

The Italian Job

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Bari to Rodi Garganico

The hills of the Gargano will first come into view some forty minutes after leaving Bari's provincial airport. We pass Lakes Lesina and Varano where the limestone hills of the peninsula plunge coastwards to the two pretty little white-walled towns of Peschici and Rodi Garganico.

Day 2

The North Coast

The coastline between Rodi and the stunningly situated cliff-top town of Peschici is quite beautiful. Hills covered in cistus roses and pines descend to a coast of white cliffs and small fields. Bushes of Jupiter's Beard and Tamarisk lie behind sand covered in medicks and pretty pink *Silene colorata*. Short turf on old dunes is an ideal habitat for orchids and we shall see perhaps a dozen species before lunch! Little patches of Bumble-Bee Orchids grow so thickly that they seem like grass and one has to be careful where one stands. The endemic *Ophrys garganica* and diminutive *Ophrys sicula* (a type of Yellow Bee Orchid) are hardly less common and with the spectacular large flowers of *Ophrys apulica* are two rather uncommon species, *Ophrys oestriifera* and *Ophrys incubacea*. Lunch will be taken below one of the many watch towers built to keep an eye out for marauding Turks - this one has the endemic *Campanula garganica* growing on it!

Day 3

Bosco di Spina Pulci, Lake Lesina & Cagnano

The hills rise sharply from the coast and as we reach the upper slopes the view north over the Lago di Lesina and the sea beyond is sublime. Perched atop the hills, the Bosco di Spina Pulci is an area of mixed limestone grassland and superb oak woodland. The ground flora is quite exquisite. Brilliant pink *Cyclamen repandum* is such a striking sight whilst in other areas blue *Anemone apennina* carpets the woodland floor mixed with violas and swathes of Pheasant's-eye Narcissus. Woodlarks and Mistle Thrushes and cattle laden with huge bells seem to emphasise the idyllic rural nature of this beautiful place. Still there are new orchids. The creamy-yellow spikes of Roman Orchids are a common sight and in the open areas we shall find one of the most beautiful of all the peninsula's bee orchids - the Spectacle Ophrys. The Gargano is surprisingly good for birds and the morning will see us at an excellent wetland - the Lago di Lesina. A cacophony of sound from Edible Frogs will greet us.

Water Rails call frequently and Great Reed and Fan-tailed Warblers add their voices to the general din! Marsh Harriers float over the reeds and Bearded Tits are quite common. Later we will move to the hillsides above Cagnano where the panorama over the huge Lago di Varano is spectacular. The lush slopes hold lots of orchids - here we can find Spectacle Ophrys, and two specialities, the endemic *Ophrys parvimaculata* and *Ophrys archipelagi*, all growing together amongst *Lathyrus venetus* and the Mediterranean subspecies of Kidney Vetch.

Day 4

The Foresta Umbra

Today we traverse the famous Foresta Umbra en route to the south. Famous throughout Italy, the cool green beech, oak and hornbeam forest will be in early leaf and it is a delight to wander the paths across the open forest floor. Some of the trees are huge - one roadside beech is five metres in circumference and forty metres tall. With all these trees about it is not surprising that woodpeckers are common. We should see Middle-spotted and Green Woodpeckers and with a little luck Black Woodpecker too. Collared Flycatchers which should just have arrived will be busy setting out their territories. Provence Orchid, a robust yellow orchid, blooms under these trees along with Sword-leaved Helleborines, the latter not always in flower at the time of the year. The pink flowers of *Dentaria heptaphylla* are quite striking and we shall find Spurge Laurel and Peonies before dropping towards the Carbonara Valley, its fields adorned with Wild Tulips.

Day 5

San Marco in Lamis

Swathes of Pink Butterfly Orchids grow with a rich assortment of other orchids. Green-winged Orchid and *Orchis italica* are both abundant and hybrids between the former and the butterfly orchid are common. On dry rockeries we can admire the uncommon Milky Orchid and Lady Orchid and these have Burnt-tip and Four-spotted Orchids for company. *Ophrys bertolonii* with its bright speculum set amid a dark purple-black hairy lip and set off by rich pinky-red sepals and petals is a magnificent thing. The closely related *Ophrys bertoloniiformis* will already be familiar to us but here is abundant and we shall also find the third of the triumvirate, the large-petalled *Ophrys promontorii*. Both the last two are endemic to the region! Sawfly, Yellow Bee, Early Spider and Dark Ophrys all grow amidst Asphodels, Grape Hyacinths, Rosy Garlic and lots and lots of rockroses, including the pretty white *Helianthemum apenninum*. Just a few plants of what is now known as *Ophrys lupercalis* can be found at this site.

Day 6

Manfredonia's Wetlands & Monte St Angelo

En route to the marshes and reed beds of the Vasca del Lago Salso we shall see the very rare endemic *Ophrys sipontensis*, this lovely bee orchid is only found in the

vicinity of Manfredonia! The reedbed is very extensive and is home to many thousands of frogs - both Edible Frogs and Italy's own tree frog, *Hyla intermedia*. These little green frogs are very abundant as you'll hear but are not easy to find. A variety of terns fly above the reeds from which occasional Ferruginous Ducks fly. Elegantly plumed Little Egrets, Marsh Harriers, Purple Herons and various warblers will be much in evidence. Spoonbills, Glossy Ibises and Spectacled Warblers can be seen in the salt marshes by river. A little to the south are extensive salt pans with flocks of Greater Flamingos and colonies of Slender-billed Gulls looking resplendently pink in their breeding dress! In the afternoon there will be an opportunity to visit the nearby town of Monte St Angelo. The narrow streets are a delight and the 13th century Sanctuary of St Michael is a major pilgrimage centre, being the last on the "via Francigena" from France before pilgrims set sail for the Holy Land from the port of Manfredonia.

Magnificent many-flowered specimens of *Ophrys garganica* mix with the finest *Ophrys incubacea*, the two producing a wonderful selection of sometimes bizarre hybrids. Pink *Crepis rubra* and *Anemone pavonina* form a fine backdrop for stately Lady Orchids, patches of deeply coloured Four-spotted Orchids, and the unbelievably variable bright furry flowers of Bertoloni's Bee Orchid. Amongst the smaller bee orchids present are *Ophrys funerea* and the third member of the yellow bee orchid group, the tiniest among them, *Ophrys phryganae*. Green Hairstreaks are abundant as are Cirl Buntings and Stonechats. Nearby we'll search dry limestone slopes where locally rare *Serapias orientalis* and *Serapias apulica* grow with plentiful *Ophrys sicula*, Toothed, Burnt-tip and Lizard Orchids!

Day 7

Bosco Quarto

Narrow winding lanes take us up onto the Bosco Quarto amongst the stunning limestone karsts and oak forests of the Central Gargano. This area is perhaps the most sublimely beautiful in the region and certainly has the most remarkable floral show! Once again the sward is a carpet of *Anemone apennina* and *Narcissus poeticus*, but here also is *Corydalis cava* mixed with colonies of both yellow *Iris pseudopumila* and purple *Iris lutescens*. Another iris, *Hermodactylus tuberosus*, adorns open areas with its delicate green and black flowers and whole fields are turned blue or yellow by the lovely *Viola graeca*. Amazingly there's lots of orchids in all this. Swarms of purple Green-winged Orchids and yellow Elder-flowered Orchids mix with such beauties as Sparse-flowered Orchid and Spectacle Ophrys. Almond woods hold magnificent displays of Giant Orchid and Yellow Asphodel. Hawfinch, various woodpeckers and perhaps Wryneck are on the agenda while Buzzards and Montagu's Harriers drift by overhead.

Days 8 – 10

the Matese Mountains

An extension takes us to Molise, one of the smallest and most 'off the beaten track' regions in Italy, where a popular recurring joke is that "Molise doesn't exist". While very small, Molise is an area of green, rolling hills that rises from the Adriatic up to the impressive 2000+ metre peaks and ridges of the Matese Mountains bordering Campania. Fabulous high-altitude grasslands are covered with Spring Gentians, *Anacamptis morio*, *Orchis pauciflora*, *Bellevallia romana* and millions of yellow or purple-blue *Viola eugeniae*. The gorgeous *Edraianthus graminifolius* should just be coming into bloom. Amongst a host of fine subalpine species we'll encounter the wild liquorice *Astragalus glycyphyllosi*, bright orange *Lilium bulbiferum*, *Valeriana tuberosa*, lots of *Trifolium alpestre*, pretty *Linum alpinum* and endemic *Erysimum apenninum*.

Extensive Beechwoods are full of *Dactylorhiza sambucina* and *Dactylorhiza romana*, *Anemone apennina*, *Corydalis cava*, *Cyclamen repandum* and *Scilla bifolia*... where the beech mixes with the endemic oak *Quercus dalechampii* the first *Paeonia officinalis* will be putting forth its scarlet goblets and around it a fine show of *Convallaria majalis*, *Lithospermum officinale*, *Scutellaria columnae*, and another endemic, *Iris marsica*. The Matese Mountains are largely limestone so there's plenty of orchids including rarities such as *Ophrys minipassionis* and the lovely yellow *Ophrys lacaitae*. At lower altitudes we can find *Himantoglossum adriaticum*, *Limodorum abortivum* and several species of *Serapias* growing amongst *Asphodelus macrocarpus*, *Anthericum liliago* and swathes of *Cistus creticus eriocephalus*.

Day 11

Naples

After breakfast we'll depart for Naples and will have the chance to visit one or two of this famous city's highlights during the afternoon. The Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli is one of the world's finest archaeological museums, featuring immense collections from nearby Pompeii. And then there's Spaccanapoli, a narrow straight street that cuts right through the historic old town, brimming with life, churches, and shops.

Day 12

to Cassano allo Ionio & Pollino National Park

After a relaxing morning 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.

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 13

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 Ionio, 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 14

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 Ionio 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 15

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 16

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 17

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 18

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 19

Departure from Naples Airport

Perhaps we'll have chance to enjoy another walk around the delightful streets of Cassano allo Jonio 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.

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