

OCTOBER ODYSSEY



Crocus goulimyi var. *leucantha*



Dried *Ferula communis* at Monemvasia

Whilst I've written much about south-west Turkey this corona-year, and extolled its virtues as a plant paradise, I have to concede the finest autumn experience lays west across the water. Certainly, I can find as many if not more late season species in my local area. But I cannot match the displays of the Peloponnese, in southern Greece, those fingers of land that dangle into the Aegean Sea offer a rich and rewarding visit. I have been fortunate to see the area many times, I find it irresistible, the perfect combination of flowers, food and cultural bites at such a peaceful time in the Mediterranean. Understandably, it's a popular place and just about every natural history holiday company attempts to run tours here. It's not at all unusual to meet up with other bulb-crazed groups.

Why do they come? The Mani is one reason, a small peninsula that juts into the blue sea around which half a dozen lovely crocuses can be seen. Here the soft mauves of endemic *Crocus goulimyi* mingle with pure white *C. boryi* or smaller starry *C. laevigata*. Or even the big, goblets of *C. niveus*, a real stunner that can also be lilac and white with prominent red styles. Olives groves in the Mani are packed with these, sunshine



Crocus goulimyi



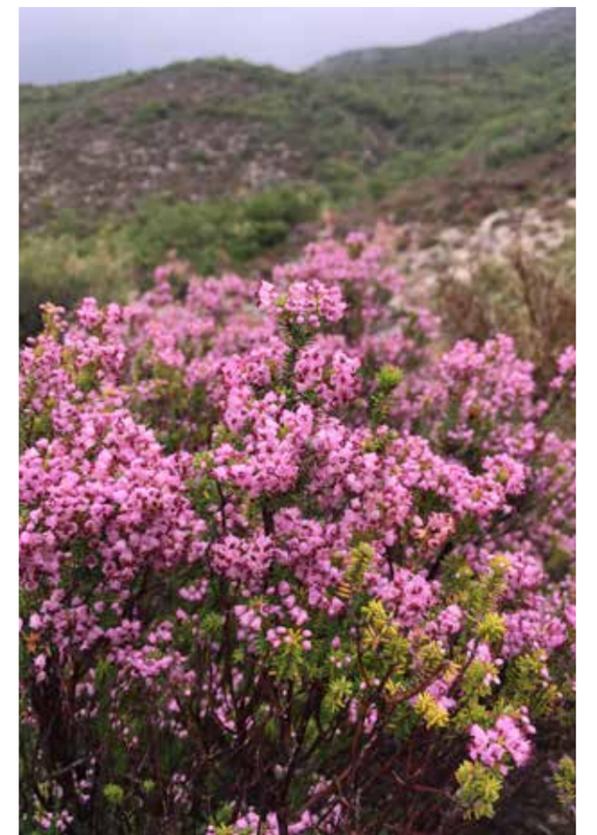
Arbutus andrachne



Cyclamen graecum

drifts of *Sternbergia lutea* and abundant clumps of *Cyclamen graecum* in a range of shades and with an even broader range of intricately patterned leaves. Head almost as far south as you can and the rocks are peppered with more *Crocus niveus* and the still flowering clumps of showy *Campanula versicolor* to add a little extra colour.

Head across the winding headlands to the east and early-flowering *Narcissus tazetta* appear with *Anemone coronaria* (if the rains have been good). Continue onto Monemvasia and you have not only a wonderful historical treat, with a well restored Byzantine town, but also the ruined upper town. In a good year the rocks up here are dripping with *Sternbergia lutea* and *Colchicum cupanii*. My many visits invariably see shifts in flowering, mainly due to rainfall or a lack of it. Last year (2019) was dry yet the display of *Sternbergia lutea* above Monemvasia was superb and elsewhere the autumn-flowering heath - *Erica manipuliflora* - was the best I'd ever seen, colouring the macchie pink. Conversely, some normally glorious drifts of *Crocus goulimyi* were as dry as a bone and flowerless. A dry year meant finding my next little gem was tricky, it was not a great year for the *Colchicum sfikassianum*, a delicate chequered



Erica manipuliflora



Galanthus regina-olgae



Sternbergia lutea subsp *sicula*



Sounion



Narcissus tazetta

gem - but find a few we did, sprouting from the bare ground of track. It's fair to say dry years are the exception rather than the rule.

Easier to find were the drifts of *Crocus goulimyi* var. *leucantha* (a white variant) growing with plentiful, sweet-scented *Cyclamen hederifolium*. All good trips come to an end. But what a finale to enjoy on the Peloponnese. A trip to the fascinating ruins of Mystra in the morning then lunch among gorgeous plane tree and fir forest. Here the pure white bells of *Galanthus reginae-olgae* push up through the deep litter and add their undeniable refinement to the season.

It has been said I have a lead boot when it comes to driving. Maybe so, but it gets me from Mystra to Sounion in time for a glorious sunset and the perfect end to a Grecian bulb-frenzy. Sounion has not only an impressive temple positioned with an Aegean a view to die for, but also plenty of *Narcissus obseletus* (formerly *N. serotinus*), splendid clumps of *Sternbergia lutea* and the cherry on the cake, that is *Crocus cartwrightianus*. Forerunner to the widely grown *C. sativus*, the provider of saffron, this is one of the most striking Greek crocuses, almost as lovely as my own Turkish *C. wattiorum*.

Almost.



Colchicum sikkassianum



Crocus cartwrightianus