

# Kaçkar Summer TURKEY

## 2024 Trip Report

viranatura  
tours



*Urtica paradoxica*



## Day 1 22 July – Meeting in Trabzon

Some of us arrived in Trabzon a few days before the tour to get over the jetlag and look around Trabzon. I arrived on the day and we met at the hotel and officially started our tour. Driving towards Sumela Monastery we first stopped at Macka town just below the monastery to have lunch. Our first introduction to Turkish cuisine was well received with Lahmacun - much like thin-crust pizza with minced meat and tomato and peppers. The first day was also an introduction to some problems with our hire car! I had to deal with it while the ladies took a tour in the monastery by themselves. Luckily the problem was solved quickly and then we drove on to the İkizdere Valley where we were going to stay for the next four nights.

## Day 2 23 July – Anzer Yaylası

We woke up to a sunny day. After having great open buffet breakfast we headed to İkizdere town to get our picnic supplies and then set off for Anzer Yayla (a high plateau) that is only a one hour drive away but it took us a much longer time to get there because of the many stops to look for flora.

First stop was good to get to know the common roadside plants. Yellow-flowered *Salvia glutinosa*, purple red-flowered *Stachys sylvatica*, another purple; the droopy flowered *Cirsium hysopifolium*, impressive black centered magenta *Geranium psilostemon* and *Salvia verticillata* were some of them. Some of the flowers also had attractive leaves including stately *Heracleum platytaenium*, *Tussilago farfara* and *Chaerophyllum aureum*. At another stop by the roadside we noted *Telekia speciosa*, *Impatiens noli-tangere*, *Vincetoxicum fuscum* and *Digitalis ferruginea*. Driving a little further we again stopped by the road this time by a rocky outcrop that was home to different plants like *Sedum sediforme* and *Hylotelephium maximum*, *Phlomis russeliana*, *Linaria genistifolia* and the yellow hollyhock; *Alcea hohenkerrii*.

Eventually we reached Anzer and first found an open shop that sold (the certified) most expensive honey of Turkey - Anzer Honey. After shopping we found a great lunch spot at 2750 meters, surrounded by mountains just above the village. Near the stream we found *Gentiana pyreniaca*, *Dactylorhiza euxina*, *Pedicularis nordmanniana*, *Gymnadenia conopsea* and *Swertia iberica*. We stopped three more times on a 500 metre long road to the pass. Everywhere was so colourful with different flowers, a superb and harmonious blend that included candy pink *Polygonum bistorta* and purple-veined *Geranium ibericum*. Some rocks were covered with *Minuartia circassica* and others with



*Eryngium giganteum*



*Coronilla orientalis* whilst *Hypericum linaroides*, *Asyneuma amplexicaule* and *Sempervivum armenum* were some of the other interesting plants. Another stop before the pass by a slope of coarse scree produced ice-blue *Corydalis alpestris* and at Anzer pass we enjoyed amazing views on both sides. Some plants seen on the roadside screes were *Asperula gracilis*, *Thymus praecox* and *Pilosella hoppeana*.

Having enjoyed the views we started to head back the same way and half way down we had another good stop this time for the impressive and architectural *Eryngium giganteum*. Along with this there were *Campanula aucheri*, big amethyst-flowered *Delphinium formosum*, and it's unusual cousin; beige *Delphinium dasistachya* together with orange-flowered *Papaver lateritium*.

### Day 3 24 July – Ovit Pass

Despite the cloudy weather report a sunny and pleasant day welcomed us again. After breakfast and quick shopping we headed for Ovit Pass at 2640 metres. We spent whole morning on the hills of the pass. The turf was dotted with *Geranium cinereum* with many different variants from pale to dark pink with some white centred forms too. Walking around, near the stream we noted our first *Gentiana septemfida*. Big rock boulders were holding different plants like *Anthemis marshalliana*, *Sempervivum armenum*, *Sedum tenellum* and a few little *Dryas hispida*. Our gentle walk up was very productive. Every few steps we were noting a new species. Under the rocks there was some *Saxifraga sibirica*, on the rocks along the streams *Cerastium cerastioides*, one side of the slope had a colony of *Pedicularis pontica* with *Minuartia aizoides* on the other side.

It was nearly lunch time so we headed back to the car and drove to our next location stopping once on the way next to a rocky area coloured contrastingly with purple *Campanula lactiflora* and orange *Papaver lateritium*. There were also the dark spikes of *Pedicularis atropurpurea* and its' showier relative; yellow *P. condensata*. Passing through colourful roadside banks we found a great scenic spot for lunch, though a sweep of mist closed our view for a short while. After lunch we started to gently walk down examining the banks. *Scabiosa caucasica* was the highlight growing with *Scutellaria pontica*, *Thymus praecox*, *Campanula collina* and





*Teucrium chamaedrys* and just as on Ovit Pass we were noting new plants on every corner such as; *Campanula rapunculoides*, *Hypericum montbretii* and *H. pruinatum*, *Kartalinia (Psoralea) acaulis* and *Dianthus carmelitarum*.

We still had some time before heading back to hotel so decided to discover another valley but our journey was cut short because of a problem in our car that also caused a puncture. We managed to get back to main road to get some help though our flower hunting was now over for the day.

#### Day 4 25 July – Mor Yayla

Our new car arrived last night and we drove up an over Ovit Pass to get to Mor Yayla. Lower parts of the hills looked much drier a striking example of how the climate quickly shifts from summer rainfall Colchic-Euxine to winter rainfall Irano-Turano steppe as one moves inland. Nonetheless, as we ascended it greened with some good plants including tall *Cephalaria gigantea* which dominated the hillside vegetation. When we looked closer in some areas finding many plants like *Helycrysum armenium*, *Psephellus appendicigera*, *Campanula glomerata*, *Acantholimon uliginosa*, *Teucrium pruinatum* and a *Dianthus zonatus* subsp. *hypochlorus*. A pleasant drive through the villages with their many bee hives took us to higher parts. The view at the top (2400 meters) was amazing, looking across to seven placid mountain lakes. *Silene pungens* clumps were so beautiful. As we started to wander around we noted plants like *Jurinea moschus*, great clumps of *Dianthus multicaulis*, *Anthemis splendens*, *Psephellus appendicigera* and *Erigeron caucasicum*. On the rocks was growing *Prometheum (Sedum) pilosum*, *Gypsophila nabelikii* and *Oxytropis albana*. We spent quite a while here and then headed down after having lunch with a grand view. A short stop on the way to look for the endemic *Viola odontocalycina* was successful. We also photographed pink flowered *Carduus lanuginosus* a handsome and architectural thistle with ashen grey indumentum. Here and a bit further down we saw the beautiful *Vicia canescens*.

Driving back our last stop was to see the impressive stands of golden-yellow *Centaurea macrocephala* an especially robust herb.

#### Day 5 26 July – To Camili, Maçahel

We decided to have a cultural interlude today and left the hotel early to spend some time in Çamlıhemşin Valley where Başak is originally from. After an easy drive along the coast we arrived there. First we visited a ceramic shop where there were many



*Dianthus multicaulis*



classy souvenirs and art pieces. Everyone chose what they liked and then it was time to have some real coffee with some pastries. Next we visited the *Buxus sempervirens* forest taking in some very old arching bridges on the Firtina river. *Buxus* trees have been suffering from a fungus that defoliates the trees for last 10 years and almost all of them looked dead. It was like a ghost forest. It was disappointing to see them like that but the good news was some scientist have found the cure and have been implementing and started to see the results. Some of the trees started to regenerate fresh leaves after three years of work.

From here we drove to Başak's village to see her old traditional house. We also observed the tea harvesting and had a chat with old ladies knitting socks with five needles.

After a tasty lunch in the valley with traditional cheese fondue and refreshing elderberry flower soda we started to drive to Camili. Stopping to ask a question to market owner and ended up in his house tasting the chestnut honey he produced this year. Camili is in Maçahel area, a gene centre for the strong Caucasian honey bee. All the honey production here is controlled and regulated thoroughly. Not surprisingly, the honey was so delicious we ended up buying some.

Eventually, we arrived at our hotel and had some rest on the terrace with great sunset views followed by dinner.

## Day 6 27 July – To Şavşat

We woke up to a nice sunny day and the view from our hotel terrace was fabulous. After a very rich open buffet breakfast we packed and started our journey over the mountains to Şavşat. Before we left the Camili area paid a short visit to the impressive Georgian mosque built in 1851.

Driving through the village we stopped for various plants and every time we stopped we were offered tea or coffee. Even though we politely refused it was very nice to receive such hospitality. We had a close look into *Coryllus maxima* that was the main crop in the area. The nuts weren't fully mature yet but didn't stop us to try them. Leaving the village we were in amazing *Fagus orientalis* forest, with impressive grey barked trunks and a little bit





higher the large *Abies nordmanniana* started to appear. Roadsides were lined mainly with *Epilobium angustifolium* and *Campanula lactiflora*. As the mist arrived in the forest we had the chance of some great atmospheric photos. The forest understorey was covered with *Rhododendron ungeri* with big pale pink flowers and large leaves with whitish grey indumentum. Another nice plant we found was *Hypericum bithynicum* and at the last stop before the heavy rain started we noted *Campanula latifolia*, *Pedicularis condensata*, *Prenathes cacaliifolia* and *Achillea biserrata*.

We didn't have chance to stop at the pass because of the rain and continued on our way, stopping lower down for the unusual creamy-bracted inflorescences of *Origanum rotundifolium* and some blackberry picking before we heading to Şavşat town for a delicious lamb döner kebab. In the early afternoon we arrived at our bungalow hotel ideally positioned in the hills with great mountain views.

Ellen I took a stroll in the village before dinner at the nearby Laşet restaurant.

## Day 7 28 July – Arsiyan Yaylası

Today we headed for the mountains that we could see across from our bungalows. We drove down and just outside the village we made our first stop. We noted different plants as it was much drier here with *Eryngium campestre*, *Xeranthemum annuum*, *Salvia sclarea* among them. There were also *Cornus sanguinea*, *Quercus patraea* and *Acer campestre* and on the rocky sections we photographed *Dianthus orientalis*.

Eventually we started to go higher and evergreen trees like *Pinus sylvestris*, *Abies nordmanniana* and *Picea orientalis* became dominant. Understorey flora was very colourful as usual with *Lathyrus rotundifolius* showing its colour very well against *Rubus* leaves. However, showy *Geranium psilostemon* was the star of the forest. Passing through some summer pastures and cow herds we stopped to examine the alpine flora. There were beautiful plants like *Campanula collina*, *Delphinium flexuosum*, *Aconitum nasutum*, *Astrantia maxima* and *Dianthus multicaulis*. We turned back and stopped by a yellow field. It was *Helichrysum armenium* and there was a minibus load of people collecting them. We spend a little longer here as we encountered some new plants for the tour; *Ononis arvensis*, *Senecio sp.*, *Geranium asphodelioides* and *G. pyreniaca* and *Nepeta nuda* among them. Ellen spotted two different Gentians, which although they were not in flower had different leaves after some debate we decided they were *Gentiana cruciata* (larger leaves) and *Gentiana septemfida* (smaller leaves). Another nice surprise in the area was *Aconitum orientale* with pale flowers.



*Geranium psilostemon*



We drove a short distance to a small lake to have our lunch and on the way down couldn't resist to have photos next to giant *Verbascum speciosum* plants. Back down in the forest another stop produced *Melampyrum arvense* with its yellow flowers and a variation of deep pink or cream bracts and the rusty spires of *Digitalis ferruginea* were at their peak here. Other plants we noted on the way down were *Centaurea macrocephala* and *simplicicaulis* and *Lonicera caucasica*. Before going back to the hotel we visited Şavşat Karagöl Lake and had a nice walk around it.

All the rain clouds that had been growing around finally caught up with us as we arrived in the hotel.

#### Day 8 29 July – Çam Pass - Sahara National Park

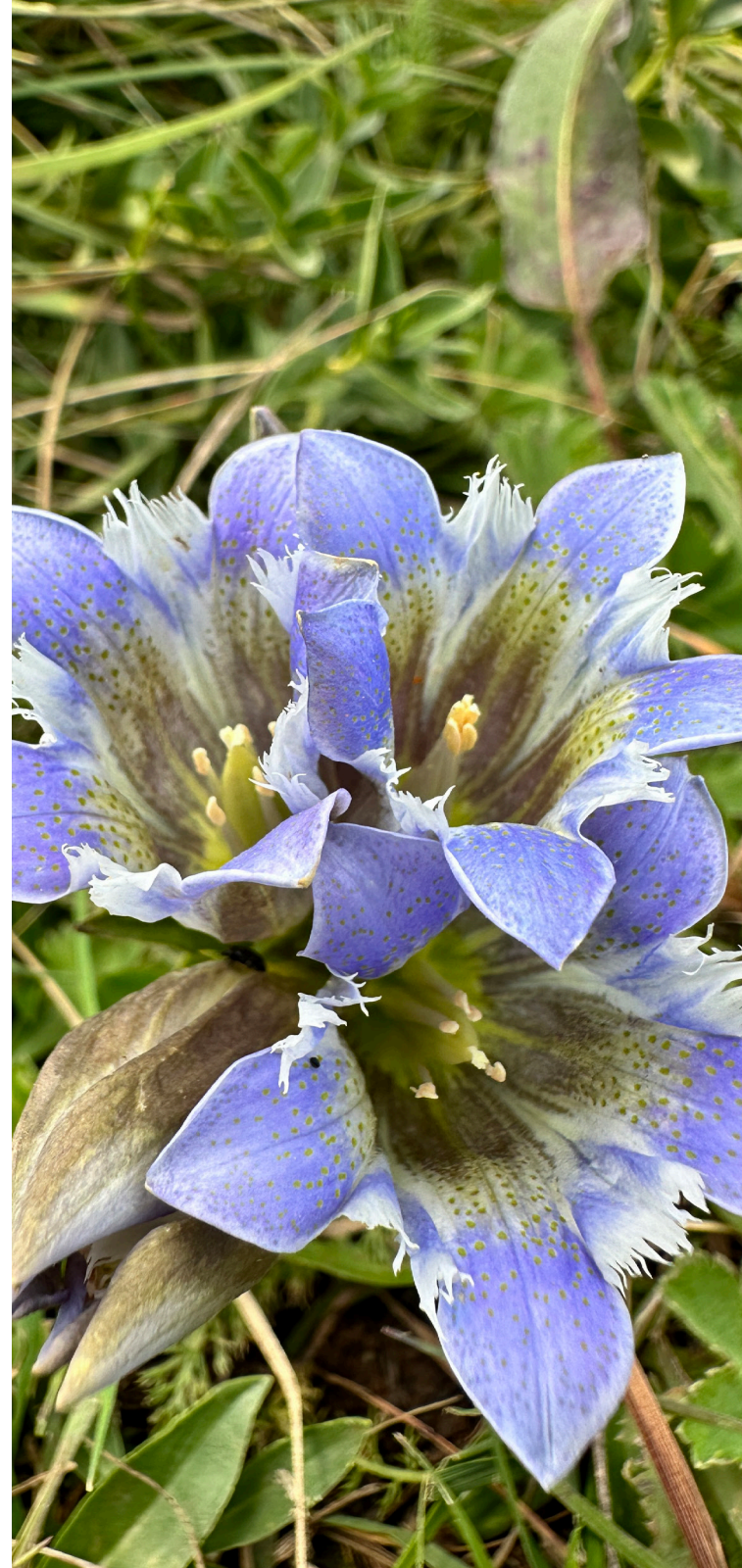
We spent the whole day in the Cam Pass that sits between Şavşat and Ardahan. After a delicious big breakfast we left for the mountain. Our first stop was at a great viewpoint just below the pass from where you could see mountains from every point. Flowers were superb too. Some of the plants appearing in the turf were *Erigeron caucasicus*, *Psephellus pulcherrima*, *Sideritis balansae* and *Gentianella caucasica*. Heading on to lush areas different plants appeared; striking *Circium obvallatum*, *Inula orientalis*, *Stachys macrantha*, *Campanula lactiflora*, *C. collina* and *C. latifolia*. Another hillside was covered with the pink, mauve and blue shades of *Scabiosa caucasica* and *Echium vulgare* with rock crevices filled with succulent *Prometheus spurium* and *P. tenella*. Having spent two hours in the area we moved to the other side of the road finding *Aconitum nasutum* and *A. orientalis* flowering in the scree areas but it was hard to get them because of the tall *Urtica dioica*.

It was lunch time and we moved to pass and found another scenic location. After our favourite tuna and egg salad with vegetables and fruit was eaten, we started to look for plants and found superb *Gentianella caucasica* as well *Gentiana septemfida*, *Sedum anuum* and *Allium olympicum*. Next we moved further down towards Ardahan and explored the hills a little more. Pale yellow flowered *Gentiana gelida* was first plant that caught our eye, whilst muddy stream sides were full of *Veratrum album*, *Filipendula ulmaria*, *Tanacetum balsamita* and *Aconitum nasutum*. We also found *Swertia iberica* and the rare *Hypericum montanum*. Walking around further there was the pale blue hybrid gentian (*Gentiana septemfida* x *gelida*). On the other side of the road there was the superb, steely blue *Eryngium giganteum*.

We stopped briefly at a view point where we could see the peaks of Kaçkar Mountains and then continuing back to the hotel to relax and enjoy the views from our bungalows.

#### Day 9 30 July – Aktaş Lake & To Kars

We had another great breakfast with another great view and left our hotel to go to Kars, once again travelling up and over the Çam Pass again. Driving down the pass an area of cliffs caught our attention and we stopped. A little climb towards the rocks brought us to where was *Campanula crispa* showing off wonderfully with its crisp white flowers. The campanula was not the only highlight, there was



*Gentiana gelida* x *septemfida*



also the bluest *Erygium giganteum* we couldn't stop photographing them all. We encountered many other plants like *Delphinium flexuosum*, *Stachys macrostachya*, *Psephellus pulchellus*, *Scabiosa caucasica* and *Helianthemum nummularium*. We also spotted an impressive *Prangos ferulacea* with fantastic red fruits. There was also a little treat for our stomachs with some super tasty wild raspberries as well.

Driving further passing the town Ardahan we had another stop with great views of a canyon where we first encountered the yellow flowered *Aconitum anthora*. There were also cushions of *Acantholimon* sp on the rocks in full flower. *Echinops pungens*, *Convolvulus lineatus*, *Teucrium polium* and blue *Eryngium billardieri* were the other plants we found around. Next we moved to our lakeside stop. It was much drier than expected but we still managed to note some new plants including *Sanguisorba officinalis*, *Centaurea pterocaula*, *Cirsium rhizocephalum* and more *Gentiana gelida*. It was hot so we didn't want to walk further and turned back having a quick look at the birds on the lake and had great views of Dalmatian Pelican.

Returning back we took the scenic route via Çıldır Lake back to Kars stopping to photograph *Alcea hohenackeri* and probably a garden escape; *Alcea rosea* on the way. Our hotel in Kars was a converted old Russian building. Dinner was taken Başak's favourite restaurant in Kars serving local delicacies and great wine.

## Day 10 31 July – Ani & Boğatepe Village

As an extension to our botanical tour programme, we paid a visit to the UNESCO world heritage site of Ani. This medieval city has many religious and military structures from different periods and it was an Armenian capital during the 10th-11th centuries.

We spent almost four hours inside the great walls of the city exploring the spread out ruins. There were also new plants among the ruins like *Lepidium vesicarium*, *Eryngium campestre*, *Centaurea solstitialis* *Peganum harmala* and some unidentified umbels.

In the afternoon Başak's mother joined us and this time to learn about something different we all drove to a nearby village called Boğatepe where there was a tiny village museum telling the story of Kars's famous graveyere cheese.

The last dinner of the tour was taken in another restaurant serving local dishes where we had chance to try the delicious goose meat.



*Campanula crispa*



## Day 11 1 Aug – Back home

We all had leisurely morning and the ladies flew back to Istanbul while Başak and her mother drove back to the mountains for a few more days in the green Kackar hills.

