

SPRING IN CENTRAL ASIA 2025

viranatura
tours 

Iris bucharica

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Corydalis schanganii

Day I Arrival & Sholak Mountains (29 March)

Most of the group had arrived a day or two early from far flung corners (New Zealand, Tasmania and Alaska), whilst I'd taken a mere hop from Turkey. I went to the airport early in the morning to meet John and then after a rest and breakfast we all set off with Sultan at the wheel of his huge SUV. We headed north and away from Almaty, with glimpses of snowy mountain slopes peeking from between mist and cloud. The road was lined with many still leafless trees and these in time, petered out to featureless steppe. What could possibly live here? The rugged ridges of the Sholak Mountains emerged from the haze and we made our way towards them, passing alongside the calm lake waters before turning inland and entering a narrow valley that led deeper into the hills. We stopped in a wide grassy area and glancing up at the rocky slope in front of us we could see the striking yellow and red goblets of *Tulipa alberti*. There were many superb specimens all in excellent condition, the yellow interior of the flowers with prominent red markings and attractive undulate glaucous leaves. With them on the slope were tufts of *Thalictrum isopyroides*, plenty of *Rindera tetraspis*, *Androsace maxima* and a small plant of *Ixiolirion tataricum*. Reaching the ridge, *Gagea bulbifera* was abundant on the sunnier facing slope, whilst the more humid north-facing slope had a different flora including some fine fresh clumps of *Corydalis schanganii*, rosettes of a *Goniolimon* sp and leaves of a second tulip species. Bird life was also plentiful with pied wheatear, common redstart and the constant cackle of chukar as a griffon vulture flew over.

Lunch was a filling a lavish feast prepared by Sultan, washed down with coffee (or tea). We then took a walk along the track that we had driven in on, seeing both pied and isabelline wheatears, short-toed larks and corn buntings before finding a colony of flowering *Iris tenuifolia*. Diminutive red *Nonea capsica* and lots of small *Ceratocephala testiculata* grew around them. A solitary *Tulipa biflora* (*binutans*) was found, but there were plenty further down the track along with a single lovely *Fritillaria karelinii*. From here we drove onto Altyn Emel and entered the park seeing a large herd of wild ass followed by a saker falcon and Montagu's harrier as we neared a narrow, dark canyon, the rocks seemingly covered in a glossy black slick. Into this unusual layer were carved many bronze age petroglyphs of ibex,

red deer and hunters. Kestrels were flying about here too. Leaving the site the herd of wild ass crossed the track a hundred metres in front of us, the animals galloping swiftly across the rocky-strewn steppe. And, making our way out of the park we continued to see other wildlife with two white-tailed eagles and long-legged buzzard as we passed by busy rookeries (of rooks).

Dinner was in a nearby restaurant with shaslik and salads.

Day II West of Konaev & Tamgaly Tash

One of the crown jewels of the trip we really wanted to see is the unique *Tulipa regelii*, a delightful dwarf species with highly distinctive deeply grooved leaves. We drove out across the green steppe lands where herds of horses and sheep were scattered in the vastness and flocks of rooks drifted across from time to time. In an hour we reach an unusual area of rocky slopes that surrounded a reservoir and here we started looking. It took no time at all to find the first gorgeous specimen, the (usually) solitary leaf best with a crisp, white flowers with egg yolk centre. There were many scattered across the shattered slate rocks and slopes, with exquisite clusters of three flowers, delightful vignettes among the rocks, little groups of a dozen plants with blue sky backdrops and as if this plant needed to get any better, getting down closer and the flowers had a delicious, sweet scent. Swaying in the breeze just above were the pretty white stars of a second species, *Tulipa biflora* (*binutans*) and dressing the slopes in a sulphurous veneer were countless *Gagea bulbifera*. But all eyes for the most part were on the beautiful *Tulipa regelii*. Plenty of time was spent enjoying these and we continued to find wonderful little groups as we searched the slopes also finding a solitary *Iris kuschakewiczii* in flower.

Lunch was in a second spot where we also found a few diminutive specimens of *Anemone petuliolosa*. There was a great view along the reservoirs sinuous shore as we sat in the warm lee of the vehicle. One jewel down the second one was a couple of hours drive away, recrossing the steppe and then turning north before we reached Tamgaly Tash, a



Tulipa regelii



Fritillaria karelinii

rock art site where carpets of *Gagea bulbifera* coloured the slopes. Stopping in an area of earthy sands we found a superb population of the lovely *Fritillaria karelinii*, with some good multiflowered spikes and various pink colour variants of the well-speckled flowers. A Horsfield's tortoise was seen as we photographed these and a suslik appeared from it's burrow too. Across on a different slope we found a few *Iris tenuifolia*, as well as a pretty drift of *Tulipa biflora* (*binutans*) extending up to the crags above and pleasantly lit with backlight.

Next there was as visit to the singular Buddha relief carved into the rust-tinted rocks as a number of climbers dangled from ropes higher up. Clumps of *Corydalis schanganii* were fast emerging and one was in good flower nestled at the base of a shrub. There was time for one last stop for a second colony of *Fritillaria karelinii* with the spikes backlit from the late afternoon sun, each spike topped by twisted bracts. Less is more and just this species together with the singular *Tulipa regelii* had been the perfect combination on a fine sunny day.

Day III Altyn Emel (31 March)

A long day that took us to some of the most impressive scenery in the country. Heading out of Konaev we climbed to the Arkagly Pass and once on the other side started to see a crisp white frosting of countless *Crocus alatavicus* across the turf. This remarkable display continued for miles, waxing and waning in density and eventually we just had to stop by one denser patch. The crocuses were very uniform in appearance with pure white set off by the blackish-purple reverse to the outer tepals. The were lovely with soft backlight and we spent some time finding good groups and drifts of flowers. Continuing the road climbed to the Altyn Emel pass where the land was still decidedly wintery with large snow patches and leafless shrubs set off by the high ridge of the Tien Shan beyond. On the other side the landscape changed dramatically to one of flat *Artemisia* steppe bound by distant hills. After signing in at park HQ it was to these far hills, we headed next, rumbling across the dry plains to the painted hills nestled in the Aktau Mountains. Here we hiked to a viewpoint across the multi-coloured landscape where a confusion of old sea deposits had been thrown together. To our left rose the alabaster flat-topped

mountains, riven by erosion channels and crowned with turrets of soft stone, yielding to the stunning red and grey banded strata below with a foreground of ochre sands and stony sediments that was also peppered with straggly, half-dead looking shrubs. In fact, many of the shrubs were alive, they had barely begun to awaken from the harsh winter. We hiked to a higher vista that revealed the drama of area's weathering with the softer sediment cap eroded to a stunning red sandstone beneath.

Lunch was in a shady shelter and then we retraced our steps and pushed on towards the famed Singing Dunes, seeing wild ass and goitered gazelle on the way. The dunes rose sharply from the landscape and had a 'razor-edge', but we refrained from the effort of climbing them (a real thigh-burner I can assure you) and instead looked for plants in the sands, finding the emerging rosettes of an *Eremurus*, *Gagea* sp, *Rindera tetrapis* and the old stems of *Cistanche tubulosa* at the base of a large *Tamarix*. It was getting late, and the sun was dropping quickly and silhouetting the ridges. Driving out we saw Corsac (red) fox and many suslik diving into their burrows. By the time we topped the pass again it was dusk and the remaining couple of hours was completed in the dark, nonetheless arriving in time for another delicious meal at the local Georgian restaurant.

Day IV Alasa Pass & Charyn Canyon (1 April)

Today we again travelled east, but this time on better roads and south of the Kapchagay Lake, with the long line of the Tien Shan extending to the horizon as we edged closer to the Chinese border. Rocky hills led up to the Kokpek Pass and we stopped at a side valley to explore, finding plentiful pale pink forms of *Corydalis glaucescens* in the scrub and on the slopes, together with *Gagea* spp. and several just emerged large tortoiseshells, orange-tips and peacock butterflies. *Crocus alatavicus* was also sprinkled here and there was the lovely *Iris kolpakowskianum*, with a superb bank of them a bit lower down. An elegant species, the flowers came in a variety of colour forms, and we tried our best to (it seemed) photograph them all. The road continued onto a rather bleak plain and then twisted up to an area of dry but attractive low hills. It was here that we found stunning displays of *Tulipa biflora* (*salsola*) mingled with various forms of *Iris kuschakawiczii*. The interesting hairy flowered *Gagea setosa* was found



Crocus alatavicus



Iris kuschakewiczii

and following a rocky ridge line more and more fine shows of both appeared along with an array of other plants such as *Orostachys thyrsiflora*, *Rosularia platyphylla*, *Lagochilus* sp., a pretty dwarf *Astragalus* and *Zygophyllum kegense*. Time flew past and before we knew it was well past lunch time. Walking back there were patches of *Ranunculus polyrhizos* and the rough, crinkled leaves of *Rheum tataricum* in the sandy ground.

The weather had become a bit rougher by now with a brisk wind and we huddled behind the vehicle to eat lunch, though sometimes this was not enough, and it was necessary to hold onto the food. There was time afterwards to visit the nearby Charyn Canyon, enjoying superb close views of a steppe eagle on the ground with a pika in its clutches. The canyon itself was an impressive defile, splitting the jumbled geology and leading off towards the distant Altyn Alatau mountains. By now it was very breezy, but thankfully there was no need to try and photograph any more beautiful flora and all that remained was to drive the distance to Almaty and the comforts of our hotel.

Day V Degeres & Tamgaly Tash II (2 April)

There were clearer views of the mountains as we made our way through the morning traffic and out of the city, finding ourselves crossing gently undulating open countryside, the roads lined with trees that hosted a great many rooks. After a while a side road took us up into low rocky hills where we parked and went to explore nearby knolls, seeing a black vulture circling overhead and fine colour forms of *Iris kolpakowskianum* on the way. As we photographed these a huge flock of hundreds of rooks swept in, swirling in the air in black aerial rafts of birds, as many landed close by to feed. On the adjacent stony ground, we found a rather pallid *I. kuschakewiczii* but we were actually searching for a different species. A probable specimen of creamier-coloured *Iris subdecolorata* did turn up but was not entirely convincing. A second site lower down had some clearcut specimens of *I. subdecolorata*, which were still somewhat variable in colour, muddled further by the closely related *I. kuschakewiczii*, with which it seemed to be freely hybridising to produce an array of intermediates.

The plan had been to continue to the Kordai Pass, but time had moved on together with the prospect of delaying road works, so instead we opted to go



directly to our intended final stop for the day, Tamgaly Tash. It turned out well enough, especially when we saw drifts of *Tulipa biflora* decorating the grassy steppe as well as a decent view of a long-legged buzzard. Reaching the petroglyph site a local guide took us around and showed us the best examples which ranged from ibex to horses and more intricate ‘flower-headed’ people carved on various smooth but cracked rocks. Tufts of *Corydalis schanganii* added a botanical note. There was a final excellent Sultan-style lunch before we set off on the return, seeing three demoiselle cranes and stopping to photograph the ubiquitous rooks. We were in in good time to prepare for tomorrow's flight to Tashkent.

Day VI To Khojand via Tashkent (3 April)

A day of travel that encompassed three countries and when the peculiar borders of Central Asia came to the fore. On a fine clear morning we had breakfast in Kazakhstan, before driving to the airport for our flight to Tashkent, Uzbekistan where we had lunch. After this we drove to the border with Tajikistan and crossed easily enough without any more incident than having to cart our bags through the long no man's land that separated the two countries. Having met our guide and driver we then drove to Khujand, enjoying a wonderful sunset over the rippling, silhouetted ridges of the far western arm of the Tien Shan on the way. We then had dinner in Tajikistan! A stroll past the reconstructed old fort and grand new buildings followed, continuing through the lavishly lit parks that were a blaze with bedding plant displays. Even the construction cranes were decorated with red, white and green lights in a show of national colours.



Gymnospermium alberti

Day VII

Shahriston Pass (4 April)

Setting off on a fine morning after a comfortable night in our huge rooms, hopes were high for a good plant day. And seeing the oncoming rocky hills topped by the spectacular ridge of the Pamir Alai raised expectation further. Unfortunately, a combination of geology, fences and heavy grazing meant little was seen at our various short stops. A patch of *Tussilago farfara* was found and on the dry rocky slopes the other accessible flora we did find were a few shrubs; *Prunus griffithii* subsp. *tianshanicus* and plentiful *Zygophyllum atriplicoides*. However, the geology was impressive with multicoloured strata and deep plunging valleys rising to snow crowned tops and two lammergeiers were seen well riding the air currents. After a good lunch we climbed to the second higher Anzob Pass, transiting the rather ropey Iranian-made tunnel and exiting to a stunning mountain backdrop.

Now things picked up botanically, with carpets of *Gymnospermium albertii* on the steep flanks of the valley and we eventually stopped for an excellent colony of these. Growing among the abundant *Gymnospermium* was plenty of *Corydalis ledebouriana* and the blue of *Fessia vwendenskyi*, with hefty tufts of glossy green *Arum korolkowii* fast emerging. There was a fine mountainous sweep beneath blue skies beyond, but the sun was heading towards the ridge and so we kept moving and continued to what should have been a large *Crocus korolkowii* display. Alas, this year they had flowered early and there was only a smattering of flowers remaining, though *Fessia vwendenskyi* was common with some fine clumps. What the botanical gods take on one hand they give back with another, and our next stop was the vivid scarlet of *Tulipa praestens* growing among more *Corydalis ledebouriana*. Nearby was a rather tatty *Iris rosenbachiana* too as well as a pristine *Fritillaria bucharica*. More of the latter were found with some good patches and this plant proved common (as did the tulips) along the roadsides as we descended. Also frequent were wonderful floriferous trees and shrubs of a wild almond; *Prunus bucharica*. Another attractive flowering shrub became increasingly common as we descended with slopes coloured rich cerise with flower-laden *Cercis griffithii*. Much of it seemed hard to reach but we did find a copse of this lovely shrub under which grew plentiful *Anemone tschernaewii* mixed with *A. petuliolosa* and on bare ground the fine foliage of *Bongardia chrysogonum* was topped with spindly yellow flowers. We could have stopped a dozen times for the many flowers but there was still the gnarly city traffic to battle through to reach our hotel for the next three nights.

Day I

Karatag Valley (5 April)

Grant and Paul left us for another tour, but John and I went to meet Chris and Veronica from their early morning arrival to maintain the numbers. After a few hours' sleep we were ready, on an overcast day, for a feast of flowers. Driving west for an hour we turned north and entered a scenic valley, stopping first for a few *Eremurus albertii* growing by the roadside. This was but an introduction for what was to come and as we progressed the sulphurous flowers of *Iris bucharica* became more and more plentiful, covering great swathes on either side of the valley. There were to be several stops for this remarkable display of abundance, the first was in a dramatic rock bowl formed of thick plates of strata below which the turf had many egg-yolk yellow irises. A gentle sweet scent drifted from these and among them grew *Bongardia chrysogonum* and *Geranuim transversale*. The overwhelming bounty of the irises had us in awe, with the display continuing for miles along the valley as we rumbled along the unmade track. Lunch was beside the river and then we took a walk along a narrower stretch of road that had cliffs and short slopes to our left. Brown dippers and blue whistling thrush were alongside the stream and the plants were represented by some good spikes of *Fritillaria bucharica*, a pretty pink *Parry sp*, and a large *Gagea sp*. The colour form of the iris had firmly shifted by this stage with all of them now a more distinct white and yellow bicolored form.

Turning around we drove back down stopping for more iris displays, tufts of fleshy-leaved *Pseudosedum longidentatum* and then of course for more fine iris displays as they were impossible to resist. The sun came out and that seemed to be that except as we neared the lower reaches of the valley a dark shape on a hillside turned out to be the striking *Eminium albertii* and we managed to find a way up to enjoy many perfect velvety deep purple spathes, each ringed by distinctive deeply divided leaves. Some had superb mountain backdrops and time was spent enjoying this unexpected finale.

The drive back into town was easier than yesterday with weekend traffic much lighter.



Eminium alberti



Iris rosenbachiana

Day 2 Romit (6 April)

Today we drove east past more slopes with cerise *Cercis griffithii* bushes, turning off onto an altogether bumpier road. We rumbled along this until we found a good clump of *Onosma baldschuanicum* along with *Pseudosedum longidentatum*, *Scorzonera sp.* and *Atraphaxis pyrifolia* bushes. It's fair to say the road had not been well maintained and travelling took longer than normal to reach the various spots, beginning with a old garden that had lots of *Iris vicaria*. This mingled with *Bongardia chrysogonum* on the adjacent slope and there was a sprinkling of *Anemone tschernaewii* and *Corydalis popovii*. As we drove the slopes that were dominated by emerging eremurus and then flowery trees and shrubs of wild almonds. A bit of a logistical hiccup (me forgetting exactly where we had to go) meant we drove a bit further than intended, but the flip side was we found some good *Tulipa praestens* and *Fritillaria bucharica* on a slope while our driver-guide team prepared lunch.

Retracing our steps we did get to where we needed to be and took a short walk along a river past superb venerable walnuts with wide gangly branches to an earthy slope that had a good number of the lovely *Iris rosenbachiana* in various colour forms. A few slender white *Corydalis nudicaulis* were also here, but the irises were the star turn. Satisfied we had found what we came for, we trundled back through the very typical Tajik village of tin-roofed houses and adobe walled compounds and then back down the rough road. Reaching smoother tarmac there was one last stop on a side track for an area with *Cercis griffithii* that also had red *Anemone bucharica* and a robust spike of *Phlomoides labiosa*.

Dinner was in a Turkish restaurant where we enjoyed pide and guvec.

Day 3 Varzob and to Penjikent (7 April)

Getting from one Central Asian country to the next is always a puzzle and for this trip we were to travel north and enter from the town of Penjikent (tomorrow). This took us via some excellent flower areas, and we began with another look at the pretty show of *Anemone tschernaewii* and *A. petuliolosa* that grew (and hybridised) beneath the glowing cerise canopy of *Cercis griffithii*. Next, we continued to a colony of *Tulipa praestans* growing among granite boulders and

scrub together with *Iris vicaria* and a generous sprinkle of *Fritillaria bucharica*. The red glow of tulips could be seen elsewhere as we drove, and a particularly splendid drift stopped us again. To reach them we had to climb up to an open slope past drifts of *Corydalis ledebouriana* mixed with various colour forms of *Fessia vwendenskyi*. The tulips we wonderful with the blue sky beyond and the fine weather also brought out the colours at our next stop for sheets of *Gagea sp.* and *Fessia vwendenskyi* peppered with *Corydalis ledebouriana* beside a rushing river with snowy mountains in either direction. The last flowers of *Crocus korolkowii* were here too but much better (and fresher) awaited a little higher up. Perched about the same river now we crossed the snow patches to an area where golden crocuses illuminated the bare turf. *Gymnospermium albertii* was plentiful here too and walking back we found some lovely specimens of *Iris rosenbachiana* too.

Lunch was with a stunning view of the Hissar Range and the deep valley we stood above and there was a view stop higher up where this met the Zeravshan. The road now plunged down the other side into the drier hills we had come through a few days ago, so there was only the odd view stop for the remarkable and varied scenery with multicoloured and buckled strata, deeply eroded hoodoos formed of coarse conglomerates and the white spine of the Hissar Range. There was a final stop for a stony slope with many bushes of *Prunus griffithii*, growing with yet another *Gagea sp* and on the coarse scree was *Corydalis aitchinsonii*, with long spurs that changed colour with age from yellow to rich orange creating a striking colouration. This all meant we were running late so opted to go directly to dinner (via the beer shop) for a tasty meal of plov.

Day 4 Penjikent & Samarkand (8 April)

A day of cultural contrast began with a visit to ancient Penjikent where the much-eroded remains of the city were scattered about a grassy site that had drifts of *Erodium cicutarium* and a second *Erodium* species, punctuated with feathery *Descurania orientalis*. One or two structures had been recreated in traditional materials of clay and straw too and the setting was dramatic set beneath the rugged coloured mountains. After a quick look around the museum we drove onto the border where our crossing was fairly smooth, and we were soon in Uzbekistan and meeting our guide Charos for the short drive to the city.



Corydalis aitchinsonii



Iris warleyensis

After a revitalising coffee/tea we went to lunch and then began our tour of the ancient city's main sites, beginning with Gul-i-Emir (Timur's mausoleum) with its distinctive fluted domes, before moving onto the grandeur of the Registan and its huge medrassas clad in blue tiles. Our final destination was the mausoleum complex of Shah-i-Zinda, which arguably has the finest tilework of all the sites as well as some spectacularly positioned blue-tiled domes.

Dinner was in a restaurant overlooking part of the Registan just in case we had not seen enough Timurid splendour.

Day 5 Taktakaraca Pass (9 April)

An excellent plant day with some standout species in the Hissar Range (that lays to the south of Samarkand and extends east to Tajikistan and west into the desert) with the road rising from the neat and extensive orchards and into rugged round bouldered granitic landscapes. We quickly found the first lovely *Iris warleyensis* on a gravelly bank, though they were a bit soggy and bashed about by the last night's rain. Some more were located a bit further along the road where we also saw the big pink daisies of *Tragopogon malika*. There were a good number of irises, but the best was a bit inaccessible on a high gravel slope. Luckily, we found many more in a variety of colour forms at a second location, with many still in bud and most very fresh, each beautiful lilac and purple flower edged with white. That was not all, we also turned up a solitary *Primula fedtschenkoana* and some *Corydalis maracandica* before leaving this productive place.

At lower elevations we started to see *Iris magnifica* and many flowering bushes of *Prunus bucharica* and shorter, denser *P. spinosissima*. On a lower slope we climbed up to a grassy slope with many hefty clumps of *Astragalus sieversianus* in flower. A few *Bellevalia turkestanica* were just hanging on too. Scouring the scrubby slopes, we found one big flower of vivid *Tulipa fosteriana* and then several more higher up, mostly in excellent condition. A fabulous tulip. Lunch was in a nearby restaurant and then we retraced our steps up to the pass and turned off on a side track. Not far in and two small snow patches had a good number of *Crocus korolkowii* together with a few *Colchicum kesselringianum* and *Eranthis longistipitata*. The latter species appeared again on a bank but this time with the distinctive form of *Corydalis ledebouriana* that is also found here as well as

various *Gagea* species. Walking down to an area of granite rocks and sculpted outcrops we found a wonderful garden of *Iris magnifica* with many fine spikes and some vigorous stands, whilst patches of *Corydalis maracandica* were also here and there. However, the latter species was in much greater quantity at our last stop where a gully held many fine tufts including some showing a delightful colour change from yellow to rosy-pink as they aged. *C. ledebouriana* was also here as was *Fritillaria bucharica* and then we found a colony of pretty *Primula fedtschenkoana* to round things off. Almost. We drove down and then at the base of the mountain made one last stop for an area of steppe with *Phlomoidea labiosa*, *Ixiolirion tataricum* and *Onosma dichroantha*.

Dinner was with a stunning view of Bibi Kanum mosque.

Day 6 Chimgan (10 April)

A very early start was needed to catch our 05.08 express train to Tashkent and the start of our next mountain range – the Tien Shan. As dawn broke we passed by the snowy line of the Pamir Alai, seeing it recede into the distance as we entered a broad break in the mountains and the fertile flat plain at the head of the Fergana Valley. The train was bang on time and we were met at the station by our guide Dima who took us to a nearby café for a coffee/tea boost before continuing. It took a while to clear the city and start driving through the countryside with the Chirchik River and associated towns to our left and orchards, then foothills to our right. Turning off we climbed into the green hills in places swathed in low scrub or walnuts and then higher up we could see the snowy tops of the mountains and below the ghostly frosting of mass flowering fruit trees. A side turn took us to a slope (which was being demolished by diggers on one side) but still had a good number of pretty *Fritillaria stenantha* on the other. These grew with the dense heads of *Pedicularis olgae* and bright yellow *Anemone petuliolosa* (the form here having a red reverse), whilst on the opposite side of the road was a good number of sulphurous *Iris tubergeniana*. This good start continued in the Chimgan Valley. However, we had to get over the shock of the sudden large-scale development that was taking place in the area. Back from the road there remained an abundance of spring flowers with the turf dressed in a near constant veneer of tiny *Gagea tenera*, punctuated with tufts of soft pink *Corydalis ledebouriana* and *Scilla puschkinoides*. Sadly,

Tulipa dubia





Eremurus lactiflorus

there was also plentiful litter from the seasons' picnickers but ignoring that we later found lovely drifts of *Crocus alatavicus*, a smattering of *Colchicum luteum*, some fine unfurling red-stemmed *Gymnospermium albertii* and then the joyful stars of *Tulipa biflora* (*bifloriformis*) in increasing abundance as we traversed the slope. They combined beautifully with the other flora and the Greater Chimgan mountain backdrop.

A good picnic lunch was enjoyed by the small river and afterwards we scrambled up the nearby slope to look at the many stunning red and yellow *Tulipa dubia* that grew there, all wide open in the sun. *Iris orchoides* was also found in bud. From here we walked back down through the building site and into the vehicle for the drive down to Charvak Reservoir. The undulating hills here support some interesting flora, and we found in one little gully fine stands of *Eremurus lactiflorus* and a fiery sprinkle of elegant *Tulipa greigii* to complete a solid plant day.

We arrived nice and early at our pleasant hotel situated above the reservoir with big views across the silhouetted hills.

Day 7 Pioneer Camp & Gulkan Canyon (11April)

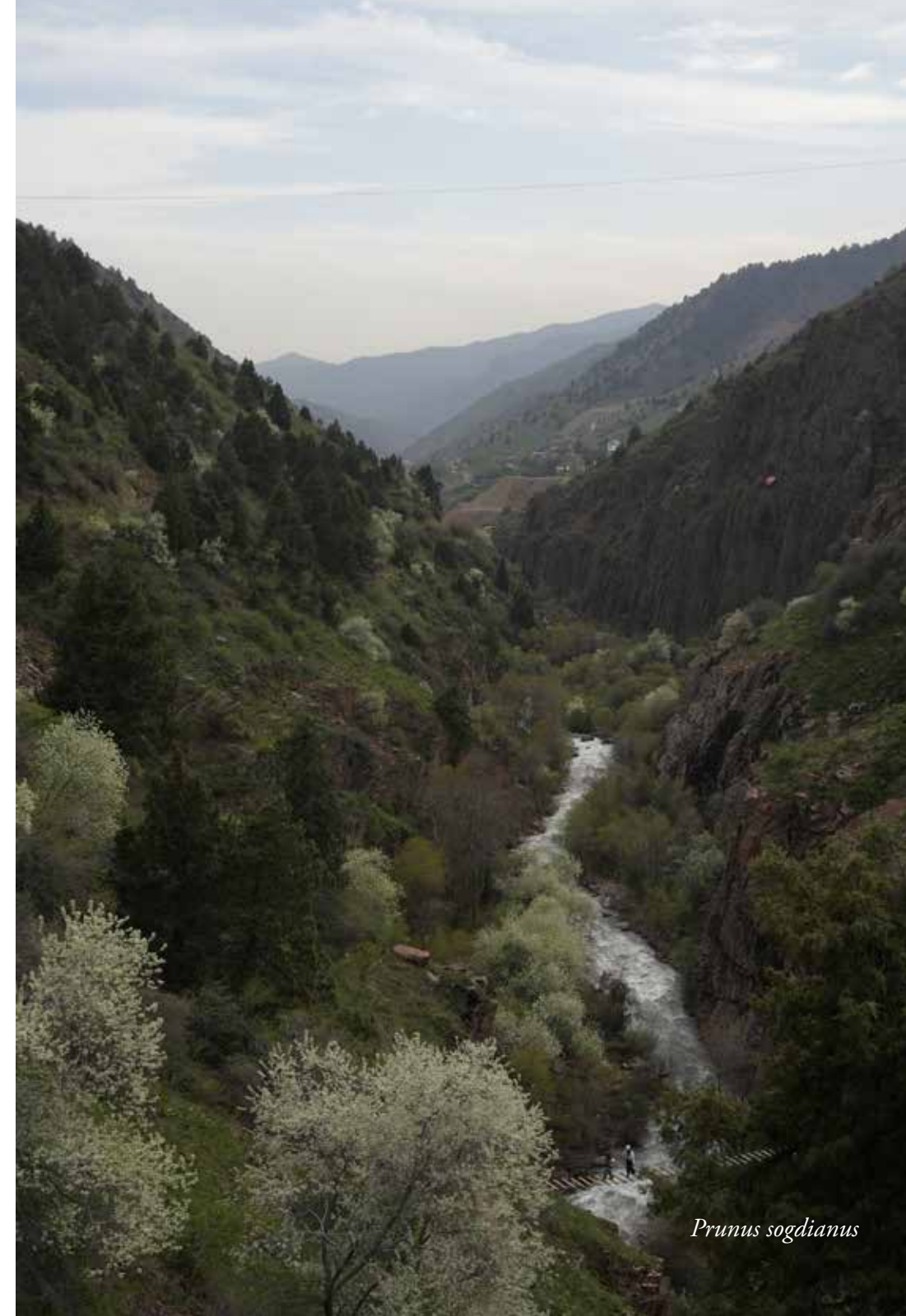
A warm blue-sky day which began with a drive alongside the Charvak reservoir, past the huge 138-metre dam and onto a pleasant summer camp tucked in the hills. The rough igneous slope was green with fresh grass, flowery bushes of *Atraphaxis pyrifolia* and stout golden spikes of *Phlomoides speciosa* as well as a few perfect vase-shaped *Tulipa greigii*. A good number of *Eremurus lactiflorus* could be seen higher up, glowing in the morning sun and once we had made up way up to the ridge, we could see a colony of many more. On the stonier slope below we saw *Iris orchoides* and the dark-flowered *Parrya gracillima*. Reaching the foxtail lilies, we sat for a while admiring the expansive view across the bluish waters, mountains and town below with the many waving creamy wands below us. There was the bonus of a single flowering spike of *Eremurus regelii* and many crinkled, rough leaves of *Rheum maximowiczii* on the other side of the hill. The way down was easier, and we saw many more *Iris orchoides* and *Phlomoides speciosa*. From here we drove back and then onto a different area nestled in Gulkam Canyon with the snowy Tien Shan at its head and slopes filled with flowering *Prunus sogdianus*. Tulips were plentiful here too, beginning with *Tulipa greigii*, then various forms

of *T. x tschimganica*. On the limestone screes we could also the blood red of *T. butkovii* (with its neater anthers and darker centre). However, these had to wait until after our picnic lunch beside the rushing river. Making our way along the slopes and rough track we found many more *T. x tschimganica* in a wide variety of colour forms together with *Arnebia tschimganica* and on the return some nice patches of *Viola rupestris*. The silver birches along the river were bursting into leaf and it was a very pleasant wander back past the many flowering trees. A final look at *T. butkovii* on a patch of scree completed the confusing tulip lesson for the day and we arrived back in good time to enjoy a relaxing sit on our balconies overlooking the lake.

Day 8 Yangiabad (12 April)

On a fine sunny morning we drove around the western tip of the Tien Shan to the small town of Yangiabad that lays (more or less) directly south of where we started in Chimgan, with 40 kilometres of mountains in between. We skirted Tashkent and made it to the tourist base nestled in the mountains by lunchtime. There was more than a hint of soviet era architecture and layout, but the setting was very pleasant with a river rushing by beneath and orange rock cliffs rising to distant snows. After checking in and having lunch we had the whole afternoon to explore the areas around the ski centre and began by walking up the narrow valley flanked by impressive cliffs. We had gone no distance at all when the first stunning red *Tulipa vvedenskyi* was seen near the bridge and several more superb specimens were found close by. A fine spike of *Fritillaria sewerzowii* followed and in areas where the snow had left only recently there was plenty of *Corydalis ledebouriana* and a fair smattering of *Scilla puschkinoides*. A set of wooden stairs led up to another fine display of big tulips and here we also saw a Lataste's Pit-viper. All along the valley trees of *Prunus sogdianus* were bursting with foamy masses of white flowers and the whole scene was delightful. We found little else that was different on the walk, but it was a very pleasant amble.

Dima and I ventured higher on a second walk passing areas of scree brimming with *Tulipa vvedenskyi* before reaching an impressive rocky gorge, at the end of which was a small waterfall. The tulips continued throughout along with the emerging leaves of *Allium karataviense* and fine stands of *Thermopsis*



Prunus sogdianus



Iris capnoides

alternifolius were common lower down. The evening meal was more than a bit reminiscent of school dinners, but there again the location was great, and it was nothing a cold beer couldn't improve.

Day 9 To Osh (13 April)

Just before breakfast we all went to see a colony of *Iris capnoides*, with some of the greenish yellow flowers pleasantly suffused with rose. There were no frills with the breakfast, but we needed to get away, though as it turned out we were the only passengers getting on and could have left half an hour later! At first the train rattled past rocky slopes and cliffs where we could see more *Tulipa vvedenskyi* in flower as well as tall *Prangos/Ferula* before passing through a 19-kilometre tunnel. Incredible slender pedestrian bridges were slung across some gorges too. The landscape changed not long after into one of hilly steppe and poplar-edged fields. Drifts of poppies could be seen on the steppe areas, but the vista was now more agricultural as we rumbled on to Andijon in the heart of the Fergana Valley.

Lunch was in the town and then we drove on to the border where the crossing was fairly smooth save for some slow passport control in the Uzbek side. We met Jalil and Slava and drove to our hotel, checked in, showered and then went for a good dinner in town.

Day 10 Batken (14 April)

Few would have relished the prospect of a six-hour drive to a location to see one species of plant. But then there are plants and there are plants. In truth the length of the journey was partly the product of our driver taking the wrong road and extensive muddy roadworks! The unintended route did take us through an area of hilly steppe where we could see *Eremurus cristatus* and *Onosma irritans* on the rocks along with the abundant *Crambe kotchyana*. We rumbled along the latter half of the journey on a much better faster road where we passed rocky hills dressed with blue patches of *Ixiolirion tataricum* and the upright clumps of *Vinca erecta*. The route was the only one that avoided all of the peculiar exclaves of Uzbekistan that lay entirely within Kyrgyzstan. Picking up a guide in Batken (who we didn't actually need) we drove out toward low limestone mountains and then met with a second local guide who made sure we took the correct road to the start of our walk.

Scanning the cliff with binoculars revealed hundreds of big orange flowers, but the cliff face looked an impregnable challenge. Undaunted, we set off, reaching the base of the limestone massif and picking up the winding route that made its way up the rock face via shelves of vegetation that included lots of a form of *Tulipa ferganica*. After half an hour we turned a corner and could see the wedge of green, a wedge of green that was populated with an extraordinary display of a botanical marvel; *Fritillaria eduardii*. These statuesque bulbs stood tall with rings of flared orange flowers, virtually all pristine and fresh. Among them grew the frothy masses of a pink *Prunus* species adding a charming foil to the display. All thoughts of the long drive to get here and the tough climb up were instantly banished. Gaining a bit more height most of us reached the base of the cliffs where the flowers were densest with magnificent stands, sweeping backdrops of limestone cliffs and the buzz of big grey (pollinating) bees. It would have been easy to stay longer, photographing each and every amazing group, but rumbles of thunder and spits of rain had us making our way down. We all made it safely to the vehicle and revelled in a truly memorable botanical experience that is hard to describe unless you have seen it.

The skies were moody and not long after we began the drive to Batken the rain came down...timing is everything. There was a short stop to photograph the giant *Fritillaria* gate that spanned the road to Aigul-Tash and then onto the hotel. Dinner was somewhat odd, but Slava's lemon-infused homemade hooch eased us through.

Day 11 Return to Osh (15 April)

The return journey to Osh was more leisurely and in sunshine rather than (partly) in rain. We first went out to an area of stony hills with coloured rock bands. Our target was the lovely cerise-flowered *Tulipa rosea*, but it took three attempts before we finally found two pristine flowers in the bleak terrain, a real jewel in the desert. Moving on we drove into flatter lands and among an area



Fritillaria eduardii



Eremurus alberti

of saxaul scrub stopped for vibrant colourful displays of scarlet *Papaver ocellatum* mingled with drifts of yellow-and-purple *Arnebia guttata*. There were stops too for a big drift of a peculiar form of *Ixiolrion tartaricum* on a grassy slope and for the upright shrublet *Vinca erecta* which grew with the honey-scented *Crambe kotchyana* and *Vicia subvillosa*. Three big griffon vultures took off close to the next town where we found a good restaurant for a lunch of samsa and chocolate cake.

Continuing through the landscape of neat orchards and green fields, the ghostly ridges of the snowy Pamir Alai floated alongside on a bed of haze to the south. In contrast there was dramatic multi-coloured strata to the north as we made reasonable progress on variable roads and erratic traffic. Our final stop was for earthy slopes with a thriving colony of *Eremurus albertii* with impressive spikes rising from the bare ground and populating the slope like immense pink candles with backlight. Among them grew a good number of much slenderer *E. cristatus* and crossing to the opposite slope we found also some superb *Phlomoides speciosa* in perfect flower. However, the prize was an especially fine group of three huge spikes of *Eremurus albertii* that grow with a sweeping background of contoured and crinkled slopes backed by the distant Pamir Alai mountains.

It was a short stretch to Osh, but as we neared the hotel water was flooding across the road from a burst water main...and sure enough when we arrived no water. The shower would have to wait.

Day 12 To Toktugol (16 April)

Overnight rain meant we woke to a murky morning, but at least the showers were now operational. Getting out of Osh on a wet morning (especially since the town authorities had dug up half of the streets) took a while and the first two hours were in rain. This did stop and we were able to look around an area of mature *Pistaccia vera* woodland, with abundant *Atraphaxis pyrifolia* in bountiful cream to rose fruit underneath. Pretty deep violet-pink *Allium barsczewskii* was also scattered about the slope and *Papaver ocellatum*, *Roemeria refracta* and *R. hybrida* were all found. Only a short distance further and there were also some good clumps of *Onosma dichroantha* among the abundant *Euphorbia ferganensis*.

Lunch was taken in a sheltered spot near some *Lonicera korolkowii* and then as

we drove on, we saw more and more impressive poppy displays, the best being right along the Uzbek Kyrgyz border, a place we could not stop! Not long after the landscape began to change becoming steeper and hilly as we entered dramatic geology of the Naryn River gorge. A colony of bright yellow *Glaucium fimbriigerum* grew on a shaley bank and the smaller *P. litwinowii* was also found here. Stands of *Eremurus fuscus* became increasing common and substantial, but we pushed on winding our way through the fine scenery, stopping next to look for irises. Alas, this year they were finished already but there was sweet-scented *Rosa ecae* and *R. kokanica* together with a colony of *Allium karataviense* nearby to compensate, the latter also home to the attractive *Chesneya ternata*. The road continued through the varied dry hills, many places coloured by the abundant and floriferous *Rosa ecae*. However, once we had gained a bit of height, these receded and we reached an area of tall, extensive screes where we stopped for an altogether better colony of *Allium karataviense* with many superb specimens in perfect flower. The nearby displays of *Eremurus fuscus* were also fresh and impressive continuing far up the scree slopes. The road climbed a pass and here we stopped to look for *Fritillaria sewersowii*, finding a few decent specimens, whilst on the opposite slope were several superb and very architectural *Ferula kuhistanica* in perfect condition.

It was a short drive down to the reflective Toktugol Reservoir with the snowy ramparts of the Tien Shan on the far side.

Day 13 Ala Bel (17 April)

A wonderful varied and spectacular journey day across the Tien Shan began with the glowing yellow-and-red cups of *Tulipa ferganica* (*toktogulica*) growing on steep banks above the lake, augmented with the more subtle pink of *Geranium transversale* and *Tragopogon marginifolia*. There was a second stop for more lovely tulips and then we drove on around the lake with superb views of the complex hills and banded strata on the opposite side. Sheets of a small yellow mustard carpeted the ground and added to the stunning landscapes as we went, accentuating by the dark coats of the many sheep and cows. Further along was a bank of *Glaucium elegans*, each pretty flower a botanical bull's-eye. Then there was the first of our trio of quite



Allium karataviense



Glaucium elegans

different irises with the clumps of *Iris alberti* and we stopped a couple of times for the various colour forms. This species continued for some way up, as far as our lunch stop in a local restaurant and beyond to where abundant bushes of *Prunus ulmifolius* were completely submerged in pink flowers beneath the dramatic spine of the mountains.

Searching the roadside banks carefully we then found a superb colony of *Iris graeberiana* growing with the robust stems of a white *Astragalus* sp and stemless yellow *Astragalus schanginianus*. There were many good iris flowers in a variety of colour forms. Honey was bought from a nearby vendor and from here we climbed up to the pass over rather bleak and flowerless terrain (there had been little snow this year) except for carpets of pale yellow *Chorispora macropoda*. On the other side things perked up and we stopped three times for increasingly impressive drifts of *Colchicum luteum* with magnificent snowy mountain backdrops. Further on was an abrupt (and interesting) switch from the latter species to white-and-purple *Colchicum kesselringianum*, with vast numbers dressing the ground like a sprinkling of hail. They continued like this for some way in incalculable quantity (extending all the way up to the pass). On the gravels beside the road also grew a pretty drift of pink *Chorispora bungeana*.

As we approached the pass there was a stop for the delightful *Iris kolpakowskianum* in a variety of colour forms (including white) and this was to be our final botanical stop and a good one to finish on. Climbing the sinuous road to the pass the were expansive views across the vastness of the Suusaymyr Plateau to the Tien Shan beyond and then on the other side we stopped to photograph the road winding down into a deep, steep gorge that continued for sixty-four kilometres (forty miles) to the flatter lands below, passing through a tremendous variety of deformed strata and cliffs.

It had been a long day, and we went straight to dinner on arrival in the bustling Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek.

Day 14 Chon Kemin (18 April)

The weather gods had other plans for us today and we had run out of luck with them. Until we had dodged bad weather and had endured little disruption to our botanical plans. However, today's cool cloudy weather with rain in the air did not bode well for a final tulip feast, but we still strode into the hills to search. There was plenty of *Tulipa ostrowskianum* in various red, orange or yellow colour forms spread across the grassy slopes, whilst on the more exposed earthy slopes a bright yellow form of *T. ferganica* grew. All were tightly closed, but looked elegant, nonetheless. We climbed up higher for more tulips and views of the moody Tien Shan. Across the slope beneath a cliff, we also found a flowering plant of *Eremurus zoeae* and both *Rindera tetraspis* and *Arnebia tschimganica* were seen too. Down again, we briefly lost Veronica but having regained her we drove a short distance for lunch above the river and then set out to look at *Tulipa tarda* growing amidst *Spiraea hypericifolia* scrub on a stony slope. A shrubby pink *Astragalus* and a pink *Parrya* sp also grew here. We just had to imagine the scene on a sunny day.

Roughly in the direction of Bishkek lays the Burana Tower and we stopped here on the way back to look around the site of old Balasagun, with only mounds remaining of the walls and castle, and a scattering of balbals (carved gravestones) surrounding the intricate brickwork of the tower. Traffic was slow getting into the city.

Our final dinner was a delicious plov followed by some farewell vodka back at the hotel.

Day 15 Flights (19 April)

An early flight meant a very early departure. After saying farewell to Debbie (who was n on a later flight and her long trip back to America) formalities were uneventful and the plane was on time for Istanbul connections after a thorough exploration of the botanical jewels Central Asia in spring.



Eremurus zoeae

Tulipa biflora (salsola)

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Minulus naiandinus