Flowers of Crete

Holiday Report
1 - 8 April 2017
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Introduction

The main focus of this spring tour was to enjoy a good sample of the diversity of plants for which Crete is famous. Our week was spent exploring the western side of the island, from our base on the outskirts of Chania. The guests joining guide Sotiris for the week were Jean, Christopher Jill, Bryn, Nicholas and Linda.

The following is an outline of the week with a daily diary, followed by a gallery and list of the most interesting, local and endemic plant species seen.

Note: all photos © Sotiris Alexiou unless stated otherwise

Outline Itinerary

Day 1, 1st April: Arrival at Chania airport and transfer to hotel

Day 2, 2nd April: Falasarna, Polirinia & Agia Lake

Day 3, 3rd April: The White Mountains - Omalos plateau & Sougia

Day 4, 4th April: Gorges Day - Imbros & Aradena

Day 5, 5th April: Spili

Day 6, 6th April: Akrotiri peninsula & Delianon Gorge

Day 7, 7th April: Topolia Gorge & Paleochora

Day 8, 8th April: Akrotiri peninsula and transfer to Chania airport for departure
Day 1: Saturday 1st April

After a wet and cold winter, Crete was starting to show its well known face. Sun and warm temperatures were just starting to appear upon the snowy White Mountains. The heavy winter snow was still very evident as we were landing at the airport of Chania this spring! So, spring was late this year, after all these low temperatures that prevented plants from flowering at their more typical time.

Jean and Christopher arrived earlier in the day and had time to spend at the sandy beach of our hotel; the rest of the group flew in later. Once met we had a short drive to the hotel and the necessary introductions, a good late dinner was appropriate, followed by a good night’s sleep. A lovely week was about to start and we all needed to be in our best shape!

Day 2: Sunday 2nd April

The eggs from Mrs Aristea’s hencoop would be the main part of our breakfast for the rest of our trip! The sun was shining today, although still quite cool as the wind was cold.

**Falasarna**

We drove for half an hour and reached the west part of the island. The Minoan city of Falasarna, a very important port once, was in front of us. At least what was left to be above ground, as sea water has advanced a lot the last centuries.

The sandy beach of Falasarna is very popular among tourists visiting the island during summer time. But at this time of the year in spring the place was ours alone and at our disposal!

Being very careful where we were stepping, we met a rare and threatened Knapweed of the eastern Mediterranean, *Centaurea pumilio*, half buried inside the hot sand. The white-wooly *Inula candida*, endemic to the south Aegean area was growing on the rocks, not in flower yet, while Striated Catchfly, *Silene colorata* and Three-Horned Stock, *Mathiola tricuspidata*, with the three horns on the tip of the fruit, were abundant on the sand. The same two plants made nice carpets in the sand of our hotel also. A second *Silene, S. behen*, was also present in the area away from the sand. We encountered some common Mediterranean plants such as Crown Daisy, *Glebionis coronarium*, Sea Spurge, *Euphorbia paralias*, Salsify, *Tragopogon sinuatus* and *Geropogon hybridus*, among others. A Nightingale could also be heard for a while, singing from its cover, inside a bush.
A short drive away, and after passing the modern town of Kasteli, we ended up at the hill of the ancient city of Polirinia. We left the car almost at the foothills, enjoyed our lunch at a spot with great views and took the path that leads up to the old Acropolis. A male Podarcis cretensis lizard, endemic to the island, with its beautiful colour pattern, was playing hide and seek with us and our cameras.

The first Bee-Orchids would soon appear, Ophrys sicula, Sawfly Orchid, O. tenthredinifera and Bumble Bee Orchid, O. bombyliflora. Also, Giant Orchid, Himantoglossum robertianum, was there. Giant Fennels, Ferula communis, some of them over two metres high were abundant. As we moved up and passed an old church with a small cemetery, butterflies were observed, the beautiful endemic Cretan Festoon, Zerynthia cretica, Common Blue, Polyommatus icarus, Clouded Yellow, Colias crocea, Wall Brown, Lasiommata megera and one Mallow Skipper, Carcharodus alceae, on its food plant. Clusters of the endemic Pheasant’s Eyes, Adonis cretica, in its fine yellow flowering form was seen along our path, as well as the white-flowering Woundwort, Stachys spinulosa and Crown Anemones, Anemone coronaria. The view from the ruins of Acropolis was majestic and the breeze refreshing!

Some nice refreshments seemed appropriate after our walk, so we drove to the artificial lake of Agia, a well-known birdwatching spot. A flock of Yellow–Legged Gulls, Larus cachinnans michahellis was resting on the opposite side of this rather small lake. Coot, Fulica atra and Moorhen, Gallinula chloropus, were the first birds to see, but soon we observed a female Little Crake, Porzana parva, and later the more colourful male, hiding inside the reed. A Marsh Harrier, Circus aeruginosus, came flying in, but was driven away by the gulls very quickly! A number of Tufted Duck, Aythya fuligula, were swimming up and down, and a Little Grebe, Tachybaptus ruficollis, was diving for its
food. A pair of Balkan Green Lizards, *Lacerta trilineata*, were watched basking on a rock, a terrapin was seen in the water, as was a giant Goldfish. A large brown dragonfly landed on a branch of an olive tree and great effort was needed in order to track it, although it was a couple metres away from us and with its wings open!

**Day 3: Monday 3rd April**

As winter was late this year, we decided to drive up to the White Mountains today and try to find the very interesting winter endemics of that mountain. Plants we wouldn't normally see during a more typical April!

**Omalos plateau**

We took the road to the famous Omalos plateau. As we expected, no tulips were in sight yet! *Tulipa saxatilis*, that forms famous carpets up here, still needed a couple of more weeks to appear. But, no complaints! There were the Cretan endemics *Crocus sieberi*, with the amazing variation in mauve stripes on the outer side, and Cretan Glory of the Snow, *Scilla nana*!

We moved to the other side of the plateau, and found one of the rarest and least known plants of Crete, *Gagea omalensis*, described at 2013 and restricted on this plateau. Many *Romulea bulbocodium* were there also.

**Sougia**

We took the road that leads to the south coast, to the village of Sougia. We made a couple of stops looking for orchids. A flat area covered with phrygana rewarded us with many lovely species! *Ophrys omegaifera, O. tenthredinifera* with huge variation on tepals colour, of course *O. sicula, O.*
phryganae and O. bombyliflora. Also, a lot of O. spruneri, a few O. cretensis, a handful of O. herae (one of them hypochromatic!), O. cretica, O. iricolor and O. phaedra. A few O. heldreichii and O. episcopalis were seen also. A few Anacamptis collina and A. papilionacea, and Neotinea lactea at the end of its flowering period. And we continue at this orchid locality! Orchis anthropophora, a lot of O. Italiaica, O. pauciflora and O. quadripunctata. Nice stands of the white form of Turban Buttercup, Ranunculus asiaticus and the south Aegean endemic Anemone hortensis subsp. heldreichii. Small rounded shrubs of the south Aegean endemic Lithodora hispidula, were in full flower. A stop was made only to admire the Bee-Orchid with the largest lip, Ophrys grigoriana, with a lip reaching 3 cm length!

Finally we reached Sougia and some refreshments were appropriate! Tables by the sea, next to the waves and under the evening sun. A few relaxing moments were enjoyed before we hit the road to drive back to our hotel.

Day 4: Tuesday 4th April

This day was dedicated to the gorges of south Crete and some culture! Whilst Christopher and Jean took a day off to visit the Museums of Chania, we took the road to Sfakia. Nicholas and Linda decided to walk Imbros gorge, from the entrance down to sea level. An easy walk that took them around 4 hours. Gill and Bryn, with Sotiris, drove to Anopolis, a small village facing the sea. We walked through the village and all the way to the famous Aradena gorge. The white-flowering Cyclamen creticum, was there. Also, some nice Ophrys cinereophila.

The fields were covered with White and Yellow Asphodels, Asphodelus albus and Asphodeline lutea. Butterflies were flying around; most common was the Cretan Festoon. On the other side of the bridge, over the gorge, we enjoyed some nice refreshments with the locals, most of them working on their bee-
hives. A big group of Griffon Vultures came over the gorge and flew down, through the gorge!

After collecting Nicholas and Linda from the exit of Imbros gorge (tired but happy!), we drove straight to the harbor of Chania, to meet Christopher and Jean and enjoy dinner, with local Cretan delicacies and *raki*!

**Day 5: Wednesday 5th April**

**Spili.**

Spili is a well-known destination for people visiting Crete for its treasure trove of flowers. Among the orchids we had not seen so far, we saw *Ophrys creberrima*, one plant of *O. ariadnae* and *Anacamptis boryi*. *Neotinea lactea* were there in millions, and of course many of the species we had already seen in the previous days (and had no problem seeing them again!). A small population of the hybrid *Ophrys X sommieri*, with the parent species *O. tenthredinifera* and *O. bombyliflora*, were there. *Tulipa doerferi* was not in flower yet, so we enjoyed the plants in bud. Widow Iris, *Iris tuberosa* and Algerian Iris, *Iris unguicularis*, were both in full flower. The tiny bulbous *Romulea linaressi* subsp. *graeca*, with the dark mauve flowers was also observed among others.

A coffee stop inside Spili was much appreciated as well as a visit into a local monastery.

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Day 6: Thursday 6th April

Akrotiri peninsula

The morning was windy and black clouds were hanging over us. After breakfast we drove to the area of Akrotiri peninsula. Christopher and Jean visited the Monastery and the Museum of Agia Triada and the rest moved to the north part of the peninsula. The Dragon Arums, *Dracunculus vulgaris*, were in flower, with their carrion-smell diffusing into the air. Some *Ophrys* were seen, mainly *O. tenthredinifera*, *O. heldreichii* and *O. sicula*. And many of the Mediterranean plants that flower in this rocky place were also observed. The path leading down to the sea, through a steep gorge, was followed for a while.

Delianon Gorge

A nice, easy to walk path led us through Delianon Gorge. Mandrake, *Mandragora officinarum*, with their huge leaves were seen next to the path. Butterflies like Speckled Wood, *Pararge aegeria*, Large White, *Pieris brassicae*, Small White, *Pieris rapae*, Cleopatra, *Gonepteryx cleopatra* and Holly Blue, *Celastrina argiolus* were flying around. A few *Ophrys herae* were also observed on the side of this gorge.

A colony of Griffon Vultures thrives inside this gorge. We counted 18 flying around! We spent some time watching them coming in and flying out of their nests, on the vertical rocks of the gorge. We could even see some of the juveniles inside the nests, being now about 2-3 months old.

A well prepared dinner was expecting us at the port of Chania, so we drove straight there!
Day 7: Friday 7th April

Topolia gorge

Another day dedicated to the south part of the island. We drove south through Topolia Gorge. We stopped to admire the Agia Sophia cave, with an old church being built inside it! The large entrance of the cave holds some interesting plants, like Verbascum arcturos, endemic to Crete and Ranunculus creticus. A few steps lead to the entrance of the cave. Crag Martins and Rock Doves were seen, they were nesting inside the cave.

Paleochora

An area covered with phrygana was chosen again to explore, close to an abandoned village, in order to spot some more orchids. A few plants of Ophrys episcopalis were seen for the first time on this trip and also Orchis simia. A total of around 25 different species were counted! We took a break under an Oriental Plane, next to a spring, for lunch. Linda was the first to spot a monster plant of Anacamptis papillionacea, with three lips in every flower! More than that, a nice hybrid of O. pauciflora and O. quadripunctata, O. × pseudoanatolica was spotted by Linda, among the parental species.

We enjoyed nice refreshments at Paleochora, a small city by the sea. Hoopoe flew in front of us and landed inside a Tamarisk. Two Night Herons were seen flying above us, so at least one couple should be nesting at the small rivulet next to the town.

Bryn enjoyed a swim and the rest a few minutes in the town, until we returned to our hotel.
Day 8: Saturday 8th April

And so the last day of our trip had arrived! We all had late evening flights home from Chania. After checking out from our hotel, we drove to Akrotiri peninsula. We stopped at a nice olive grove and looked for orchids. We did observe around 10 different species, among them *Serapias linqua* and *S. bergoni*, *Ophrys cretica* and *Anacamptis pyramidalis*.

Afterwards, a short walk inside a small gorge revealed some more of the endemic or interesting flora of Crete. Our first *Petromarula pinnata*, this very peculiar and isolated member of Bell Flowers family, was hanging from the rocks as well as the tiny Mediterranean *Campanula erinus*. Some more tiny Mediterranean plants, like *Convolulus siculus* and *Malcolmia chia* were also growing inside the rock crevices.

Christopher and Jean were the first of our group to take the plane back home. The rest of us celebrated our last hours on Crete inside a nice field with Field Gladiolus, *Gladiolus italicus*, and several orchid species. A flock of the impressive Alpine Swifts arrived and flew low above us for the first time on this trip. Some of us then remembering how much Christopher wanted to see them; wished he could maybe see them now, perhaps through the plane window!

Our week had come to an end but we all left feeling we'd enjoyed seeing a good amount of the flowers and other wildlife (and culture) of this wonderful Greek island.
Anemone hortensis

Lathyrus albus
Lithodora hispidula

Ophrys episcopalis

Romulea bulbocodium

Romulea linaresii
Species List - Monocots

**Araceae**
- Dracunculus vulgaris
- Arum concinnatum

**Asphodelaceae**
- Asphodelus ramosus
- Asphodelus fistulosus
- Asphodeline liburnica

**Hyacinthaceae**
- Muscari comosum
- Muscari spreitenhaferi
- Ornithogalum creticum

**Iridaceae**
- Crocus sieberi
- Gladiolus italicus
- Iris unguicularis
- Iris tuberosa
- Morea monophyla
- Romulea bulbocodium
- Romulea linaresii subsp. graeca

**Liliaceae**
- Gagea graeca
- Gagea omalensis
- Tulipa doerfleri

**Orchidaceae**
- Anacamptis boryi
- Anacamptis collina
- Anacamptis pyramidalis
- Himantoglossum robertianum
- Neotinea lactea
- Ophrys ariadnae
- Ophrys bombyliflora
- Ophrys cinereophila
- Ophrys creberrima
- Ophrys cretensis
- Ophrys cretica
- Ophrys episcopalis
- Ophrys herae
- Ophrys heldreichii
- Ophrys iricolor
- Ophrys omegaifera
- Ophrys phaidra
- Ophrys phryganae
- Ophrys sicula
- Ophrys spruneri
- Ophrys tenthredinifera
- Ophrys X. sommieri
- Orchis anthropophora
- Orchis italicca
- Orchis pauciflora
- Orchis quadripunctata
- Orchis simia
- Orchis X pseudoanatolica
- Serapias bergonii
- Serapias lingua
Species List - Dicotyledons

Aceraceae
Acer sempervirens

Apocynaceae
Nerium oleander
Vinca major

Asteraceae
Anthemis altissima
Anthemis rigida
Centaurea argentea
Centaurea pumilio
Centaurea raphanina
Centaurea redempta
Crupina crupinastrum
Galactites tomentosa
Helichrysum orientale
Inula candida (in bud)
Ptilostemon chamaepeuce
Staehelina fruticosa

Boraginaceae
Echium italicum
Alkanna sieberi
Lithodora hispidula
Onosma graecum
Onosma erecta
Symphytum creticum

Campanulaceae
Petromarula pinnata
Campanula creutzbergii
Solenopsis minuta

Caryophyllaceae
Dianthus xylorrhizus

Fabaceae
Ebenus cretica
Lathyrus albus

Lamiaceae
Lavandula stoechas
Nepeta scorditis
Phlomis cretica
Scutellaria sieberi
Stachys cretica
Stachys spinulosa

Linaceae
Linum arboreum

Myrsinaceae
Cyclamen creticum

Orobanchaceae
Orobanche crenata
Species List - Dicotyledons

**Ranunculaceae**
*Adonis cretica*
*Anemone hortensis* subsp. *heldreichii*
*Ranunculus asiaticus*
*Ranunculus creticus*

**Rosaceae**
*Crataegus monogyna*
*Prunus webbii*

**Saxifragaceae**
*Saxifraga chrysosplenifolia*

**Scrophulariaceae**
*Verbascum arcturus*
*Verbascum macrurum*
*Verbascum spinosum*

**Valerianaceae**
*Valeriana asarifolia*