

AUTUMN JEWELS OF THE AEGEAN - THE PELOPONNESE TRIP REPORT

Sternbergia lutea subsp. *sicula*

ViRA NATURA
TOURS

Day 1 To Athens

Midday arrivals meant we had time to reach the dramatic cut through the land at the Isthmuth of Corinth where the first of many *Cyclamen graecum* were growing in stony ground. Moving on the *Erica manipuliflora* were the best we'd ever seen (after a hot summer) and hillsides were swathed in pink and bushes completely laden with tiny pink to purple pink bells. At Mycene (the most overpriced historical site in Greece) we found more cyclamen, a scattering of *Sternbergia lutea* and plenty of *Arisarum vulgare* with their sombre little green-brown striped spathes. Vast tracts of olive groves stretched away to the hills as the light began to wane.

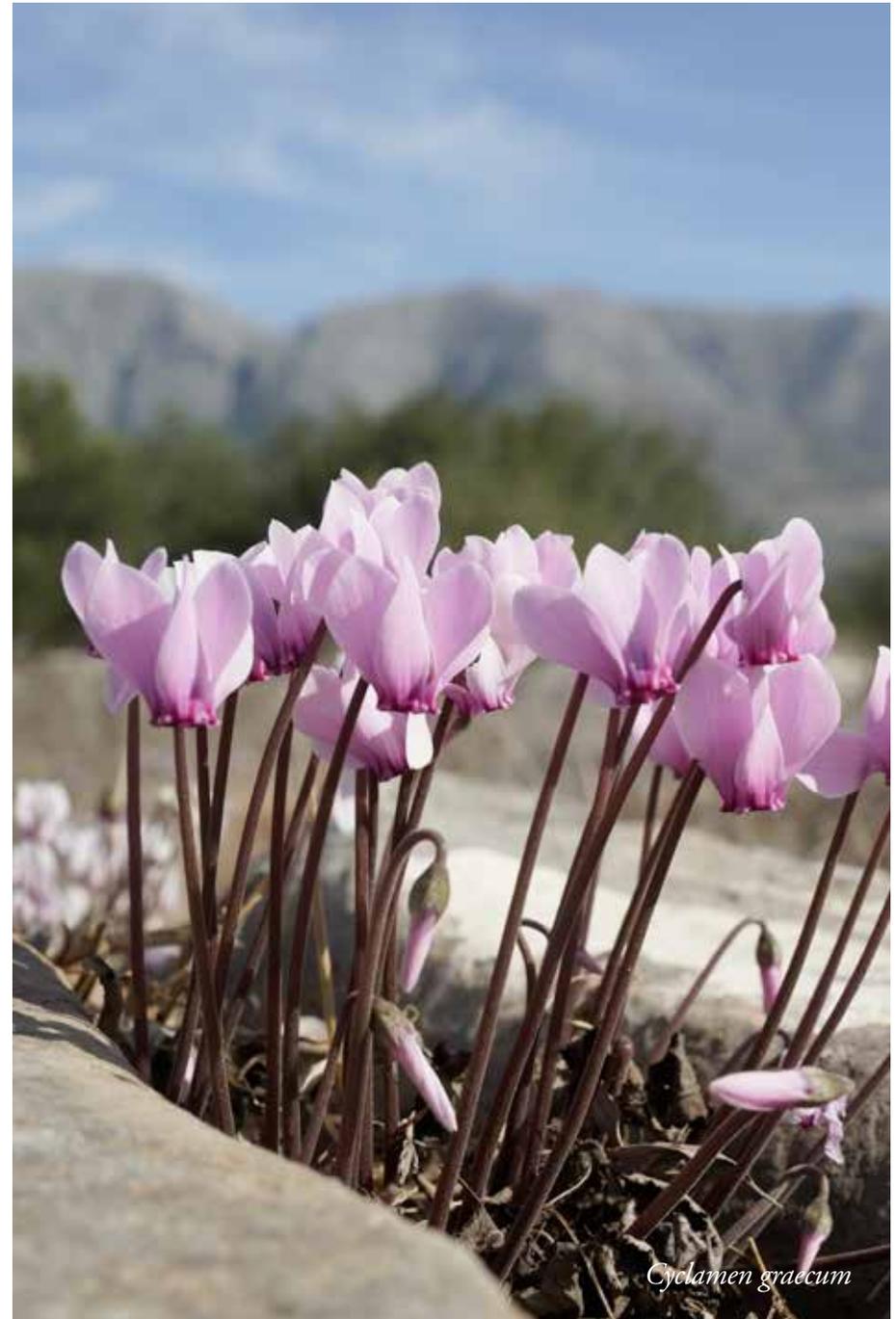
Day 2 Githio via Sparti

Giving the land a chance to warm up we left on a fine sunny morning and stopped not far into the hills south of Tripoli. Here we found plentiful *Crocus hadriaticus* (including some lilac forms) as well as *C. biflorus* subsp. *melantherus* with their pretty striped outer tepals. A nearby hillside had patches of *Sternbergia lutea* and more *Crocus hadriaticus*. Much closer to Githio a side road led along the coast to where abundant *Colchicum parlatoris* were sprouting from the limestone rocks along with quite a few *Narcissus obsoletus* (*serotinus*) and *Cyclamen graecum*.

Day 3 Mani Peninsula

A touch breezy but clear and sunny as we made our way to a rundown castle. In the surrounding macchie were *Narcissus obsoletus*, the lovely pure white goblets of *Crocus boryi* and it's rather similar starry *C. laevigatus* (scented with a tepal stripe – both having white anthers). Scouring the rather spiny macchie we also found a smattering of that peculiar autumn orchid *Spiranthes spiralis*.

Our next stop was beside the road where a colony of *Crocus goulimyi* was growing with *C. boryi* near wonderful domed bushes of *Euphorbia dendroides*. A side road also had *Colchicum psaridis* and the dainty pallid onion *Allium callmischon*. The middle part of the day was spent in a little bit of botanical



Cyclamen graecum

heaven, amidst peaceful olive groves coloured with abundant *Cyclamen graecum* and the blazing yellow of *Sternbergia lutea*, with some superb patches of the latter. The big chalices of *Crocus niveus* appeared in places, a quite wonderful species varying from pure white to having outer tepals of softest lilac.

Further down the Mani, the feeling of being at the end of the world increased as we passed delightful rambling villages perched on the rocks with serene coastlines beyond. One almost the furthest rocks we found thriving plants of *Campanula versicolor* still in bloom along with more of the lovely *Crocus niveus*. The odd spike of *Drimys aphylla* was also still in flower this year and there were superb acorns with huge shaggy cups on tree of Valonian Oak.

Day 4 Monemvasia

The low cliffs near Githio hold a colony of *Narcissus tazetta* and these were flowering amidst sharp limestone with a smattering of early *Anemone coronaria*. Close to these were tumbling masses of *Clematis cirrhosa* festooned with creamy bells.

Moving on we stopped in a superb crocus area with hundreds of *Crocus goulimyi* glowing in the morning sun. Following this floral feast we had a bit of culture with a visit to the restored town on Monemvasia, dramatically positioned beneath the towering cliffs. However, it was the upper settlement that held the botanical interest and the climb up was really not that difficult. After appreciating the fine views across the Aegean we followed the rough path to a corner of the island where there were many *Colchicum cupanii* and *Cyclamen graecum*. Those with the energy can scale the highest point on the island. The path all the way



Crocus goulimyi

has many more colchicum as well as increasing numbers of *Sternbergia lutea*, until right at the top are many sprouting from the big rocks and glowing in the sun.

Lunch was in a lovely cool olive grove enveloped in the scent of so many *Cyclamen hederifolium*. There were superb big tufts of these all across the hillside, in places mingling with the *leucanthus* white form of *Crocus goulimyi* with superb views back towards Monemvasia.

The last botanical treat of the day was the rather subdued, but pretty tessellated *Colchicum sfikassianum*, growing in a stony track amidst fine macchie with *Arbutus unedo* in colourful fruit.

Day 5 Lambokambos

The road climbed to a fine viewpoint across the region with a few *Crocus niveus* appearing along the rock roadside. The slopes below had *Arbutus andrachne* in fine (red) fruit. The branches of some specimens were a gorgeous rich red. *Erica manipuliflora* was also in good flower, with a few *Colchicum cupanii* appearing in between the bushes.

On its day, Lambokambos this is one of the most delightful places in the Peloponnese at this season. Today was a good day, with abundant drifts of *Crocus goulimyi* colouring the empty fields and paddocks, together with *Sternbergia lutea* and *Cyclamen hederifolium*. Also in the village were large trees of *Quercus cocciferus*, one of the mainstays of Mediterranean woodland, but which is more usually seen as a miserable, goat-topiaried little bush. The land rises to reach the lower forests of Grecian Fir, many laden with big bunches of *Viscum album* subsp. *austriacum*.

Descending we reached flat land where a track led to small fields peppered with the lilac-tinted finely lined *Crocus cancellatus* subsp. *mazzaricus*, probably the finest form of this species.



Crocus cancellatus

Day 6 Mystras & Sounion

Historical sites bookended the day. We began at the Byzantine site of Mystras with various churches, forts and ruined buildings to wander among. *Campanula versicolor* grew on the rocks leading to the fort. The road then climbed much higher towards the Langada Pass, entering a dramatic gorge crammed with autumnal plane trees and firs. Thriving among the moss and leaf litter was the refined beauty of *Galanthus regina-olgae*. Lunch was in this cool retreat.

Then it was off to Athens for an entirely different landscape. Utilising the fast new roads around the country we were able to push onto the rugged indented coast south of the capital and the spectacularly positioned site of Sounion. Here our final treats awaited with the stunning purple striped flowers of *Crocus cartwrightianus* beset with striking red styles and yellow anthers. *Narcissus obsoletus* was also plentiful and there were superbly positioned *Sternbergia lutea* with great backdrops of the coast. Staying for sunset is a must as the columns colour a perfect orange hue looking out to the realm of Poseidon.

Day 7 Flights home



Narcissus obsoletus

For information on our tours
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Clematis cirrhosa