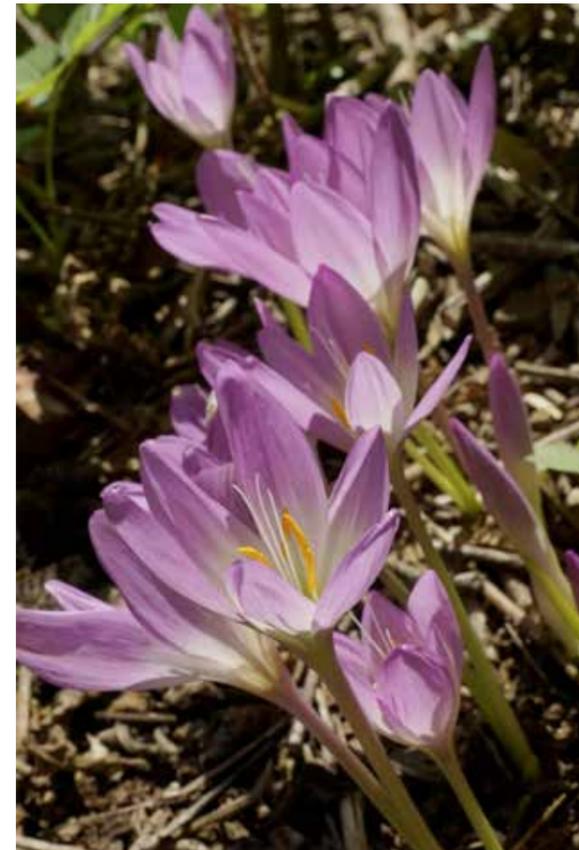


AUTUMN ESCAPE



Colchicum speciosum



Much as we love the Mediterranean, cabin fever had set in and this year's enforced stay has left us a little jaded - as no doubt so many of you are. We were in need of a change of scene and luckily Turkey's great diversity offered us the chance of something completely different - the lush green north-east, the Kackar. What is more, it is Basak's family heartland, with the chance to get to some wonderful places no visitor would normally see. And, free accommodation throughout!

The lure of seeing the stunning landscapes draped in the rich colours of autumn was too tempting and we made a last minute decision to go, departing next day and undertaking the long (18 hour) drive via an overnight in Ankara. The route left the pine and limestone of the Med and crossed vast steppes with changing ochre and sienna hues, the land now dried and fading. Reaching the Black Sea, the landscape was immediately greener, the slopes clad in hazelnut groves. Understandably, the kids became a little frayed at times, but overall did well, thrilled to arrive at the rustic village near Camlihemsin, perched above beech forests with tea plantations lapping around the tumble of houses. Not that we could see much at first, it was dark on arrival.



Salvia glutinosa



Kackar hills



Crocus vallicola



Salvia forskhalei

All was revealed in the morning with an emerald carpet of tea bushes beneath the house and wonderful clumps of *Colchicum speciosum* bursting from the banks and field edges. Whilst the north-east lacks the autumn-bulb diversity of the Med, but what it has packs a punch. This splendid bulb is the forerunner of the big horticultural forms, though frankly the wild versions are so large and showy it seems unfeasible they need 'improving'. They were in clumps of up to thirty big swollen blooms spread in loose drifts, emerging even from dense, overgrown slopes. The colour did vary with some very dark purple-pink forms, but most were rich pink, and tall. Alongside these, two fine sages were still in flower, yellow *Salvia glutinosa* and mauve-blue *S. forskhalei*.

A couple of hours away, high in the hills is the family yayla (traditional grazing area) and we set off early to reach this, driving through the fern-choked lushness and following a tributary of the Firtina River higher and higher. The road became increasingly rutted and rocky, but our trusty car chugged on passing beautifully sunlit slopes with reddening shrubberies. The village was set at two thousand metres in a magnificent valley, the lower slopes covered in spruce and



Vaccinium arctostaphylos and grasses



Autumn in the Kackar

rhododendron, the upper yielding to big tracts of vaccinium, now firmly in the throes of autumn.

After giving Basak's mother the shock of her life (we hadn't let on we were coming) we left the boys with her and set off into the hills with Basak's sister Isik. The slopes were an absolute riot of colour, every bush of *Vaccinium arctostaphylos* turning a rich red and laden with black berries. There were stands of red-bronze *Rhododendron luteum* and then best of all, small trees of *Sorbus*

aucuparia, each weighed heavily with big trusses of orange berries. Glancing up at the higher slopes, they were generously painted orange and red, with stone houses emerging from the glow. Crossing the slopes the slim white goblets of *Crocus vallicola* were common, each delicately lined inside, and here and there were *Gentiana septemfida* and *G. asclepiadea* throwing up a few late flowers too.

It had been gloriously sunny on the walk up,

but by early afternoon, the Kackar was starting to wear its other face and clouds were rolling over the ragged tops and threatening to roll down to us. This is after all the wettest part of Turkey, receiving all the Black Sea throws at it, but thankfully, it stayed dry as we walked down gathering big bags of berries on the way having enjoyed the glorious autumn hills in solitude.

Basak and I took another walk a few days later, this time to the high alpine tarn of Avusor,

perched at 2650-metres. The lower slopes were again ablaze, and the landscape vast and revealing with the ridgeline of Kackar clearly visible, the higher parts with their first dusting of snow.

A little reminder that this is a wild corner of Turkey, where the weather is king. We had enjoyed a wonderful blue sky week of coloured mountains, hospitality and clean air, the only downside was we couldn't find any fresh clotted cream to buy!



Sorbus aucuparia and autumn birches

Painted slopes

Rhododendron luteum autumn colour