

ACROSS THE SHANS TRIP REPORT 2024

viranatura 
tours

Meconopsis racemosa

Day 1 10 June – Arrival in Dali, Yunnan

We all convened at the hotel in Dali from various parts of the world, a diverse group of five nationalities, all seeking China's wonderful flowers. Some had arrived yesterday and either spent time in the old city or walked the miles down to the lake and back. Regardless, we all made it to Dali!

A relaxing beer was followed by a delicious first Chinese meal together.

Day 2 11 June – Cang Shan

Rising up directly behind the city are the green, forested hills of Cangshan and we spent a botanically-rich first day up in the higher reaches. A cable car whisked us to 3900 metres, first passing over forests of pine with a rich shrub understorey of *Hydrangea*, *Piptanthus*, *Hypericum*, *Spiraea* and much more. Many of the pines (*Pinus yunnanensis*) were laden with impressive long bluish cones and after passing through an extensive bamboo belt this transitioned to another blue-coned conifer; *Abies delavayi*, accompanied by a rich mix of rhododendrons. The slopes at the top were a mass of whitish *Rhododendron taliense*, with seemingly every bush in full flower and coating the landscape in a creamy veneer. From among these rose the many architectural *Abies delavayi* and following the boardwalk around we found a superb array of plants beginning with *Primula bryophila*. Its cousin *Omphalogramma delavayi* appeared and these got better and better as we progressed also seeing lovely mixed drifts of *Caltha scaposa* and *Pegaeophyton scapiflorum*, short meadows of *Primula serratifolia*, a pink *Pedicularis*, blue *Hackelia uncinata*, yellow *Draba surculosa* and the pretty nodding purple of *Primula amethystina*. Rising above this meadow mix were hefty whorls of *Megacarpa delavayi*, a flamboyant herb with big heads of pink flowers. Sinister spathes of *Arisaema elephas* were also plentiful and each turn in the path brought a new photo opportunity with many delightful combinations of flowers, vast displays of rhododendrons and even the dazzling fire-tufted sunbird pollinating the latter. Stopping for coffee and nibbles didn't really help as we were still surrounded by flowers.

Until now we had been walking slowly downhill, but the path now turned uphill and this was when we became aware of the altitude which considerably slowed progress. Luckily there were lots of botanical excuses to stop, from the



Primula serratifolia

green-yellow bells of *Megacodon stylophorum* to handsome fresh leaves of *Rodgersia pinnata* or simply fine views across the landscape. Unfortunately, an upper branch of the path was closed and this would have taken us in close proximity of the dazzling red *Rhododendron haematodes*. Instead we had to (frustratingly) settle for more distant views of this vivid species. Around the small tarn were *Bergenia purpurascens* and white *Androsace alchemilloides*. After a rest at the upper viewpoint we started back down stopping for more good plants on the way. It had been a superb first introduction to Chinese plants and the weather had been kind to us with very little rain, the swirling mists only adding to the drama of the landscape.

Taking the cable way back down over the rich forests we arrived in decidedly warmer climes below and enjoyed a beer sitting outside the hotel.

Day 3 12 June – Three Pagodas & Haba

A mix of culture, landscapes and some stand out flora began with a visit to the three pagodas. The central pagoda was the most imposing, flanked by two smaller pagodas and a broad avenue led to other temples lined with well-tended gardens on both sides with a wide variety of warm temperate to sub-tropical trees. Moving on we took the fast road beyond Lijiang, taking advantage of the network of new roads that have been rolled out in double quick time across the country. These drier hills were swathed in open pine woods that in places had many shrubs beneath. A smaller road led onto the impressive Tiger Leaping Gorge where a viewpoint gave us a good impression of the sheer sides and tumultuous Yangtse River rushing below. Lunch was in a delightful spot off the road where we had a big selection of tasty dishes, fresh peaches, walnuts and more.

Moving on towards Haba we made a couple of stops, the first for a big cascade of *Rosa longicuspis*, festooned with fragrant white flowers and then a longer pause for a colony of *Salvia digitaloides* growing on the edge of the road. Closer inspection also revealed *Anemone rivularis*, *Stellera chamaejasme*, *Viburnum sp.* and a good number of delicate little *Cypripedium plectrochilon*. However, the orchids were destined to become bigger and rarer. Meeting up with Ashu, we followed him into the forest on



Rhododendron impeditum & *Abies delavayi*

a track we never would have found on our own. The banks where we first stopped had a scattering of *Primula pulchelloides* and as we progressed through the woods (in light rain) there were *Arisaema consanguinea*, *Cynanchum forrestii*, sky blue *Cynoglossum amabile*. Diving off into the mossy woods we found the first of several remarkable *Cypripedium likiangense*, each boat-like flower speckled with red spots, as were the handsome broad and ribbed leaves. The second of this type of orchid required a bit more searching but we did finally locate the equally remarkable *Cypripedium margaritaceum*, this species having a rather smaller rounder flower. All around in the light pines grew thousands more pink *Primula pulchelloides*, Hoy found *Calanthe tricarinata* and Samo the beautifully patterned leaves of *Goodyera schlechtendaliana*. An added bonus were the rather fun earth star fungi that were scattered about.

Driving out there were a few *Primula poissonii* and lots more *Cynoglossum amabile* before we reached our pleasant guesthouse set in the green hills below Haba Shan.

Day 4 13 June – To Shangri-La

We awoke to the pleasant rural vibe of Haba, had a good breakfast and set off on our journey towards Shangri-La, making the first of many botanical stops just outside town. Along the roadside and on the rocks grew some fine bushy plants of *Incarvillea arguta* laden with pink, tubular flowers. The next stop involved a bit of a scramble on dry slopes for *Campylotropis* sp. a shrub with lax branches of pink pea flowers, which was very common but invariably hard to reach. Far easier was our first foray to see *Rhododendron decorum* with many bushes of white or pink variants. On the ground beneath were many other good plants including *Roscoea tibetica*, *Viola cameleo*, hairy-flowered *Salvia aerea*, plentiful *Gentiana curvifolia* and one or two *Arisaema echinatum*. The rhodos got better and better as we drove on through the extensive pine-clad hills, with grander limestone ridges poking out beyond. It was impossible to resist so we stopped again and delved into a small stream valley where there were not only abundant, but even better *Rhododendron decorum* with lots of pretty little *Iris collettii* on the ground. Searching the woods, damp areas had first *Primula poissonii*, then a solitary red *P. wilsonii* in flower followed by a good population of *Calanthe tricarinata*. A side road led to dense dwarf oak woods with *Rhododendron rubiginosum* and we had lunch down here. It was rather dry and not much else was evident except little shrublets of *Leptodermis potaninii* and *Viola delavayi*. Bright yellow *Stellera chamaejasme* was also here and became a constant feature, also colouring the dry



Cypripedium margaritaceum

ground between the shrubberies of *Rhododendron rubiginosum* and *R. lepidotum* that grew at the pass among the weeping branches of *Larix potaninii*. Despite the dry we still found a good sprinkling of *Androsace rigida* and a few *Incarvillea mairie* too. Not far below the pass a better-watered sloped had damp ground filled with many pristine *Primula sikkimensis* and *P. secundiflora* in a delightful combination, one of the signature features of this part of Yunnan. With these grew *Rhododendron ventricosum*, *Rosa sericea*, *Clematis montana* and *Berberis* sp. There was even a few *Gentiana crassicaulis* in flower on the opposite side of a primula-lined stream.

The ground levelled out and we entered a broad valley flanked by wooded hills with green pastures in between. Stopping at one slope there were superb stands of purple *Iris chrysographes* with *Primula sikkimensis* mingled among them and searching higher we found *Primula polyneura*, a bush of *Syringa yunnanensis* with sweetly fragrant flowers, the marbled leaves of *Podophyllum hexandrum*, some good clumps of *Incarvillea zhongdianensis* and probably the star turn; a pristine flower of *Nomocharis aperta*. Along the shady stream were also green-flowered *Smilacina henryi*, *Oreorchis erythrochrysea* and a dainty *Maianthemum tatsienense*. Moving on we passed rocky knolls with drifts of *Incarvillea zhongdianensis* and eventually stopped by a fenced area with flowery slopes. Next to the vehicles grew sky-blue *Corydalis appendiculata* and inside was a treasure trove of plants with stunning drifts and combinations of plants. *Androsace spinulifera* was abundant mixed with stately *Heracleum candicans*, spikes of *Pedicularis monbeigii*, slender wands of *Polygonum paleacea*, many big trumpets of *Incarvillea zhongdianensis* as well as *Cynanchum forrestii* and darkest-red flowered *Cynoglossum triste*. We would have stayed for hours if the land owner hadn't told us to leave. It was probably for the best and we completed the journey and reached our very pleasant guest house in the city.

Day 6 14 June – Tianbaoshan & Napa Hai

Some effort was required to reach the botanical treasure today, but it was well worth it. Driving east we turned off onto a rough road and made our way towards the limestone hills beyond. A blue *Meconopsis racemosa* brought us to a halt, growing alongside *Corydalis appendiculatus*, but a few steps further and a look up the slope revealed many more of both together with floriferous bushes of *Daphne calcicola* submerged in yellow flowers. A little valley had *Salvia digitaloides*, *Piptanthus nepalensis*, *Arisaema elephas* and *Anemone rivularis* too. The main location was higher up, past where a stream side thronged with *Primula sikkimensis* and close to steep blocky screes that stretched up to the ragged peak



Incarvillea zhongdianensis & *Androsace spinulifera*

above. We made our way slowly (and carefully) up these scree in places crossing into patches of rhododendron scrub and here we found the first *Cypripedium flavum*. Looking closer there was also the diminutive *C. bardolphianum* too. A bit more effort and we reached the first of several lovely *Meconopsis pseudovenustus*, which varied in colour from blue to mauve or a mixture of both. There were superb views all around as we explored the scree, Nicola finding *Fritillaria delavayi* and blue *Corydalis melanochlora*, whilst the leaves of *C. benecinta* were commonplace. A few *Cypripedium flavum* were also on the scree, but more and better could be found in the stabilised patches of woodland and rhodos. Here there were wonderful drifts of dozens of pristine slipper orchids. A good patch of *Cypripedium bardolphianum* was also found and dropping a bit lower there were five dark red-pink *C. tibeticum* to complete the slipper orchid bonanza.

We all made it back down in one piece and enjoyed a good lunch sheltered under a flysheet, which kept out the rain shower that came through. The rain did not last long and we spent some time walking back down the road finding some superb flowering bushes of *Daphne retusa* and pale yellow *Berberis forrestii*, whilst the electric blue of *Corydalis pachycentra* and yellow *Chrysoplenium griffithii* were sprinkled throughout. Several flower-laden *Rhododendron wardii* were the final flourish, growing both from and around fissured mossy boulders with fabulous mountain back drops. Driving out we stopped briefly for a couple of *Nomocharis aperta* and then pushed on to Napa Hai where we had another short stop for the intense scarlet of *Androsace bulleyana* growing on the shattered limestone slopes. *Clematis rehderiana* grew nearby.

Our final location involved a walk up to an area of pine and larch, passing *Aquilegia rockii*, a flowery arching shrub of *Rosa moyesii* and a stony path liberally dressed with deep blue *Gentiana curviflora*. In the woods we found *Iris ruthenica*, both white and pink forms of *Anemone demissa*, slender *Pedicularis lachnoglossa* and both *Cypripedium flavum* and *C. plectrochilon*. However, the target was to find the various colour forms of *C. tibeticum* that grow here and we did eventually find a patch with four distinct forms ranging from dark red with yellow sepals to stripey pink-lipped. A spike of *Boschniaka himalaica* was an extra bonus. From here we walked back down after an energetic and rewarding day.

Pizzas and beer was the perfect finish.



Rhododendron wardii

A rich and varied day began just beyond the flat pastures and stout Tibetan houses, where the land rose up into an area of birch woods. Here we found a good number of *Nomocharis aperta* with a variety of patterns on their inner surface. Stands of handsome *Osmunda interrupta* ferns, *Anemone demissa* in various shades and white *Acanthophyllum alba* were also among the trees. A little further on and a bank below the birches had both *Cypripedium guttatum* and *C. flavum* as well as *Incarvillea zhongdianensis* and *Aster souliei*. Arriving at our next location there was a short delay for a heavy downpour, but once this eased we were out into primula heaven with big displays of *Primula secundiflora* and a fair smattering of *P. sikkimensis* mixed in too. A small buttercup provided a foil to the superb display and on drier patches we also found *Lancea tibetica* and mixed colours of *Anemone obtusiloba*. Next up was a robust clump of *Primula chionantha* subsp. *sinoplangtaginea* and near this we also found a big plant of *Megacodon stylophorum*, the striking purple-tipped yellow *Salvia flava* and three *Galearis wardii*, whilst the attractive leaves of *Beesia calthifolia* and a leathery *Ligularia* laced the scene together. There followed a good specimen of *Meconopsis pseudointegrifolia* growing amongst blue *Hackelia uncinata*. From here we ignored the many flowers around us and drove onto the lake immediately seeing a grand display of *Rhododendron phaeochrysum*, with virtually every shrub buried under a snow of white flowers. In total contrast were the many ebony bells of *Lilium souliei* that popped up among the much shorter *Rhododendron telmateium*, each shiny dark flower in perfect condition. Spikes of green *Veratrilla baillionii* were also scattered among the expansive shrubbery and closer to the lake we found the sombre and peculiar bells of *Mandragora caulescens*. More lovely mixtures of *Primula secundiflora* and *P. sikkimensis* were also here and a little further on were drifts of *Allium humile* nestled beneath the willows. The rain returned for another bout just as we made our way to see large bushes of *Rhododendron wardii* in flower among the lichen clad firs.

Fortunately, we had the tent to shelter in for lunch and the weather improved greatly afterwards, giving us the chance to photograph the rhododendron display as well as a bank of *Cassiope pectinata* in full flower. Our return journey was punctuated by several stops, first for a fine display of violet-blue *Primula deflexa* growing with leafy clumps of *Rheum likiangensis*, whilst another little side valley had a fine colony of *Adonis delavayi* with bushy clumps of purplish-back white flowers, *Cardamine delavayi* and more *Primula deflexa*, if anything in even greater numbers. Next there were short stops for *Deutzia calycosa* and *Philadelphus delavayi* followed by a final pause for the unusual red flowers of *Schizandra rubriflora* and some outsize flowers of *Clematis montana* var. *grandiflora*. Driving back we arrived in time for most of the group to take a look around the ‘old town’.



Primula secundiflora

The next two days were to be spent on Baima Shan, a botanical hotspot and one with contrasting geology. However, our first plant stop was just outside Shangri-La where a rough looking hillside was actually home to the lovely *Cypripedium yunnanensis*, including one gorgeous clump with six perfect flowers. There were others scattered about too including some growing attractively from mosses and ferns. The road passed through spectacular scenery with plunging dry valleys capped by greener forests. The only rub was the regular delays because of bridge repairs (and there are many bridges on this route). Reaching Benzilan we had a short break at the first bend in the Yangtse and then continued up, with the landscape changing remarkably quickly, leaving behind dry slopes with floriferous spreading bushes of *Rosa soulieana* and soon reaching greener forests of oak, then spruce and fir with *Rhododendron decorum* laced throughout. The scenery was no less grand with densely forested mountain slopes yielding to raw rocky ridges, peaks and vast screes, whilst snow patches merged into encrusting glaciers on the higher tops.

We pushed on past fabulous rhododendron displays and climbed into a limestone valley to look for one of the loveliest of all alpine plants; *Paraquilegia microphylla*. They were immediately obvious with fine tufts on the rocks and cliffs. Another cliff held an especially large specimen, maybe sixty-centimetres (two feet) across with over a hundred flowers. Above this also grew a fine pink flowered form. The adjacent scree held other delights, the ice-blue *Corydalis melanochlora* with white *Taphrospermum verticillatum* and on the rocky turf were dainty *Polygonatum hookeri* and the crisp white (and large) *Anemone rupicola*. Elsewhere stony slopes had *Eriophytum wallichii*, *Pleurospermum foetens*, *Potentilla stenophylla* and in the wet ground near the stream the lilac-blue of *Primula zambalensis* with lurid pink *P. polyneura* at the base of the cliffs too. A little way up the track Samo found a solitary *Incarvillea compacta* and *Astragalus yunnanensis*.

On the opposite bank of the river that ran past our lunch spot we could see many flowering rhododendrons, though this could hardly prepare us for the spectacle we were to witness in the afternoon. Large areas were blanketed under a sea of lavender dwarf rhododendrons punctuated by emerald larch trees and with yellow *Rhododendron rupicola* var. *chryseum* mixed among them with superb



Rhododendron phaeochrysum

views across to the chain of mountains. It seemed it might be hard to top this but our last stop did this in glorious fashion with simply stunning displays of *Rhododendron phaeochrysum* in various shades from white to pink, smothering the slopes for many hectares, indeed to the horizon from where we stood. It was actually quite difficult to take it all in and concentrate on where point cameras (or to just sit and enjoy it). Among all of this beauty were patches on dwarf *Rhododendron calostrotum*, *Cassiope pectinata* and the pretty and diminutive *Primula nanobella*. Steeper banks had lots of *Bergenia purpurascens*, little cushions of *Androsace delavayi* and on upright stems emerging from the heath were the buttery bells of *Lilium euxanthum*. Last but not least were the fine cushions of *Diapensia purpurea* peppered with pink flowers.

We would return tomorrow for more and different delights.

Day 9 17 June – Baima Shan II

The second half of our Baima experience took us back up the same scenic road, this time stopping for a good population of *Paeonia delavayi* var. *lutea* that grew on slopes with oaks and fragrant flowered *Syringa yunnanensis*. Continuing directly to the pass there were flower-laden stands of *Rhododendron roxieanum* and slopes plastered with countless *R. calastrotum*. Arriving at the 4290 metre pass, we dealt with the gate and then drove across the alpine turf (gaining some valuable altitude) to the start of our walk in an area of granite rocks. Beginning at 4550 metres steps were small and progress steady. Thankfully there was an abundance of flowers to give us a reason to stop and take photos as well as the stunning 360-degree landscapes. *Anemone gelida* and wonderful drifts of *Cassiope pectinata* were common lower down and as we gained height there were superb mats of *Diapensia purpurea*, yellow *Draba involuocrata*, tufts of *Thermopsis smithiana* and tight cushions of *Arenaria polytricha*, the latter dominating some areas of flatter turf. Closer to the remaining snow patches were *Oxygraphis glacialis* and then rocky banks and ridges had plenty of *Bergenia purpurascens*, pretty *Solms-laubachia retropilosa* and the first *Chesneya purpurea* a rather attractive patch-forming dark-pink flowered pea. Star of the show on this section though was probably *Primula dryadifolia*, with some lovely clumps sprouting from crevices and among rhododendrons. By now we had made it most of the way and the cherry of the cake awaited across an area of rocky flats



Chionocharis hookeri

Corydalis benecincta

with abundant *Arenaria*. There along the edge of the little plateau with commanding views across to a dramatic cirque were the cushions of *Chionocharis hookeri*, a gem of a high alpine, the variably shaped buns generously dressed in rich blue flowers. Other plants included *Androsace delavayi* and *Anaphalis nepalensis* and time was spent finding the finest cushion and or best combination with the other flora (and lichens) that also populated the slope. The scenery was spellbinding with vast scree fields pouring down the slopes and jumble of richly coloured geology that begged exploring. Maybe not today!

Walking down there were more fine displays of dwarf rhododendrons and lunch was taken amidst the mountain splendour, everyone well satisfied with having reached 4800 metres. There was a stop for a lovely drift of scented

Primula zambalensis that grew near an earthy bank sprinkled with many *Polygonatum hookeri* to complete the botany. From here we took a short cut down to the main road (that included a rickety bridge just wide enough for the cars) past more *Rhododendron roxieanum* and then drove once again down, passing areas of mountain slope that were smothered in vast shrubberies of rhododendrons all flowering in profusion. A special year. Descending again into the dry valleys we then climbed back to the cooler environs of Shangri-La and arrived in good time to freshen up before dinner.

Tomorrow was the start of our Sichuan adventure.

Day 10

18 June – Da Xue Shan

We were saying farewell to Yunnan and heading north into Sichuan, driving for a bit before a short stop. Unfortunately the road was being renewed and finding plants not easy. Luckily a little further on we found *Phaius delavayi* on a bank with *Cornus*-like *Swida macrophylla*. New bridges and tunnels confused things a bit but we found the rather pot-holed old road up to the pass driving up through rich lichen draped forests, finally breaking the tree line with striking views of the raw limestone mountain peaks. The potholes instantly changed at the pass the moment we entered Sichuan, becoming smooth tarmac! A few bends down and we stopped to take a walk into a valley, immediately finding many primulas; *sikkimensis*, *secundiflora* and *monroi* (syn. *involucrata*) as well as *Trollius farreri* and the crinkled rosettes of *Phlomis rotata* beset with clusters of violet flowers. Making our way slowly higher (there was no other speed at 4300 metres) an area of coarse shale scree held many lovely *Corydalis benecincta* which it shared with pretty *Hemilophila sessiflora*. In the adjacent streamlets was *Corydalis hamata* and



electric blue *C. curviflora* was also sprinkled about. Drifts of *Primula sikkimensis* were followed by flowery tufts of *Potentilla stenophylla* and then a bit further on a number of *Meconopsis integrifolia* and one *M. lancifolia*. All around us at this time the shrubberies of *Rhododendron agniphum* were bursting with flowers and colouring the landscape. A fine plant of *Primula chionantha* was found and on an area of scree the nodding flower of *Cremanthodium campanulatum*. Just up from this was a large rosette of coarse leaves that belonged to *Rheum nobile*. This had been one of our target plants, but despite searching further afield none could be found in flower this year. A hail storm had us moving downhill quickly and back to the shelter of the mess tent where the team had prepared fried rice with yak meat and revitalising coffee.

The road gently descended passing more dramatic landscapes and then slopes coloured with *Rhododendron rubiginosum*. One stop had these with *Aster batangensis*, *Incarvillea mairiei* and *Rosa omeiensis*, but the displays of *Androsace rigida* I had hoped to find were not doing much here. They made amends a bit further along where some lovely drifts grew, contrasting beautifully with the rusty underside of the rhododendron leaves. A few of us clambered up higher into the rhododendron scrub and among the flakey barked small trees was a stunning carpet of *Androsace rigida*. The road now plunged down and revealed the neat villages below with immaculately tended fields and attractively style Tibetan houses. This very distinctive style continued all the way to Xiancheng, with many stout white building ornately decorated with red bands below the roofs and multicoloured window frames.

Day 11 19 June – To Litang via Haizi Shan

We drove northwards along the narrowing valley, stopping to photograph the patchwork fields and ornate houses, also seeing fragrant *Rosa soulieana* at the same time. A higher viewpoint gave us a sense of the scale, with little enclaves of green and gold set amidst the dark hills. The road climbed into forested areas and past sheer cliffs, reaching a broader valley with extensive shrubberies and trees where the rhododendrons were again going full throttle with their flowering. We found a dirt road higher onto the slope and spent some time looking, not just at the abundant *Rhododendron fastigiatum*, *R. primuliflorum* and larger *R. roxieanum*, but at the many things that grew in between including *Androsace wardii*, *Primula blinii* and the many big cerise trumpets of *Incarvillea mairiei*. Moving higher we



Androsace rigida

looked at turf studded with golden spikes of *Spenceria ramulosa*, fine clumps of *Aster batangensis*, *Astragalus acaulis*, bright yellow *Androsace bisulca* var. *aurata*, pretty pale blue *Gentiana* af. *chungtienensis* and the peculiar stemless rosettes of *Dolimiaea souliei*. There was even more richness at the rather windy pass with one side having *Iris dolichosiphon* and *Meconopsis lancifolia* and the other a varied array of alpine; starfish-like *Soroseris rosularis*, *Androsace wardii*, fine cushions of *Arenaria kansuensis*, mats of *Silene davidii*, *Hedysarum pseudosikkimensis*, a *Pedicularis* sp. and a pretty pink form of *Meconopsis rudis* growing with *Phlomis rotata*.

The pass was at 4720 metres and we began our descent, stopping for a good plant of *Primula orbicularis* by a streamlet with *Cardamine macrophylla*. Another good plant was found lower down by a larger stream; *Iris delavayi*, with superb stands on the stream bank and the surrounding shrubbery was also rich with pink and very spiny *Caragana jubata* growing cheek by jowl with a scruffier yellow flowered cousin. Also featuring in the wood section was *Berberis* af. *wilsoniae*, *Spiraea schneideriana* and *Potentilla fruticosa*. After lunch we carried on at first along flatter ground, pausing for a monastery photo as white-eared pheasants chased a marmot down a slope. The grassy areas among the trees held wonderful meadows of flowers, dominated by the various blue to white shades of *Anemone demissa* var. *villosissima* among which also grew *Stellera chamaejasme* (pale yellow form), *Incarvillea mairei*, *Ligularia* sp and the odd *Geranium delavayi* (with reflexed petals). These meadows continued for some way until the land began to rise and huge boulders of granite filled the landscape, eventually forming the vast Haizi Shan plateau, with blocky hills and strange rockscapes. Alongside the river we stopped for a triple stem of *Rheum alexandrae*, also finding *Cremanthodium angustifolium*, *Aster himalaica*, *Alectris nana*, *Lagotis yunnanensis* and *Fritillaria cirrhosa*. As is the way with these things there were many more *Rheum alexandrae* as we drove on with the adjacent turf smothered in *Androsace bisulca* and lavender rhododendrons. Pushing on past this lakeland stonescape we climbed to a pass and stopped to search the low shrubs and boulders, finding a selection of colour forms of the unusual *Primula tangutica*.

This was to prove the plant finale and not far down the road heavy rain swept in for a time and we continued to Litang for the night. Dinner was a lavish affair with delicious crispy duck amongst the dishes.



Rheum alexandrae

Day 12 Litang & Jianziwan Shan

Dominating the town to the north is the large Litang monastery and we spent an interesting hour here, first looking at the outside and then the incredibly ornate interior of the main prayer hall. Nongbu explained various aspects of Buddhism as a gathering of monks carried out their morning prayers and rituals. Among the dazzling designs and creations inside was an intricate sand mandala. A tame chough was waiting in the lobby before left and plenty more wheeled about outside too. From the monastery there were expansive views and such vast landscapes would be with us all day. Our first plant stop was a stunning one and not far from the town, where a hillside was carpeted in flowers in a truly memorable display with countless *Anemone demissa* var. *villosissima* among which grew numerous *Iris dolichosiphon*, *Incarvillea mairie* and the peculiar egg-like flowers of *Lilium lophophorum*, as well as *Ajuga lupulina* and *Lloydia delavayi*. A number of locals also turned up to enjoy the flowers and given how few Westerners visit this part of China there were photo calls with us involved. It was a wrench to leave this magnificence but we had to continue and drove for a while until we saw a colony of *Thermopsis barbata* on a high bank (which fortunately we could reach). A rich violet *Meconopsis henrici* was seen together with *Allium prattii* at a later stop, but the busy road made stopping problematic so we pushed on to the disused pass road and pulled up at slope swathed in *Rhododendron* af. *phaeochrysum* for lunch, with a grand view across the forested hills capped with green grasslands.



It would have been easy to sit and enjoy the warmth and sun but there were flowers to find. At the pass itself the flattened rosettes of a *Pleurospermum foetens* were found and we then set off down the road in search of *Meconopsis*. Many rosettes were found but all in bud and it seemed it was a late season for them. We did find some lovely patches of a different shade of *Androsace wardii*, a fine shrub of *Lonicera hispida* and in some heavy scree was *Cardamine loxostemonoides*. The road now descended via a series of tight hairpins and in the woods we could see the cerise flowers of *Paeonia veitchii*. Luckily, there was a dirt road leading off and we spent some time here finding peonies in the woods and drifts of *Caltha palustris* in the adjacent stream. It was not far from here to Yajiang and its rushing river.

Following the valley out of town we stopped first for a lovely pink form of *Stellera chamaejasme* growing on a stony slope amidst attractive ferns and a slender orange *Senecio* sp(?). The rockier areas later yielded to greener slopes with cultivated fields and traditional style Tibetan houses. Drifts of yellow *Pedicularis cranolopha* could be seen and we found a small side road and spent time looking along this finding our way up onto a field where it grew in abundance with *Erigeron breviscapa*, *Aster souliei* and wands of a *Polygonum* on long stems, as well as a few edelweiss; *Leontopodium dedekensii*. Along the road were also pretty lilac-pink *Thalictrum delavayi*, *Arisaema echinatum* and robust clumps of tall pink *Pedicularis setchuanica*. Another very flowery area followed with abundant *Aster souliei* and the creamy-yellow form of *Stellera chamaejasme* together with *Anemone demissa*, *Androsace spinulifera* and different louseworts. The meadows were set among birch woods and in these we also found *Meconopsis lancifolia*, *Lilium lophophorum* and spikes of mauve-blue *Scutellaria hypericifolia*. The only negative was the constant noise from the construction of huge new rail station, the juxtaposing of fast-growing China and bounteous nature an odd one.

The road now climbed via an extraordinary series of looping road sections up onto the grasslands where we took a quieter road for a while, passing through a countryside with a new style of architecture, the fields around swathed in broad sheets of flowers from louseworts to daisies. Stopping for a 'quick' photo of some of these houses with hay barns and Tibetan music drifting out of the window a glance at the nearby cliffs with binoculars revealed something blue. Driving over the blue turned out to be the lovely *Corallodiscus lanuginosus* with their pretty mauve-blue flowers set above crinkled leaves. There were some superb patches on the rocks, often mixed with ferns and the steep slope and rocks where they grew proved a rich area with patches of *Potentilla bifurca*, *Vincetoxicum forrestii* and dainty *Pedicularis batangensis* also here. A little further on we stopped for lunch in a flowery area with *Ponerorchis chusua* and pale lilac *Vicia* sp. among the new plants, though there was also an abundance of large ants, making photography a quick process. They didn't bother us as we ate and we were soon away again.

A seep passing over steep slope held lots of soft yellow *Primula prattii* and the surrounding rock areas had *Clematis tangutica* too, but the elusive blue poppy



Pedicularis cranolopha & *Polygonum* sp.

remained elusive (they had been at the very same place a few years before). Pushing on the road climbed towards a green pass and we ground to halt at the sight of huge clumps of *Paeonia veitchii*. The next stop was a bit more awkward as the renewed road and fast traffic meant looking for plants was a not easy. We did find some good patches of bright orange *Primula cockburniana*, little pink *Gentiana rubicunda* and deep purple *Ajuga ovalifolia*, but the area was difficult to search properly. Fortunately, a second location a bit lower down did also produce the delicate *Primula violacea* and *Aquilegia semcalcarata*. That seemed to be that and now we made for Danba, with a brief view of the glacier encrusted slopes of Yala Mountain before we drove down into a lush forested valley. Adong then spotted a superb spike of *Meconopsis racemosa* growing on red-lichen stained rock and we had a final botanical flourish to the day.

It was then onto Danba and our tall hotel on the banks of the fast-flowing river, enjoying dinner as the Vegas-style lights went on in the city.

Day 14 22 June – Jiajin Shan

A varied plant day began with a population of *Eremurus chinensis* on a scrubby slope with the twining stems of *Ceropegia mairei* growing through the shrubs and bearing their peculiar elongated flowers. Taking a side road we stopped for a large *Lilium davidii* growing in a garden, causing a traffic jam at the same time. As it turned out this was a real stroke of luck as we gone completely the wrong way! Talking with the locals it transpired we had to retrace our steps to Danba and take a different road. We did this, stopping to photograph some of the famous Danba towers nestled on a green slope among attractively styled Tibetan houses. Then it was onwards and upwards taking a small road into the lush hills and navigating through small villages, some with trailing stems of *Clematis rehderiana* and the bright yellow of the poppy *Dicranostigma leptopodum*. The forests grew denser and were heavily draped in long trailing lichens, all very photogenic. Stopping beside one area of trees next to a rushing river there was also a thriving population of *Primula polyneura*, the near black flowers of *Phlomis atropurpurea*, dainty soft lilac *Maianthemum henryi* and a small *Podophyllum hexandrum*, whilst on the rocks was *Pedicularis artselaeri*. Displays of primulas lined the road with *Primula gemmifera*, *P. involucrata*, *P. sikkimensis* and then as we climbed into the rhododendron belt the sumptuous



Ceropegia mairei

mauve-blue of *P. longipetiolata*. There was a stunning view of the mists swirling through the remarkable sharp-lined peaks, in fact the landscape all around was quite different to anything else we had seen with all of the schist strata vertically inclined in jagged lines. Reaching our lunch spot at 4500 metres we explored the turf just below where there was an abundance of an as yet undescribed dwarf *Primula* growing among abundant yellow *Oxygraphis glacialis*. Hefty clumps of *Primula longipetiolata* also grew here sprouting from among rocks and turf.

A brief shower swept across, but we were tucked away under cover eating at that point. However, the mists remained giving the whole area a tweak of mystery especially as we hiked up onto a narrow ridge, immediately seeing *Lagotis* af. *praecox* and then on the scree above were the woolly jellyfish of *Saussurea medusa* and *S. quercifolia* as well as a dense mound of a *Rhodiola* sp. The path carried on upwards and we continued to 4650 metres with small plants of *Primula chionantha* alongside it and little *Androsace minima*. The upper screes had *Leontopodium calocephalum*, small, blue-flowered *Veronica ciliata* and those that pushed on to the end of the line also saw *Ranunculus* af. *balangshanicus*, *Callianthemum pimpinelloides* and tight mounds of *Thylacospermum caespitosum* (one of the world's highest growing plants – reaching to 6000 metres). The mists came and went occasionally offering a half view of the dramatic peaks, but the scene opened up more as we descended, stopping first for a population of *Rhododendron phaeochrysum* and then grinding to a halt at the sight of our first *Meconopsis punicea*. There was a positive rush up the slopes with all round excitement as we saw not only many of these remarkable pendant red flowers but both yellow *M. integrifolia* and plentiful purple *M. lancifolia* growing with them. Some time was spent enjoying these and it was worth arriving late at the hotel for.

Day 15 23 June – Balang Shan

Our last hurrah in the hills began well with a good population of *Primula gemmifera* growing along a rivulet with *P. pulchelloides* on the adjacent bank. Alas, once we reached the other side of the tunnel the rain began. The road onto the pass had been closed last year so we knew we had to walk, but had to take a detour that avoided the road that had us clambering up a steep bank to the



Primula longipetiolata

pass road (but out of sight of the security camera). From here we plodded up the wet turf to a river where there were a few *Meconopsis punicea*. Adong took some of the group further up the river valley where they found plenty more, but aside from the lovely violet flowers of *Omphalogramma viola-grandis*, tufts of *Primula brevicaulis* and *P. longipetiolata* there was little else in flower, in what seemed to be a late season. Returning to the vehicles a bit soggy we drove down lower and found a place for lunch. The rain had largely eased by the time we finished and we spent some time afterwards looking at a very pleasant flowery meadow above the road and away from the crowds (it was Sunday mania). The first significant plant was a perfect flower of *Cypripedium franchetii* nestled in the shrubbery with a few *Paeonia veitchii* just beyond. Entering the meadow there were lovely combinations of *Primula sikkimensis*, *Iris chrysographes*, the abundant *Euphorbia pekinensis*, slender wands of *Pedicularis davidii* with their peculiar twisted beaks, the stunning blue of *Corydalis calycosa* and the broad plates of *Pleurospermum yunnanense* were also scattered here and there.

Moving on a bit higher once again we stopped in an area with many spikes of *Veratrum grandiflorum*. Among these were dark-flowered *Phlomis atropurpurea* and as we gained height, increasing numbers of *Cypripedium tibeticum* in various colour forms. The orchids got better and better and as well as the cypripediums there were *Galearis wardii*, slender green *Malaxis monophyllos*, pink *Ponerorchis chusua* together with yellow *Corydalis pseudocristatus* and the cerise spikes of *Pedicularis davidii* var. *macrodon*. The ground flattened a bit and we found some excellent clusters of six or seven *Cypripedium tibeticum* and a *Fritillaria sichuanica*, with fine views across the landscape and the oceans of golden *Caltha palustris*. Walking back down we saw *Lloydia ixiolirioides* and more good orchids. A final stop for a couple of *Meconopsis punicea* rounded off the day.

Day 16 24 June – Wolong

It was our last day in the field and we drove back up and through the tunnel, seeing fresh snow on some of the higher peaks, before descending into the lush lower forests. A 'short' stop for the attractive variegated foliage of *Actinidia pilosula* (growing with its cousin *A. kolomitka*, which was in flower) also produced *Hydrangea heteromala*, a pink flowered *Rosa sp.*, lovely stands



Meconopsis punicea

of *Pedicularis davidii* and feathery-leaved *P. rex*, as well as a flowery bush or two of *Deutzia longifolia*. Then, Zsolt drew our attention to the bright pink *Gentiana rubicunda* (much larger than the specimens we had seen so far) that he had found close to the river. The final botanical highlight was a little further on and it was a grand one, with a good number of amazing *Cardiocrinum giganteum* var. *yunnanense* growing among lush herbs in the woods, including some beautiful crimson infused forms - a stunning finale. We had lunch in Wolong and then completed our journey to Chengdu, and our hotel in the rather quaint 'old town' arriving in plenty of time to prepare for tomorrow's journey home.

At the final dinner we thanked our excellent driving team who had made the trip work so well. China can be a challenging destination, but with their help everything had gone very well.

Day 17 25 June – Return flights

Various departures at various times took us back to the five countries we had started from.



Cardiocrinum giganteum var. *yunnanense*



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Cypripedium tibeticum

