates this impressive variety. Apollos are rather common in the area and there are several strong colonies of Small Apollos at higher altitudes where their larval foodplant *Saxifraga aizoides* is abundant. We'll encounter a few Scarce Swallowtails and European Swallowtails during the week. In the highest areas we'll find Mountain Green-veined Whites and with a little luck a Peak White or two. There's Mountain Dappled Whites and reasonable numbers of Mountain Clouded Yellow as well as a strong colony of Moorland Clouded Yellows.

Large groups of mud-puddling blues are found in some places. Silver-studded and Idas Blues are common, and so too is Damon Blue, one of the commonest species at this season. At higher altitudes we will find colonies of the typical mountain *Lycaenids* such as Glandon Blue, Silvery Argus, Alpine Blue, and Eros Blue. Large Blues will be seen and so too Escher's Blue, Chalk-hill Blue, and Turquoise Blue. Scarce, Sooty, and Purple-edged Coppers are all common, and all equally beautiful, their shimmering golden-orange wings lighting up the meadows. There's also Purple-shot and Small Coppers to be seen.

We are likely to see in excess of twenty species of Fritillary. Silver-washed and Dark Green are common, the former including a number of the form *valezina*. High Brown and Niobe Fritillaries will be noted too. The alpine meadows hold good colonies of both Mountain and Shepherd's Fritillary, and we'll see several Balkan Fritillaries. Marsh Fritillary may still be flying. Middle altitude meadows have plenty of both Titania's Fritillary and Marbled Fritillary, and we'll see good numbers of Glanville, Knapweed, Spotted, False Heath, Heath and Provençal Fritillaries during the tour. Highlights will be a colony of Cynthia's Fritillary on a high pass, and on the French side another high-altitude species, Grison's Fritillary. Lesser Purple Emperors, usually of the *clytie* form, will be much enjoyed and we'll also see Large Tortoiseshell, Comma and White Admiral.

Erebia ringlets are one of the faunal signature species of the Alps and here several species are present in good numbers. Large Ringlet can be abundant, and Lesser Mountain Ringlet, Piedmont Ringlet and Common Brassy Ringlet are all widespread. More unusual are Silky Ringlet, False Mnestrá Ringlet and Sooty Ringlet. Both Alpine Heath and Chestnut Heath fly in these higher meadows. Lower down we'll likely encounter Great Sooty Satyr, Great Banded Grayling, Pearly Heath and Large Wall Brown. The list of skippers is impressive - Large Grizzled, Olive, Carline, Safflower, Tufted Marbled, Red Underwing and Silver-spotted Skippers will all be seen and we can hope for the local endemic Foulquier's Grizzled Skipper. though it's not always easy to find!

In July the flora is rich and varied. Above the tree line the alpine meadows and pastures are a riot of colour. Various pinks, cinquefoils, clovers, gentians, speedwells, bellflowers, knapweeds, and orchids put on a fine show.

At mid altitudes the flowery meadows that are not yet cut for hay are rich in species such as both Greater and Lesser Masterwort, Wood and Dusky Cranesbills, Caraway, Betony, Meadow Clary, Large Yellow Foxglove and Hoary Plantain. Campanulas are especially well represented in the area. Among the more widespread species are *Campanula patula*, *Campanula glomerata* and *Campanula trachelium* whilst more unusual are *Campanula spicata*, *Campanula rhomboidalis* and *Campanula scheuchzeri*. We should also find no fewer than seven species of Rampion. Among the orchids a few of the local speciality, stunning bright pink *Nigritella corneliana* will be a fine sight and at several sites we'll find Small White and Frog Orchids as well as Fragrant and Pyramidal Orchids.

The alpine slopes yield, among a host of other species, *Bartsia alpina*, *Potentilla grandiflora*, *Viola calcarata*, *Lotus alpinus*, *Pedicularis rostratospicata*, *Erigeron alpinus*, *Arnica montana*, *Trollius europaeus* and the very attractive Plume Knapweed. Moonwort is locally common. The impressive cobwebbed rosettes of *Sempervivum arachnoideum* are not uncommon and we'll find *Saxifraga oppositifolia* still in flower at the highest sites. Yellow Mountain Saxifrage is very common, this species is the food plant for the colonies of Small Apollos.

Pinks are a feature, notably *Dianthus seguieri*, *Dianthus pavonius*, *Dianthus sylvestris*, *Dianthus furcatus* and *Dianthus deltoides*. Alpine, Mountain and Brown Clover will all be in flower. Edelweiss looks at its alpine best here and there's the impressively large flowered *Hypochoeris uniflora*, as well as *Doronicum grandiflorum*, and the endemic *Delphinium dubium*. A few *Primula farinosa* will still be in flower. White False Helleborines will be in good bloom, and we'll see several Martagon Lilies, as well as an Orange Lily or two. The beautiful endemic *Allium narcissiflorum* will be one of the week's most stunning flowers.

Astragalus alpinus, *Astragalus hypoglottis*, *Astragalus sempervirens*, *Oxytropis campestris*, *Ononis cristata*, *Ononis natrix*, *Onobrychis montana* and *Anthyllis montana* are amongst a fine mix of alpine legumes. On roadsides in France we'll encounter the impressive large *Astragalus alopecuroides*, reminiscent of several central Asian species of this huge genus. Gentians will be much in evidence with the local speciality *Gentiana rostanii* in fine flower. We'll also find *Gentiana tenella*, *Gentianella campestris*, the latter common, as well as some fine Snow Gentians.

Marmots will be much in evidence on the alpine pastures, being particularly common below the Col d'Agnello, their shrieking whistles a feature of the area. Alpine Chough are found at higher altitudes, and in the coniferous forests Nutcrackers are rather common. Raptors include Golden Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and Honey Buzzard. Red-backed Shrikes, Water Pipits, Whinchat, Snow Finch and Citril Finch are typical montane birds here.

Day 18

Departure

One last chance for us to enjoy the local meadows before we depart for Turin Airport.

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