

The logo for viranatura tours features the word "viranatura" in a large, lowercase, serif font, with "tours" in a smaller, lowercase, sans-serif font below it. To the right of the text is a stylized black silhouette of a plant with three leaves and a central flower-like shape.

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A wide-angle photograph of a desert landscape during a flowering season. The foreground is filled with numerous white and pink flowers growing between large, grey, rounded rocks. The ground is sandy and dotted with small green plants. In the background, a large, smooth sand dune stretches across the horizon under a cloudy, overcast sky. The overall scene is a vibrant contrast of colors in a typically arid environment.

**CHILE'S
FLOWERING DESERT
2022**

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Nolana baccata

Day 1 29 Sept To Antofagasta, Chile

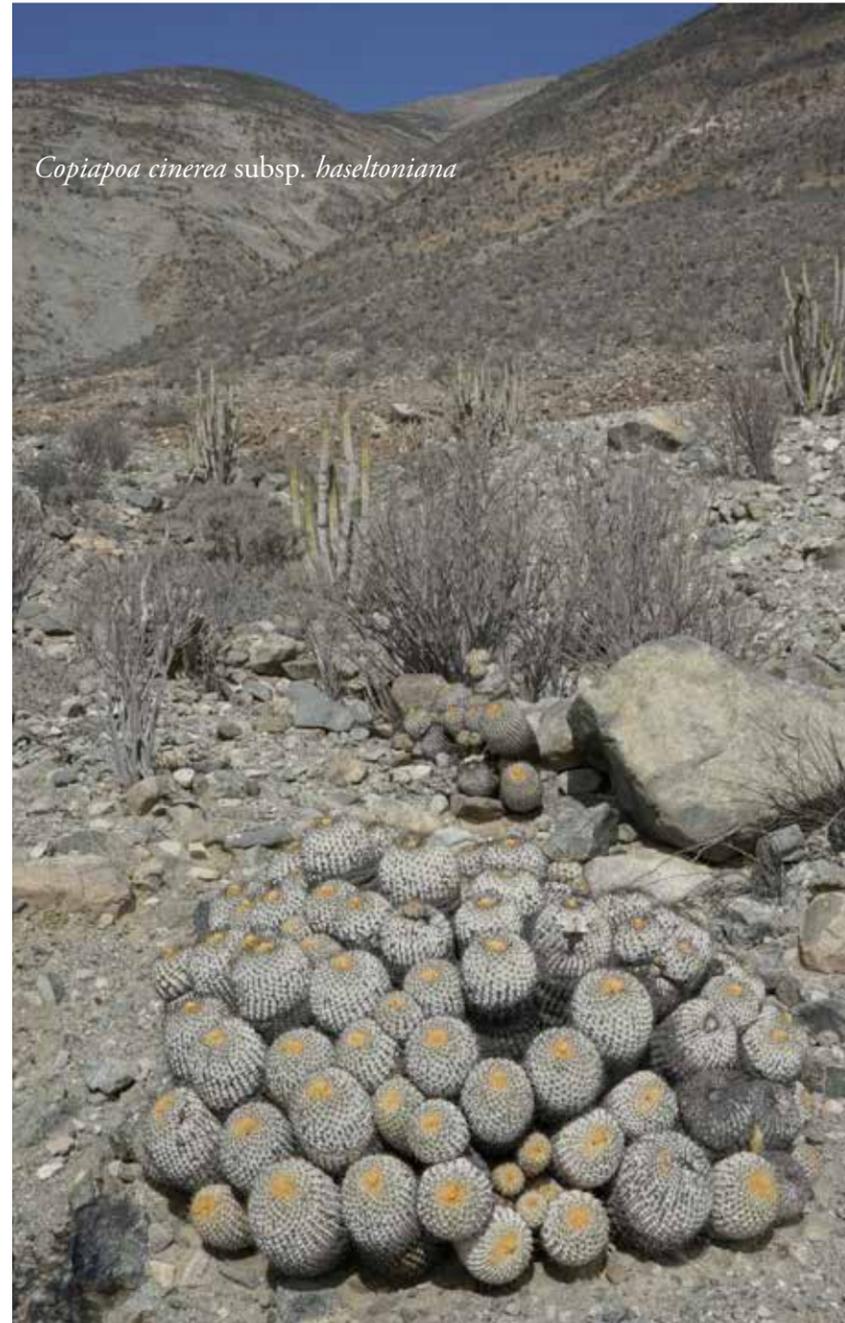
Nicolas, Frances and I had spent the last three days driving the vehicles north from Santiago, seeing lots of wonderful flowers on the way. We now met the members of the group from their various flights and drove them all back to the hotel on the coast in time for a filling first meal together.

Day 2 30 Sept Paposo

Leaving the city we climbed into the desert landscape, turning off and traversing an area of barren and dramatic scenery. This came into sharp focus with our stop overlooking a spectacular cloud sea landscape with the rust and ochre hills crinkled and folded below us as we were blasted by strong gusts of wind. Descending some way we stopped for a large population of *Copiapoa solaris* growing in the fog zone at 700-1000m. It should have been a stunning population except there was an obvious and tragic decline in this formerly impressive colony with at least ninety percent of the plants dead, including many very large specimens (that must have been centuries old). A decline in the frequency and intensity of fogs is most likely to blame. We did find some live and intact (mainly smaller) plants in gullies that probably receive more moisture.

Dropping down to the ocean we then drove along a dramatic coast of rocky headlands and sweeping shores backed by the impressive desert slopes that rose to the cloud capped tops. There was a stop to photograph one stretch that also brought an array of seabirds with Peruvian pelican, blue-footed booby and grey gulls flying above a group of bonus pinnipeds; southern sea lions. Further on and another lowland group of *Copiapoa solaris* was a bit healthier with more live plants but once again the older giants now were no more.

Lunch as near a colony of compact *Copiapoa abremephiiana* and then we drove on stopping for *Cristaria integerrimus* and then *Nolana stenophylla*, before reaching a superb population of *Copiapoa cinerea* subsp. *haseltoniana* mixed with *Eulychnia breviflora*. There were many superb specimens of the former and we spent some time searching for interesting forms with long chestnut branches topped with ashy heads or huge mother plants with a great many



Copiapoa cinerea subsp. *haseltoniana*

heads, all with a superb mountain back drop. There were plenty more as we drove and in some places, on bare gravelly slopes, they formed the dominant flora. Our last stop was in a valley where a spring of sorts meant the vegetation was a lot greener. Here the *Euphorbia lactiflua* were in flower with green leaves and the odd orange centred yellow *Balbisia peduncularis* poked from among them. We took a short hike uphill to where there were bushes of the rare and localised *Croton chilensis* and strung from some of these were a few pretty scarlet *Tropaeolum tricolor*. A couple of delicate *Cleome chilensis* had begun to flower too as had *Loasa nitida*. Large specimens of *Nicotiana solanifolia* were in the bottom of the washes.

From here we drove directly to Taltal and found our hotel. The wander to the restaurant seemed to take a while but the food was good.

Day 3 1 Oct Pan de Azucar

More expansive desert landscapes were stretched before us as we drove south, with dry crinkled hills and ridges filled with sandy wastes in between. The rocks were varied with bands and colours, the assorted colours of the ash slopes riven with washes and runnels from past rain events. And it slowly became obvious that there had been sufficient rain in this part of the desert too with very floriferous bushes of *Heliotropium pycnophyllum*, the colours ageing from white to purple. Shrubs of both *Nolana salsoloides* and *Eremocharis fruticosa* were also seen and the washes had fantastic crazy-cracked patterns.

Moving on we took the productive walk to the mirador, quickly appreciating the effects of the precious rain with plentiful *Leucocoryne appendiculata* (some a delightful lilac colour) becoming increasingly abundant as we gained height. These were joined in the flatter gravelly areas by golden *Argylia radiata* and on the rocky slopes a yellow *Oxalis* sp. as well as a



Nolana rupicola

smattering of *Nolana elegans*. There were fine stands of *Eulychnia breviflora*, some encrusted with various lichens, especially as we got closer to the ridge top where moisture-laden clouds swept in regularly. There was a calling guanaco (seen much closer by some as they walked back down) and the odd *Cistanthe cachinalensis* in flower too, shortly before we arrived at the impressive sweeping viewpoint, which took in a large slice of the coast, islands as foamy breakers lapped the white sands.

After lunch we stopped at a thriving and extensive colony of *Copiapoa cinerea* subsp. *columna-alba* with many healthy mature plants. Among these we managed to find a few, almost invisible, *Eriogyne oederi* nestled at ground level and almost buried in grit. There was a final cactus-oriented stop just as we exited the park, with a big population of *Copiapoa cinerascens* dotted across the landscape. In the rocky bluffs were superb trailing plants of big-flowered *Nolana rupicola* along with *Perityle emoryi* and *Polyachyurus poeppigii*.

Our final stop was in a rocky area with fragrant bushes of *Heliotropium floridum*, spender *Ozioroe biflora*, *Leucocoryne appendiculata* and some superb big plants of the blue form of *Nolana acuminata*, one filling a gap between the rocks alongside *Solanum remyanum*. The sandy ground was covered in *Cistanthe littoralis*, some of which has just started to flower as had the trailing stems of *Loasa elongata*, with two red-tipped white flowers.

Dinner was in a Peruvian restaurant with excellent pisco sours!

Day 4 2 Oct Quebrada de Leon

A very flowery introduction to the flowering desert and a contrast to the drier areas we had seen at the start of the trip, though the experience of seeing just how these areas look normally made what was to come all the more striking. We drove to a rocky valley and on the approach there were a great many *Argylia radiata* and on the rocky slopes were superb clumps of *Alstroemeria violacea* bursting from the rocks. Here and there on the same slopes were compact *Eriogyne taltalensis* with pink flowers, the attractive grey-leaved fern *Cheilanthes mollis* and a flowering *Leucostele (Echinopsis) deserticola*. Big-flowered *Nolana acuminata* was also common, spectacularly so once we



Heliotropium linariifolium

had climbed a short distance onto the plateau, passing big-leaved *Nicotiana solanifolia* with long tubed green flowers. Here the landscape was generously dressed in white, *Nolana acuminata* the slopes looking as though it had snowed, punctuated by the orange domes of floriferous *Heliotropium linariifolium* and leafy *Cistanche cachalinensis*. Here and there were clumps of yellow *Oxalis leucophyllus* and the taller narrow-leaved shrublet *O. ornithopus* as well as spreading mats of *Cruckshanksia monticola*. On the slopes the narrow endemic; *Copiapoa leonensis* was common though just one was found in flower.

After lunch we drive onto another fascinating valley where there was a diverse array of plants on offer from the gangly yellow-flowered shrub *Oxalis gigantea*, to a tiny *Eriogyne oederi* in flower. Along the base of a rocky slope *Loasa nitida* was in big drifts with clumps of *Leucocoryne narcissoides* and there was still a smattering of diminutive *Alstroemeria graminea* (the only annual species). Deep pink *Mirabilis elegans* was scattered across the plain and as we walked back we found some very large specimens of *Eriogyne oederi* and Duncan aced a pink-and-cream flowered *E. confinis*, a scarce species.

There was more to come and we drove out of the valley to the coast, to where we could see a big deep pink patch on the hillside. Walking up the dunes through swathes of *Cistanthe longiscapa* we reached a stunning viewpoint where these classic flowering desert annuals stretched away towards the rocky curve of the coast where waves coarsed the white sands. A large hawkmoth caterpillar and grey-striped beetle were also found as we walked back. Heading back we took another side road and climbed on an area of hills populated by the peculiar bushy mounds of the bromeliad; *Tillandsia landbeckii*. Among these were *Zephranthes (Rhodophiala) bagnoldii* and *Oenothera coquimbana*°. It was a peculiar plant community, the bromeliads sustained in dry years by the fogs. A chance meeting with some locals by Frances saw us driving a bit farther to catch a fine display of *Cistanthe longiscapa* with *Leucocoryne appendiculata* to complete the day.

We were back rather late, but flowers first, food we can have anytime!



Alstroemeria violacea



Day 5 3 Oct Caldera to Vallenar

A stunning flower day. Heading towards the coast the land began to colour with drifts of white and pink and we reached one amazing area where the entire broad slope (a kilometre or more across) was a canvas of rich pink *Cistanthe longiscapa* mixed with the sheets of a soft lilac *Cristaria sp.* and broad brushstrokes of white *Nolana baccata* with a sulphurous gilding of *Argylia radiata* by the countless thousands, some a rich rusty or reddish colour. Indeed, the sheer number of flowers and the populations we encountered today was truly mind-blowing and uncountable. It was overcast and cool and some flowers were still opening so we wandered along the sandy track towards the immense display ahead to give things time to develop. There were a few beetles, wasps and other insects starting to move about (but surprisingly few pollinators given the vast number of flowers on offer). In between the ‘forest’ of *Argylia radiata* stems was a small *Adesmia eremophila* and succulent stemmed *Tetragonia pedunculata*. We drove on to a small mine and walked from there, almost immediately entering the snowy blanket of *Nolana baccata* on the way to our first viewpoint of the even larger expanse of pink *Cistanthe longiscapa* beyond. A little farther and there was another gasp of “It’s unbelievable” as the tapestry of pinks and white blended into a gorgeous sweep of subtle intermixing colours that were ultimately absorbed by horizon-scraping deep pink. Rocky ridges were dressed with snowy patches of *Nolana baccata* and golden stripes of *Argylia radiata* cut across the desert below. Mesmerising.

Wrenching ourselves away (we were quite drunk with flowers and photography by this point) we walked back and then had a picnic amongst the flowering desert. The sun now came out and the golden *Argylia* became almost too bright to look at. Driving on we had barely made it to the tarmac when a huge population of *Leucocoryne narcissoides* brought us to a halt. There were hundreds of thousands stretched across the flat stony ground, mingled with *Nolana baccata*, pretty *Cristaria* and various colours of *Cistanthe longiscapa* (pink, white and yellow). They were in perfect condition with barely a spent flower amongst the millions of flowers on offer, each pretty white whorl embellished with a waxy golden centre. Trying to move on we passed through an undulating landscape that appeared dressed in snow, the carpets of *Nolana baccata* were so vast. Eventually we succumbed to one particularly dense patch, where the dense scent hit us the second we exited the vehicles. Amongst the blinding whiteness was a smattering of blue forms and bushes of *Adesmia pungens* sprinkled with pretty purple-streaked golden flowers.

Next it was a huge population of many thousands of *Zephranthes bagnoldii* spread across a hillside and down towards sweeping views of the coast. Among these were the purple marked yellow flowers of *Sisyrinchium graminifolium* and stands of handsome mauve *Solanum trinominum*. A couple of rocky gullies were a delight filled with big wide plants of floriferous *Mirabilis elegans* nestled beneath stout columns of *Eulychnia acida* cacti and further coloured with the golden cups of *Balbisia peduncularis*. *Viola polypoda* was virtually a ground cover it was so common. *Copiapoa echinoides* was found in flower too. Just when everyone thought we had run out of colours for the day there was the wonderful sky blue of *Zephyra elegans* in abundance in a rocky flat alongside *Senna cumingii*. A perfect flower of *Eulychnia breviflora* was a short stop as was a field of pale blue *Zephyra compacta* and we then had to pin our ears back and head for the hotel passing slopes and canyons filled with colour and flatter lands with carpets of pink. Even along the roadsides *Encelia canescens* was super abundant, filling the central reservation with big yellow daisy flowers.

The hotel had surprisingly lavish plant-filled gardens.

Day 6 4 Oct Llanos de Challe

The flower displays just kept coming! We started with a rocky slope coated in a combination of feathery white *Schizanthus candidus* and billowing pink *Mirabilis elegans*, blended with *Encelia canescens*, golden *Cruckshanksia pumila* and hummocks of *Copiapoa coquimbana* var. *alticostata* and two upright species *Eulychnia acida* and *Miqueliopuntia miquelii*. It was a stunning natural rock garden. A population of *Alstroemeria philippii* followed (though we need not have bothered if we had known what was to follow) along with *Caesalpinia angulata* and *Heliotropium sinuatum*.

Moving along the coast the dunes were coated in a veneer of golden *Adesmia tenella*, among which grew plentiful *Zephranthes bagnoldii* and a pretty *Cristaria sp.* Another gully, another stunning collection of flowers. The landscape was painted generously with the pale blue of *Zephyra elegans* that formed drifts among the domes of *Copiapoa fieldleriana* and columnar *Eulychnia*. In the gully below were fabulous stands of *Alstroemeria philippii*,



Alstroemeria philippii

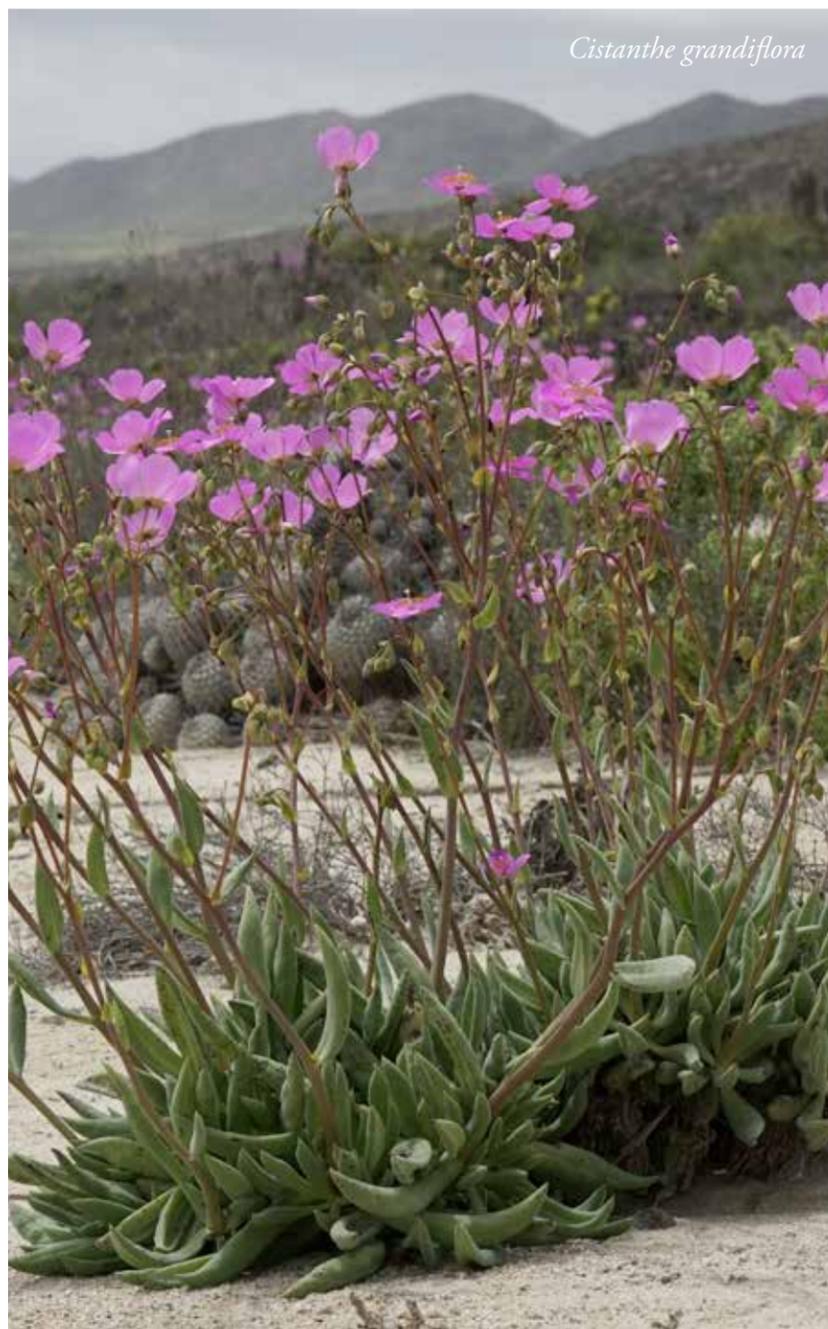
part of a dazzling duet with *Balbisia peduncularis*. It was a lot to take in with so many delightful vignettes and combinations. The unusual green flowering scrambler *Diplolepis viride* was easily missed among the glamour.

By now it was beyond lunchtime but we drove on a bit to have our picnic among stunning stands of flower laden *Cistanthe grandiflora* and the huge domes of *Copiapoa dealbata*, some with two hundred heads. A truly ravishing scene. Irregular spires and bent stems of *Oxalis gigantea* sprung up smothered in flowers and here and there clumps of *Leucocoryne narcissoides* poked out from cactus mounds. We need to calm down at this point so we drove on past ridiculous numbers of *Zephranthes bagnoldii* and masses and masses of *Zephyra elegans*, swirls of *Cistanthe longiscapa* and impressive gatherings of cacti to a canyon that led down to the Pacific. We walked down to the coast passing many trailing stems of *Bomarea ovallei* that were still in tight bud. This iconic flowering desert plant is always the last to flower so it was fingers crossed. On the way there were airy patches of deep blue *Pasithea caerulea*, a bright red *Zephanthes phycelloides* and a flowering *Leucosteles (Echinopsis) deserticola* with half a dozen wide open white flowers. Then there it was a perfect flowering specimen of *Bomarea ovallei*, the inflorescence a ball of blood red. On the rocks were many superb *Copiapoa echinoides* too and Carmen, Janice and I explored the cliffs to find the best of these with ocean view backgrounds. It was good to be down by the sea.

There were a couple of stops on the way out of the park, the first to look at big spreading patches of *Aristolochia chilensis* with many flowers (and Robert opened one up to find it crammed with dead flies lured for pollination purposes) along with more superb mounds of *Copiapoa dealbata*, orange *Argylia radiata* and *Argemone huennemannii*. Then as the light on hills became softer and the shadows revealed the crumples and valleys we stopped for some good flower-laden bushes of *Cordia decandra* and a fine *Caesalpinia angulata*.

Day 7 5 Oct Freirina to Ovalle

Today was always going to be long, we had to get from Vallenar to Ovalle, and we had to do it botanising! We took an interesting back road that meandered up and down across the hills. First stop was for a colony of *Zephranthes (Rhodophiala) phycelloides*, though we need not have bothered as there were many throughout



Cistanthe grandiflora

the day, including at our next stop for various shrubs and bulbs including *Aloysia salvia*, *Calliandra chilensis*, *Caesalpinia brevifolia* and flower-laden *Nolana rostrata*. Among these grew very impressive (probably polyploid) specimens of *Leucocoryne narcissoides* with varying amounts of lilac-blue suffusion. Every shrub seemed to be in flower with mounds of *Heliotropium*, *Cordia decandra* and *Senna* everywhere in bloom, the gaps in between filled with copious stands of orange *Argylia radiata*, *Zephranthes phycelloides* and *Leucocoryne*. We then stopped at a rocky scrubby slope where the bushes were strung with strings of gorgeous subtly-coloured *Tropaeolum kingii*. Feathery wands of *Adesmia elata*, foamy pink *Valeriana sp.*, various bushy Asteraceae and floriferous *Caesalpinia angulata* grew in between and on the opposite side of the road Frances found a flowering *Maihueniopsis domeykoensis*. A bit farther on there were tall *Argemone huennemannii* in a stony dry river bed, deep red-brown *Argylia radiata* and *Mirabilis ovatus*. Then it was time for lunch and another *Tropaeolum* treat with plentiful *T. azureum* strung over cacti and shrubs.

There was still some distance to cover so we tried to carry on, grinding to a halt at a dense tuft of *Tristerix aphylla* crowning a tall *Leucosteles (Echinopsis) chilensis*, the flowers so dense they were like fur. Then there was one last blast of the flowering desert with a ravishing mix of *Cistanthe longiscapa*, *Zephranthes bagnoldii*, *Cristaria sp.*, *Encelia canescens* and *Argylia radiata* in a riotous jumble of colours. Ears pinned back we drove unwaveringly for an hour or so, descending the cloudy Cuesta Buenas Aires that more or less defines the end of the Atacama and down into the Mediterranean climate region, pulling up at a green slope with bushes festooned with densely-flowering tangles of *Tropaeolum tricolor*. *Loasa tricolor* was also very common in scrambling stands among which grew *Schizanthus porrigens* subsp. *borealis*, *Oziroë biflora* and some lovely clumps of *Leucocoryne angustipetala*. *Lobelia polyphylla* and *Fuchsia lycoides* were also both in flower. Just as we thought it was safe to move on a stand of *Puya bertroniana* meant another stop and a scramble up a rocky slope to where several fine spikes were in flower, crowded with turquoise trumpets, with big views of the coastal landscape beyond.

An inland route meant we did arrive in reasonable time at our comfy hotel, complete with big llama in the garden.



Tropaeolum azureum

Day 8 6 Oct Coquimbo

What a bulb day this was, with oceans of various *Leucocoryne* species, though we began with big drifts of *Schizanthus splendens*, crowding flat ground with bushes of *Nolana rostrata*. Wonderful drifts of *Leucocoryne coquimbensis* followed in a beguiling array of colour forms, stretching out across an area studded with *Leucostele (Echinopsis) skottsbergii*, some of which were in fine flower with magnificent views of the Andes behind. Some spiny trunks had tangles of *Diplolepis geminiflora* on them too. The valleys and slopes all around were coated in a thick veneer of golden *Loasa tricolor*, here and there broken by stands of blue *Pasithea caerulea* and more *Leucocoryne coquimbensis* in a rich blend of colours. Gorgeous.

A population of pink-tinged *Zephranthes bagnoldii* followed, spread out beneath more flowering cacti. Then driving north, the road lined with drifts upon drift of *Leucocoryne* in simply unimaginable numbers and side road took us to another little piece of heaven where thousands of *Leucocoryne purpurea* coloured the matorral along with very flowery bushes of *Nolana rostrata*. The odd big *Eriogyne aurata* was also found and patches of white *Leucocoryne ixiooides(?)*. Attempting to reach another area we ground to a halt at the dazzling sight of thousands of *Zephranthes bagnoldii* growing among a tapestry of *Nolana acuminata* that carpeted the ground, punctuated by more *Leucocoryne purpurea*.

Surely it couldn't get any better? Climbing a low pass the displays of *Alstroemeria magnifica* became bigger and brasher and we just had to stop in an area dressed with fabulous clumps, all in perfect condition and in a mix of shades from near white to pink. They filled the gaps in the scrub and burst from among rocks in a mind-numbing display of the exotic. To calm us a little we crossed to the other side of the valley (where there were on drifts of a few hundred) and found strings of *Tropaeolum hookerianum*, hairy *Viola pusilla*, *Alonsoa meridionalis* and the unusual greenish *Leucheria menana*. To complete the day we drove a little farther north and stopped in an area brimming with thousands of a rich lilac-blue form *Leucocoryne coquimbensis*, that filled not just the



Leucocoryne coquimbensis with *Loasa tricolor* and *Pasithea caerulea*

area we walked in, but stretched across the landscape into just about every open area. The glamorous bulbs were set amongst a pretty foil of white *Cryptogramma sp.* and numerous wide sprawling patches of *Aristolochia chilensis*. After a while we couldn't take any more and had to just sit and look.

Even driving back took us past villages and holiday homes where every square metre of open ground was packed with stands of bulbs and *Nolana*. Is it possible to fit any more flowers in one place?

Day 9 7 Oct Combarbala & Los Molles

Our final day, and although the big displays were fewer, that was in part because we chose a cross-country route in search of some specials that don't occur along the coast. After an hour we stopped for big flower-covered shrubs of *Cordia decandra*, with each and every plant of this species in riotous bloom. They surrounding rocky slopes also has *Schizanthus alpestris* and *Cumulopuntia sphaerica* in flower. *Leucocoryne violascens* was also here and there (the displays actually became much denser later on) and we stopped for a good patch that was also near another good stand of *Puya bertroniana*. Christine then found a few flowering *Alstroemeria x chrysantha* coming into flower.

There was a target plant on our cross country route and cresting a pass there they were the sumptuously coloured *Phycella (Placea) amoena*, a beautiful bulb with rich wine-red flowers. They looked stunning in backlight and were plentiful on the scrubby slope where we also found *Eriogyne aurata* and patches of a sulphurous *Oxalis perdicaria*. The next lovely was *Tropaeolum hookerianum* subsp. *austropurpureum* that scrambled over roadside bushes near drifts of dissect-leaved *Loasa multifida*. A few dainty *Schizanthus parvulus* were also found here.

We drove past very colourful matorral with every shrub in flower and patches of pink *Schizanthus carlomunozii*, *Puya chilensis* and probably lots of other great stuff! Lunch was in a Copec station and then we stopped a short distance down the road in an area of matorral with lots of new



Phycella amoena

species, most notably the unusual green-and-white orchid; *Bipinnula fimbriata*, with feathery sepal tips. There were quite lot dotted about the area and Christine also found a fine spike of similarly coloured *Chloraea galeata*. Golden pouches of *Calceolaria corymbosa* subsp. *santaginia* brightened the scrub along with *Oxalis arenaria* and abundant purple-marked yellow *Sisyrinchium graminifolium*. *Oziroë arida* was common too and there were drifts of lovely and delicate whitish *Leucocoryne ixiooides*. *Alstroemeria pulchra* var. *maxima* was also in good flower and there was just enough time to visit a seaside area where the rocks were home to flowering *Eriosyce chilensis*, *Cistanthe grandiflora* and the waxen beauty of *Alstroemeria peregrina*.

Alas, it was time to go and we drove straight onto Santiago airport, getting through some awkward traffic and all making it to the comfortable hotel and a final meal together.

Day 10 8 Oct Flights home

Sadly, we had to leave all of this floral magnificence behind, but what a show we had enjoyed! I can honestly say I do not think a more flower-charged trip is possible! But I hope I do find one!



Bipinnula fimbriata



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