

SPRING IN THE PINDOS TRIP REPORT 2019

Crocus pelistericus

ViRA NATURA
TOURS

Day 1

To Parnassos

After arrival in Athens we drove onto our hotel nestled in the foothills of Mount Parnassos, climbing the serpentine road from Mediterranean macchie to sub-alpine Grecian Firs. There was time for a look around the hotel where we found a thriving colony of *Iris pumila* in both yellow and purple colour forms along with pretty tufts of *Aethionema saxatile*.

Day 2

Parnassos

The looming bulk of Mount Parnassos rose up behind the hotel, a craggy 2300 metres of limestone. Reaching the areas of snowmelt there were many lovely *Crocus sieberi*, some poking through the melting snow. Scattered like stars across the dry straw of last year, *Anemone blanda* varied in colour from pale to a rich blue. Various snow patches were looked at, though the first really stuck in the mind with so many perfect flowers glowing in the sun. Other banks had the purple flowers of *Viola graeca* and as our route descended we reached rocky banks with *Ophrys aesculapii*, *Orchis pallens*, *O. anthropophorum* and *O. quadripunctatus*.

More exposed limestone slopes had abundant *Phlomis fruticosa* in flower with slender spikes of *Verbascum undulatum* and sprouting from the rocks were the fiery droplets of *Onosma frutescens*, the flowers changing colour from yellow to red-orange as they aged. A few flowers of *Campanula topliana* had also begun to appear.

Day 3

Delphi

The world famous classical site of Delphi was just a short drive away. However, before reaching this there was an orchid feast with a grassy slope holding hundreds of gold-rimmed *Ophrys aesculapii*, pink-sepalled *O. ferrum-equinum* and the odd *O. spruneri* in a superb mix. Further across the slope the red glow of *Papaver apulum* mingled with a few of its beautiful pink cousin *P. hybridum*, plentiful spikes of *Leopoldia comosa* and on the rocks were spreading mats of *Hypericum empetrifolium*. The latter were more impressive a little farther on, co-dominating an area of phrygana with many *Ornithogalum umbellatum*. Tufts of



Papaver apulum

bicolored pink and violet *Lathyrus digitatus* and stands of golden *Asphodeline lutea* stood out against the blue sky and sheer cliffs of the mountain.

After lunch we spent the rest of the day at Delphi, exploring the extensive ruins where *Campanula topliana*, billowing masses of *Alkanna orientalis* and the pendant flowers of *Cerintho retorsa* sprouted from the ancient stone blocks and venerable olives stood sentry as they had for centuries.

Day 4 To Meteora

After a relaxed breakfast our pleasant country route north took us past impressive stands of *Serapias vomeracea* and patches of macchie with a smattering of *Anacamptis boryi*. Roadside meadows had *Campanula spathulata*, delicate *Linaria pelisseriana* and *Verbascum undulatum*. After lunch we pushed on via the new fast road to Meteora, to arrive in time to photograph the spectacular rock formations in the soft evening light.

Day 5 Meteora and to Papigo

The morning was spent visiting some of the open monasteries , each perched precariously on top of the unusual conglomerate rocks. The wonderful landscapes of Meteora also contain some fine flora and we drove to an area of meadows with plenty of *Ophrys reinholdii*. *Serapias vomeracea* was also common. Driving on after lunch among the orchids the roadsides had swathes of the attractive daisy *Crepis rubra* too. The road wound up into the hills and then joined a much faster road that sped us down to the western lowlands.

Beyond Ionanina we detoured to an area with our first *Ophrys helenae*, surely one of the most remarkable bee orchids in the Mediterranean, with broad velvety labellums bereft of any other



Arnebia densiflora

markings, unlike all other *Ophrys* species. Bushy plants of *Centranthus ruber* hung from roadside banks and then we stopped for some superb bushes of the Judas Tree *Cercis siliquastrum*, the bare branches choked with pink pea flowers. It is remarkable as one of the few cauliflorous woody plants in the Mediterranean - most are tropical forest plants. A few more *Ophrys helenae* were found here too. Our route was a spectacular one, rising into the hills of Zagoria to the entrance of the Vikos Gorge. Drifts of *Salvia viridis* and meadows with pink *Anemone pavonina* were seen as we passed through cool plane tree woods and then up via an amazing switchback road to the enchanting village of Papigo, where all buildings were in traditional stone style. The sheer ramparts of Mount Tymphi rose up behind, colouring gently in the late afternoon sun. A stunning spot.

Day 6 Vikos Gorge

After a superb breakfast including the finest coffee in Greece, courtesy of our jovial Greek host, our exploration of the dramatic Zagoria began. Then it was a cliff with big flowering plants of *Saxifraga rotundifolia* and drifts of *Anemone pavonina*, followed by a delightful meadow of annuals with sheets of *Geranium pyrenaicum* punctuated with *Anchusa cretica* and white *Anthemis cretica*. The road made its way up into a remarkable area of limestone rocks, the multiple pancake layers creating the air of a lost city. Sprouting from these rocks were pretty tufts of pink *Matthiola orsiniana* and encrusting cushions of white-flowered *Saxifraga marginata*. Oakwoods filled the gulleys in between the rock piles and these were full of stout pink spikes of *Corydalis bulbosa*, golden discs of *Doronicum orientale* and among the dense litter was the peculiar parasite *Lathyrea squamata*.

The spectacular Vikos Gorge lay a little farther on and what a sight it was, a plunging defile with sheer limestone cliffs clothed in emerald forests below. Carefully exploring the narrow path that ran along the top we found more big cushions of *Saxifraga marginata*, *Aubrieta deltoidea* and *Corydalis bulbosa* as well as a few *Fritillaria graeca*.

The afternoon was spent looking first at the fine triple span Ottoman bridge near which we found a few orchids with a fine plant of *Orchis purpurea* and then both *Orchis simia* and *O. morio* on the terraces nearby. A side track led



Ramonda serbica

past big drifts of lilac *Lunaria annua*. Our final stop had both another fine bridge as well as a superb colony of *Ramonda serbica*, surely one of the most refined and lovely plants in the region. They were in perfect flower, with many plants plastered on the rocks with their little lilac saucer flowers.

Day 7 Bourazani

The areas of the far north of Greece, that border Albania are rich orchid country. We began about as far up as you can go, finding a wonderful area with many *Ophrys helenae* and *O. mammosa* together with *O. scolopax* and *Orchis pauciflora*. Flowery shrubs of *Cercis siliquastrum* were everywhere too. A side track led to another area pleasant and quiet area among oak woods. This had a rich array of flora and not just orchids, but also the intense red bowls of *Paeonia peregrina*. *Orchis simia* was common here with a few *O. ustulata*, lots of *O. quadripunctata* and a few *Neotinea tridentata* too. Other notable plants included creamy *Melittis melissophyllum*, some splashed with cerise-pink, plentiful *Lathyrus digitatus* and a few *Fritillaria graeca*. Coppicing work meant we couldn't make it too far along the track, but luckily we had found good everything anyhow.

We stopped for other orchid areas on the way back finding more good specimens of various *Ophrys*, *Anemone pavonina*, a few still flowering *Asphodelus aestivus* and stopping for good landscape photographs of the afternoon light on magnificent Mount Tymphi. A final dinner serenaded by Nightingales was a perfect end to our very pleasant stay in Papigo.

Day 8 Aoos Lake

This year's season was a touch later than normal with snow still lying in shady places and we found superb drifts of purple *Crocus veluchensis* with golden yellow *C. chrysanthus* along the roadside. There were also patches of *Muscari botryoides* and plentiful *Primula veris* and *Fritillaria montana* held its elegant bronzy bells above the flatter ground. A roadside seep over serpentine rocks had plenty of lovely *Pinguicula crystallina* plasters over the rocks, holding their pale pink flowers well clear of the sticky leaves. These were even better at a seep a bit lower down as we searched for orchids among the woods. We managed



Paeonia peregrina

to find *Ophrys sphegodes* and *Dactylorhiza romana*. Deep blue *Lithospermum purpurocaerulea* grew along the roadsides with the showy *Lamium maculatum* and patches of *Geranium pyrenaicum*.

Day 9 Katara Pass

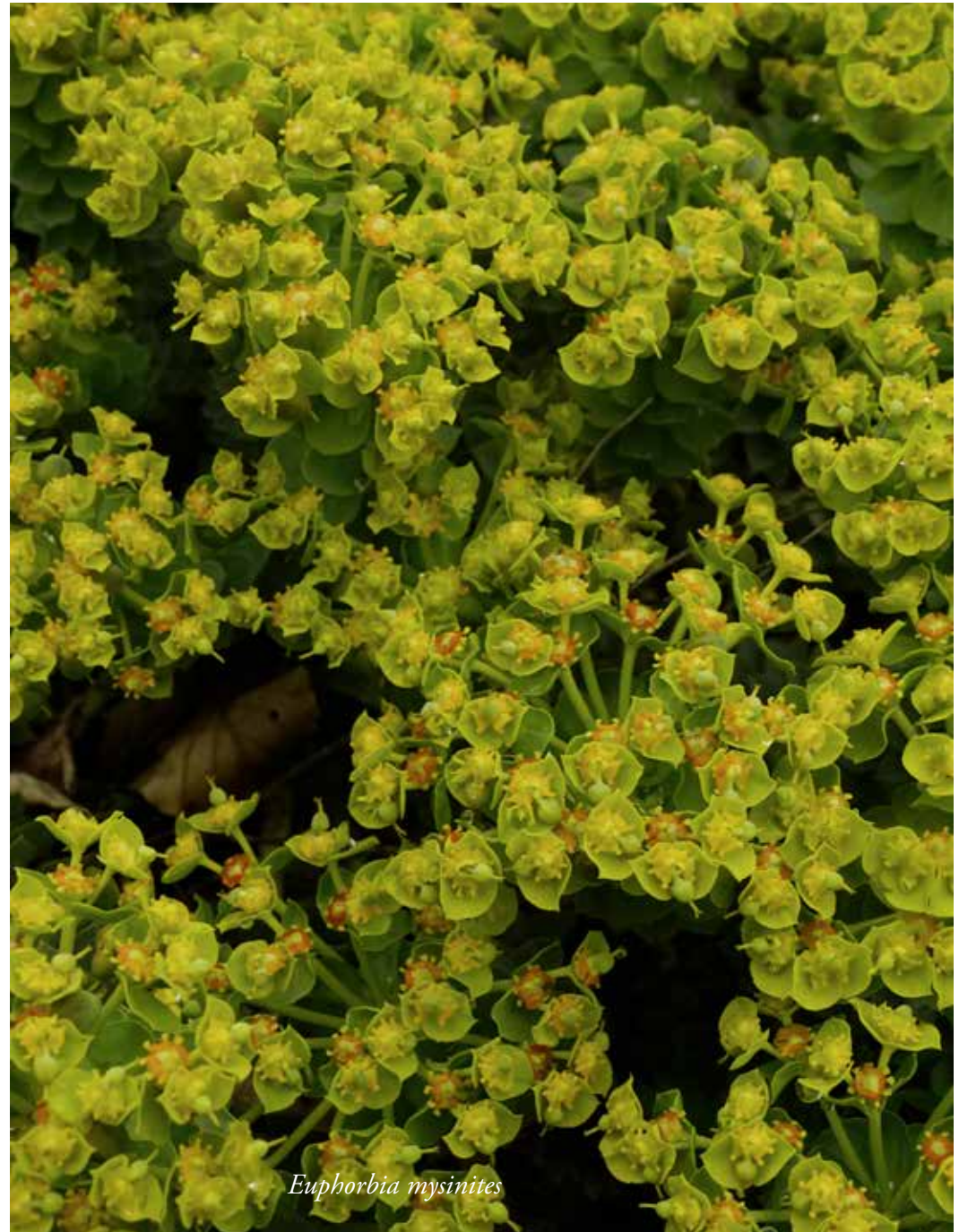
A fine sunny day began with a good colony of *Fritillaria graeca*, some bells strongly striped. Then we stopped for the abundant patches of near white *Primula vulgaris*. Reaching the first snow patch there were more *Crocus veluchensis*, including some strongly striped forms. Alas, there had been lots of late snow this year and it was impossible to cross the pass and visit the population of *Tulipa sylvestris* on the other side. And our planned foray deeper into the hills was also thwarted by late snow patches. Nevertheless, we were able to enjoy a walk to more good patches of crocuses and *Helleborus cyclophyllus*, but *Soldanella pindicola* would elude us this time around.

Day 10 To Kajmakcalan

Fast roads whisked us east and onto the slopes of Mount Vermion for the yellow *Crocus cvijicii* that grow there. Continuing we passed through areas of limestone with short turf that held both yellow and purple forms of *Iris reichenbachiana* in plenty. Stands of *Asphodeline lutea*, peachy *Alkanna graeca*. The weather was not great on the higher slopes of the mountain so we settled for looking at the various lower plants that included *Euphorbia myrsinites* and both purple and yellow forms of the Mount Voras endemic *Viola violitisi*. Delicate *Corydalis solida* grew in the woods with *Scilla bifolia* too.

Day 11 Kajmakcalan

A fine sunny morning had spirits up and sure enough as we progressed up the mountain the first of countless *Crocus sieberi* appeared, the lilac goblets opening and glowing in the sun. Though there may



Euphorbia myrsinites

have been fewer species today, what we lacked in diversity we made up for in sheer quantity. There were staggering numbers of crocus, sprinkled across every area of turf. Some areas also held drifts of the deep purple *Crocus pelistericus* and in places the two merged together.

We stopped and revelled in various populations, also photographing *Viola violitisi* growing from the rocks. It was a fabulous finale to the tour and we had the whole wondrous scene to ourselves.

All that was left was the two hour drive to Thessaloniki and a final night overlooking the Aegean Sea.

Day 12

Flights



Crocus sieberi



For information on our tours
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Campanula topliana