

SPRING IN THE PINDOS TRIP REPORT 2019

Crocus pelistericus

ViRA NATURA
TOURS

Day 1

To Parnassos

Various hiccups (late flights and my lost luggage) meant arrival was a little later than planned. Strong coffee helped reset clocks.

We drove directly to Arachova and climbed up to the plateau beneath towering Mount Parnassos, its slopes still heavily streaked with big snow patches. Dinner was in a nearby restaurant with a commanding view across the fertile, green fields and hills beyond. Then arriving back at our very pleasant mountain hotel, we stopped to look around a rocky slopes liberally sprinkled with *Iris pumila* subsp. *attica* in both yellow and purple colour forms. There were many fine clumps as the late sun illuminated the flowers so perfectly. Fresh *Euphorbia myrsinites* was spread across the ground too, and rocky patches had *Aethionema saxatile*.

Day 2

Parnassos

A splendidly floriferous day began with a colony of *Ophrys lutea* growing on a bank with *Astragalus monspessulanus* and a fine patch of purple-lipped yellow *Iris pumila* subsp. *attica*. Various blue shades of *Anemone blanda* became increasingly common as we passed through fir forest and found a small forest road where a few golden-yellow *Crocus olivieri* were still flowering with fresh *Helleborus cyclophyllus*. The latter was common throughout the woods and clearings, alongside *Ranunculus ficaroides*, the lovely, felted young foliage of rare *Paeonia parnassica* and blue *Scilla bifolia*. Many more anemone appeared and around snow patches were some fine *Crocus sieberi*, *Ornithogalum oligophyllum* and *Corydalis solida*. Our route turned downhill to where large-flowered *Viola graeca* was common around a small church. It was even more impressive a little farther on, with superb clumps and drifts on stony slopes. The few *Orchis pallens* we found preferred a damper grassy bank. A clump of *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *aesculapii* was seen on a bank where *Lathyrus digitatus* was common and intense scarlet *Anemone pavonina* coloured the grasslands. A solitary *Iris tuberosa* and stands of pink *Anemone pavonina* followed, then a rocky bank of macchie with *Orchis anthroporum*, *O. quadripunctata*, *Helianthemum hymettium* and *Onosma* sp. Grassy slopes were coated in blue *Anchusa cretica* and countless snowy *Ornithogalum montanum*, together with *Ophrys lutea* and *Alkanna tinctoria*. The landscape opened up and we saw some wonderful *Cercis siliquastrum* growing with *Fraxinus ornus* and



Crocus sieberi

the strawberry tree; *Arbutus andrachne* with the wide flat plain below and rocky slopes of Parnassos above. A final stop along a shaded track produced the orange-tipped lemon-peel drops of *Onosma frutescens*, mauve *Campanula ramosissima*, fine shrubs of *Euphorbia characias*, masses of dainty white *Gagea graeca*, and the pink discs of *Crepis rubra*.

Day 3 Delphi

We planned to drive straight to Delphi to avoid the heat, but the morning light was magical and we couldn't resist stopping for pink *Tragopogon sinuatus* (= *porrifolius*) and then in an olive grove was *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *spruneri*, *O. lutea*, abundant *Leopoldia comosa*, *Isatis tinctoria*, countless peas and vetches, *Tordylium apulum*, also the yellow-tipped purple tubes of *Cerintho retorta*. Delphi was very flowery and it took some time to wander up to the hippodrome, delayed by architectural *Ferula communis*, beautiful spreading plants of *Campanula topliana* subsp. *delphica* on the rocks, joined in places by another chasmophyte; pinkish or white *Stachys swainsonii* and big tufts of *Centranthus ruber*. The handsome umbel *Malabiala aurea* was common as were the flaming torches of *Asphodeline lutea*, flower-laden trees of *Cercis siliquastrum*, bushy *Trigonella arborea* and blood-red poppies. At the hippodrome there were still a few flowers left on the stout spikes of *Himantoglossum robertianum*, as well as sticky *Silene gigantea* and pretty little *S. colorata*.

Lunch was in a small taverna with a view of the hills and coast, followed by a short visit to the seaside. Back up on the macchie-covered slopes *Phlomis frutescens* was common and among the olive groves were found a few *Serapias orientalis*, *Orchis italica* and a superb drifts of *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *spruneri*. An area of limestone grassland higher up has deep violet-blue *Vinca herbacea*, tumbling masses of *Euphorbia myrsinites* and sprawling shrubs of *Prunus prostrata* smothered in flower close to cascading mats of violet-pink *Aubrieta deltoidea*. *Ornithogalum montanum*



Campanula topliana subsp. *delphica*

and *Anthemis chia* were in unfathomable numbers. The last stop was for orchids with plenty of *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *aesculapii* mingling with more *O. sphegodes* subsp. *spruneri*.

Day 4 To Meteora

Driving down from the cool fir forests we passed Mediterranean slopes a blaze with poppies (*Papaver apulum* and *P. rhoeas*), various sulphurous mustards, frothy *Tordylium apulum* and stands of *Tragopogon sinuatus*. A small tortoise was trying to stay unnoticed in the herbage. A side turning further on had fabulous displays of *Cercis siliquastrum* lining the road and colouring the hillsides. Hidden fields were submerged beneath a snow white lacey blanket of *Tordylium apulum* punctuated with yellow-green *Smyrniium perfoliatum* and in an area of *Satureja*-scented dry grassland we found a few *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, delicate *Verbascum boissieri*, soft yellow forms of *Helianthemum nummularium* and slender violet *Linaria pelisseriana*.

From here we drove for a while, stopping for an invigorating coffee, before reaching the remarkable landscape of Meteora, with tortured, sculpted rock pillars rising from emerald oak woodlands. Lunch was in the shade of the deeply-lobed foliage of *Quercus frainetto*, and the surrounding grasslands harboured *Aristolochia rotunda*, *Parentucelia latifolia* and a mixture of orchids; *Serapias vomeracea*, *Anacamptis morio* and silver marked *Ophrys reinholdii*.

Various monasteries are spectacularly perched on top of the immense rock pillars and we drove around this fascinating landscape, visiting Varlaam monastery and stopping at various superb viewpoints to properly appreciate the landscape. We also nipped out after dinner to capture a view or two at sunset, especially nice with the sun filtering through Judas' tree flowers.

A geological note courtesy of Wikipedia:

Beside the Pindos Mountains, in the western region of Thessaly, these unique and enormous columns of rock rise precipitously from the ground. But their unusual form is not easy to explain geologically. They are not volcanic plugs of hard igneous rock typical elsewhere, but the rocks are composed of a mixture of



Meteora panorama



Meteora sunset with *Cercis siliquastrum*



sandstone and conglomerate. The conglomerate was formed of deposits of stone, sand, and mud from streams flowing into a delta at the edge of a lake, over millions of years. About 60 million years ago during the Paleogene period[8] a series of earth movements pushed the seabed upward, creating a high plateau and causing many vertical fault lines in the thick layer of sandstone. The huge rock pillars were then formed by weathering by water, wind, and extremes of temperature on the vertical faults. It is unusual that this conglomerate formation and type of weathering are confined to a relatively localised area within the surrounding mountain formation. The complex is referred to an exhumed continental remnant of Pangean association. This type of rock formation and weathering process has happened in many other places locally and throughout the world, but what makes Meteora's appearance special is the uniformity of the sedimentary rock constituents deposited over millions of years leaving few signs of vertical layering, and the localised abrupt vertical weathering.

Day 5 Meteora & Mikro Papigo

There was a wonderful early morning foray to various viewpoints to catch the landscape and monasteries in gentle morning light. We left after breakfast to visit the small Agios Nikoloas monastery, perched on a rock pillar with surrounding gardens being carefully tended by monks concerned about the germination of their beans. Leaving town we dived into a café for a decent coffee and then carried on north, through fine mountain landscapes, down to Ioannina and then into the hills of Zaghoria for a late lunch in a church garden. As we ate our spinach pies we noticed *Anacamptis morio* and *Ophrys lutea* growing around our feet. A serpentine road climbed up to Papigo, a beautifully restored and preserved Zaghorian village, each home constructed of local stone and topped with wonderful stone slab roofs. Behind the village rose the spectacular, sheer limestone cliffs of Mount Tymphi.

After a rest and time to let the heat of the day dip a little we drove up to Mikro Papigo (the sister village) for a pleasant wander among the houses, the waysides coloured by *Senecio vernalis*, *Geranium pyreniacum*, *Lunaria annua* and plentiful *Ornithogalum montanum*. There was also a plant of two of *Iris tuberosa* on a side track.

Day 6

Vikos Gorge

There was a short detour to look at good plants of *Chamaecytisus hirsutus* and *Hesperis laciniatus* growing on the way to Mikro Papigo, We then drove towards the Vikos Gorge, passing through more pleasant stone villages, one with masses of green and lack *Vicia melanops*. The road climbed into a remarkable area of pancake limestone rocks where pretty pink *Malcomia orsiniana* and *Lamium garganicum* grew in the crevices as did rosettes of *Ramonda serbica* (though still in bud). The Vikos Gorge is a truly spectacular place, the cliffs plunging 900 metres to the forest flanked river below. The whole area is pristine with no building, roads or development. On the cliffs above us were big cushions of *Saxifraga scardica*, *Aubrieta deltoides*, *Arabis alpina* and tufts of *Ajuga orientalis*. Both *Corydalis solida* and *C. cava* grew downslope out of reach, but we saw both of these close up in an area of mossy woodland as we moved on.

We'd hoped to see *Fritillaria graeca* and *Narcissus poeticus* near the small monastery of Paraskevi, but alas, the path to the edge of the gorge where they grew had been closed. There were fine stands of *Asphodeline lutea* and fresh leaves on *Aesculus hippocastanum* (a tree which is confined to ravine woodlands here and rarely reaches the majestic proportions we see in cultivation) and we then found some good *Fritillaria graeca* in woods near the monastery before a revitalising coffee.

We spent the afternoon looking at some of the superb Ottoman bridges that spanned the (sometimes dry) riverbeds. They are wonderful structures with elegant round arches, the one at Kipi involving three arches. Around the largest of them we saw more fritillaries too. Shortly before we arrived back we stopped for a meadow full of pink *Anemone pavonina* and blue *Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum*.



Malcomia orsiniana

First stop was in pleasant plane tree woods alongside the river, accessed by another fine bridge and on the mossy rocks were many lovely *Ramonda serbica*. A great start to the day. Leaving the fast flowing blue waters we climbed into the green hills and then took a small side track into the forest. Three dazzling scarlet cups brought us to a halt; *Paeonia peregrina*. There were a great many others in bud, but clearly this year they were a little late. No matter we had seen these (very fresh) flowers. The woodlands were delightful and we drove onto a small church that was surrounded by candy crush meadows of *Geranium pyrenaicum*, from among which emerged some immense flowering *Cercis siliquastrum*. It was an idyllic spot. Retracing our steps we found several *Orchis simia*, *O. quadripunctata* and plenty of *Fritillaria graeca*, as well as pretty *Lathyrus laxiflorus*, *Melittis melissophyllum* and as we were leaving Penny spotted a wide-open *Tulipa sylvestris* too.

The road wended its way through lovely countryside with lots of Judas trees and walnuts, past the river and areas of shattered shale strata, before climbing to the Albanian-Greek border. There was a tremendous hum of bees from the trees at the church overlooking the sleepy frontier. A fine tuft of *Campanula ramosissima* sprouted from a wall near the square where we had an excellent fresh cheese pie for lunch. There had been rain forecast so we moved on to an excellent orchid site with a great abundance of *Ophrys helenae* (together with a few *O. sphegodes* subsp. *mammosa* and *O. lutea*) and the elegant pale yellow *Orchis pauciflorus*, which grew in combination with deep pink *O. quadripunctata* in swirls of colour. There was a peel of thunder and a light shower of rain as we left, but this had ended by the time we reached our final stop, another orchid-rich spot where we saw more fine *Orchis simia*, *Neotinea tridentata* and lots more *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *mammosa* in the sunny grassland between the oaks.



Orchis pauciflora & *O. quadripunctata*

It was rainy first thing but this cleared up by the time we set off and spawned fine misty views of the valleys and forests. We took the 'quick' route to Metsovo, and soon wished we had not. There was a cycle race and the road we needed to access Aoou Lake was closed to traffic. We tried other routes but encountered the same problem and so we had little choice but to drive somewhere for lunch and wait. The wonderfully named Zoodochou Pigis monastery fitted the bill. By the time we returned the road had reopened and we could finally access the lake, though the weather was still decidedly cool and murky. Nonetheless, the bank of *Muscari neglectum* and *Primula veris* was lovely and there were fine clumps of *Veratrum album* bursting from the ground as well as big patches of *Caltha palustris* in flower. We continued around the lake past the vibrant green beech woods and viewpoint to where we took a side road downhill and stopped beside a stream. In the area around it Sue found an *Orchis provincialis* and there were many emerging *Platanthera chlorantha* and *Listera ovata* too. The latter turned up in flower at our next stop, with two large plants below the road. We had actually stopped for a patch of lovely *Pinguicula crystallina* growing around a spring, but this proved to be a mere sighter with huge patches just down the road, each sticky cluster of leaves sporting a delicate pale pink violet-like flower.

We searched for other orchids lower down, but no luck, finding a large *Fritillaria graeca* and *Lilium carniolicum* foliage. Back up at lake level a stop in an area of pine woods soon produced our first reddish bells of *Fritillaria montana* amidst the hellebores and primulas. A solitary *Dactylorhiza sambucina* (pink form) was also found. There were several more of the pale yellow form a little up the road too. An area of grassland had lots more *Fritillaria montana* in various colour forms, but the rain had returned so we opted to keep this one for later on tomorrow and slowly made our way back along the twisting lakeside road instead.



Pinguicula crystallina

Alas, the weather looked grim and our day looked a touch foreboding. Undeterred we set off stopping first on the northern shore of the lake for a good population of *Fritillaria montana* in various colour forms. It was decidedly cool with a more than fresh wind. Descending a bit seemed a smart move, so we drove down through the lush forests with mists draped across them, stopping next for an amazing colony of *Pinguicula crystallina* that was almost completely encrusting a large stretch of serpentine rocks, with many thousands of plants. Our next stop had a couple of *Orchis provincialis* and not quite open *O. purpurea* and we found more of the former in an area of acid heaths with big drifts of *Saponaria calabrica*, mounds of *Aethionema saxatile*, *Chamaecytisus supina* and a few *Ophrys helenae*. However, the best display of *Orchis provincialis* came next with many tall flower-laden spikes on a steep bank.

Lunch was by a small church where we also saw *Hypericum olympicum* and fine patches of *Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum* and *Helianthemum nummularium*. Our route then cut across country and after we had negotiated a large herd of cattle we looked down on an area of wet grassland, speckled with many white flowers. It was a superb population of sweet-scented *Narcissus poeticus*, with hundreds of plants in perfect flower stretching across the wet meadows. Quite some time was spent revelling in this wonderful display.

Despite the continuing poor weather on the pass we drove up there on the way back, just about making out a rocky slope on the left to explore. Here we found many plants of *Fritillaria epirotica* (though still two weeks from flowering) and *Tulipa sylvestris* in bud amongst a matrix of red-leaved *Sedum album*. The cold meant the many *Crocus veluchensis* were tightly-closed, though still attractive as the mists swept through the ghostly leafless beeches. A final flourish was provided by many flowering shrublets of *Daphne blagayana* on bank. Then it was back to Metsovo for a warming shower and hot tea.



Daphne blagayana

Day 10

To Kajmakjalan

Despite a bright start the Katara Pass clouded over quickly, so it seemed prudent to make tracks and head east where the weather seemed brighter. Even before we reached Edessa, a quick 'bush' stop produced a planted clump of *Iris reichenbachiana* in a church yard. We found many more of the same on a productive stony slope with both yellow and purple colour forms present. Among them were many good forms of *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *mammosa*, quite the best population I had ever seen. *Asphodeline lutea* was ridiculously abundant and created a golden haze to the horizon with countless plants in flower. A few faded *Tulipa sylvestris* were also found and in the lush herbage around the orchards was *Adonis flammea*. A magnificent flock of white pelicans, effortlessly rising on a thermal was another highlight.

Revitalising coffee followed and then we visited another interesting location with mixed habitat of rock outcrops, stony meadows and woods. A colony of *Paeonia peregrina* was seen (though not in flower) before we wandered up a delightful track lined with thousands of *Asphodeline lutea*. The lacy white flowers of *Centaurea pindicola* were common. On a large rock outcrop we found many more *Iris reichenbachiana*, spreading mats of *Aubrieta deltoidea*, clumps of *Dictamnus albus* (in advanced bud) and two tortoises.

From here we drove past large, immaculately trained orchards and the placid Vegoritida Lake before climbing into the wooded hills and our comfortable hotel, nestled beneath Kajmakjalan. We were the only guests in town.

Day 11

Kajmakjalan (Mount Voras)

The forecast the night before had been hopeful and indeed blue skies greeted the day, albeit with some clouds moving about. We



Iris reichenbachiana

drove up through lovely mixed forests with fresh leaves, stopping for a big clump of deep yellow *Viola macedonica* on a turf bank. Clearing the pine woods we soon saw the first big patch of *Crocus sieberi* fringing the snows and beginning to stir. Giving them some time to open we first stopped to look at pretty *Viola doefleri* growing on rocky slopes, but soon the lure of crocus drifts drew us down. With them was the white *Ranunculus crenatus* and sprinkles of blue *Scilla bifolia*. The crocuses slowly but surely were opening, so we sped up to the ski centre where flat areas were dressed in lilac splashes of countless crocuses - I do not exaggerate, there must be hundreds of thousands if not millions up here. Among the lilac drifts were deep violet patches and these were the handsome chalisés of *Crocus pelistericus*. They too were opening more as the sun warmed them. It was still cool though, so we descended again to another even denser patch where they had indeed opened up a lot more. It was a stunning spectacle with the sun illuminating thousands of violet flowers across the turf. Flashes of golden-yellow *Caltha palustris* provided some relief from the relentless lilac and violet.

There were fine views of the reflective lake as we drove back down for a deserved coffee, before setting off towards Thessaloniki. Photos were taken of the tidy orchards and after I got a bit lost we had a quick lunch in small restaurant before driving out to where we found irises before in the hope of seeing some late-flowering tulips. Unfortunately, we couldn't find any, so all that was left was the drive to Thessaloniki, which passed mainly through rural areas with waysides coloured with billowing brassicas and blood-red poppies, orchards of figs and olives and ultimately to our hotel perched overlooking the Aegean Sea.

We enjoyed a good final dinner with margaritas.

Day 12

Flights



Crocus pelistericus

For information on our tours
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Narcissus poeticus