

Pollino National Park

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Halfway between the shores of the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Seas, and far from the tourist crowds of other Italian regions, the Pollino Massif straddles the borders of Calabria and Basilicata. Italy's largest national park is a well-kept secret. Its landscapes are breathtaking, and its traditions have been kept alive for centuries by local communities.

The area lies within the Apennine-Calabrian-Peloritani orogenic system, one of the most tectonically active zones in the central Mediterranean, shaped by the convergence of the African and European tectonic plates. This collision generated the prominent fault system known as the Pollino Line, and this can be observed in the Timpa della Murge area, where visitors can walk along what was once the ocean floor.

Most of the mountain range consists of Mesozoic–Cenozoic limestone sequences, sculpted over time into caves and karstic landforms, and there are well-preserved ophiolite suites — fragments of the Tethys Oceanic lithosphere. An arena perfectly prepared for an abundance of orchids!

The region also contains ancient beech forests, such as those of Cozzo Ferriero and Pollinello. These forests are among the last undisturbed ecosystems of their kind in Europe, home to wolves, deer, otters, and dozens of bird and amphibian species protected within the Pollino National Park.

Lying at a crossroads of multiple civilizations and cultures — including Greek, Roman, Lombard, Saracen, Byzantine, Norman, and Spanish influences — it is perhaps surprising how sparsely populated the region is today. An intriguing local tradition known as the Festival of Saint Anthony in Rotonda (June, not May unfortunately!) has two large trees being hauled by 26 decorated oxen. The oxen are raised by hand and symbolically “married”. Local agri-gastronomic traditions remain strong. These include the production of paddaccio cheese and baked ricotta; cultivation of unique crops like the red aubergine of Rotonda and the pepper of Senise; and traditional baking such as the bread of Cerchiara.

Day 1

Arrive Naples and transfer to Cassano allo Ionio

After a lunchtime arrival in Naples we'll drive south towards the Pollino Massif and settle in our accommodation for the whole week, the La Locanda del Parco. This gorgeous agriturismo is located on the edge of the National Park that we'll spend the days exploring, and in the picture-postcard medieval village of Morano Calabro.

Day 2

Cassano Hills and town and the cave of Sant'Angelo

Pollino is still pretty much unknown to orchid enthusiasts from outside of Italy, 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 Antonio de Marco who is now arguably the most knowledgeable orchid specialist of Pollino.

Antonio will start our exploration in the hills just outside town. There will be a bewildering torrent of new orchids on the first day but don't get discouraged, we'll see many of them on every or at least several days. The diversity of bee orchids in particular is spectacular. Here we'll find the Bumble-Bee Orchid, Bee Orchid and Yellow Bee Orchid. There's the beautiful furry-lipped *Ophrys bertolonii*, bold and bright *Ophrys apulica*, rather dark *Ophrys incubacea*, *Ophrys lucana*, sawfly orchid-like *Ophrys neglecta*, and elegant *Ophrys tarentina*. Striking specimens of Naked Man Orchid dot the aromatic hillsides, alongside Pink Butterfly Orchids, Pyramidal Orchids, Man Orchids and the local form of Green-winged Orchid. We'll enjoy delicate Four-spotted Orchid and several species of Tongue Orchid.

Hybrids are frequent in the area and Antonio will delight in discussing the complicated parentage of some of the stranger ones you'll see. During the morning we might come across *Ophrys bombyliflora* x *Ophrys incubacea*, *Ophrys bertoloni* x *Ophrys incubacea*, *Ophrys neglecta* x *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys neglecta* x *Ophrys bertoloni* and *Orchis italica* x *Anacamptis antrophopora*. Antonio is one of the contributors to a huge new tome (800 pages!) on naturally occurring hybrids found in Italy being published this winter by the Italian Orchid Society.

In the afternoon we'll take a walk through the historical centre of Cassano allo Jonio, a medieval labyrinth of narrow winding alleys, ancient stone staircases, and noble palaces nestled between the ruins of a Norman castle and the prehistoric Grotte di Sant'Angelo. We will also visit those remarkable caves. These have been (partially) developed so we can easily go inside and explore – the karstic formations inside are truly spectacular.

Day 3

Plataci, Cerchiara di Calabria and Madonna delle Armi

In the morning we'll visit the Arbëreshë comune of Plataci in the province of Cosenza. The Arbëreshë are an Albanian minority that migrated to Italy between the 15th and 16th centuries. The limestone terraces and olive groves in the comune are very rich in orchids with noteworthy populations of bee orchids such as *Ophrys apulica*, *Ophrys bertolonii*, *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys incubacea*, *Ophrys lucana*, *Ophrys lutea*, *Ophrys neglecta*, *Ophrys tarentina*, and the Mirror Orchid, *Ophrys speculum*. The Tongue Orchids *Serapias lingua* and *Serapias bergonii* are both common and we'll also find a rare apochromatic form of Four-spotted Orchid, the flowers lacking their

typical floral pigments and so appearing pure white. With luck the healthy population of Lizard Orchids will already putting forth their first blooms.

In the afternoon we'll move to Cerchiara di Calabria within the Pollino National Park. This little town has a spectacular location at 650m above sea level overlooking the Sibari plain and to the Ionian Sea beyond. The woodlands here have both *Paeonia peregrina* and *Paeonia mascula* putting on quite a show with their differing shades of red. Growing with them are yellow *Orchis provincialis* and the local form of Early Purple Orchid, *Orchis ovalis*. We'll hope to see *Orchis provincialis* x *ovalis*, the hybrid between the two, which produces some rather striking blooms with a mixture of the pink and yellow of the two parents.

On the way back to Cassano allo Jonio we'll stop at the sanctuary of Madonna delle Armi. The Byzantine Monastery was built in the 15th century on the site of an older chapel where, legend has it, hunters chased a deer into a cave and found two wooden icons of the evangelist saints. It houses precious frescoes and a silver reliquary of the "Madonna delle Armi," believed by some to be acheiropoietos — not made by human hands. Built into the rock face of Monte Sellaro, the complex has sweeping views over the surrounding valleys.

Day 4

Morano Calabro

Today we'll visit Morano Calabro, a stunning medieval hill town widely celebrated as one of 'I Borghi pi belli d'Italia' - The Most Beautiful Villages of Italy. We'll spend some time visiting the old town and visit the natural history museum there (where there's a book shop). But for most of the day we'll explore the orchid-rich lands close to the town. There are particularly fine populations of *Ophrys apulica* and *Ophrys bertolonii* here. The lovely Spectacle *Ophrys* *Ophrys biscutella* will be much appreciated. There are also large populations of Green-winged orchid, Pink Butterfly Orchid and Man Orchid, with many hybrids between them too

Day 5

Bosnian Pine woodlands of Malvento and orchids of Campotenese

We'll head to heights of Malvento this morning, the road taking us up to over 1500m above sea level to the land of the Bosnian Pine. These magnificent old pines are scattered across the mountainsides. We'll take a one and a half kilometre walk to the Malvento viewpoint, passing contorted specimens of these ancient trees, some of which are a thousand years old making them among the oldest trees in Europe. The oldest, nearby in the park, has been radiocarbon dated as 1230 years old. At the viewpoint there's sweeping panoramic vistas of the plain of Castrovillari, the Orsomarso mountains, and surrounding peaks like Monte Timpone di Sant'Angelo.

We'll find Monkey Orchid up here and a range of superb flora including *Helleborus foetidus*, the blue *Anemonoides apennina*, fine forms of *Hepatica nobilis*, and the endemic maple *Acer lobelia*. On rocks is pretty *Viola aethnensis messanensis*, *Polygala alpestris* and the rare endemic bellflower *Campanula pollinensis*

In the afternoon we'll return our attention to the variety of orchids and will explore hillsides around Campotenese. Dense-flowered Orchids are prominent here as well as Lady Orchids, Toothed Orchids and Burnt-tip Orchids and a whole range of wonderful hybrids between them! The jury's out on *Orchis colemanii* – is it a true species or a hybrid? Certainly whichever is true the origins of the parents are clear; pinky-purple *Orchis ovalis* and the yellow Sparse-flowered Orchid, *Orchis pauciflora*.

Day 6

Cassano and the marshes and archaeological site of Sybaris

We'll start this morning further exploring the hillsides close to our hotel where amongst hordes of Tongue Orchids, Pink Butterfly Orchids and Pyramidal Orchids we can discover lots of bee orchids including pure white apochromatic forms of *Ophrys bertolonii*. Plentiful Yellow Bee Orchids are joined by *Ophrys apulica*, *Ophrys incubacea* and *Ophrys lucana*.

In the afternoon we'll visit the archaeological site of Sybaris founded around 720–730 BC by Achaeans. Sybaris became immensely wealthy and famous for its luxurious lifestyle before it was destroyed and flooded by rival Crotona in 510 BC. The stacked remains from Greek, Athenian-led (Thurii), and Roman (Copia) periods include stone streets, a Roman theater, and fragments of an archaic temple. Nightingales sing from the woods backing the marshes of Sybaris where we'll see Black-crowned Night Herons, Squacco Herons, Black-winged Stilts and hopefully Greater Flamingos. Migrant waders are often seen at the Foce del Crati and gulls too, Slender-billed, Audouin's and Little Gulls all being likely.

Day 7

Colle Marcione

Wild limestone hillsides, the steeper parts draped in thermophilous oak woodland and maquis, the more open areas with terraces and small fields, typify the journey up to the Colle Marcione. Above are raptors such as Griffon Vultures and Egyptian Vulture, Black Kites and Golden Eagles. *Ajuga tenorei*, *Anchusa hybrida*, *Anthyllis montana* and *Sideritis italica* decorate shrubberies of *Pistacia* and *Acer opalus*.

We'll find intricately marked *Ophrys pinguis*, *Ophrys bertolonii*, *Ophrys neglecta*, delightfully furry *Ophrys tarentina*, and simply stunning brilliant yellow and chestnut *Ophrys lacaitae*. Nearing the Colle itself we'll be at around a thousand metres and there will be a decidedly northern feel to the air, and to the botany, with orchids here represented by species more typical of the Alps of Central Europe such as Frog

Orchid and Elder-flowered Orchid. We'll also note *Aquilegia atrata*, *Cynoglossum montanum*, *Erica multiflora* and *Plocama calabrica*.

Day 8

Departure from Naples Airport

Perhaps we'll have chance to enjoy another walk around the delightful streets of Cassano allo Ionio or another last check on the local terraces for more orchids as Eurasian Bee-eaters fly overhead and Lesser Whitethroats and Sardinian Warblers scold us from the bushes. And then we'll return to Naples Airport for departure.

If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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