

Spring Flowers of Corsica

A Greentours Itinerary for the
Friends of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh

18th - 25th April 2020 8 Days



Crocus corsicus (Tristan Lafranchis)

Day 1 To Corsica and Ajaccio

We start by flying from Edinburgh to Nice before making a local connection there on to Ajaccio with Air Corsica. Full flight details are yet to be confirmed. Ajaccio is the island's capital and was the birthplace of Napoleon. There is a busy but picturesque harbour and the narrow streets through the pastel shaded rather higgledy-piggledy houses are a delight. We'll arrive in the afternoon and head for our hotel just along the coast on the peninsula north of the town.

Day 2 Pointe de la Parata and the West Coast

Square stone Genoese towers top the many promontories that jut out from the rather complicated geomorphology of the West Coast of Corsica. One such promontory ends in the Pointe de la Pineta, just 12km west of Ajaccio. Here *Narcissus tazetta* decorates rocky crevices almost to the high tide line whilst above brick pink porphyry cliffs sweep down to the sea draped with delicate blue-flowered *Convolvulus sicula*. The Pointe points to the Iles Sanguinaires, a line of four islands that form an idyllic scene stretching out into the Golfe d' Ajaccio. Audouin's Gulls fly overhead and we'll see Hoopoes and Crested Larks at the back of beaches where dunes have Dense-flowered Orchid, the stock *Matthiola tricuspidata* and lovely *Silene sericea*. On nearby rocks is the endemic *Limonium articulatum*. *Cytinus ruber* parasitizes *Cistus monspelliensis* (and other nice flora here includes Small-flowered Catchfly, Weasel's-snout, Fringed Rue, *Stachys glutinosa*, *Euphorbia pithyusa*, pretty *Vicia benghalensis* and *Succowia balearica* with its distinctive hedgehog-like fruits. Green Underside Blue, Clouded Yellow and the endemic Corsican Dappled White will already be on the wing and we'll also see the locally common Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard and hopefully the Moorish Gecko.

We'll see many orchids on this tour and we'll start here with a fine meadow full of *Orchis morio*, *Orchis papilionacea* and two Tongue Orchids, *Serapias lingua* and *Serapias neglecta*. We'll find the tiny light blue stars of *Sedum coeruleum* above fleshy green leaves tinged red. Another tiny, unusual and beautiful plant is *Linaria flava sardoa*, a small yellow flax endemic to Corsica and Sardinia, and we'll also see *Linaria pelisseriana*, an unusual red form of *Fumaria capreolata*, and *Jasione echinata*, a Sheep's-bit only very recently added to the flora of Corsica.



Pointe de la Parata (Rob Hauer)

Later in the morning we'll head to the Couvent Saint Francois near Oletta where we'll spend an hour or two enjoying the excellent botanical garden there before taking our picnic under the shadey boughs. The gardens of the convent were voted the favourite garden on Corsica in 2013 in a competition run by the France 2 television channel (Le Jardin Préféré des Français 2013). The convent has magnificent views over the surrounding mountains. Surrounding a 13th century convent which has been lovingly restored by its owner the artist and painter Candida Romero the gardens have been designed sympathetically with the convents religious and cultural heritage. The gardens were designed by Candida in partnership with garden designer Armand de Foucault. The gardens have an Italian influence in keeping with the influence of past invaders of the island of Corsica. There is a Renaissance Garden with a fountain, a Monk's Garden and a romantic Garden of Ruins.

In the afternoon we'll head uphill through the lovely now leafless beech woods with *Cyclamen repandum* becoming common as we go. Roadsides are covered in mats of rosy *Saponaria ocymoides*, blue *Anemone apennina* and magenta *Gladiolus segetum*, as we head into the mountains northeast of Ajaccio. It is just an hour's drive from Ajaccio to Corte and the Restonica Gorge, but we are sure to stop many times! *Orchis papilionacea* is frequent as well as *Orchis lactea*, whilst the drifts of *Asphodelus cerasiferus* are something to behold. We'll spend two of the next three days exploring the magnificent gorges that descend from the flanks of Monte Cinto, an impressive peak, and Corsica's highest mountain.



Erodium corsicum (Tristan Lafrançais)

Days 3 & 5 Restonica Gorge and the Col de Verghio

Fabulous mounds of *Saxifraga cervicornis* adorn shaded rocks close to our hotel in the Gorges du Restonica. Tumbling down through the scenic gorge is a lovely river whose waters are one minute cascading white through giant boulders, the next lucid pools of pale turquoise, the pebbly riverbed giving hints of jade, pink and fawn; a most beautiful sight. With the river on one side of the track and carmine and white colour forms of *Cyclamen repandum* on the other, our cameras will be busy! Bulbous *Brimeura fastigata* flowers in the valley with *Allium triquetrum* and on rocks we may find *Erica terminalis* with the odd flower. *Helleborus argutifolius* has pellucid lime-green petals that seem to shine amongst the dark green rather spikey-looking foliage. Found only in Corsica and Sardinia this hellebore however occurs at all levels on the island. The cries of Yellow-billed Cough echo across the gorge walls and we'll likely see Black Redstart and Crag Martins. Giant Orchid, Lady Orchid and Man Orchid bloom on the shales at Favalello and with luck we can see the Pygmy Lizard, *Algyroides fitzingeri* here. Woodlarks sing about us as we look at some fine rockplants such as *Teesdalia coronopifolia* and the endemics *Coincya monensis recurvata* and *Barbarea rupicola*.

A little to the north we'll find lovely *Saxifraga corsica* hanging from the sheer cliffs of the Scala di Santa Regina. Above the gorge Nightingales sing in the gardens of the little village. This is Calacuccia, set by a beautiful deep-blue man-made lake in a shallow valley below the pinnacles of the northern slopes of Monte Cinto. We'll see the endemic Corsican Swallowtail here. Small blue *Lupinus angustifolius* and the pink-flushed cream flowers of *Stachys corsica* decorate the neglected stoney terraces around the village with cerise *Orchis papilionacea*. *Pancratium illyricum*, unlike its more widespread beach-flowering cousin, can be found growing far up into the mountains, its heads of striking white flowers an impressive sight. We'll keep a watchful eye out for Lammergeier and Golden Eagle in the skies above.

Amongst dwarf junipers by the roadside on the Col di Verghio we'll find the little green-centred yellow stars of *Gagea fragifera* - there are no less than six species of *Gageas* blooming in these hills during the time of our tour. The lovely lilac *Crocus corsicus*, the outside of the flowers flushed satiny-yellow and etched with deep purple lines, forms drifts on the slopes close to the road and hidden amongst clumps of *Berberis* and *Daphne* we'll find perfect little *Viola biflora*. Descending we'll pass through an area of pines where we'll stop to look for the endemic Corsican Nuthatch, the only species of nuthatch on the island. Down the valleys are gorgeous forests of beech and freshly-leaved chestnuts in which we'll find Firecrests, Serins and more Citril Finches. Stately spikes of *Orchis provincialis* will just be coming into bloom with the local form of *Orchis mascula (olbiensis)*, and abundant blue anemones mix with some beautiful forms of *Corydalis pumila*. Among fresh green birch woods we'll look for intense purple *Romulea requienii*. Descending further into gorges we'll see *Armeria leucocephala* and Burnt Candytuft, a species found for the first time in Corsica by our groups here.

We'll also take time out with a local guide to enjoy some of the wonderful hill villages of Corte and visit some of the artisans keeping traditional local crafts alive.

Day 4

The Calvi Coast: Parc de Saleccia & Jardin Botanique Fruitier

Today we'll head to the Calvi area on the northern coast where we'll visit the outstanding Parc de Saleccia. This small garden is dedicated to the natural world around it and as you walk through the beautifully landscaped grounds, under olives, Cupressus and oleander, you'll smell and see the beat of the Mediterranean around with you. Aromatic maquis has been tamed into something of great beauty, herbs and flowers arranged in what in April will be a colourful show. There are also excellent collections from other areas with a Mediterranean climate such as South Africa, Australia and California, and the seven hectares of plants are well labelled with a lot of information about the plants and growing them.

In the afternoon we'll visit the Jardin Botanique Fruitier in Avapessa. This garden has a collection of more than forty kinds of edible fruits, with many rare varieties of each from all parts of the world, spread throughout a three hectare garden. The garden is the work of Robert Kran a passionate and dedicated fruit grower who has amassed this amazing collection over years of study and travel.

Days 6 & 7

Bonifacio & the Southern limestone

Heading south we'll drop down to the coast, on the way encountering a dense maquis of *Cytisus triflorus* where *Cytinus hypocistus*'s yellow flowers glow from red bracts amongst *Cistus salvifolius* and *Cistus albidus*. The regional endemic Marmora's Warbler is frequent in this habitat alongside more widespread species such as Stonechat and Sardinian Warbler. Cirl Bunting and Blue Rock Thrushes are also frequent. *Cyclamen repandum* is a frequent sight in shaded locations; it is a very widespread plant on Corsica. Pretty *Erodium corsicum* cascades over rocks close to the sea where we'll also find colourful displays of *Matthiola tricuspidata* and *Anchusa crispa*.

Limestone areas near Bonifacio host endemic *Morisia monanthos* and orchids. There's bee orchids such as *Ophrys corsica*, *Ophrys marmorata* and *Ophrys panormitana praecox*. There's also the gorgeous *Ophrys morisii* and *Ophrys incubacea* amongst plenty of lovely *Bellardia trixago*. The site is rich in rather special plants such as *Simethis mattiazii* (Kerry Lily), *Ranunculus ophioglossifolius* (Adder's Tongue Spearwort), *Baldellia ranunculoides* (Lesser Water-plantain), *Isoetes histrix* (Mediterranean Quillwort), *Ranunculus revelieri* (endemic to Corsica and Sardinia) and *Erica scoparia*.

Unlike much of the Mediterranean a good percentage of Corsica's shorelines are relatively unspoilt. Impressive hummocks of *Astragalus massiliensis* (Marseille Milkvetch) and *Juniperus phoenicea* (Phoenician Juniper) the fascinating

limestone habitats just along the coast east from Bonifacio. *Allium roseum* (Rosy Garlic) of the endemic *insulare* subspecies is common here and is joined by more endemics such as *Limonium obtusifolium* and beautiful *Erodium corsicum*. Also flowering here is *Morisia monanthos*, the pink-flowered *rubriflora* subspecies of Kidney Vetch, and blooming rock crevices both *Narcissus tazetta* and *Romulea requienii*.

The lagoon there attracts various waterbirds and both Small Red-eyed Damsel fly and the Island Bluetail are found around its shoreline. Scarlet Darters are also common and we can see Emperor Dragonflies and Keeled Skimmers too. The rare Tyrrhenian Tree Frog is found in such spots along with the unusual Kerry Lily and several broomrapes, including beautiful richly-coloured *Orobanche sanguinea*, (Bloody Broomrape) which parasitises *Lotus cytisoides*. Blooming in the old town of Bonifaccio is the impressive *Ornithogalum arabicum*. There is a richness of quantity and colour to the displays of *Serapias* hardly matched elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Large-flowered *Serapias cordigera* is joined by *Serapias parviflora* and huge numbers of *Serapias lingua*. A perhaps surprising habitat to find a 'citril finch' in but the Corsican Finch is quite catholic in its choice of habitat and can be found at all altitudes!

We'll visit U Giardinu de l'Isali, a Botanic garden on the southeastern coast above Bonifacio famous for having the largest collection open air collection of palms in France.

There is plenty of evidence of Bonifacio's long maritime history to be found in and near the town and we'll spend an afternoon exploring various sites including the famed citadel in the company of a local guide

Day 8 Departure

We'll have plenty of time for a little more local exploration as our return flight departs from the airport just outside Bonifacio (or Ajaccio if the connections from Figari don't work). The flight takes us to Nice with Air Corsica and thence on to Edinburgh. Full flight details are yet to be confirmed.



Holiday Price

The price of this Holiday Edinburgh to Edinburgh is £2475 per person. The single supplement is £330 per person.

Leaders

Ian Bennallick and Alice Hunter. Ian Bennallick grew up on a farm in deepest wettest Cornwall where an early interest in wildflowers and ferns has blossomed (!) into a wide-ranging enthusiasm for the natural world. Ian is the BSBI joint recorder for Cornwall and co-ordinator for the Botanical Cornwall Group, whom he leads walks for, encouraging people to learn more about Cornwall's fine flora. Alice Hunter grew up in rural Hertfordshire surrounded by the wildlife that she grew to love and later to examine in detail through the lens of her camera. Her career as a wildlife and landscape photographer has blossomed at the same time as her leading career. 1 leader up to 14 people, 15 or more people will have both leaders.

Included in the Price

All flights. Transport, accommodation and all meals in Corsica. Services of the leaders.

Excluded from the Price

Drinks, tips, and items of a personal nature, including insurance, are not included.

Walking

Relaxed and easy. Up to two or three miles a day and always at a slow pace.

Accommodation

We start with a night in the L'Hôtel La Pinède (3-star), a little along the coast towards Parata from Ajaccio. The hotel is in a lovely spot with pleasant gardens and is right by the sea. The rooms are large and comfortable. Next we've four nights in the central mountains in the magnificent scenery of the Gorges du Restonica. Our hotel, the lovely Dominique-Colonna (4+ star equivalent), is set in a well-wooded stretch of the gorge and right by the rushing river, a very lovely setting indeed. We finish the holiday with two nights at the Hôtel U Libecciu (3-star), beautifully situated amongst oaks and Strawberry Trees at the head of the Gulf of Figari. The hotel is a stylish modern place with large and airy rooms. All rooms on this holiday have en suite WCs and showers/baths.

If you would like to ask about any aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.