

A vast field of purple crocuses with yellow centers is in full bloom across a grassy, mountainous landscape. Patches of snow are visible on the hillsides in the background under a clear sky. The flowers are densely packed in the foreground and middle ground, creating a vibrant purple carpet.

WELCOME BACK  
SPRING

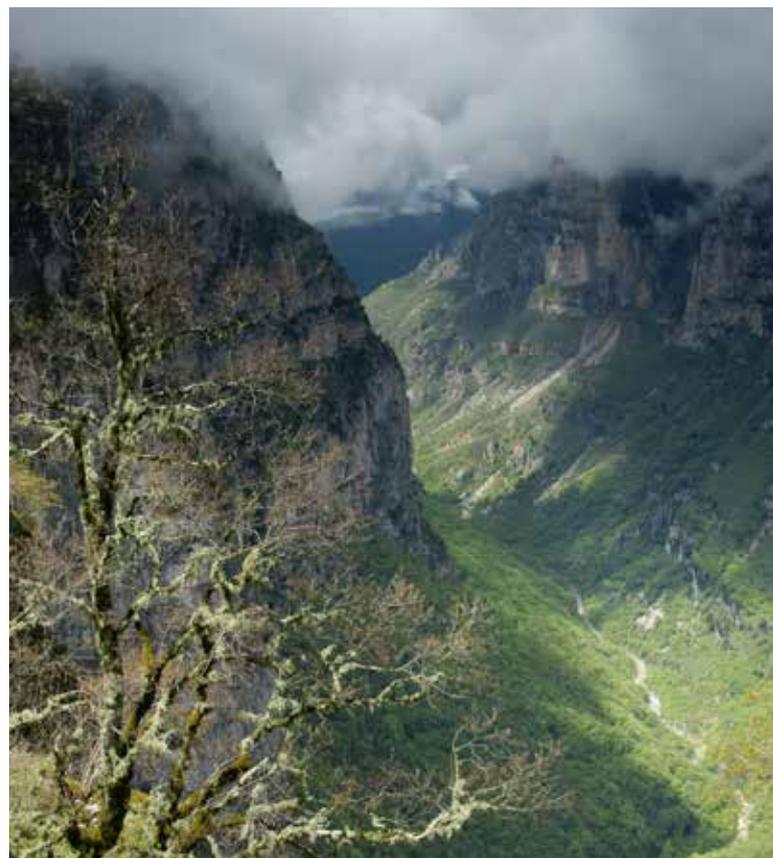
*Crocus sieberi* on Kalmakjalan



*Crocus pelistericus*

Finally a springtime with some real optimism in the air. And, where better to kick start that than one of our favourite areas, north-western Greece, which combines superb flowers with stunning landscapes and a smattering of fascinating history. As the snows slip away from the mountains, they reveal wondrous displays of *Crocus sieberi*, which in places such as Parnassos and Kalmakjalan number in their thousands. The latter also blends with drifts of dark violet *C. pelistericus*, whilst the woods below have *Corydalis solida*, tufts of endemic *Viola violistsii* and *Anemone blanda* in various shades from white to blue. On the open limestone are the dense heads of *Euphorbia myrsinites* are both purple and yellow forms of compact *Iris reichenbachiana*. It's doppelganger; *Iris pumila*, grows commonly in parts of Parnassos. A third crocus gilds the woodland edge and turf near the spectacularly positioned town of Metsovo; *Crocus veluchensis*, also fringing the waters of Aaos lake, where it mixes with the sulphurous-gold of *C. chrysanthus* to give an extra boost to the display. Among all of this are invariably lots of green *Helleborus cyclophyllus* too and a careful look in the woods will find the chestnut and green bells of *Fritillaria graeca* in various forms. Rarer, *F. epirotica* grows here too, but this sombre endemic beauty flowers a full month later.

Zaghoria is renowned for its' quaint stone villages and there can be few better preserved examples than Papigo. This delightful place is nestled in the hills beneath the towering ramparts of Mount Tymphi, itself the gateway to the plunging Vikos Gorge, claimed to be the deepest in the world. Certainly, looking down from the precipitous viewpoint one can well believe it. For once it is a world class view that is



Vikos Gorge



Spring meadow with Judas trees, crane's-bills and much

not blighted by constructions, power lines or any other human made distractions. Instead the view is of densely forested slopes and vertiginous cliffs with a blue river flowing between. On a side branch there is a precarious monastery, but nothing else. Pancake limestone rocks create an extraordinary contorted landscape, topped with gnarled oaks and harbouring fritillaries, endemic *Malcomia orsiniana* and lovely *Ramonda serbica*. However, the latter can be found in much greater quantity in the dappled shade of the plane tree woods that line the clear, blue waters of the Voudamatis river, which flow beneath a succession of elegant Ottoman bridges. The climate deserves a mention. This corner of Greece is wetter than some and the deep gorges served as reservoirs for relict populations of plants when glaciers came and went across Europe. This has only added to the richness of flora found here.

Hidden tracks lead to through the oaks, sprinkled with monkey orchids and *Melittis melissophyllum* to groves of stunning red *Paeonia peregrina*. Orchids abound in this region in spring and close to the border with Albania, in areas

coloured by the rich pink of big floriferous *Cercis siliquastrum* are beguiling mixtures of *Orchis pauciflora* and *O. quadripunctata* alongside the very distinct *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *helenae*. *Ophrys sphegodes* is among the most perplexing of orchids, exhibiting such an array of forms and subspecies, that some authors had divided them into many species. Elsewhere, near Delphi, below the diverse limestone massif of Parnassos, colonies of gold-rimmed *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *aesculapii* mingle freely with *O. spruneri*, each lip emboldened with blue speculums. Yet another bee orchid beauty can be found near the cultural and scenic highlight Meteora, a collection of monasteries (some still occupied) that cling to impressive domes conglomerate outcrops in a truly one-off world. Meadows nearby have tongue orchids and *Ophrys reinholdii*, a species with a striking white-speculum on its deep purple-red lip. This area also has plentiful pink *Crepis rubra* and the spring meadows are stunning, with drifts of *Geranium pyreniacum*, daisies, hound's tongues, various poppies and darker spires of *Leopoldia comosa* and the like. Asphodels are



*Fritillaria graeca*



*Pinguicula crystallina*



*Ophrys spruneri*



*Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *helenae*

*Ramonda serbica*





Meteora landscape



*Iris pumila*

abundant as they invariably are in the Mediterranean, with branched white *Asphodelus aestivus* and the gold of *Asphodeline lutea*, the latter prominent at ancient Delphi. A visit to this classic site is a must, with *Campanula topliana* tumbling from the hewn limestone blocks.

However, limestone is not the only substrate and as with other parts of the eastern Mediterranean, bands of serpentine protrude into the landscape, forming the highest peak (Mount Smolikas) and encouraging the evolution of numerous localised and endemic plants. It can be an unforgiving rock, but for those plants that have adapted, it offers a rich niche. Springs and seeps are plastered in dense mats of sticky-leaved *Pinguicula crystallina*, over which hover pale pink, long-spurred flowers creating what is surely one of the most charming little carnivores. At other times of year one finds isolated populations of lilies, the aforementioned *Fritillaria epirotica* and other specialists.

Usually, by May the nightingales have arrived and sitting in a restaurant, sipping wine and watching the late-afternoon light play across the soaring cliffs of Mount Tymphi, with these melodious songsters going full blast in the background is enchanting. And, did I mention my hotel serves the finest capuchinos in Greece?

*Paeonia peregrina*

