

viranatura
tours 

**LILIES OF GREECE
2023**

Lilium candidum

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Day 1 Arrival and to Petrini Gonia

Flights and meet ups all went to plan and by 13.30 we were driving to the far eastern corner of Greece, passing through the drying summer lowlands with rounded hills covered in Mediterranean macchie. A stop at a café gave us the chance for revitalising sandwiches, ice cream and coffee. Then we drove the final hour to our pleasant hotel nestled in the hills. After a relaxing break we had our first filling Greek dinner together with a nightingale bursting into song or at least we could hear one between the lulls in lively Greek conversations.

Day 2 Rhodope National Park

A day of interesting contrasts. Our first, very productive stop, was for an area of Mediterranean grassland fringed by oaks (*Quercus frainetto*). Along the verge were several hefty and pristine spikes of lizard orchid; *Himantoglossum caprinum*, some attractively suffused with violet. They burst from the abundant clovers and there were at least six species of these including the yellow balls of *Trifolium campestre*, the long fuzzy spikes of *T. angustifolium*, similar but much more compact *T. arvense* and deep pink *T. alpestre*. Also common were the white discs of *Orlaya grandiflora*, yellow *Cota tinctoria* and a rather delicate tall rock rose which was actually an unspotted form of *Tuberaria guttata*, whilst related *Cistus creticus* was a common shrub, each low plant smothered in big pink flowers and further on we found Jupiter's-beard too; *Anthyllis barba-jovis*. As we progressed slowly through the grassland, dominated by the tall airy wands of *Chrysopogon gryllus*, we found more and more with; flat-topped *Centaureum erythraea*, large-flowered *Hypericum olympicum*, long-stemmed *Dianthus armeria* in a variety of colour-patterns and increasing numbers of *Anacamptis coriophora*. A third orchid; *Serapias vomeracea* was also seen, as were spikes of the lovely *Digitalis lanata* and dainty *Ornithogalum sphaerocarpum*. wandering back up to the vehicle the verge was lined with a golden grass; *Melica sp.* and the spurge; *Euphorbia seguieriana*.

From here we drove higher and transitioned from Mediterranean to more humid Euxine vegetation, with large areas of beech forest and bracken. The latter is often associated with the star plant of the day and the one we most wanted to find; *Lilium rhodopaeum*. There was the teaser of one on a



Lilium rhodopaeum

bank and then we stopped in a flowery area of Scots pine and bracken. A short distance along the road and there they were a population of eight beautiful lilies, scattered among the bracken. Lily beetles were doing the worst to damage the plants and we did our duty and squashed any we saw. If the leaves were damaged the flowers were still in very good condition. A solitary greater butterfly orchid; *Platanthera chlorantha* was also found in the shade. Along the road were lots of *Rhinanthus minor*, *Cynoglossum hungaricum*, *Knautia arvensis*, patches of bright yellow *Chamaespartium sagittale* and then another lone lily. Others were found in leaf too. Back near the vehicle we found some perfect spikes of *Gymnadenia conopsea* before walking on to a different area via a flowery track with abundant *Polygala vulgaris* and rich pink *Trifolium alpestre*. On a dry bank were clumps of white-flowered *Vincetoxicum hirundinaria* and spikes of a reddish-yellow broomrape; *Orobanche gracilis*. A second species with broader reddish flowers was found higher up, along with *Digitalis viridiflora* and the a colony of *Lilium martagon* var. *martagon (catanii)*. Alas, the lilies were still at least a week from flowering, but to get both this and *L. rhodopaeum* in peak bloom at the same time is not possible.

We had lunch in this pleasant flowery spot before moving just a short distance to another superb colony of *Lilium rhodopaeum*, this one with at least fifteen plants. These included one beauty with three flowers and four twins, though some were inaccessible among fallen pine branches. Just beyond these in the deep shade of the beech trees were a few bird's-nest orchids; *Neottia nidus-avis*. Our winding circuit route took us slowly downhill past banks full of *Anthyllis barba-jovis* and sunny roadsides with a few pretty *Linum hirsutum*. Large-flowered forms of *Campanula persicifolia* followed before we reach flatter ground. It was warm so an ice cream stop seemed in order and we enjoyed a break in the shade in a small village.

Closer to base there was time for a couple of good stops, the



Salvia sclarea

first for more *Linum hirsutum*, which also produced spires of *Digitalis lanata*, *Onosma heterophylla* and *Malva sylvestris*. Then a final stop was interesting for the superb display of *Salvia sclarea* in full flower, with ranks of tall plants filling a rocky slope. On the opposite side of the road Peter found some huge spathes of *Dracunculus vulgaris* in flower in the shade of some Kermes oaks. And, in the adjacent open areas were lots of *Carduus nutans*, *Stachys cretica* and subtle delights such as *Sideritis montana* and *Micromeria juliana*, whilst both *Clematis vitalba* and *C. flammula* were seen in flower too.

It was now time to savour the late afternoon light from our balconies before tackling another huge meal!

Day 3 Mount Falakron

Another fine morning with clear skies and cloud banks lying gently across the hills. We drove out and then up directly to the alpine areas of Mount Falakron, the roadside banks and meadows growing increasingly flowery until we could take no more. The next hour was spent on an incredible alpine slope absolutely plastered in flowers. Dominating the floral matrix was yellow *Helianthemum oelandica* subsp. *alpestre*, together with abundant mats of blue *Globularia cordifolia* and the pretty heads of white-flowered *Anthyllis vulneraria* subsp. *pulchella*. Among this were so many more plants. Yellow *Linum elegans* was easily missed among the rock roses, from which rose deep pink spikes of *Orchis mascula* and the softer pink of *Neotinea tridentata*, whilst the pretty pallid-centred daisies of *Achillea ageratifolia* calmed the scene. Looking closer at the colourful turf we found tufts of pink *Anthyllis montana*, its golden cousin *A. aurea*, as well as a third more typical form of white *Anthyllis vulneraria*. The white stars of *Cyanus napulifera* appeared with pretty cerise *Onobrychis montana* and as we moved higher there were patches of *Clinopodium alpina*, mats of pink *Thymus* sp. and emerging *Sideritis scardica*. The colour was relentless and we spent time finding the best combinations of plants. More orchids were found with *Neotinea ustulata* and then its hybrid progeny with *N. tridentata*, with various intermediates. As if this vast alpine garden was not enough once we had pulled ourselves



Globularia cordifolia et al

away from this we found another slope that if anything offered more beautiful combinations. What was more, the little rocky dell below was filled with frothy *Saxifraga rotundifolia*, tight cushions of *S. sempervivum*, pink *Geranium macrorrhizum* and *Ajuga reptans*, whilst foamy patches of *Galium anisophyllum* and various ferns, filled gaps in the rocks and grassy areas were full of *Viola macedonica* and silvery-leaved *Ranunculus illyricus*.

Lunch was in a small wooden shelter with convenient table and seats. Afterwards we went into the pinewoods to look for *Lilium martagon* var. *martagon (catanii)*, finding many *Neottia nidus-avis* and *Cephalanthera damasonium* on the way. Sadly, the lilies were all still in bud and search as we might none could be found in flower. The woods were delightful nonetheless, resounding with birdsong and then later on the odd rumble of thunder. Exiting the woods *Anacamptis pyramidalis* was found and more followed at our next stop where handsome *Salvia argentea* crowded roadside banks, foamy *Filipendula ulmaria* popped up among the bracken and the beech woods had tall spikes of *Limadorum abortivum*. A little higher up we found *Cephalanthera rubra* and *Neottia (Listera) ovata* too. The thunder had increased and the first rain drops had us making for the vehicle. And not too soon either as a heavy downpour ensued as we descended.

Near Drama there had clearly been no rain and we took the chance to have a coffee boost before completing our journey.

Day 4 Kajmakjalan (Mount Voras)

Today there was the necessary transit across the country to reach the next prime lily destination. There was a little more cloud in the sky this morning and indeed once we'd reached the motorway a few sprinkles began, but these did not last long and by the time we'd reached Thessaloniki it was clearer and dry. Passing Edessa we reached our first plant stop, a limestone outcrop where there was a good population of *Lilium candidum*. Scaling the rock steps up to the small plateau above we found a good number of lilies growing in a



Geum coccineum

remarkable landscape of sunbaked limestone pavement grassland and scrub. *Convolvulus cantabricus*, pale yellow *Sedum ochroleucum* and *Sideritis montana* were common and lazy drifts of leggy *Lomelosia argentea* mingled with the pink stars of *Xeranthemum annuum*. From here we moved on and climbed into the greener hills stopping by a convenient shelter for lunch with a big view of the lake and its surrounding cherry orchards below.

Driving a little further up we exited the Scots pine woodland and entered an alpine wonderland. Here the slopes we dressed in lush meadows filled with buttercups and stands of pink *Silene atropurpurea*, drifts of *Veronica chamaedrys* subsp. *chamaedryoides* and *Cruciata laevipes*, the pretty and abundant pink discs of *Geranium subcaulescens* and white stars of *Ornithogalum divergens*. Both yellow and pink forms of *Dactylorhiza sambucina* were found along with a couple of *Anacamptis morio*. In the water meadow below the ground was a simmering mass of *Geum coccineum* in huge numbers, crowding the edges of streams with *Alchemilla indivisa* and *Cardamine acris*. Wetter boggy slopes had plenty of deep pink *Dactylorhiza majalis* subsp. *cordigera* and the silvery wisps of a cotton-grass too; *Eriophorum latifolium* too. It was a beguiling sight of alpine abundance.

There was more to come and we drove up as high as we could in the vehicle. A small snow patch still had a couple of *Crocus sieberi* and *Ranunculus cacuminis*, (a plant endemic to Mount Voras) whilst *Viola doefleri* was abundant, colouring the open rocky slopes. In the grassier alpine turf, buttercups were again innumerable, creating vast sheets of yellow mixed with the white of *Anthemis tenuiloba*. Wandering across the flat upland new plants appeared regularly among this sea of colour with pretty cushions of *Dianthus myrtinervius* which grew larger as we progressed, as well as mats of pale pink *Antennaria dioica*, orange-centred *Potentilla aurea* and splashes of blue *Myosotis alpestris*. Even larger cushions of *Dianthus myrtinervius* were found amidst a stunning alpine garden of colours. Descending a little we found a good clump of *Gentiana verna* subsp. *balcanicus* in the turf and then a large number of neat mounds of *Minuartia stellata* in full flower alongside the twisted stems of *Plantago atrata*.

Such as floral feast needed finishing off and we had a coffee down below before making our way via an interesting backroad with rocky grasslands filled with mulleins and thistles and then the green beech woods above Florina before



Geranium subcaulescens,
Potentilla aurea
& *Myosotis alpestris*

gaining sight of the silvered disc of Prespa Lake, fringed by neat rows of runner bean fields. Our hotel was not far beyond and a good barbeque dinner awaited us there.

Day 5 Mount Vournos

The neatly arranged bean fields got our attention first thing, with clear views towards the lake of rank upon rank of cane wigwams, each one with a climbing bean at the base. There were a number of interesting plants along the edges too with the tall golden-flowered *Pastinaca sativa*, a *Verbascum*, the first flowers on *Centaurea saloniata*, fearsome *Onopordum acanthium* and pretty palest yellow *Linaria peloponnesiaca*. Best of all though was the superb bushy *Salvia amplexicaule* forming big domes of purple flowers. Moving on we stopped for a view point of the lake and surrounding mountains, before climbing much higher into the hills, passing through the dense beech woods and then turning onto a side track. A stand of *Verbascum longifolium* were perfectly lit, growing with *Achillea nobilis* and small-flowered *Dianthus stenopetalus*. The road up was rather wet and overgrown in parts, but still driveable and we made it above the tree line stopping where there was a big view all around.

The slopes were full of bushy *Chamaecytisus hirsutus* in full flower, plenty of *Silene atropurpurea*, and softer pink *Lamium garganicum*, whilst *Viola macedonica* lined the path. We walked for while seeing many flowers, but only finding *Lilium albanicum* in advanced bud. It seemed the season was rather late, but we continued to a second much larger population finding grasslands filled with *Geranium subcaulescens*, *Cyanus triumfettii* and the tall silvery-leaned gold of *Tephrosia integrifolia*. Alas, although we found many plants there were no lilies in flower. Fortunately, I had seen one (with binoculars) in a different location lower down and we back-tracked and walked down to a rocky ridge smothered in a dainty *Arenaria* and *Genista depressa*, the crevices encrusted with a *Sempervivum* and low spreading mats of *Juniperus communis*. Extraordinary habitat for a lily but there they were and we managed to find half a dozen or more in flower, each bloom fresh and bright yellow with orange anthers. Our picnic was perfect among the pristine landscape, gazing out over flowery meadows. A solitary, stout spike of *Asphodelus albus* stood on the slope above us.



Lilium albanicum

On our way back we found the necessary café for a caffeine (and ice cream) boost. Then, on the quiet side road to Prespa lakes we stopped for a wide meadows brimming with countless *Dianthus viscidus*, mixed with creamy *Achillea nobilis*, the odd *Leguosia speculum-veneris* and tall and *Knautia integrifolia*. our final stop was a quite different habitat, where on decaying granite slopes we found the elegant *Linaria dalmatica*, the blue pom-poms of *Jasione heldreichii*, *Hypericum olympicum*, a graceful *Stipa* grass and more.

Day 6 Aaos Lake & to Papigo

A fine clear day began with a superb stand of *Digitalis lanata* on a roadside bank with many perfect spires of white-lipped flowers. After this we motored for a while, taking advantage of the excellent highway network including at least twenty tunnels which sped us through the green countryside and onto the Pindos Mountians at Metsovo. Not far from the town a large water meadow thronged with hundreds of *Gladiolus palustris* in a variety of colour forms and among the grasses were quite a few *Anacamptis coriphora* too. Driving up higher, there were fine views of the town and dramatic surrounding landscape. After a quick stop on th Katara Pass where serpentine rocks were encrusted in the red-leaves of *Sedum album* we descended to a convenient lunch spot near Aaos Lake. There were lots of *Geranium brutium* and fine-lined *G. versicolor*, *Campanula tymphaea*, *Armeria canescens* and in the marsh below; *Dactylorhiza saccifera*. However, none of these compared to the huge prize specimen we found after lunch, a four-spiked beauty that outweighed anything else we found. We moved on to look for pretty *Pinguicula crystalina* smothering rocks and seep edges. In the adjacent woods we managed to find a few *Lilium chalconicum*, but these were still in tight bud. The same lily was found on the road leading down from the lake before we stopped at another orchid area, this time for *Cephalanthera rubra*, *Platanthera chlorantha* and *Anacamptis pyramidalis*. *Epipactis helleborine* was in advanced bud too.

From here we continued on our convoluted and winding route passing through a matrix of oak woods fringed by stands of *Cotinus coggygia* and meadows. On a bare gravel slope there were mats of *Putoria calabrica* and *Teucrium polium* subsp. *capitatum*, as well as a fine green praying mantis. Then we stopped for a superb colony of at least forty *Himantoglossum carpinum* all



Himantoglossum carpinum

in perfect condition, growing in a short meadow packed with *Petrorhagia prolifera* and clovers. There was still some distance to cover, so we drove for a while passing through tiny villages and wending our way through the hills, eventually reaching the limestone country near Kipi where we could see the cliffs had *Lilium candidum* in flower (something for tomorrow). Climbing a low pass the limestone was plastered in the floriferous blue bushes of *Salvia officinalis* among which grew sulphurous *Sedum acre* and shrubs of golden *Phlomis fruticosa*. Further searching also found a second sage; *Salvia virgata*, rosy *Scabiosa tenuis*, *Sedum hispanicum* and some fine backlit grasses all growing among swathes of lacy *Orlaya grandiflora*.

After we had swept up the many tight bends from the river towards Papigo, there was a scenic spectacular to finish the day with a sensational view of the entrance to the Vikos Gorge. Our hotel was at the top of the lovely stone built village of Papigo and we enjoyed an excellent dinner serenaded by nightingale song as the evening light played across the soaring cliffs of Mount Tymphi.

Day 7 Vikos Gorge & Kipi

The last hurrah and charged with a filling breakfast and some excellent coffee we set off descending the remarkable serpentine road that connects the village. There was a short stop to admire the crystalline blue waters of the Voudomatis River, complete with some trout swimming lazily in it. Not much farther on a huge display of *Verbascum pulverulentum* filled a field or two. Nearby were the climbing stems of *Bryonia cretica* too. Passing through more attractive stone villages we ascending into the amazing pancake limestone landscapes of the Vikos gorge area, stopping to look at mats of various sedums, many pristine *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, the endemic *Malcomia orsinii* and pretty *Campanula ramosissima*. Moving on our next target was *Lilium martagon*, which I had seen in the oak woods four years ago. Unfortunately, they could not be refound despite extensive searching of many suitable gullies and wooded areas. *Dactylorhiza saccifera*, *Cephalanthera rubra* and *Epipactis microphylla* were seen as were the developing stems of *Lilium chalconicum* (a long way from flowering) and the roadsides were swathed in colourful annuals. Everyone had a look at



Anacamptis pyramidalis

the impressive, deep Vikos Gorge, made all the more special because of the complete lack of any sign of humankind on the pristine forested landscape. Another area was searched for the lilies, but no luck so we descended to a shaded shelter for our final picnic lunch.

The afternoon was spent looking at some of the impressive stone bridges that span the rivers, as well as the fabulous pancake rock pillars and gorge landscapes. Many *Lilium candidum* could be seen flowering on the high cliffs of some and on the cliffs near to us was *Bubon macedonicum* with large umbels of foamy white flowers. After viewing one especially large bridge span and then a more complex triple arched bridge the warm weather suggested an ice cream break was a good idea and we found a suitable shaded place to eat them before a final push for the lilies. This year *Lilium candidum* was plentiful and we found some beside the road at ground level, but there were many more on the cliffs and a small track led towards another nice bridge with lots handsome *Acanthus balcanicus* growing along the edges. Following the trail over the bridge and up a couple of switchbacks we did find some more lilies including one more or less reachable one with good flowers, but the pancake rocks though appearing enticing and easy to scale, were in reality rather tricky, so we had to more or less admire them from a distance.

Heading back it began to shower a little, but this did not stop us looking at some splendid stands of *Acanthus spinosus* and a few *Centaurea salonitana* to round off the botany.

Day 8 To Thessaloniki

An early start was needed to get back across Greece to the airport in Thessaloniki, so an early breakfast saw us away by 6.30 am, with mists draped across the hills and foggy patches on the roads as we crossed murky valleys between the forested hills. The fast road pierced the same hills aided by the many tunnels and this gave us enough time to stop for a boosting coffee and still arrive in good time after a truly flower-filled week.



Acanthus spinosus



Gladiolus palustris

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