

MINOAN MAGIC CRETE IN SPRING

Tulipa saxatilis subsp. *bakeri*



Anemone coronaria

Few springtime Mediterranean destinations resonate quite like Crete. Former abode of the Minoans, it is rightly renowned as a scenically spectacular and flower-filled land and no doubt such ancient residents would have revelled in the fabulous early displays of colour much as we do today. Then, as now, the macchie is strewn with countless violet *Anemone coronaria* and the lovely pink cups of *Tulipa saxatilis* subsp. *bakeri*. The displays of the latter are near legendary on the Omalos Plateau, where the graze resistant tulips have come to dominate some fields and fill them brim-full of flowers. The only rub with Crete is the proliferation of weld-mesh fencing, which means the eager botanist needs a pair of pliers handy to open and close the fences. Inside is one of the finest shows in the Mediterranean in spring. More subtle plants are also mingled among this abundance such as green-and-black *Iris (Hermodactylis) tuberosus*.

Heading higher from the plateau, I always manage to coax my hire vehicle up the rocky track to the refugio on the ridge. It's here around the last snow patches that I find the gorgeous *Crocus sieberi* in perhaps its finest form, bicolored reddish-purple and white. Greece has some of the best bulb displays to be seen and parts of the north have vast quantities of the variant *C. sieberi*



Crocus sieberi



Orchis italicus



Ophrys kotschyi subsp. *creticus*



Ophrys sphegodes subsp. *spruneri*



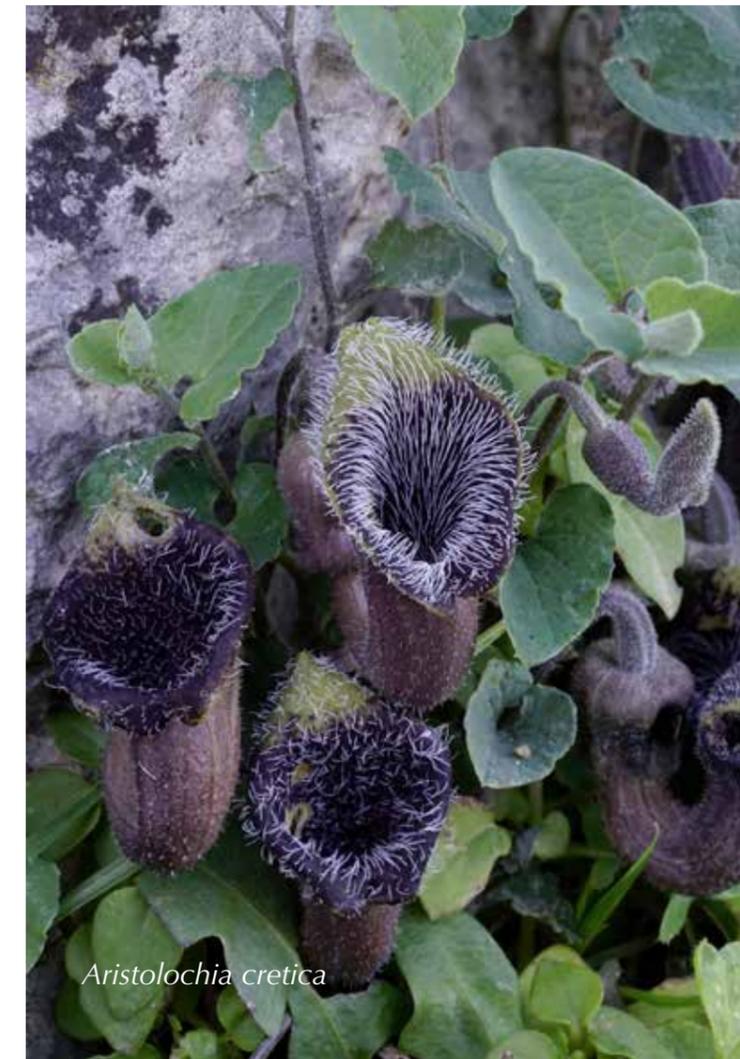
subsp. *sublimis*, sometimes alongside deep violet *C. pelistericus*.

However, Crete is equally well known for another family of plants - orchids. The famed Gious Cambos has a simply mind-boggling array of bee orchids including *Ophrys fuciflora*, *O. kotschyi* subsp. *cretica*, *O. scolopax* and various forms of *O. fusca*. They create great debate among aficionados as to what is what and just how many species are present. Other orchid riches include an abundance of *Orchis italicus* in drifts that blend with the horizon. Fallow fields nearby also have plentiful red *Tulipa orphanidea* aglow in the afternoon sun. More delicate pink *Tulipa cretica* grows in areas of serpentine with yet more thriving populations of orchids. Driving back to the pleasant coastal town of Plakias drifts of *Ranunculus asiaticus* gild the verges, in places growing in great numbers mixed with *Gladiolus italicus*. This lovely spring flower comes in various colour and on Cyprus it's possible to see all variants from white to pink, blood red or yellow, but seldom mixed together. This is quite different to their close relative *Anemone coronaria*, which invariably occurs in populations containing various colour forms. On Crete (at least in the areas I visit) *Ranunculus asiaticus* in white or pink.

Tulipa orhanidea



Ranunculus asiaticus



Aristolochia cretica



Ebenus cretica



Plakias Bay

Plakias Bay is well worth visiting to explore the low cliffs and coastal phrygana where curiosities such as endemic *Aristolochia cretica* can be found among the golden glow of so many *Phlomis fruticosa* and *Euphorbia dendroides*. Another striking yellow is provided by *Ferula communis*, a fennel, though the vigour of their display varies from year to year with some seasons producing stunning stands, other very little. Other plants exhibit this biennial tendency such as *Asphodeline lutea*. In good years there can be impressive 'forests' that dominate heavily grazed areas, the following season can be bereft of flower. Luckily, there is always the wonderful landscape and other choice delights to see such as *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *spruneri*, another of the perplexing bee orchids.

One plant that always seems to put on a stunning show is one of our favourites, not just in Crete but in the Mediterranean. We can think of few lovelier shrubs than *Ebenus cretica*, an island endemic (and Crete has a good number of such unique plants) that is engulfed in tufted dense racemes of pink flowers in April. Around Plakias they colour the loose, low cliffs. And, from these beauties it's just a short stroll to the nearest taverna for a delicious sea food meal and whatever else takes your fancy.



Ferula communis