

NORTHERN PELOPONNESE DELIGHTS

Tristan Lafranchis lives in Greece and has explored many parts of the country in search of plants. One of his prime interests is the rare plants of the northern Peloponnese and here he describes the results of many hours' exploration

The Peloponnese, the southernmost part of mainland Greece, is a popular botanical destination for seekers of crocuses and other bulbs that are plentiful in the autumn, particularly in the south. But the northern part also deserves a visit (and even more than one!) for it possesses a very rich flora with a number of local and beautiful endemics.

The northern Peloponnese is still a wild country: most of the population is concentrated in the narrow coastal plain with some cultivation extending to the nearby hillsides, while the mountains are close to the sea and very sparsely



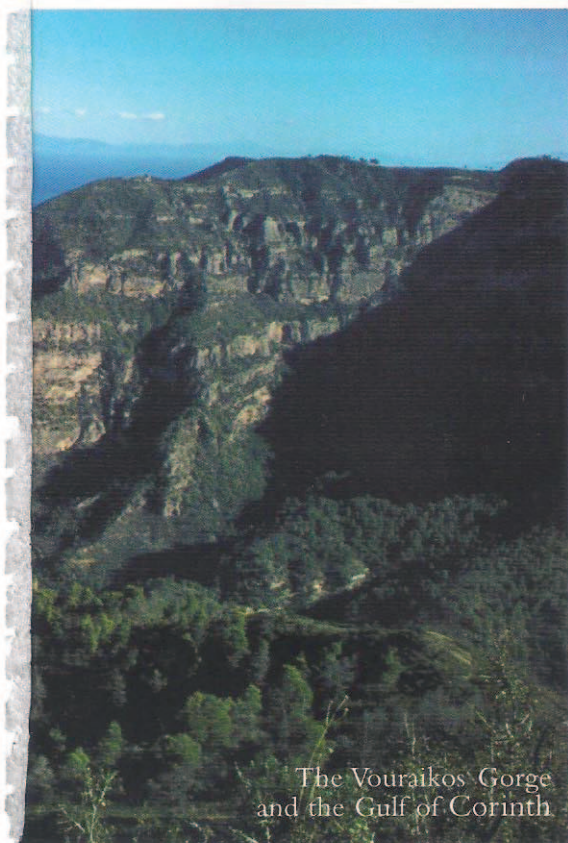
PHOTOS: TRISTAN LAFRANCHIS

inhabited. The whole area offers endless possibilities for a naturalist and life is pleasant in the coastal villages. It is the place where we (my wife and children) chose to live five years ago.

Winter is rainy and mild on the coast but cold inland, even just a few kilometers from the sea. Snow covers the tops of the hillsides at least one or two weeks every year and remains for three or four months on the high mountains. There is always a dry season at the end of the winter and then a short rainy season in the early spring. The weather is usually dry and hot between early May and September,



Ebenus sibthorpii (see p.204)



The Vouraikos Gorge
and the Gulf of Corinth

with occasional storms. Temperatures are always cooler above 1000 m and nights are often cold in the mountains, even in mid summer. The botanical season starts in February at low levels, but not until May on the high mountains where many plants do not bloom before mid or late June.

Hillsides

The hillsides above the northern coast of the Peloponnese, between Xylokastro and Egio, are huge masses of Tertiary conglomerates made from pebbles. They are deeply cut into gorges by permanent rivers and in several places the cliffs reach a height of 500 m. It is amazing to see how easy it is to take pebbles away from the bottom of these rock-faces; nevertheless, these impressive cliffs are still there ! The river beds are colonised by wild Oleander (*Nerium oleander*), Plane trees (*Platanus orientalis*) and White Willows (*Salix alba*). The tops of the hillsides, at 700-800 m above sea-level,

NORTHERN PELOPONNESE FLOWERS



Anemones are a feature of the early spring landscape in the northern Peloponnese: the jewel-like effect of the multi-coloured *Anemone coronaria* (top and bottom left) and the startlingly vibrant blooms of *A. pavonina* (bottom right)

are usually flattish and dedicated to vineyards which produce nice red and rosé wines. The slopes were formerly extensively covered by woodlands of Aleppo Pine (*Pinus halepensis*), but a

disastrous fire destroyed them eastwards from Diakopto some ten years ago. A low scrub, called *phrygana*, has replaced the pine trees; shrubs include Kermes Oak (*Quercus coccifera*), white *Cistus salvifolius*

and pink *C. creticus*, both species of strawberry trees (*Arbutus unedo* and *A. andrachne*) which sometimes hybridise), Lentisk (*Pistacia lentiscus*) and lower shrublets such as *Hypericum empetrifolium*, a St John's Wort with woody base and small flowers, or scented *Salvia fruticosa* and the thyme-related *Coridothymus capitatus*. Main crops on the slopes are olive trees, producing a very tasty oil, and currants, harvested in September and dried under low white tents.

The conglomerates of the northern Peloponnese host a rich flora of chasmophytes (plants growing on vertical rocks), from where they sometimes colonise stone walls. The first to bloom is *Asperula arcadiensis* whose pink nodding flowers appear on pale green cushions as early as January in the sunny valleys. Flowering time depends upon exposure and altitude and this pretty plant can be found in full blossom as late as mid June



Asperula arcadiensis

at 1600 m on Mt Chelmos. Another exciting speciality is *Campanula topaliana* which is also known from south-central Greece, especially around Delphi (in its distinct subspecies *delphica*). It belongs to a difficult group of Greek bellflowers, rich in endemic species, and characterised by attractive rosettes of silvery green leaves and stems adpressed to the rocks which bear many blue flowers. Other chasmophytes include the bristly *Onosma frutescens* with yellow and orange flowers, *Scrophularia heterophylla* and the sticky *Silene congesta*.

Many other interesting and attractive plants are found on banks, bushy slopes and open pine woodlands on conglomerates. From mid-March to early May the clearings and the neglected olive groves are visited by orchid fanatics, seeking colourful *Ophrys delphinensis* and *O. argolica* together with no less than 25 other species. Both *Anemone coronaria* and *A. pavonina* are very common; the



The 'Spectacle Orchid', *Ophrys argolica*



Colchicum peloponnesiacum,
an autumn-flowering species

former usually starts in February, but is much earlier in some years, even late October or November if there have been regular rainfalls in the autumn. *A. coronaria* is found in a large variety of colours from white to pink, red, pale lilac-blue or violet-blue and all the colour forms can be found intermixed. *A. pavonina* is plentiful in March and April and is mostly found in two colour forms — deep red and pink — but these only rarely grow together. Mid-May is the right time to look for legumes (Leguminosae): the blue *Cicer graecum*, a large and scarce endemic to these hillsides, the pink *Ebenus sibthorpii*, the yellow *Astragalus hellenicus*, whose stemless flowers appear in the middle of a rosette of leaves, the small broom *Genista millii* and various *Lathyrus*, *Vicia* and *Ononis* species. The best places to see them are the hillside above Trapeza and the area around Evrostina. Other local plants include the delicate and tall *Silene corinthiaca*, and the short yellow-flowered *Stachys parolinii*, both growing on open stony ground.

Summer is very dry here with few flowers, and it is easy then to locate the

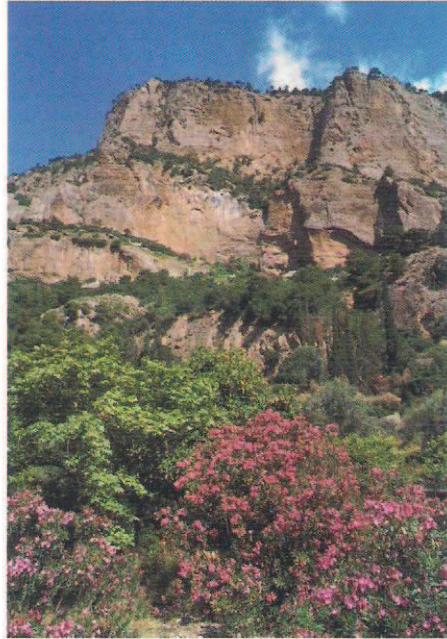
large spiny purple flower-heads of the endemic *Centaurea achaia* growing along roadsides and fields where it is locally very common. From August to mid September the scarce *Dianthus mercurii* can be seen along the road to Kalavrita, shortly after the famous monastery of Mega Spileo. This large-flowered pink is endemic to these hillsides and is only given three sites in *Flora Hellenica* to which we can now add two others. Further searches will probably bring the discovery of other new places. From early September to mid October the grazed dry grasslands between 600 and 1200 m are brightened by the large chequered flowers of *Colchicum bivonae*. Lower down, in October, some bare areas above Diakopto are carpeted with the small endemic pink *C. peloponnesiacum*, whose narrow leaves appear at the end of the flowering period, earlier in rainy years.



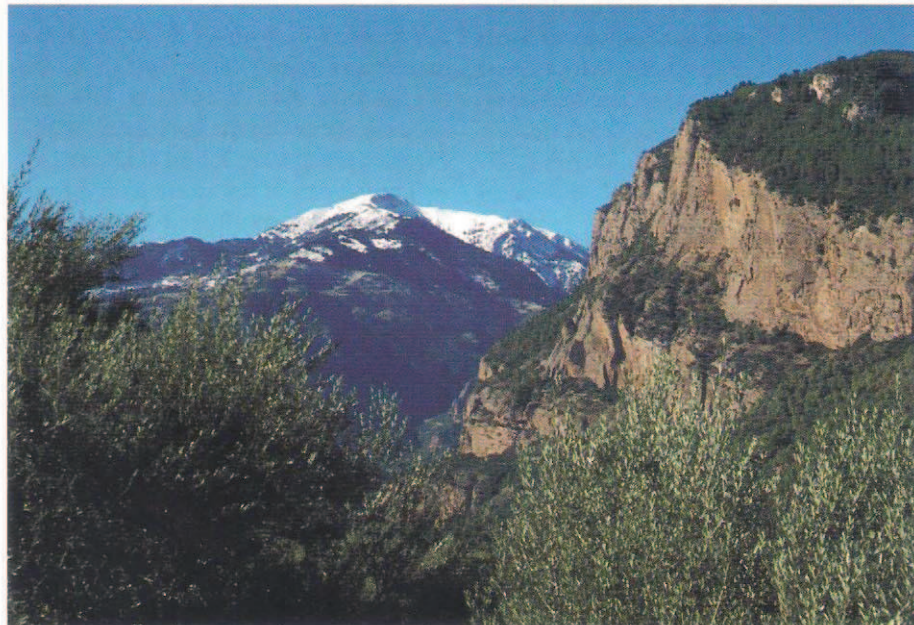
Astragalus angustifolius; formidably spiny

Mt Klokos, 1200-1777 m

I often go to this small mountain which is only half an hour's drive from my home. From the friendly village of Pteri, on its eastern face, a path signposted with red marks leads to the top. The first part follows a broad track to an aerial, through bushy grasslands and stands of Greek Fir trees (*Abies cephalonica*). The banks host local *Fritillaria graeca* and pretty *Ornithogalum nutans* in the second half of April and the whole area is a fantastic place for butterflies throughout spring and summer. There is an alternative, a small path in the woodland to the spring of Tria Pigadia, through a healthy colony of the red-flowered *Lilium chalcidonicum* which blooms in early July. On the bare ground just above the aerial, at 1300 m, the tiny violet *Romulea linaresii* can be found from mid-March to early April. The path then more or less follows the ridge, with good stands of *Crocus sieberi*



Mt Klokos (below) and the Kerinitis Gorge (above and below)





Fritillaria graeca (above left) and the rare *Gymnospermium altaicum* (above right), both present on Mt Klokos

and *C. olivieri* in March, together with the best colony of the strange *Gymnospermium altaicum*, a scarce member of the Berberidaceae which is only known from the northern Peloponnese and, with different subspecies, in Albania and Montenegro, near the Black Sea and in the Altai Mountains. In October, the stony slopes are yellow with *Sternbergia*

sicula, and in November the white *Crocus cancellatus* subsp. *mazziaricus* is not uncommon. Above 1450 m, the trees become scarce and the last bushes, mainly *Prunus cocomilia*, are found at about 1600 m. The last part of the ascent goes through a rocky slope dominated by the spiny cushions of *Astragalus angustifolius* whose white flowers appear in June.



Sternbergia sicula

Around the chapel, built right on the top, a beautiful rock garden blossoms from late May to early June, with deep yellow clumps of *Aurinia moreana*, endemic to the northern Peloponnese, and bright purple *Geranium subcaulescens*. The pale yellow *Erodium chrysanthum* is also common around the chapel and grows taller here than elsewhere thanks to the manure from a herd of goats which often stays here in the summer. The view



from the top of Mt Klokos is one of the best I know in Greece. Looking north, the white city of Egio stands out between greyish-green olive groves and the deep blue Gulf of Corinth is backed on the

Aurinia moreana (left) is a rock-dweller, while *Tulipa orphanidea* (right) is local in fields in parts of the Peloponnese



Geranium cinereum subsp. *subcaulescens*

far shore by an impressive range of high peaks : Vardousia, Giona and Parnassos. On the near side we find all the highest mountains of the northern Peloponnese, from west to east : rounded Panachaikon, sharp Erimanthos, Chelmos and Killini.

In spring, I like to follow the track on the southern side. The Yellow Asphodel, *Asphodeline lutea*, is very common at the bottom of the screes and lower down, in the walnut groves, the flora is not so rich but there is a colony of tulips which are still a mystery to me : they are nodding in bud and have broad tepals, like *Tulipa australis*, but have dark anthers and are often orange, like *T. orphanidea*. These pretty flowers, which usually open in the afternoon, are perhaps hybrids between the two former species but I have to date found only three plants of *T. orphanidea*

at the bottom of the northern side, above the village of Pteri, and none of *T. australis*.

Mt Chelmos, 1600-2300 m

Mt Chelmos is a famous area for its flora and more generally for wildlife. Despite the increasing human pressure (a ski centre, roads, more grazing) there is still a lot to see up there from April to September. The area has been proposed for a national park but without success so far.

The access to the ski centre, at 1650 m, is very easy thanks to a good road from Kalavrita. As soon as the snow has melted, the flat meadows below the car park are carpeted with *Crocus sieberi*



A view of Mt Chelmos (above); colourful *Crocus sieberi* subsp. *sublimis* f. *tricolor* (left top) and *C. olivieri* (bottom left)



subsp. *sublimis* in its beautiful forma *tricolor*; the large orange, white and lilac flowers are outstanding. Locally they grow together with orange-yellow *C. olivieri* and with the delicate pale pink *Colchicum triphyllum* whose leaves — usually three, hence its name — appear together with the flowers. Blooming soon afterwards are yellow *Ranunculus ficarioides* and *Viola aetolica*, white *Ornithogalum oligophyllum* and *Anemone appennina*, which varies from dark violet-blue to white and, exceptionally, pale pink.

The first places to be free of snow are the slopes of the small hillsides of Xerokambos, just north of the ski centre. On one of them we discovered a small

colony of *Gymnospermium altaicum*, a new location for this scarce plant. In May, the yellow tulip, *Tulipa australis*, is common in the grasslands, as are the gorgeous violet-blue cushions of *Viola graeca* at the bottom of the stony slopes. In June pink *Dianthus viscidus* and pure red *D. biflorus*

are just part of a show which also features the tall and dense spikes of *Verbascum mallophorum*, prickly *Morina persica*, pale blue *Campanula spatulata* and the large purple-pink flowers of *Lathyrus grandiflorus*. In early September, the grazed and very open grounds are home to *Sternbergia colchiciflora*, whose small single yellow flowers appear leafless on the ground.

The ridge east of the ski centre offers dramatic views over the Styx valley, where the ancient Greeks located one of the entrances to Hades. The white limestone is more friable here and is really worth a visit in May and June for its flora. On the slopes by the car park yellow *Linum elegans* grows together with the endemic creeping *Globularia stygia* and the scarce



Spring-flowering *Colchicum triphyllum* (left) and *Viola graeca* (below), a widespread species on the higher Greek mountains





Mt Chelmos in moody light (top);
the upper Styx valley (bottom left);
Sternbergia colchiciflora (bottom right)