

THE FOX & THE ICE QUEEN



Eremurus robustus



Eremurus regelii

Way back in 1999 I undertook what was only my second botanical tour, to the recently opened realms of Central Asia, the Tien Shan. I recall too much horse-riding and too much vodka to nullify the after effects. But the flora and landscapes were fabulous, and they have become one of my favourite plant-hunting destinations, especially now I've discovered so many new places. Our trip along the Tien Shan traverses three of the 'stans', crossing the convoluted Stalinist borders here and there.

When I was preparing our Flora of the Silk Road a few years ago, I was determined to photograph some of the spring bulbs in the region and took a trip to Uzbekistan, where the Tien Shan begin their journey to China. Here, I met Vasily, an ethnic Russian with a passion for walking in the hills. We had three excellent days in the hills, I got my photos and at the end he gave me his card, which showed him standing among a superb stand of towering *Eremurus robustus*, with the Tien Shan behind. I had to come back in summer!

Since then, I've returned a few times and trekked the hills with Vasily and his righthand man, Slava - a former world-class mountaineer. Not only do they help us into the hills to see the magnificent foxtails, but also the chocolate-veined

Iris korolkowii





Aquilegia atrovinosa



Trollius altaicus



Eremurus fuscus



Primula minkwitzsiae

Iris korolkowii, rusty-brown *Eremurus regelii*, peonies, late-flowering tulips and much more. Vasily even tunes up his guitar in the evening and provides some evening entertainment, lubricated by some of excellent local vodka.

Next stop on the journey involves battling with Uzbek ladies laden with huge boxes of cherries and bags of apricots as they muscle their way to the front of the immigration queue. Through the other side, in Kazakhstan and we make for the unique Aksu-Dzabagly nature reserve. This special place was established nearly a century ago and has had no livestock grazing for all of that time - a very rare thing in this part of the world. The diverse meadows and shrubberies are in effect a time capsule of Central Asian natural history. In the past I endured horse, yurts and uncomfortable beds. Today, we use 4WDs and stay in a hotel. That said, we still have to walk to reach the good stuff, climbing slowly up into the fast-greening slopes, with meadows of *Anemone narcissiflora* subsp. *protracta* and cabernet-red *Aquilegia atrovinosa*, rock crevices with *Primula minkwitzsiae* and the choice *Paraquilegia caespitosa*. Or, in years of good snow, patches of *Tulipa kaufmanniana* and a few late *Iris willmottianum*. The warmer valleys have the exotic *Morina kokanica*, stands of burning bush - *Dictamnus albus*, architectural fennels and oscillated seas of *Stipa* grasses.



Corydalis fedtschenkoana



Trollius lilacinus



Diarthron tianshanicum (white) and *Linum heterosepalum* (pink).

Perhaps my favourite CA country is Kyrgyzstan, it offers so much variety, easy access to great heights and I have a great team of people there. We cross various high passes of well over 3000 metres, passing turf coloured pink with countless *Primula algida*, golden carpets of *Trollius altaicus* and immense stands of *Eremurus fuscus*, all of these a product long term heavy grazing that selects for these unpalatable plants. It looks spectacular, nonetheless. Further into the country and we hit some amazing high country where the translucent 'Ice Queen' *Trollius lilacinus* springs up in great numbers in old snow beds, especially in the magnificent lakeland at Barskoon. This is probably my favourite Central Asian plant - in part its beauty, it part where it grows. High screes in this area also have lilac-pink *Desideria flabellata*, snow-white *Callianthemum alatavicum*, vivid pink *Primula nivalis* and in a few spots the gorgeous filagree-leaved *Corydalis fedtschenkoanus*.

That doesn't mean the lowlands are lacking. Heading out to the extensive grasslands below the mountains there are floriferous banks of *Diarthron tianshanicum* and *Linum heterosepalum*, wet meadows thronging with rib-leaved *Veratrum lobelianum* and colonies of reddish-leaved *Dactylorhiza hatagirea*.

The restricted days of Soviet occupation are over and Central Asia is open and welcoming. Just take it easy with the walnut vodka.



Dactylorhiza hatagirea