

viranatura
tours 

**SPRING IN THE
STANS
2023**

Tulipa dubia

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Day 1 6 April Arrival & to Khiva

The long haul from the US and Canada had us all meeting up in Istanbul, some a touch sweatier than others after a close call connection. The flights was fine, but two bags failed to show (marooned in Dallas as it turned out). A revitalising coffee in a local hotel kept us awak long enough to take the next flight onto Urgench, from where we drove onto the old town of Khiva.

Breakfast and a snooze were followed by an interesting city tour, visiting the architectural and cultural highlights, exquisite tilework, superb wood carvings and monumental minarets, interspersed by a huge four course lunch. Dinner was equally filling, served from rooftop terrace with great views of Khiva in all directions and a warm sunset. The rising moon only added to the charm.

Day 2 7 April Desert forts

I went to meet Julie (who had been delayed a day) on the flight from Istanbul and we drove back had breakfast followed by a whistlestop tour of Khiva. Then it was on with everyone else into the desert, crossing the much abused Amu Darya (Oxus) River, which supplied the water to the intense agriculture we saw all around from cotton fields to apple orchards. Life in this region (Karakalpakstan) is totally dependent of the river and beyond its life-giving banks the saline expanse of the desert quickly asserts itself, a flat plain dominated with various Amaranthaceae, whilst damper depressions and riversides had plentiful pink flowered *Tamarix ramosissima* and possibly *Myricaria squamosa* too. The first weather beaten fortress was surrounded by these stark saline flats (the river having shifted course over the centuries and rendered the towns uninhabitable), a complex of earth walls and the remains of dwellings.

Moving on we rattled our way to a second larger complex, poised on a hill with a commanding view across the plains to ridges of blackened rocks. Here there was a dramatic shift, the elevation lifting the vegetation above the saline water table and within the deep sands all around we could see large clumps of glossy green leaves. These belonged to *Ferula foetida* and though it wasn't a big fennel year (when virtual forests of these hefty herbs come into bloom) we did find quite a few in fine flower, magnets for pollinating wasps, flies, butterflies and mating beetles.



Iris longiscapa

The stems we remarkably stout and large bracts peeled off below the dense heads of globular umbels. The leaves of an *Astragalus* sp., broad-leaved *Allium capsicum* (in bud) and abundant *Carex physodes* sprouted from the sands. Climbing the hill towards the fort we also found increasing quantities of pretty pink *Astragalus subbijugus*, whilst a swallowtail butterfly eagerly fed from the greenish flowers of *Matthiola odoratissima* (?). Shrubby *Atraphaxis* sp. was quite plentiful too. Entering the fortress a search around the interior threw up a smattering of whitish *Tulipa sogdiana* in a damp depression, whilst outside we finally found the lovely *Iris longiscapa* in the sands below the fort, including one impressive violet specimen with three flowers. Some would have it the donkey gave me directions.

From here we drove back to Urgench and to the large railway station in good time to board our train and find our comfortable sleeper compartments. Celebratory beer and vodka helped us get a few hours of sleep before arriving in Bukhara and transferring to our hotel in a converted medrassa.

Day 3 Bukhara

We awoke in a new old city, and after a hearty breakfast set off on foot for a tour of the city, visiting impressive architecture, cultural and traditional handicrafts centres for an insight into what is produced in the region and importantly learning about the place they were first sold. There has been some good restoration of key monuments, with their superb tile- and brickwork as well as the ongoing excavation of new sites such as a caravanserai and haman complex. We completed this part of the day with a visit to the stunning Kalon complex with beautiful blue-tiled domes, medrasas and courtyard complete with an old spreading mulberry. Lunch was beside the main pool and then we returned to the hotel. Free time in the afternoon gave us time to shop retrieve baggage, identify plants or relax (and get rid of the jet lag).



Khiva



Day 4 Bukhara & to Samarkand

There was a time in the morning to visit the Ark complex and its museums as well as the more recently constructed summer palace of the last Emir. After lunch it was onto the train station for the comfortable and swift ninety-minute ride to Samarkand, passing from desertic plains dominated by *Artemisia*, to greener fields sprinkled with red poppies, as the mountains gained in significance.

Day 5 Samarkand

I met the two Rachels at the airport in the morning and we all convened after breakfast for our final city tour to complete the triumvirate of Silk Road centres. Leafy boulevards led to the immense statue of Timur, the current national hero, and then on to his mausoleum. The magnificent Registan followed, then lunch of tasty plov and final flurry of blue tiles at Shah-i-Zinda. Now drunk of the four 'M's (mosques, medrasas, mausoleums and museums we went back to recover.

Day 6 Taktakaraca Pass

From here on in it was to be botany and we drove south towards the Gissar Range (and extension of the Pamir Alai) a granitic ridge that extends back into neighbouring Tajikistan and one which rises to around 1660 metres at the Taktakaraca Pass. We climbed into green hills with many fruit trees and walnuts lining the way, rising above this to the rockier top. An access road allowed us to wander along the ridge where we quickly found the huge inflorescence of *Ferula khustanica*, pretty *Corydalis ledebouriana*, *Gagea leiopardii*, *Anemone petuliolosa*, the shuttlecocks of *Astragalus janischewskii* and plenty of *Ranunculus paucidentata*. Bushes of both *Amygdalus spinissisima* and *Cerasus erythrocarpa* were at their floriferous best. Along the way there was the chance of *Gentiana olivieri* and an *Astragalus* sp. which looked very much like an *Allium* at first glance. One of the plants of the day was on a grassy slope; *Pyrus regeli*, a Red Data Book species, which was in full flower. The characteristic cut-leaves were visible too. Climbing a bit higher there was a ladder over the fence and we were able to walk down

into a gully flanked by granite boulders and outcrops. The green patches between the rocks held a thriving population of *Iris magnifica* and the fiery chalises of *Tulipa fosteriana* (forerunner of many of the large garden tulip cultivars). The latter were the most blazing scarlet with striking black and yellow interiors and many good specimens were found. Likewise the iris which had fine stands and clumps scattered throughout. Here and there were pretty patches of pale blue veronica and yellow *Barbarea plantaginea*.

Just below the pass we stopped for the lovely pink flowers of *Tragopogon malika* (and clumps of finished *Iris warleyensis*), before descending a few bends to a lower slope. Here we climbed up to a meadow full of impressive *Astragalus sieversianus*, the hairy stems lined with soft yellow flowers (that develop into cotton-ball seedpods later on). Bright red *Roemeria refracta* was scattered about the meadow, *Bellevalia turkestanica* was found in fruit and there were quite a few *Ixiolirion tartaricum* in flower and across the way we could see the billowing masses of large *Crambe kotschyana*. An *Allium* sp grew in a damp flush and *Fritillaria bucharica* had just finished flowering.

After a good lunch in a pleasant local restaurant shaded by trees fast coming into leaf, there was time for one last stop a little lower down where a grassy slope was home to many *Phlomooides napaulensis* and *P. fetisowii* as well as plentiful *Gentiana olivieri*. A large glass lizard was also seen. It was now time to drive back to Samarkand, zig-zagging back up through the dramatic granite boulder landscape of the southern slope and back down the greener northern slope. It was a comfortable two hour train trip onto Tashkent for the night. The only concern; we had run out of '20 drops!

Day 7 Chimgan Valley

A change of scene today, departing the city life we had enjoyed for the last few days and heading for the hills. Tashkent more or less sits at the far western end of the Celestial Mountains or Tien Shan, a botanically-rich range that runs from there to western China, fizzling out somewhere east of Urumqi. Meeting up with our guides; Slava and Dimitri, we set off via the excellent vodka emporium (where we saw a rich selection of Uzbek



and Russian brands alongside some oddly-labelled soft drinks, and smiley faced yogurt balls). Leaving the traffic choked city behind we drove through the greener countryside with Dimitri giving us lots of information about Tashkent and each area we passed through. In time we turned off the main road and stopped shortly afterwards for a slope with some good spikes of *Phlomoidea speciosa* and flowery bushes of *Atraphaxis pyrifolia*. *Hultemia persica* was almost in flower and in the filed edges above was *Adonis aestivalis*.

A little farther up and we found a colony of *Fritillaria sewerzowii* in the shade of some walnut trees. Another frit was the star of the nest stop, an earth bank where both pink *Fritillaria stenanthera* and yellow *Iris tubergeniana* grew. Above these was also a good patch of *Anemone petuliolosa*. We were now much closer to the mountains and what better than a walk up a valley towards them. The main event for the day was a wander up the Chimgan Valley. It is no exaggeration to write that the ground was quite literally thickly carpeted with the small yellow flowers of *Gagea gageoides* in ridiculous abundance, truly countless. Among this foil was woven a stunning tapestry of *Corydalis ledebouriana*, *Fesia puschkinoides* and the yellow-centred cream stars of *Tulipa bifloriformis*. Indeed the tulips got better and better as we walked with delightful drifts mingling with the endless swathes of gageas. Where the snow had only recently melted we found *Crocus alatavicus*, *Colchicum luteum* and plentiful *Gymnospermium albertii* in various stages of its development. The crocuses became increasingly common as we neared the larger snow banks, fringing the edges with glowing white and purple.

Lunch was beside the river and then we went over to some other snow patches where both *Eranthis longistipitata* and *Colchicum luteum* were in good condition. Crossing over the large snow bank filling the stream bed the slopes became grittier and was here we found our first *Tulipa dubia*, a handsome yellow and red species. With these were also a couple of *Iris orchoides* and there were many more tulips on similar slopes as we followed the river down. The last stretch was an easy amble and then we drove the half hour to the hotel above the large Charvak Reservoir with good views of the various Tien Shan ridges beyond.



Crocus alatavicus

Day 8 Little Chimgan & Gulkam Canyon

Strong winds early on dissipated by the time we had driven up to Chimgan on a clear, bright day. Our target was a ridge that linked Little and Great Chimgan mountains and we set off through the now familiar carpets of gagea, gaining height slowly at first as we entered wooded areas with lots of *Cerasus tianshanicus* and larger flowered *C. verrucosa*. Flowering bushes of *Lonicera tianshanica* were seen and *Corydalis ledebouriana*, *Fesia puschkinoides* and various *Gagea* sp were ever present, whilst higher up were a few *Rosularia turkestanica* on a granite boulder. The trail turned towards a narrow ridge and climbed steeply in parts cresting the ridge were a few *Corydalis darvasica* could be seen on slopes peppered with *Tulipa bifloriformis*. Other tulips were the main targets and with a bit of legwork we got up to where there was a good population of *Tulipa tschimganica* in various colour forms from red, through orange to yellow with red markings. The attractive spotted leaves of *T. greigii* were also found, but more of this beauty later. There were great views of the Tien Shan from high on the ridge, the perfect backdrop for tulips.

We came down and then drove back to the hotel where we had lunch in the shady grounds, lounging on comfy cushions. Then it was back to work. We drove up towards the Gulkam Canyon stopping near the river and immediately seeing some fine *Tulipa griegii* on a high bank, the distinctive and elegant flower shape glowing with the backlit sun. A bit farther on and a huge Dryad's Saddle was seen in a hollowed out walnut tree. The trail swung around and then we crossed a rocky slope with lots of *Tulipa tschimganica* (mainly red forms), the nearly flowering *Allium karataviense* and the brassica; *Chalcanthus renifolius* with attractive greyish foliage. *Iris orchoides* was also seen and just around the bend in the trail was a small colony of *Eremurus lactiflorus* in perfect condition, the milk-white flowers opening from reddish buds. Yellow-flowered *Arnebia tschimganica* was found in good flower, there were nice silver birches (*Betula pendula*) by the river, a few *Viola rupestris* and then back down near the van, the sweet-scented *Ribes aurea* in flower to complete the botany.



Tulipa tschimganica

Day 9 Charvak & to Tashkent

A final flurry in this western end of the Tien Shan on a rather breezy morning. The first *Tulipa griegii* we stopped for were tricky to photograph, but a bit farther on we found a more sheltered gully, with not only these but lots of elegant *Eremurus lactiflorus* populating the stony slopes. With them was the unusual *Bungea vesiculifera* and a pink *Astragalus* sp. we drove onto a 'pioneer camp' above Charvak, where a stony slope (of igneous rocks) led up through extensive stands of creamy-flowered *Atraphaxis pyrifolia*. Among these we also found *Atraphaxis seravshanicus*, *Potentilla orientalis*, *Ixiolirion tartaricum* and a solitary pink *Tragopogon marginifolius*. From the ridge we could see a large colony of *Eremurus lactiflorus* a little higher up and many big-leaved *Rheum maximowiczii* (rhubarb). The deep red-purple of *Parrya gracillima* was found and just over the rise on a sunny (sheltered) slope were a number of tall *Eremurus regelii* in full bloom, the spikes maroon and wide with prominent orange anthers. Lunch was in the convenient shelter of some trees with fine views of the mountains, reservoir and Charvak town.

Driving down we stopped for some flowery *Rosa kokanica* along with *Geranium transversale* and then it was on to Tashkent, passing the extensive orchards, tamarisk lined river and then into our comfortable hotel. Saying farewell to our excellent Russian team; Slava and Dimitri this was nearly the end of our Uzbek adventure. Tomorrow we travelled to a different 'stan'.

Day 10 To Kyrgyzstan

Our travel guide, Jalor, met us in the hotel and he was to prove entertaining company during the journey. We got to the station in good time and boarded our train, settled into our spacious seats and then let the Uzbek countryside and rural life slip by for the next few hours. Occasionally we passed closer to the mountains (where Tajikistan came close) and at these times there was some botany on the move with a red tulip, lots of fuzzy *Prangos pabularia* and other flowering plants. Arriving at Andijon we disembarked and drove to an excellent lunch of shaslik kebabs, brownie and ice cream followed by good coffee afterwards. Then it was onto the border, where we crossed into neighbouring Kyrgyzstan in reasonable time and met Yevgeny and Vladimir (our driver).



Eremurus lactiflorus

The only blip in the day was a lack of beer at the restaurant! But, my birthday cake was not bad at all. Stella Artois and twenty drops back at the hotel sealed the day.

Day 11 Fritillaria eduardii reserve, Batken

In order to reach Batken in time to enjoy its floral delights we left at 8am and drove directly there, stopping once to refuel. We passed through sections of rocky hills with some tantalising steppe flora, carpets of red poppies and then the austere surroundings of Batken with bands of coloured rocks and isolated ridges rising from the flat lands backed by a magnificent snowy ridge of the Pamir Alai. Reaching the specially designated *Fritillaria eduardii* or Aigul Rock reserve we arrived to find it closed! This was news to us, but apparently it was now shut for three years to protect the plants. And we could see plenty of perfectly happy *Fritillaria eduardii* on the slopes. Plan 'B' was needed and once a local official had arrived (reinforcing that we absolutely could not go in – even though he was probably about to sneak in with his mates, except he found us there). Fortunately, the same tracksuited official offered that there was another population of Aigul not far from here and someone could guide us there (for an exorbitant fee). Yevgeny haggled as best he could and settled on a price and after quickly finishing our lunch we were off, following the small sedan car as it took a 4x4 route half way up a mountain. However, the guide was worth his money as he duly led us across the slopes and then into a gorge where we eventually found a good number of stunning *Fritillaria eduardii* in excellent condition in an area of scrub and on the limestone rocks. All around were many flower-laden *Cerasus tianshanicus*, *Amygdalus spinosissimus*, yellow-flowered *Caragana kirghisorum* (?), a very slender *Gagea* af. *michaelis*. and especially on the rocks plenty of lovely yellow-and-reddish *Tulipa ferganica*. Walking back we also found *Vicia subvillosa* and red *Nonea caspica*.

There was still time to try for one more beauty unique to this part of the country. We set off for an area of rugged that lay just inside Kyrgyzstan, stopping in an area of stony steppe. It didn't take long to find the first stunning cerise pink *Tulipa rosea* and quite a few more were found in excellent condition along with a pale blue form of *Ixiolirion tartaricum* and clumps of handsome *Eremostachys molucelloides* with white and yellow flowers emerging from large green calyces.



Nerine sarniensis

Various other steppe flora was noted not in bloom, but a bit farther along and there were some floriferous *Rosa ecae* loaded with bright yellow flowers and giving out a pleasant soft scent. Across the road a stony bank had the pink and blue flowers of *Arnebia obvallata*, lots of *Glaucium elegans* and developing *Echinops nanum*. As ever the steppe was far richer than first glance would have many believe.

Day 12 To Osh

And this played out fully today too with a rich variety of steppe flora. Our first stop was for the very obvious and abundant *Crambe kotschyana* that filled orchards and fields close to the town. Growing with these billowing masses was plenty of fiery *Glaucium elegans* and its poppy cousins; *Papaver litwinowii* (with dark spots on the petals), *P. ocellatum* (with a prominent band inside the flower), purple *Roemeria hybrida* and *R. refracta*. Moving on there were fine buns of pretty *Arnebia obvallata*, the flowers aging from rosy pink to mauve and near these were bushes of *Zygophyllum atriplicoides* in flower and developing their distinctive angled fruits. On from this *Capparis spinosa* var. *herbacea* grew near a water channel, some with a good number of large white flowers bristling with anthers and nearby were neat little plants of *Dodartia orientalis* with deep violet flowers. An area of shaly rocks held many new plants and we spent quite a while exploring this small but productive area finding; blue *Allium caeruleum*, the striking pink thistle *Cousinia carduncelloidea*, the white umbels of *Schrenkia golikeana* sp., a slender pink *Silene* sp. and both *Scorzonera inconspicua* and woolly- and wavy-leaved *S. circumflexa*. Many spires of *Phlomis integior* were scattered across the rocky terrain and beneath them grew lots of *Glaucium elegans* in a compact steppe form and an attractive spreading *Astragalus lorinserianus*.

Lunch was taken in a sheltered valley where we also found a flowering plant of *Pseudosedum longidentatum*. Light rain began though this did not stop us looking at flowery shrubs of pink *Convolvulus tragacanthoides*. Fortunately, the rain had more or less stopped by the time we reached our final stop, an area of limestone and earthy slopes. Here grew on of the more impressive foxtail lilies there is; *Eremurus albertii* and there were many big spikes, including on nearly six feet tall with flowers at the top and developing fruits below. They looked wonderful against the leaden skies as did the many snow-white *Crambe kotschyana*. Also among the *Eremurus albertii* were the dark much narrower spikes of *E. cristata*. we explored further



Capparis spinosa subsp. *herbacea*

finding a fine *Ferula khustanica* in flower, alongside some huge leaves of *Crambe*. Descending, there was the purple-spotted golden flowers of *Arnebia guttata* and that was the final botanical note.

Dinner was an excellent plov served in a local house in Osh.

Day 13 To Toktugol

An initially cloudy damp morning improved as it went on. A brief bread stop turned into a more prolonged shop of all things available in a Kyrgyz supermarket from vodka to snacks as well as bread. The first plant was the sturdy spurge *Euphorbia ferganensis* growing on a grassy bank below which grew some nice patches of *Arnebia guttata*. On from this was a couple of very flowery bushes of *Lonicera tartarica* and then an area of natural *Pistacia vera* woodland with an understorey of *Atraphaxis pyrifolia*, which was in seed and the bushes various shades of pink to reddish-pink. A slope with superb plants of *Onosma dichroantha* dripping with pendant yellow to red flowers followed before we reached a small orchard for lunch. The steppe around was ablaze with carpets of poppies mingled with drifts of pink *Strigosella turkestanica* and we stopped next in an area with this, the dense heads of *Pseudohandelia umbellifera* and the lovely pale-yellow thistle; *Amberboa turanica*.

Another superb thistle came later as we started to gain height and entered an area of rocky hills where a handsome pale pink thistle grew alongside the golden spikes of *Eremurus fuscus*. Scrambling on the bushes was *Bryonia dioica*. Then the wonderful broad-leaved onion; *Allium karataviense* was found in flower growing on coarse scree cascading down to the road. The extensive colony stretched for some distance up the slope. The botany was rounded off with another feisty fennel; *Ferula khustanica* and this species became increasingly common once we had driven through a more humid area with lots of *Acer semenovii* and *Betula*, illuminating the slopes as we descending from a pass to Toktugol; a huge reservoir backed by the moody ridges of the Tien Shan.



Nerine sarniensis

Day 14 Ala Bel & Tor Ashu

The heights of the Tien Shan beckoned and we set off through the steppe clad hills around Toktugol, stopping soon after for a fine population of bright yellow and red *Tulipa ferganica*. With these were the first flowers of *Dracocephalum nutans*. The road passed through a less inspiring tract of *Artemisia* steppe and flat farmlands before turning towards the ramparts of the Tien Shan. Stands of lovely *Iris alberti* grew on granite gravel slopes with the large leaves of many non-flowering *Ferula khustanica* and *Crambe kotschyana* in a rather coarse herb combination. Climbing higher the season was clearly well-advanced and we drove onto where we could see the Tien Shan pencil spruce; *Picea schrenkiana* growing on cooler mountain slopes in an area with lots of flowering *Prunus ulmifolia* and some handsome birch with both *Betula pendula* and greyer trunked *B. tianshanica*. *Viola rupestris* grew on damp banks under the birches. Farther along a colony of violet *Iris graeberiana* (*zenaidae*) brought us to a halt. It was also a good area to take lunch in the shelter of still leafless trees at 2000 metres.

The road now climbed higher into the snowy heights and we stopped by an area of alpine turf and large snow patches where hundreds of golden *Colchicum luteum* were sprinkled across the ground. They continued like this for a few miles, in amazing numbers. There was a photo call at the 3165 metre pass and then descending we stopped in a similar area of alpine turf that this time was populated by hundreds of white-and-purple *Colchicum kesselringianum*. I have never seen the two species mix together, but it follows that at some point they must meet. With the *C. kesselringianum* were two *Gagea* species and the sunshine yellow of *Tulipa dasystemon*.

There followed a long drive across the plateau that lies between the northern and southern ranges of the Tien Shan and we were flanked by (still) heavily snowed mountains the whole way. It was a stunning sight, even more so when viewed from higher up with a vast sweep of peaks stretching off into the distance in both directions. Another stop was made on the other side of the (rough) tunnel with plunging views down into the narrow Tor Ashu gorge. The slopes all around were clad in flat forms of *Juniperus sabina*. There was one final plant to find and eventually at around 1400 metres, Mike aced a few *Tulipa zenaidae*, with their distinctive black centres. The weather had suddenly turned very cool and glancing



up at the mountain ridges we could see all of the tree were thickly covered in haw frost. From here we had the rather tedious but unavoidable remaining hour and a half to Bishkek, arriving at a very comfortable city hotel.

Day 14 East of Bishkek & Burana Tower

After some shopping in the city to buy all essential aigul fridge magnets and felt souvenirs we drove out across the flat lands until we reached rising foothills (actually in Kazakhstan), following the border fence for part of the way before eventually reaching rocky slopes and foothills inside Kyrgyzstan. There was an entertaining cable-car river crossing that kept us amused until lunch and then after that we set off uphill soon finding many fiery *Tulipa ostrowskiana* that were liberally sprinkled across the grassy slopes. Some populations were mainly red (and orange), others entirely yellow. Among these also found *Rindera tetraspis*, *Artemisia compacta*, plenty of *Spiraea hypericifolia* and *Eremurus zoeae* was just beginning to flower. Just across from this another area of shingle banks held many *Tulipa tarda* alongside *Parrya subsiliquosum* and a *Pedicularis* sp.

There was still time to visit the modest Burana tower on the way back at a large green site where many balbals were also displayed ranging in date from 8th to 15th centuries. The tower is the only standing monument of the large town of Balasagun which thrived here back in 11th Century. Green-flowered *Scrophularia heuceriiflora* was the final floral note of the trip.

Another hour or so had us back in the hotel and then we had a good final dinner complete with a slick performance of local musicians with traditional instruments and wonderfully ornate costumes.

Day 14 East of Bishkek & Burana Tower

We were on either the bleary-eyed 02.30 or the still-early 10.10 departures from Bishkek to Istanbul for global connections. I continued onto Croatia and such is the world of travel, was eating calamari by the coast at Dubrovnik exactly 24 hours after scaling slopes for tulips in the Tien Shan.



Tulipa greigii

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Mimulus naiandinus