

DESIERTO FLORIDO



Cistanthe longiscapa

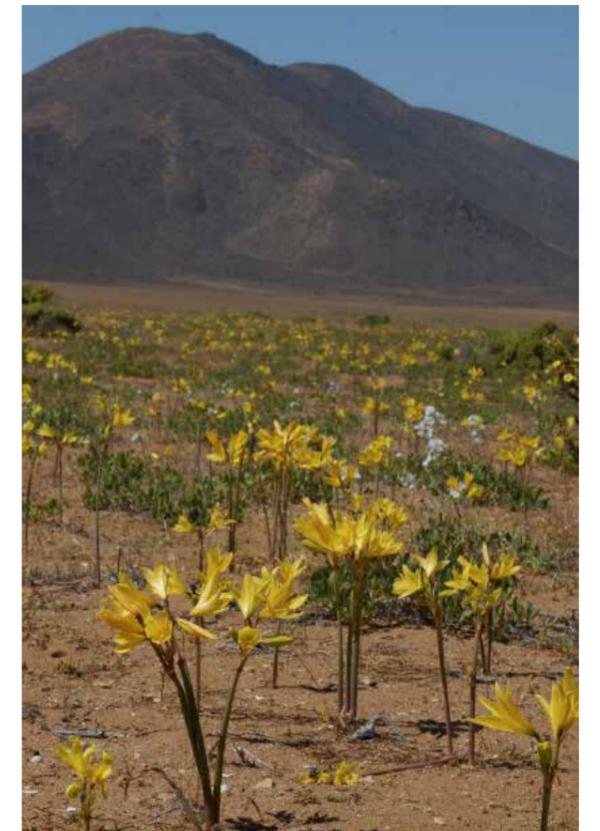


Rhodophiala bagnoldii

An endless carpet of pink extends to the hills beyond, big cherry-centred flowers quivering above sunburned succulent foliage. This is just part of the dramatic display of colour sheets that paints briefly a normally parched landscape. Chile's legendary Desierto Florido occurs only once every five years or so, dependent entirely on the arrival of rains in July and August, driven onto the desert by the shifts of El Nino. I've been fortunate to have seen this flora feast twice. On the flipside I've twice missed the equivalent floral feast in California! The first time, Basak received a facebook post on Friday, 16 October 2015, I was standing in the desert three days later! It was a sight not to be missed.

Some of the most dramatic displays are centred around Vallenar and the nearby Llanos de Challe. The later area has a rich array of desert flora, with swathes of *Rhodophiala bagnoldii* mingling with bluish-white *Zephyra elegans* and more *Cistanthe* species. Big hawkmoths were buzzing over the flower displays making the most of the sudden and short-lived bounty.

One sight that does not diminish regardless of rain are the stunning populations of cacti, especially *Copiapoa dealbata*, with many ancient







Bomarea ovallei



Aristolochia chilensis



Alstroemeria kingii

plants with dozens, sometimes hundreds, of heads. These wonderful cacti thrive in such areas, nurtured by the frequent sea fogs that blanket their coastal colonies. Scrambling in stony ground near this colony was pungent-scented *Aristolochia chilensis* and golden-starred *Chaetanthera glabra*.

The real star turn, at Llanos de Challe is a simply outrageous member of the Alstroemeriaceae, *Bomarea ovallei*, the trailing stems appearing from among rocks and rapidly growing to trail over the ground or surrounding cacti, illuminating the spiny columns with fiery globes. In one favoured canyon it grew with the soft lilac-pink of its cousin *Alstroemeria violacea*, one of many species of this flamboyant genus that thrive in dry or semi-dry habitats. All have efficient underground rhizomes to withstand years of drought.

As luck would have it, the rains returned just two years later when I was able to bring forward a planned group tour to northern Chile by a year - a wise move. This time my visit to the same location also discovered many golden *Alstroemeria kingii*. Various other desert delights can be seen in quantity during these special seasons; *Argylia radiata*, various *Nolana*, *Cristaria*, *Viola polyphylla* and *Leucocoryne narcissoides* - narcissus-like indeed. And, heading into the high Atacama to the east



Alstroemeria violacea



Eriosyce heinrichiana



Eulychnia acida

can be highly rewarding (as you will see in a few weeks).

Whilst journey further south towards the northern Mediterranean climate zone of Chile and many more superb plants await. Find the right rocky gully and the suddenly the amber stars of *Eriosyce heinrichiana* appear, the sombre rosettes almost invisible. Indeed, one of its' cousins *E. oederi* is almost entirely buried in gritty sand and can only be found when in flower.

The fogs that nurture much of the arid coast coalesce on ridges and passes to allow lush vegetation in all but the driest year. Here the columns of *Eulychnia acida* cacti are encrusted with lichens. Among the rocks appear the lurid and showy *Alstroemeria magnifica*, a Las Vegas of a flower. A few kilometres further and the desert proper is left behind, Mediterranean matorral starts to dominate and the climate shifts a little. That said timing can be tricky in this part of Chile and wet years are always the floweriest. Hopefully, when the rain next returns the world will have moved on and some of you can be jumping on that last minute flight to a botanical wonder.

Don't be surprised to see me there too.



Alstroemeria magnifica