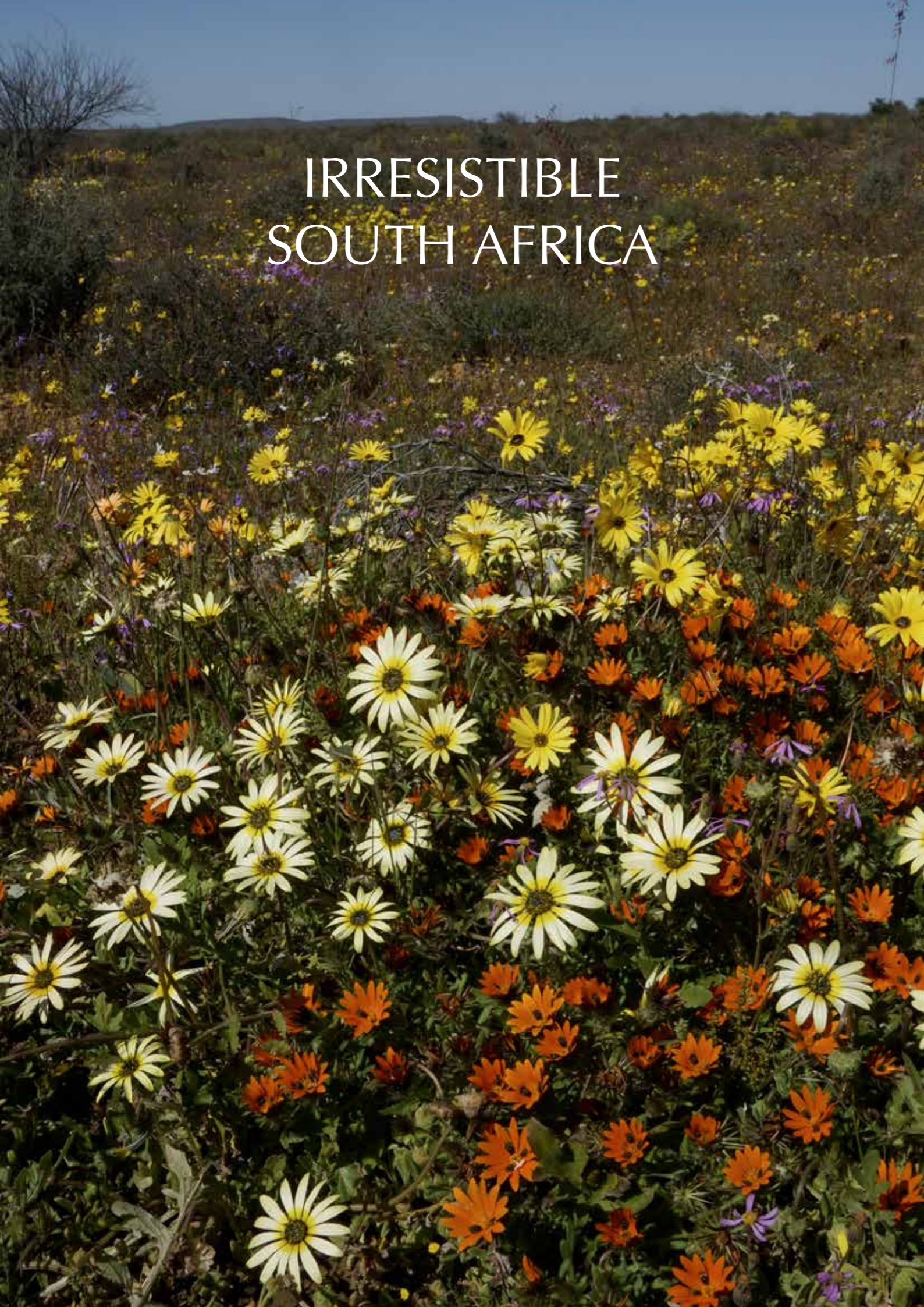


IRRESISTIBLE SOUTH AFRICA



Ferraria uncinata blue form

I am fortunate to spend much of my time in Turkey; arguably the richest plant destination in the vast Mediterranean-Central Asian biome, a region that spans thousands of kilometres and one that is filled with superb flora from snowmelt bulbs to unique steppe endemics, lilies in lush Caucasian meadows or stately cedar forests. This remarkable country is very much the gateway to the greater Asian experience, one of hazy steppe horizons, of deep, deep valleys that dissect the grandest of mountains and of sweeping open spaces with an unparalleled freedom to explore. In spring and summer especially, it is an endless playground for the botanist, but as this adrenaline-fuelled excitement threatens to peter out into the tedium of gloomy grey days, drizzle and that will-spring-ever-come-again despair, where better to turn to than what I consider Turkey's counterpart in the southern hemisphere; South Africa. This is a country I hasten to visit at every opportunity. It is one imbued with its own unparalleled richness, with a floral diversity like no other and its' fair share of entrancing wilderness. Indeed, the breadth of flora makes for a steep learning curve and it is quite impossible to visit the country just once. The complex climate, a product of the twin influences of the (warm) Indian and (cool) Atlantic oceanic currents, nutrient poor ancient soils (invariably more diverse), diverse pollinator relationships and undisturbed geological history have allowed intense speciation to fill the great many



Gladiolus superbis



Hoodia gordonii



Ruschia sp.



Nemesia ligulata



Arctotis acaulis



Lachenalia zebrina



Geissorhiza speciosissima

fine niches that have arisen. The end result is a visit is rewarding somewhere in the country from August to March, arguably all year if your interest extends to seeing flowering Aloe in the karoo in June or all of the bulbs it has to offer, thus it is the perfect flipside to the botanical season. Unlocking its secrets does take time, as ever many of the choicest delights are localised and thinly spread.

The southern spring begins in late August-September when the Western Cape reveals its unsurpassed world of bulbs. The northern reaches of Namaqualand start early in August (even July) and are very rain dependent, with precipitation varying from year to year and the splendour of flower displays likewise. A touch to the south and one reaches the famed Nieuwoudtville (a name I can never quite pronounce correctly, leaving most Afrikaans speakers staring at me as I stumble incomprehensibly through the word), which is also decidedly rain influenced. This year (2023) I received word that the rains had been good and the season promised to be a record one. I wasn't going to miss it we hastily rearranged our itinerary and managed to entice a lucky few to join me on what was a dazzling floral experience, the best in forty years the locals told us on several occasions. I so wish I could have shown more of you what we saw. Having said that, our first two days at Nieuwoudtville were beset with murky, wet

weather and we resorted to (successfully) scouring the quiver tree forests for extraordinary *Hoodia gordonii* and *Lachenalia zebrina*. When the sun did come out it was hard to take it all in as sheets of colour spread in all directions a blaze of daisies that was so bright at times sun glasses were not an option but a necessity. Among the ubiquitous Asteraceae grew so many *Lachenalia*, *Hesperantha*, *Moraea*, vivid *Gladiolus superbus*, the bone china delicacy of *Nemesia cheiranthus* and a smattering of *Pterygodium* orchids and violet *Babiana framesii*. The area is one of renosterveld soils, much of it flat lands that have been converted to agriculture in some way or other. In fact, the Western Cape has lost over 95% of its renosterveld and what remains today are precious patches that can only hint at what this land must have once looked like. The areas around Nieuwoudtville have some of the largest remaining parcels and some of these are now well-managed by the local farms, which are themselves some of the most charming places to stay when visiting. There were a few target specials we were after, chiefly the stunning *Sparaxis*, and we found the first; *S. tricolor*, beside a creek, a magnificent clump of a magnificent plant in perfect condition. Its cousin *S. elegans* was even lovelier, especially the gorgeous white form, which grew with rich-violet *Geissorhiza speciosissima* and orange *Gorteria diffusa*. Everywhere we turned there



Sparaxis tricolor



Sparaxis elegans white form



Sparaxis elegans



Sparaxis elegans white form



Geissorhiza radians and *Romulea eximia*



Babiana villosa



was colour. Another patch had the typical form of *Sparaxis elegans* (again with the *Geissorhiza*) together with abundant *Hesperantha bachmannii*. Catching our breath, we continued south exploring more renosterveld and finding wonderful displays of *Babiana inclinata* along with two iconic *Moraea*; *gigandra* and *villosa*. Where we were seeing hundreds, a typical season might see a dozen. It was a rare treat. Great domes of *Ruschia* sp were totally smothered in flowers of such an intense, saturated pink that the cameras could not accurately record what we saw. And then on reaching the coast with its endless beach, there were hundreds of blood-red *Babiana hirsuta* followed by a third rarity *Moraea calcicola* to complete another mentally exhausting day. Next, the reserves around Darling teased us on one cloudy day and then rewarded the next in the sunshine when thousands of violet-and-red *Geissorhiza radians* glowed in the marshes flanked by swirls of strawberry *Romulea eximia* and drifts of golden *Ixia maculata*. Nothing could top this? The precarious nature of the region's richness came to the fore at another small protected area near Tulbagh where we happened upon a dense display of colours like we had yet to see and would not see again. Here we found hundreds of carmine *Babiana villosa* mixed with cherry-red *Geissorhiza erosa* and the sumptuous velvet-purple of *Sparaxis grandiflora* in an eye-popping slow dance of exuberance. Quite why three unrelated flowers should employ such similar colours can only be down to pollination competition, but quite how a passing insect (or bird) can choose is a



Sparaxis grandiflora with *Geissorhiza erosa* (red)



Babiana inclinata with *Indigofera* sp.



Moraea gigandra



Moraea villosa



Ixia latifolia with *Moraea flaccida*



Moraea calcicola

mystery. This was one of the most memorable colour experiences of the trip. Surely no more? Think again. In South Africa fire is key to some much of what one sees and a big burn near Ceres took things to the next level, with thousands of soft blue *Babiana lineolata*, countless *Moraea flaccida* mingling with *Ixia latifolia*, sulphurous *Geissorhiza ornithogaloides*, the necklaces of a *Cyphia* sp. strung from every bush. And then on a bare slope oh-so delicate orchid *Bartholina burmanniana* with its elegant fringe. In truth, orchids peak later on in this region, especially November-December when some of the finest *Disa* come into flower. It's another time I'll have to visit. It was indeed the floristic zenith of this trip and though many more wonderful plants followed, from the dense lemon-yellow balls of *Leucospermum conocarpodendron* and the sunset-tints of *Lachenalia luteola*, grand views from Table Mountain and the pretty lilac bells of *Gladiolus rogersii*, we were never quite the same after these experiences.

This had been my third visit to South Africa in 2023, the one before this was in March, when once again good rains had provided a tremendous array of impressive amaryllids, many different forms of *Erica*, emblematic *Protea* and a pretty smattering of *Gladiolus*. The Western Cape has the richest of all autumn bulb floras, rivalled only by that seen in



Bartholina burmanniana



Bonatea speciosa



Dierama dracomontanum



Disa porrecta



Disa oreophila



southern Greece and south-west Turkey in October-November. Nothing can quite match the twinkling fire of *Brunsvigia marginata*.

My first South African trip of 2023 had actually been a couple of months earlier, in January, when I spent a fabulous fortnight exploring the magnificent tablelands and ridges of the Barrier of Spears (Zulu name); the **Drakensberg**. This is a region of summer-rainfall (the Western Cape is winter rainfall) and thus it offers an utterly different floral experience. January is when these mountains and their foothills come into their prime with many orchids (we found sixty species), alongside stunning *Agapanthus*, *Dierama*, *Eucomis*, *Crocasmia*, *Watsonia*, *Nerine*, many different *Kniphofia*, (some being actively pollinated by stunning Pride of Table Mountain butterflies) and immense *Brunsvigia grandiflora*. The orchids varied from the impressive long-spurred *Disa cooperi* and scarlet *D. porrecta* to perplexing *Disperis* and *Pterygodium*. It is the accessibility of the landscapes of this region that are part of its great appeal. I also found taking a photograph of a plant without a stunning backdrop a real challenge. Walking out from a secluded lodge hidden away in the seldom visited (wrongly so) western Drakensberg one easily ascends to breezy ridges with views across 'classic' grassy mesas, on the way walking through the closest thing to flower meadows in this part of the world, where hundreds of pink *Disa oreophila* mingle with scarlet *Tritonia drakensbergensis*, white *Scabiosa*

Brunsvigia marginata



Brunsvigia grandiflora



Disa cooperi



Helichrysum milfordiae

and the airy bells of *Dierama dracomontanum* whilst the big lilac daisies of *Berkheya purpurea* form impressive stands. Dieramas are quite a challenge to identify and we probably saw at least ten species, all graceful, all a challenge to photograph on a breezy day! It's here, as I lay in bed one afternoon, that I watched the unmistakable form of a lammergeier (or bearded vulture) glide across the hills and soar past my huge picture window close enough for me to see its' beard. The vaunted heights of Lesotho are ever present and the well-known Sani Pass ascends here (still rough and unsurfaced in its upper section) switch-backing up to 3000 metres where one can stay in comfort and venture out to soak in the scenery, as vertiginous rocks first giddily plunge and then ease into a sprawling layered tableland. The crevices of the rocks immediately at hand are filled with gorgeous woolly-leaved *Helichrysum milfordiae*. Overgrazing is a serious issue in Lesotho and the comparison between verdant, florally diverse South Africa and its landlocked neighbour are stark. Nonetheless, it is in Lesotho one can find huge stands of *Kniphofia caulescens*, one of the handsomest in the genus, stout and vivid and even more so with an iridescent malachite sunbird attached. Red-hot pokers are quite a feature of the area with at least ten species seen from fiery *K. linearifolia* to the crisp and contrasting *K. thodei*. The scenery in Lesotho is magnificent and views from passes where rocks are swallowed by *Helichrysum milfordiae*



Kniphofia caulescens



Eucomis bicolor



Amphitheatre, Witsieshoek



Ornithogalum regalis (left)



Harveya scarletina



Sandersonia aurantiaca



Witsieshoek dawn

enveloping cushions of *Helichrysum pagophilum* worth the stiff breeze that whips across.

Further along the line, the relatively low elevations of Giant's Castle are no less beguiling, and here an early start had us gazing across the valley as mists ebbed and flowed, then slipped from smooth contours and revealed the toothed ridges beyond all framed by architectural *Protea roupelliae*. One aspect of the Drakensberg that should be mentioned are the thunderstorms that build, rumbling and crackling across the ridges, foreboding at times but no doubt adding an element of excitement and drama. If anything, the landscape builds and builds as one travels from west to east, reaching a mind-numbing magnificence at Witsieshoek where the view of the Amphitheatre is as stunning a mountain view as can be imagined. Even better with a clump of *Agapanthus* in the foreground. It is here that some of the most rewarding walks can be had, leading to dense populations of beautiful *Nerine bowdenii*, sometimes blended with ivory bells of *Ornithogalum (Galtonia) regalis* and architectural *Eucomis bicolor* as Drakensberg rockjumpers (a bird) bound from boulder to boulder their calls echoing off soaring black cliffs, whose fissures are further encrusted in patches of nerines. Watching the dawn rise on the beautiful ridges is something else to remember and throw



Nerine bowdenii

Protea roupelliae at Giant's Castle



Gladiolus dalenii

in a dozen diversely different *Gladiolus*, including tangerine *G. dalenii* forerunner of most of our garden glads, fiery *G. sandersii*, a duo of seep and waterfalls specialists; blood-red *G. flanaganii* (aka the suicide lily) and pink *G. microcarpus*, as well as pendent *G. papilio* and the almost cryptic speckled flowers of *G. ecklonii*. Throw in some delightfully weird asclepiads, beautiful parasitic *Harveya*, architectural cabbage trees, the orange bells of *Sandersonia aurantiaca* and pretty *Zaluzianskya* and you have a perfect winter tonic (if you live in the north) or somewhere exciting for a summer holiday (if you live in the south). I'm keen to get back myself and will be doing so this coming January.

We can't force you to come to South Africa, but we will tempt you as best we can!



Gladiolus ecklonii



Gladiolus papilio



Zaluzianskya microsiphon



Schizoglossum atropurpureum

