

XINJIANG TRIP REPORT

2024

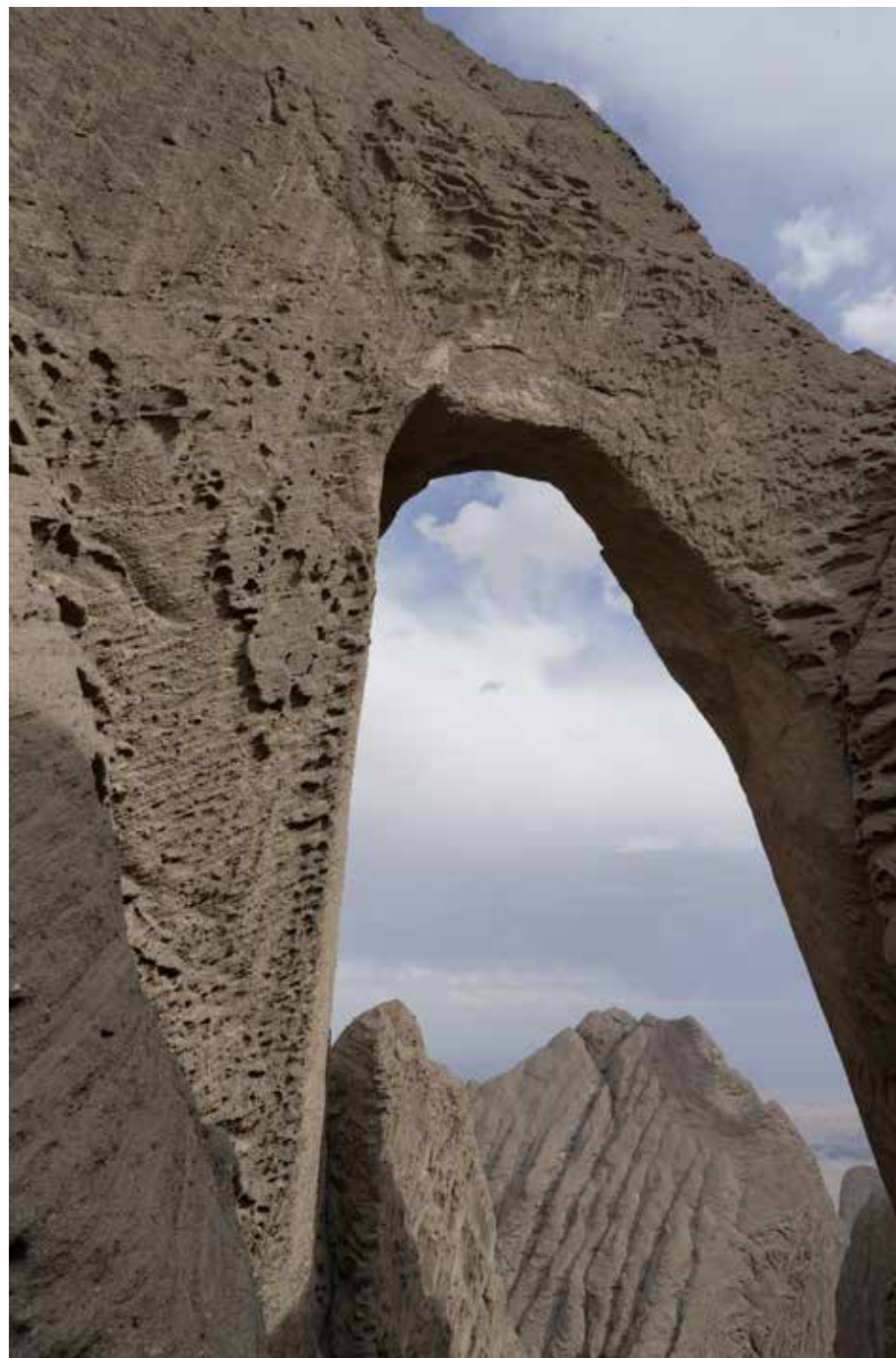
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The logo for viranatura tours features a stylized white tulip flower icon to the right of the text.

Clematis integrifolia

After an overnight in Beijing we flew west to fabled Kashgar, one of the old Silk Road names that resonates along this ancient trade route keeping company with the likes of Samarkand, Bukhara, Esfahan and Xi'an. It has changed a bit now of course and we arrived into its' new airport in the early afternoon after a six hour flight from Beijing that although cloudy for much of the way still hinted at the dramatic landscapes beneath with the jagged crests of the Tibetan Plateau and battered tracts of desert. The luggage turned up as promised and we met our driver/guide Adong and were off on the dusty Silk Road, driving to our comfy hotel near the (new) old town.

A quick settle in and we set out for the remarkable geological sight of Shipton's Arch, the world's highest natural rock arch. We eventually got on the correct road and drove through tracts of dry semi-desert hemmed in by ranks of crinkled tan and alabaster hills. Shortly before the turn off the conglomerate rocks were peppered with a rather bushy golden-yellow *Corydalis kashgarica* together with a few bushy *Convolvulus gortschakovii*. These continued as we drove up higher, stopping next for a population of attractive *Berberis* sp the somewhat spidery limbs densely-packed with leaves and yellow flowers. Reaching the upper car park the crumbly slopes all around were now filled with a different yellow-flowered shrub, the spiny *Caragana roborovskii* with large pea flowers. A short drive and then we were walking into a narrow canyon slowly moving up the stony track and negotiating a few narrow stairways. The first loose cushions of the lovely *Corydalis bucharica* appeared (the best far too high of course) and there was pretty white *Paroppyrum anemonoides* in damper places, forming little drifts here and there. Up ahead we caught our first views of the impressive rock arch, but these were nothing compared to when we had climbed the last few (breathless) flights of stairs. From here the arch sailed up and over a plunging and dramatic cut with the conglomerate riven and scalloped into peculiar shapes on either side. In the distance were more crumpled ridgelines and lower hills. It was a most spectacular sight and at that point the moody grey skies were improved with large patches of blue with sunlight on the rocks. The arch is at 2973 metres elevation), but exactly how tall the arch itself is depends on where it is measured i.e. what is the base and this varies from a modest 61 metres to 460 metres – quite a difference.



Shipton's Arch

Walking back down we also found *Rosa albertii*, a *Chorispora* sp and larger-leaved *Berberis sphaerocarpa* (?) as well as a colony of *Arnebia tibetana* by the roadside. Then it was back to base and straight out to eat at a local restaurant that served good noodle soup and barbequed lamb. The wine was surprisingly good.

Day 3 Torugart Pass

As is the way with research trips there are a few stumbling blocks along the way. We knew we needed to get permits to travel close to the border, but annoying arrived at the office five minutes after a large coach party had disembarked and queued up! An hour later we were on our way, retracing our steps from yesterday and then turning off. Here we hit the first police post and this meant a delay as we explained where and why we were going towards the Kyrgyz border and back. We were then on our way and after one more police registration we made the valley proper, climbing slowly through dry hills with large shrubs of *Rosa alberti* along the road. Green flushes were evident here and there, though all fenced off. However, one particular area held a superb colony of *Iris lactea* mingled with *Thermopsis turkestanica* and we couldn't resist and so climbed the low fence and went in. there were many superb clumps of various colour forms. The raw landscapes were rather tempered by the large scale construction going on and we made our way past rows of concrete support pillars before reaching higher areas with the first good clumps of *Iris loczyi*. A turn off took us away from the busy main road and we stopped for a late lunch and coffee with a fine view of the varicoloured mountains just a stone's-throw from the Kyrgyz border. The short-grazed turf around had many cushions of pretty *Androsace sericea*, together with *Oxytropis* af. *chionobia* and there were some good views as we explored a low ridge with many more *Androsace sericea* before moving on.

On the way down there was a good colony of *Iris loczyi* and then a stop for *Caragana roborovskii* also produced the bonus of a herd of Siberian Ibex. The light was softer now played on the furrowed hills and their diverse strata as we made our way back to Kashgar through plantations of rod-straight poplars. Dinner was in the recreated old town (Bukhara has nothing to fear) in a Uighur restaurant with good kebabs.



A clear morning meant we had grand views of the impressive spine of snow-clad peaks that spanned the horizon, though in fairness we didn't see this until we had managed to leave Kashgar. Sat-nav took us on a more scenic rural route via smaller villages and poplar lined avenues, but in due course we were on the Karakoram highway and soon enough confronted by the first of many magnificent views, with red and ochre ridges topped with a meringue of distant snow. Our first stop for this view also produced a big sprawling plant of *Capparis ovata* subsp. *herbacea*, green-fruited *Sarcozygium xanthoxylum*, diminutive *Echinops nanum* and an attractive, lax *Tamarisk*. We continued through increasingly stunning landscapes, resisting the urge to stop more (except at the annoying but necessary police checks), following the new road which included some sizeable civil engineering in the form of elevated roadways and tunnels, all the while edging closer to the many glaciers that snaked down from the towering ridges.

We reached Karakol, but decided to push on to Muztagata (one of the highest peaks in Xinjiang), where we were confronted with a colossal 7600-metre Muztagata massif encrusted in thick ice and glaciers. After a scenic lunch and coffee we walked across to a big viewpoint of the whole massif, which we had to ourselves, everyone opting to drive close to one of the glaciers. Several hefty red marmots called and played on the barren flats too. Making our way back we stopped for another glacier view and then as we crossed one wide span of bridge we noticed some superb clumps of *Iris loczyi*. A small road led down to where we could walk out and enjoy these pristine, flower-choked clumps with a fabulous mountain background. We had enjoyed the best of the light and clouds now dulled the landscape. That said the scenery was still magnificent with jaw-dropping deep valleys flanked by very steep slopes, dissected by glaciers.

It was still light by the time we wandered up to our restaurant through the maze of bling and tacky stalls.



Iris loczyi

We took a walk after breakfast, passing through the now quieter streets of the 'old' town where many school children were walking to school in their smart blue and white uniforms. It was hard to discern many genuine old parts of the town, such was the rebuild (which was ongoing), though the style was similar. Crossing a main road we did come to the attractive yellow-tiled mosque which was dated from the 16th century. It was closed when we arrived so we continued through the old town streets and tried to find the old British consulate, but roadworks thwarted our first attempt. Returning to the mosque, it was now open and we could have a look inside where the leafy interior had many shade-giving trees and pot plants (including pomegranates). The columns outside the main prayer hall were painted deep green and around these and inside were thick red carpets. It was a pleasant cool place. After taking the obligatory photo with brass camels we made our way back. A second attempt to find the consulate was made (this time with the car), but it was impossible to determine which was the building, which may actually have been demolished anyhow.

Now we had to drive onto Aksu, five hours across the vast expanse of the Taklamakan Desert. To our left were endless rows of dry, barren hills, at times richly-coloured, at others sombre and stark. Oasis towns appeared now and then and the saline flats were sometimes thickly populated with flowering tamarisk. The views became hazier and the desert faded into the horizon the view bisected by the train line and regular goods or passenger trains passing along the vital artery. The highway itself was in excellent shape and we made as good a progress as was possible with only one police checks and a break for coffee and lunch, arriving onto Aksu by late afternoon with plenty of time to settle into comfortable rooms.

Although this drier corner of China had its fascinations, the promise of greener pasture tomorrow was good news.



Day 6 Tomur Feng

Alas, sometimes things just don't quite work out. The highest mountain in the Tien Shan (at 7588 metres) promised much, but the reality was quite different. China has systematically turned Xinjinag into a theme park and the most assessible area involved a lengthy registration and then when we finally made it to the 'nature reserve' the gate was closed because it was raining a little and thus deemed dangerous! No choice but to abandon and drive back past stands of *Iris halophila*. Moving on to second area via the deep red stone valleys and then the vast stony flats, we did stop for an area with interesting plants that grew along an irrigation canal. Here were both shrubby *Clematis songarica* and scrambling *C. glauca*, together with pretty *Lactuca tartarica*, *Echinops nanum* and *Myrica squamosa*. Reaching our next entrance gate we were told come back in a year we are rebuilding the road! One shudders think what they will create.

We had coffee and lunch and then made our way painstakingly through endless poplar plantations and past villages where they were constructing long piles of compost for mushroom growing. Another stony flat led to a copse of old trees centred on a spring and there were partial views of the cloudy Tien Shan. Among the stones grew more *Clematis songarica* and then we found the attractive marbled leaves of *Glaucium squamigerum*.

By now the mountains had disappeared and we drove back to Aksu. Dinner was in a local muslim restaurant and was the tastiest we had had so far.

Day 7 To Kuqa

The weather had changed completely and we had a stunning view of the Tien Shan with a chain of snowy mountains stretching across the horizon, including the towering Tomur Feng and its substantial neighbours. We got a good view of this when we stopped on an overpass for a photo. Unfortunately, it took quite a while to get close to these mountains today, navigating through the poplar-lined roads and soon to be large cities under construction. Eventually, we made it to an interesting area with a complex geology of steeply inclined hills and sharp strata. Nestling in the crevices were flowery mounds of *Acantholimon alatavicum* and *Convolvulus tragacanthoides* with little white funnel flowers.



Rosularia turkenstanica



View from Kizil thousand buddha caves

Succulent-leaved *Rosularia turkestanica* was also flowering in the shelter of shrubs. In damper ground opposite grew *Iris halophila*. Making our way a bit higher we entered a river valley flanked by hills of varying geology. Here we stopped for coffee and lunch as a herd of zhos wandered along. The surrounding conglomerate cliffs had *Corydalis bucharica* and *Rosa albertii* was here too.

Leaving the area we stopped for more flowering domes of *Acantholimon alatavicum* with grand views of the Tien Shan with green areas and small stands of *Picea schrenkiana* (Tien Shan spruce) were visible near fresh snow. Driving back across the stony plain, there was the bonus of four black-tailed gazelle seen near the road. Our next location were the old buddha caves at Kizil, set on the slopes above a river with spectacular coloured hills beyond. The caves were interesting with some good frescoes remaining in some and our guide explained the significance of the various depictions. Afterwards we walked back down the

poplar shaded road and onto the river overlook were some flowery shrubs of *Tamarisk* sp. had stunning moody mountain backdrops and red *Sphaerophysa salsula* grew with a violet-flowered *Glycyrrhiza glabra*. scrambling all about was *Cionura acutum* with rounded heads of palest lilac-pink flowers.

We were ushered out as it was nearly closing time and from here made our way the last leg to Kuqa, stopping for pretty *Limonium kashgaricum* growing with very compact *Echinops nanum* and the peculiar *Anabasis truncata* with tufts of fleshy stunted stems. The route went via a striking tract of eroded red hills where a hailstorm had just passed through dressing the area in an icy frosting. Dinner in the hotel provided some fascination for the staff some of whom who had never seen Westerners before so we had a few photos taken before we ate accompanied with lots of smiles and giggles.

Our enforced delay (until the road opened tomorrow) meant more time was spent around Kuqa and as it turned out this was time well spent. Given the distances and minor route finding hiccups it took some time to reach where we wanted to go, following a small road into the desert and into increasingly dramatic scenery. Indeed the variation in geology today was mind-boggling. The road first passed through an area of pale soft sandy hills all deeply dissected by narrow valleys. We stopped at a bridge to appreciate the dramatic setting more and also found *Lycium ruthenica* and various yellow composites. Another stonier area had lots of fuzzy pink *Limonium kashgaricum* growing among the abundant *Zygophyllum* sp, *Ephedra* and the inflated fruits of *Sarcozygium xanthoxylum*. The saline nature of the ground and of so much of the ground in this region rather limits the diversity of plants. Going higher into better watered areas with different geology also greatly influences the flora. So that's what we did, finding a track that led along a spectacular valley lined the austere grey cliffs, fluted and eroded into columns at times so badly pock-marked and scarred to appear almost like ancient writing. The land became greener, the large thistle; *Cirsium* af. *semenovii* was found and we stopped for lunch at a good viewpoint looking over multi-coloured badlands, red hills and the snowy Tien Shan beyond. Close by John found the first good flower-studded cushions of *Acantholimon* af. *knorringianum* and when we walked to the smooth-contoured conglomerate hills after lunch we found many more superb specimens. Together with these were a few *Aster altaicus* and a diverse shrubbery with *Caragana roborovskii*, *Spiraea hypericifolia* and *Rosa albertii* and higher up the slope *Clematis alpina* subsp. *sibirica*. The conglomerate slopes had an attractive *Echinops tricholepis*, a fine woolly-headed *Cirsium* sp. and quite a few *Corydalis bucharica* too and as we walked down we also found the lemon-peel flowers of *Clematis tangutica* dangling from *Rosa albertii* and *Berberis* sp. The sun was now starting to push through illuminating the rich assortment of rocks, but this was taken to a new level at our next stop, looking across a spectacular overlook where geology seemed to have gone mad with all manner of striped and inclined strata laid out. The sun played across sections of this rich landscape as we watched, with sheer sombre cliffs behind us.



Acantholimon af. *knorringianum*

Driving back out the landscape was brightening, but we more or less drove, stopping only for a black-tailed gazelle and necessary pit stops, continuing to Kuqa and then finding the road to an ancient watchtower. Naturally, this being China the simple tower had been turned into something more major, but it was in truth set well among a fine landscape of complex hills and riven ridges, giving a hint of the remote and challenging Silk Road past when watching and warning for brigands was life or death. Dinner was in a local Uighur restaurant with some delicious local pie and other good things. Tomorrow we were to travel up and over first ridge of the Tien Shan and to greener lands.

Day 9 Borohoro Shan I

A journey of amazing and contrasting landscapes that was also filled with many flowers, beginning in the stark and dramatic chiselled desert hills and ending among tall forests of pencil spruce in the green Tien Shan. A long river valley wound its way up through the desert edge into increasingly green hills and having seen so much of this kind of scenery we did not stop until we saw *Acantholimon alatavicum* and *Glaucium squamigerum* flowering by the roadside. The snowy mountains beyond brought another photo stop, but then we carried on and upwards into the first pencil spruce belt, past alpine lakes and then through a tunnel to the other side. There had been very little in flower in the mountains at this point and it was obvious that there had been a dumping of late snow a couple of days ago. *Primula longiscapa* was appearing in increasing quantity and we found a side valley we could explore, finding this alongside *Geranium collinum*, *Ranunculus* sp., abundant *Caragana jubata* and the pretty yellow violet *Viola biflora* in the rock crevices. Fine tufts of another good chasmophyte were found nearby; *Paraquilegia caespitosa*, with *Lloydia serotina* beside it. In the sloping alpine turf above we could see many more primulas as well as lemon-yellow *Allium semenovii*, but the latter was more accessible on the other side of the stream. A lammergeir swept across the hills as John and I walked back for lunch.

Looking around a second more accessible slope, the turf was filled with *Viola kunawarensis*, *Pedicularis oederi* and further over lots of *Anemone narcissiflora*. The blackish-purple heads of *Macrotomia euchroma* poked out here and there and following a stream valley up there was *Primula matthioli*, *Trollius dzungaricus*

Tulipa altaica



and *Parrya lancifolia* along with some fine rich colour forms of *Primula longiscapa*. Heading down a drier patch had the delightful surprise of hundreds of *Tulipa altaica* with a good number still in flower. The tulip reappeared a little further down the road and then there was a stop for the pretty *Chorispora bungeana* on a shaley bank with the inflated inflorescence of *Saussurea involucrata*. The odd *Corydalis stricta* appeared on the stony cliff bases as we followed the river into the vast sweep of mountain fringed grasslands. This expanse continued for a while with views back towards the snowy ranges we had passed, turf speckled with tiny *Gentiana pseudoaquatica* and the dowdy bells of *Pulsatilla campanella*. Various herds of horses and sheep ranged across the grasslands and numerous yurt camps of varying tackiness popped up like mushrooms. Leaving a larger tourist town behind the road began to climb again and the slopes were immediately swathed in flowers with countless *Primula algida*, *Eritrichum villosum*, *Viola altaica* in yellow and purple forms and a sprinkling of dainty *Tulipa hetrophylla* all with a fine sweeping backdrop. We could have staying longer and stopped more often, but the sat-nav said there was a way to go yet.

The landscape now flipped a second time with large forests of pencil spruce (*Picea schrenkiana*) and a complex landscape of green valleys, rippling across the distant mountains. There were a few obligatory view stops before the road plunged downwards wending through mixed forests with lots of *Sorbus tianshanicus* all pleasantly green and an utter contrast to where we had begun the day. The only rub was reaching the junction the reason for the sat-nav time became apparent with a traffic snarl caused by construction and volume of cars and this added some extra time to our journey.

Day 10

Borohoro Shan II

Breakfast was a rather limited affair! Leaving the town *Iris lactea* lined part of the road and not long after were began to climb higher we stopped for fine clumps of *Scutellaria sieversii* and nearby grew loose mounds of *Thymus altaicus*. A side valley held *Polemonium caeruleum*, the dark purple-red flowers of *Cynoglossum officinale* and frothy umbels of *Anthriscus sylvestris* as red marmots whistled indignantly at our presence. The next slope had fine clumps of *Dracocephalum nutans* and the orange saucers of *Papaver croceum/tianshanicum* and it looked set to be a productive day with the road continuing into increasingly fine scenery. A bank was smothered in glowing *Glaucium squamigerum* and above this there was access to the steep slopes that were covered thickly in meadow plants where we found *Primula matthioli* and *Saxifraga sibirica* before we had lunch near a



Primula algida

rocky knoll with the odd *Tulipa altaica* and lots of violets. Tulips reappeared in great quantity a bit further on too with thick drifts on the edges of meadows.

The higher turf was smothered in lovely combinations of *Viola altaica*, *Ranunculus albertii*, *Eritrichium villosum* and *Primula algida* and we spent some time among a particularly dense area, with stunning mountains beyond and a wonderful carpet of flowers around us. It was quite mesmerising as tree pipits sang as we had such a lovely place to ourselves. The same can be said for our time on a high ridge when we turned off onto the dirt road just before the tunnel. The stony roadside slopes had white *Callianthemum alatavicum* and *Chorispora bungeana*, but heading across onto a ridge we found several gorgeous ice-blue *Trollius lilacinus*. Following the ridge there were stunning and pristine mountain views and a succession of good plants with *Paraquilegia anemonoides*, *Rhodiola gelida*, the peculiar little *Chrysosplenium nudicaule* and pretty mixed-colour patches of *Viola altaica*.

The road continued through the tunnel and then down past immense screes and we did not stop for a while, descended a long way along with the many other cars (the experience on the ridge had been a delightfully solitary time), passing tumbling masses of *Clematis tangutica* on the rocky banks. Eventually there was the time to stop for a good population of *Allium pallasii* growing with sulphurous *Patrinia sibirica* and a few yellow roses; *Rosa platyacantha*. However, the roses really came to the fore at our final stop for some of the many bushes that coloured the wide valley further one, each smothered in flowers. From here we carried on to Kuytun and rather spicy barbeque dinner.

Day 11 To Tacheng

A day of contrasting landscapes and plants, beginning with a drive across a flat steppe landscape which had little plant interest. Reaching an area with low hills and rocky outcrops we stopped where there was plentiful *Arnebia tibetana* and finding a way around the fence spent time looking at the lovely *Lagochilus diacanthophyllus*, the slender fimbriate *Dianthus kuschakewiczii*, *Cynanchum thesioides* and *Goniolimon speciosum* all growing in the dry sandy ground. Another stop was for showy pink *Oxytropis microphylla* and then we turned off a headed across another flat expanse, this time with mountains to our right and endless

Astragalus arkalyensis



drifts of a honey-scented white *Rudolf-kamelinia korolokowii*. Lunch was a bit breezy, standing amidst the vastness of what was essentially Kazakhstan, but a little further on and an area of undulating rocky hills produced a succession of good steppe plants, beginning with a lovely drift of *Hedysarum ferganense* beside the road and then a round mass of bright pink *Astragalus macropterus*, purple *Dracocephalum peregrinum*, followed by the superb ivory and rose heads of *Astragalus arkalyensis* that grew with bushes of *Caragana dasyphylla* buried in flowers, the slopes all around swathed in white and yellow crucifers that concealed the many *Phlomis hypoviridis*, *Nepeta annua* and more lovely *Lagochilus diacanthophyllus*. A few bends further on and it was the turn of ivory *Vicia costata*, the robust *Matthiola superba* in both greenish and plum-brown forms alongside bristly *Onosma setosa*. *Zygophyllum fabago* grew on rocky banks and then high above another roadside we saw mounds of *Acanthophyllum pungens*. Crossing over to see the latter there were many camouflaged ground crickets scuttling about among a varied steppe vegetation that included the unusual *Hypocoum lactiflorum*, *Convolvulus gortschakovii* and *Goniolimon speciosum*.

We now crossed a starker tract of stony steppe than followed the Kazakh border with views down and across to the large Alakol lake. In time the route greened considerably with brooding grey cloud capping the hills to our right. This area clearly received a lot more moisture, indeed enough to support lush tall meadows and rounding one bend we were confronted by majestic stands of *Dictamnus albus*. The area took a bit of ingenuity and determination to reach but it was the highlight of the day with superb tall plants of *Dictamnus* growing with pale yellow *Rosa spinosissima* and the slender spires of *Phlomis tuberosa*. There was also a large number of fruiting *Paeonia anomala* and the occasional purple spike of *Verbascum phoenicium*. It was fabulous finale and we saw one more amazing dense stand as we drove on, but the first area had been more than enough and from here we continued into a rather bland flat cultivated area that led to Tacheng.

Dinner was rather late thanks to a visit from the police, who were nonetheless polite and courteous.

Day 12 To Burqin

First thing, we tried to reach the hills close to Tacheng, taking various back roads and stopping for a good display of *Salvia deserta* growing with *Carduus nutans*,



Dictamnus albus

Hyoscyamus niger and yellow *Tragopogon capitatum*. Unfortunately there seemed to be no way of getting any higher so we turned around and drove east towards the Tarbagatay Shan. Eventually the monotonous flat lands gave way to the first hills and we stopped to look around a delightful meadow bursting with *Centaurea cyanus* mixed in with a tall mauve *Erysimum* (probably an escaped cultivar). Butterflies were abundant and looking closer we also found *Hedysarum songaricum*, plentiful *Allium pallasii* and the odd tattered spike of *Eremurus altaicus* all with the sweet scent of *Elaeagnus oxycarpa* wafting through the air. The latter turned up in far more impressive numbers once we had climbed into the rocky hills and we stopped for a superb slope with hundreds of spikes. Here and all across the hills was bursting with a rich assortment of plants, with tall *Ferula akitschikensis*, flowering shrubs of *Lonicera tartarica*, *Tanacetum* sp., *Erysimum canescens*, that we all but ignored the stately spikes of *Dictamnus albus*. The fruiting stems of *Paeonia anomala* were also common.

The road levelled and we passed through meadowlands packed with *Polygonum undulatum* and then reached a preserved meadow with many more flowers in. After coffee and lunch we took a tour around seeing many glowing orange *Trollius altaicus* mixed with *Campanula stevenii*, the elegant pink spires of *Pedicularis elata*, *Potentilla recta*, *Myosotis asiatica*, *Erysimum hieracifolia* and the ubiquitous, gangly stems of *Polygonum undulatum*. Photos were taken by the locals as we were the only tourists they had seen and indeed we had seen virtually no other Westerner during our entire time in Xingjiang.

Following the road on it passed more meadows with the razor-wired border fence of the China-Kazakh border to our left for a time. Winding our way up higher we started to see some *Paeonia anomala* still in flower and a side valley led up into an area of *Rosa beggeriana* scrub and we found a succession of peonies, though many had finished some were decent. The crisp white flowers of *Anemone sylvestris* became increasingly numerous as we walked higher and there was a scattering of yellow *Iris bloudowii*, both *Pedicularis fetisowii* and the more impressive *P. achilleifolia*, blue *Lindelofia* sp. and the coiled inflorescences of *L. stylosa*. To top it all high on the slope we found to a superb big clump of flowering *Paeonia anomala*. Next to this were the



fruiting stems of *Fritillaria tortifolia*, but despite searching widely no flowering plants could be found. Large clumps of *Orostachys thyrsiflora* encrusted rock crevices as the song of rosefinches drifted across the valley. Just beyond we stopped briefly for a stunning patch of *Papaver croceum* (yellow form) with a few flowering *Primula veris* subsp. *macrocalyx* on the bank, somewhat unexpectedly the poppies were mixed with *Lilium martagon* in the open rocky ground.

It had been a flower-packed middle part of the day but now as is the way with Xinjiang we had to move and the road climbed higher to a bleak undulating plain with large snow patches which ran right alongside the border fence, which we followed for some distance, passing occasional herds of livestock with cows and camels. A tedious police check ate up some precious time as we still had a long way to go, but luckily there was not a plant worth stopping for as we passed through uninspiring stony steppe with only the odd drift of *Iris halophila*. Closer to our destination we did see a few sleek black-tailed gazelle in the soft evening light. One more annoying police check and we reached the hotel in the new build city of Burqin.

Day 13 Kanas

It was hard to imagine the riches that would unfold during the day as we drove across a flat sandy plain with dunes and camels wandering about, but after half an hour the land began to rise and became rockier and greener. Stands of birch and conifers could be seen and rose covered slopes flashed past as we drove. Exploring these areas seemed a good idea so we turned off the main road and took a smaller road back, but didn't get far. The abundant *Campanula stevenii* caught our eye and looking closer there was a superb flower-rich meadow brimming with wonderful upright clumps of *Clematis integrifolia*, each topped by large blue flowers. Plenty more was in with these including *Scutellaria supina* attended by huge bumblebees, the rich-purple spires of *Verbascum phoeniceum*, airy *Polygonum undulatum*, *Erysimum hieracifolium*, golden *Senecio nemorensis* and pink *Rosa acicularis*. it was hard to leave such a lovely place but we had to carry on. The road descended into drier habitat with some big patches of *Scutellaria sieversii*, many roses and *Hypericum scabrum*, but was not as rich so instead we began our journey towards Kanas, a place we would never actually reach. The landscape became much greener with extensive larch forests, mixed



Corydalis nobilis

with various other conifers and intervening grasslands coloured by buttercups and forget-me-nots. We stopped beside a slope with billowing masses of *Corydalis nobilis*. In among these handsome plants was *Geranium pseudosibiricum* and a white form of *Viola montana*, then tracking around the slope we found a large snow patch fringed by *Gymnospermium altaicum* and various *Gagea*. Everything got more exciting when John shouted “*Erythronium*” and we spent time photographing these gorgeous plants with pink reflexed tepals and marbled leaves. The view up the gully was of a slope blanketed in *Corydalis nobilis* and this plant proved to be common throughout the area.

Moving on a short way we eyed another snow patch in an area of scree. Lunch was first with a fine view across the landscape and snow covered ridges beyond. Up around the snow patch there was plenty more *Gymnospermium altaicum* together with some fresh *Paeonia anomala*, big tufts of *Viola montana* and the bonus of some fresh *Pulsatilla turczanovii* with their silken bracts and soft lavender flowers. Moving on there was a wonderful flowery slope with abundant deep mauve (dwarf forms of) *Dracocephalum nutans* mingled with dandelions, forget-me-nots and then a bank with many creamy *Papaver nudicaule*. Looking at the nearby slope we found many more *Erythronium sibiricum* (mainly in seed) under the larch and we wondered what might have been. We need not have worried, rounding a bend there were some pristine clumps of *Erythronium sibiricum* and in the woods just above drifts of them gave a candy-frosting to the exposed tree roots they grew among.

We were still some way from the park entrance and at the rate plants were appearing we were never going to get there. Descending a little, the stream valley was carpeted in *Caltha palustris* and off to our right the slopes were swathed in hundreds of cerise *Paeonia anomala*. Finding a place to stop, another beauty appeared; *Aquilegia sibirica* with blue flowers and elegant curled spurs. Setting off into the trees we reached the steep peony slopes and though many had been damaged by weather the display was nonetheless impressive and some fresh clumps were found. A fine finale and we began our journey back from here driving out and then taking a side road to try and reach some birch woods, but this didn't work out so we returned to base after an excellent field day.

Day 14 Habahe and to Fuyun

The morning drive west went through sandy habitats and these proved surprisingly rich with some handsome steppe plants including fine domes of pink *Convolvulus gortschakovii*, close to which was *Astragalus flexus* and wiry shrubs of *Calligonum rubicundum* with ridged



Erythronium sibiricum



Eremurus altaicus

red fruits. Hefty and handsome *Astragalus vulpinus* was next in deep sand with *Scutellaria sieversii*, a dainty *Allium sp* and the mauve spikes of *Orobanche coerulescens*. Even larger clumps of the *Astragalus vulpinus* followed and then we stopped for flowery bushes of *Halimodendron halodendron*. Ducking under the wires we also got close to the rather modest *Eremurus inderiensis*. The plan had been to look around a large area of protected silver birch woodland but we cut this short as not only was the area overdeveloped and disneyfied (as usual) but there were few flowers of interest. Fortunately, our routing meant we took a back road towards Kanas and as soon as we reached rocky hills things improved no end with first some lovely *Allium caeruleum* on a rocky slope with *Cynoglossum viride*, *Phlomis*

tuberosa and various flowering shrubs. Lunch was nearby and then we climbed to the pass and spent a good while exploring some excellent flower-filled slopes, fringed with tall shady birch woods. Big drifts of *Hypericum lydiu*m and *H. scabrum* stretched across the upper slopes draped in silky *Stipa* plumes, whilst at our level we found the first of many tall *Delphinium pseudocyananthum*. Floriferous bushes of *Lonicera tartarica* and various roses such as pink *Rosa acicularis*, pale yellow *R. beggeriana* and white *R. fedtschenkoana* were throughout as were the small rounded shrubs of *Spiraea pilosa*. The latter often sprouted from rocks and were in good condition near a fine stand of *Eremurus altaicus* with a superb blue sky and cirrus cloud backdrop. It was a lovely spot with the bonus of a nightjar which was flushed as we arrived and as we departed there was a very blue colony of *Allium caeruleum* before we then we descended to a shady birch copse crossed the stream and walked back up.

As ever with Xinjiang there was now some travelling to get us to our next centre and we set off in mid-afternoon for the town of Fuyun close to Mongolia. The many herds of Bactrian camels provided the passing interest as we traversed a large tract of featureless steppe.

Day 15 Kektouhai

Our destination was fairly close and we set off into sunny hills. The road went through extensive heavy overgrazed grasslands and hills with unbelievable numbers of livestock that were systematically razing the vegetation to ground level. It seemed improbable we would find good plants. After a short delay arranging tickets to drive further we entered the 'geopark' we took a side road towards the ski centre, passing alongside a pleasant river lined with silver birches and various conifers. Fine clumps of *Paeonia intermedia* grew in the shade of the woods and we managed to reach some good plants, with *Clematis alpina* subsp. *sibirica* dangling from the branches above. Climbing ever higher we passed slopes liberally dressed in *Scutellaria supina* and then reached the ski centre at 2100 metres, where the cable car appeared to be running.

After lunch, they allowed us to take the lift all the way up to 3100 metres where we had a grand sweeping view of the landscape as far as the snow streaked mountains of Mongolia. After a few photos we went down to the next level and found our way to an area of alpine turf that was peppered with all sorts of lovely plants. *Callianthemum angustifolium* was followed by both *Primula algida* and a solitary *P. nivalis*, then the silken *Pulsatilla turczanovii*, deep blue *Dracocephalum grandiflorum* and the ultimate intense blue of *Gentiana verna* subsp. *pontica* (a plant I knew well from Turkiye). Drifts of *Eritrichium villosum* (blue form) coloured the turf in places and both yellow and purple forms of *Viola altaica* were ever present. We spent time finding good plants in the turf and taking in the splendid landscape, the rocky hills punctuated by thick stands of larch all with the song of tree pipits in the air.

Driving back down we stopped for a good stands of *Rheum wittrockii* and then took a drive around the geopark stopping for good views of the trees, river and granite formations. That seemed to be that until we found a wonderful colony of hundreds of *Dactylorhiza hatagirea* growing in a damp meadows with the wispy wands of *Plantago media* and *Polygonum viviparum*. A delightful combination to finish the trip.

Day 16 To Urumqi

There seemed little prospect of finding much of interest in the dry hills and Adong also had a lot to arrange in Urumqi so we left late morning and drove across the dull steppe landscape to the big city. The hotel was comfortable (as ever in Xinjiang) and we had an excellent final meal



Dactylorhiza hatagirea



Dracocephalum nutans & *Myosotis asiatica*

in a local restaurant, including some delicious duck and after a few tries some decent wine.

Day 18 Return flights (9 June)

Frances and Joan were flying back to England and John and I were continuing with Adong to Dali in Yunnan for our second tour in a very different part of China. Luckily, all of our flights left at about the same time so it was simple enough to make our way to the airport and check in. Xinjiang had been an eye-opener, a vast land with some magnificent landscapes, but all too often the best spots had been wrecked by China's clumsy approach to mass domestic tourism. There are good plants here, but the controlling nature of the government meant that travel was much slower than other parts of the country, making the distances between good plant sites onerous at times. Whether this changes in the future, we can but hope.



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Rheum nobile