

MOONFLOWERS &
TURBANS
Part Two

Tulipa bifloriformis





Relfections of the Tien Shan



Iris warleyensis



Bellevalia turkestanica

Fritillaria bucharica (left)

The complex geography of the 'stans' is matched by their political muddle, with the various states possessing Stalinist borders that intentionally divided peoples and made Soviet rule easier. These borders were retained upon independence and the in order to see the various prime plant (and cultural) areas one used to have to perform a visa dance and multiple border crossings. Thankfully, the visa dance has ended for most visitors, although fighting across borders between phalanxes of grandmothers wielding heavy boxes of cherries is still alive and well near Tashkent. This now makes it easier to visit both Kyrgyzstan (featured in the previous post) and my other favourite stan - Uzbekistan. Long steeped in mystery the former fulcrum of the Silk Road offers perhaps the ideal mix of flowers and culture. Where else can one marvel at the blue tiled mosques of Samarkand and then with an hour be among mountain flowers.

South of Samarkand is the Taktakaraca Pass, a granitic extension of the Hissar Range, a bizarre block-filled ridge that harbours many wonderful plants. I first visited in 2011 to see *Iris warleyensis* (and *I. magnifica*), but also found a suite of delights from deepest-purple *Bellevalia turkestanica* that emerged on grassy slopes opposite rocky banks full of *Fritillaria bucharica* beneath flowering

Ferula kuhistanica





Corydalis ledebouriana (Tien Shan form)

Tulipa fosteriana

wild almonds. Stands of majestic fennels (*Ferula kuhistanica*) can be seen here and in many other places in a 'good' fennel year, alongside billowing masses of *Crambe kotschyana* and *Astragalus sieversianus*. Grassy slopes higher up have the rich pink of *Primula fedtschenkoana* amidst a muddle of *Corydalis ledebouriana* and *C. maracandica* hybrids, whilst snowmelt edges have the golden cups of *Crocus korolkowii*. I must confess to using a photo from Tajikistan for this flower, I've never seen them in greater profusion than here. Fiery tints are provided by the stunning red of *Tulipa fosteriana* too, although this beauty suffers at the hands of flower pickers (to sell by the roadside) and finding an intact population can be tricky. This ravishing species has been used in tulip breeding to give us some of the biggest brightest cultivars.

Moving on from the cultural swirl of Samarkand and Bukhara, the architecture of Tashkent is modern and lively. Fast trains can whisk the traveller across the country in a few hours, switching mountains ranges in the process and opening the door on a new array of flowers. Climbing into the westernmost arm of the Tien Shan, woodland edges are filled with the typical pink form of *Corydalis ledebouriana*,

Crocus korolkowii





Tulipa tschimganica

Gymnospermium albertii

Solenanthes circinnatus and countless gageas. Areas recently freed from snow have a multitude of *Gymnospermium albertii* snaking up from the turf on blood-red stems or the sultry cups of *Crocus alatavicus*, flesh-pink *Fritillaria stenantha* or dainty *Eranthis longistipitatus*. Taking the precarious ski lift much higher there are tulips galore. On one occasion we all walked back down from the top, first finding plenty of bicoloured *Tulipa x tschimganica* (other populations can be pure red or a mix of colour forms) and then lots of sticky slippery mud so that we all ended up several inches taller than when we started (if we even stayed on our feet the whole time). Exploring the various rocky valleys, the milky ands of *Eremurus lactiflorus* often appear in great quantity, sometimes with *Tulipa greigii*. *Eremurus* and tulips are very much THE Central Asian geophytes, reaching their zenith of diversity in the region. The former really come to the fore in early summer. Tulips are very much springtime pleasures and on one ridge at Chimgan one can stand amidst creamy masses of *Tulipa bifloriformis* with *T. x tschimganica* glowing on one slope below and *T. dubia* on the other. Hot colours that are almost as warming as a post-mud soak in the bath and the evening vodka toasts.

Eremurus lactiflorus

Crocus alatavicus

