

ACROSS THE SHANS TRIP REPORT 2019

ViRA NATURA
TOURS

Cardiocrinum giganteum subsp. *yunnanense*

Days 1&2

8 June – To Dali, Yunnan

Getting to where we needed to be in China always takes some time and we all made to the lakeside city of Dali in time for our first tasty Chinese dinner and then a wander back through the cheerful throng of Chinese tourists taking their evening stroll.

Day 3

9 June – Cang Shan

A glorious rainbow was stretched across the hills when I looked out first thing in the morning. Lovely though it was it didn't bode well for a dry day and there was plenty of cloud settled on the thickly forested Cangshan foothills. But we were prepared for the weather. Once we'd boarded the cablecar we were whisked quickly up from 2000 to nearly 4000 metres, first passing over dense stands of *Pinus yunnanensis*, poplars and mixed shrubs and then as we gained height the distinctive architectural form of *Abies delavayi*, clinging to the rocky ridges with rhododendrons.

There was thick mist at the top, but that didn't stop us seeing good flowers closer to the boardwalk. Initially, this went downhill passing through dense shrubberies of *Rhododendron taliense* under which grew *Primula calliantha* with large pink flowers. Growing with these were the lovely *Omphalogramma delavayi* with fringed pinkish-mauve flowers growing closer to the turf, as well as the first impressive *Megacarpa delavayi*, a rather flamboyant brassica with dense masses of pink flowers. Wet areas were edged with a delightful carpet of *Caltha palustris* and *Pegaeophyton scapiflorum* and adjacent open turf had more primulas including the dainty purple *Primula amethystina* and the pedant yellow and white bells of *P. serratifolia*. The latter became increasingly common as we went around. The sinister forms of *Arisaema elephas* were also common, popping up among the other flowers with striped spathes and trifoliate leaves. A pretty dwarf pink rhodo was seen, there was *Anemone demissa*, plentiful yellow *Draba surculosa* and sky-blue *Hackelia uncinata*.

After a break for lunch in the wildlife centre we climbed up towards the lake seeing the red bells of *Rhododendron haematodes* and the yellow of *R. lacteum*, the handsome foliage of *Rodgersia pinnata* and superb stands of *Megacarpa delavayi* peppering the turf and mingling with *Primula serratifolia*. Whilst we admired these a stunning male Golden Bush Robin appeared and provided a wonderful show as he went back and forth to a hidden nest under the boardwalk, each time carrying



Primula serratifolia & *Megacarpa delavayi*

a beak full of swiftly-captured flies. Another stunner was just a bit further on when a male Fire-tailed Sunbird fed on the flowers of a rhododendron. The final climb up was a little breathless, but it was our first day at altitude and to be expected. To round things off there were a couple of big-billed *Megacodon stylophorum*, albeit a bit far away.

A rewarding first foray.

Day 4 10 June – Three Pagodas & Wenghai

Leaving the awakening streets of Dali old town, we drove onto some of the few authentic historical buildings left in the town, the famous Three Pagodas. They are actually part of a large (much expanded) complex surrounded by pleasant gardens, with piped Tibetan mantras soothing our mood as we wandered around. Birdlife was plentiful.

A new fast road got us to Lijiang in good time, but it was quickly obvious that this year was exceptionally dry, with little greenery beneath the pine forests. We stopped in an area with cascading shrubs of *Rosa longicuspis*, *Clerodendron peii*, *Hypericum forrestii* and other shrubs to have lunch. Usually, the understory would provide other delights but there was little sign this year. There were at least some flashes of colour in the pines with dense tufts of the showy *Taxillus delavayi*, a red flowered parasite. Driving higher it was still too dry and even around Wenghai lake the turf was shorter than normal. Fortunately, there were still quite a few plants including both *Primula beesiana* and *P. poissonii* in the damp flushes, with tiny *Gentiana chungtienensis*, *Anemone rivularis*, *A. yulongshanica* and *Tibetia tongolensis* in the drier turf. A dainty *Ophiopogon* was also found and there were *Polygonum paleacea* and a fine woolly-headed *Cirsium* sp. Driving further to the village we found a superb patch of *Primula beesiana* in



full flower beside some ponds that thronged with hundreds of sky-blue damselflies. In places the deep pink primulas grew amidst a carpet of bright yellow of *Lotus corniculatus*. Then not far from our hotel we spotted *Thalictrum delavayi* beside a small stream with *Houttuynia cordata* and the emerging spikes of an *Arisaema*. Our hotel was a rather flash modern place with lots of artwork and huge rooms. Very comfy.

Day 5 11 June – Yulong Xue Shan

We set off quite early to give us plenty of time inside the national park, negotiating the circus at the entrance and then driving up to an area of low cliffs and pine woods. However, it was immediately apparent that this abnormally dry season was having an effect on the flora. Nonetheless, some interesting plants were found including *Phlomis betonicifolia*, a yellow *Scutellaria sp.*, the last flowers on *Primula forrestii* and then further up the road a few pink *Clematis chrysocoma*. There was also both yellow and purple *Roscoea cautleyoides*, *Androsace spinulifera* and a freshly opened *Arisaema consanguinea*. The next stop was for another of the latter growing in a damp gully, this time with more of a reddish suffusion. Another side valley had several colour forms of the lovely *Salvia aerea*, as well as *Adonis davidii* and a clump of *Calanthe tricarinata*.

A cableway took us up to a higher meadow area, passing over diverse woodlands with spruce, maple and rhododendron, along with oaks festooned in *Taxillus thibetanus*. There were by now, stunning views of Yulongxueshan or Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, with immense rock walls rising to the grey glaciers around the summit. Although dry, the grasslands had plentiful *Stellera chamaejasme* var. *chrysantha* and among these were a few *Iris colletii* and many emerging *Roscoea cautleyoides*. We followed the boardwalk around to the summit with its requisite prayer flags and then searched for *Meconopsis forrestii*, but no luck this year. There were still a few blood red flowers on *Paeonia delavayi* near the monastery and beside the cable car station we found two *Incarvillea mairei* (we would see so many more later on in the tour). Taking the cablecar back down we then began our drive back stopping for *Incarvillea arguta* and fine clumps of *Salvia digitaloides*. A final stop to look for orchids found no orchids but we did find a good specimen of the lovely lilac *Thalictrum delvayi*.

We enjoyed a very convivial dinner followed by saxophone playing and Tibetan singing back at the hotel.



Stellera chamaejasme

Day 6 12 June – To Zhongdian (Shangri-la)

Our first stop of the day was to visit the former residence of Joseph Rock, an Austrian-American who spent 27 years in Yunnan studying the local Naxi people, as well as undertaking a number of plant collecting expeditions. There were several rooms with exhibits and the carefully preserved office with lots of photos of Rock and his quasi-opulent life in Yunnan. Then we drove north following the brown waters of the Yangste for a time and pausing to look at the entrance to Tiger Leaping Gorge and the big bridge being constructed across it. The landscape was still dry and suffering from drought but as we climbed it got greener and the hills were thickly forested once we'd reach the Zhongdian Plateau at 3200 metres. We stopped at an area with great swathes of *Euphorbia stracheyi*, amongst which were mingled many wonderful black-purple *Thermopsis barbata*, the pink trumpets of *Incarvillea zhongdianensis*, the tiny blue stars of *Gentiana chungtienensis* and closer to an area of birch wood, the lovely purple and white *Iris barbatula*. The latter was also plentiful near a fenced off field along with *Cynanchum hirundinarium*.

There was also a large clump of *Iris bulleyana* beside the pig pond below of lunchtime restaurant. Moving on afterwards we continued across the plateau, which was dotted with big solid Tibetan houses and fields of vegetables. Stopping near a scrubby slope we found *Anemone demissa*, *Acanthocalyx alba*, *Erigeron breviscapa*, *Polygonum paleacea*, big clumps of *Euphorbia jolkinii* and some good sized *Invarvillea zhongdianensis*. Another nearby area had many more anemones lighting up the birch trees with the cerise drumsticks of *Androsace spinulifera* and clumps of *Gentiana chungtienensis*.

From here we drove onto the renamed city of Shangri-La (formerly Zhongdian, and before that Gyelthang) and walked to our pleasant hotel in the wooden old town.

Day 7 13 June – Napa Hai

The day was spent quite close to town in the vicinity of Napa Hai lake and its calm reflective waters stretched out beneath the local botanical reserve, the shore studded with large wooden drying racks. There were only a few plants of interest inside the dry reserve, with the intense scarlet of *Androsace bulleyana* and a couple of very tall *Platanthera chlorantha*. Unfortunately, the *Cypripedium tibeticum* had already finished flowering. As we left there were some flowering shrubs of *Rosa praelucens* (a scarce local endemic) with large pink flowers, as well as *Syringa yunnanensis*, *Daphne aurantiaca* and *Lonicera trichosantha*. We moved onto a slightly higher area, which was greener and immediately more productive. There were fine plants of *Aquilegia rockii*, *Iris bulleyana*, plenty of *Anemone rivularis*. Searching the green understorey to the woods we found some fine *Oreorchis erythrochrysea* and a *Primula secundiflora*. Along the track were three species of gentian, mid-blue *Gentiana asterocalyx*,

Incarvillea zhongdianensis & *Thermopsis barbata*



tight clusters of *G. curvistyla* and the much larger *G. crassicaulis*. On the stony slopes, we found a rich patch with both *Cypripedium flavum* and *C. tibeticum*, alongside *Iris ruthenica*, and a delightful pink variant of *Anemone demissa*. The slender form of *Pedicularis lachnoglossa* grew with pink *Acanthocalyx nepalensis* and there was a fine flowering shrub of soft yellow *Rhododendron wardii*. Searching a bit further afield we also found a few of the diminutive and lovely *Cypripedium plectrochilon*.

After lunch, we drove to the lake and around to an area of birch woods where we saw a few *Corydalis appendiculata* on the woodland edge and after a bit of searching a couple of beautiful *Cypripedium yunnanense*. *C. flavum* was also here as well as plentiful *Incarvillea zhongdianensis* and *Anemone demissa*. All of these were also present at our last location another area of birch woodland. But before we reached them we were interrupted by some fine flowering spikes of blue *Meconopsis prattii*. There was also the peculiar dark-red flowered *Cynoglossum triste* and a spike of *Pedicularis monbeigii*. But, the orchids took centre stage again with fine groups of *Cypripedium flavum* and a decent *C. tibeticum*.

Day 8 14 June – Tianchi Hai

A great plant day began with the delightful *Nomocharis aperta* growing in an area of birch woodland, the translucent spotted flowers backlit by the morning sun. Alongside these were *Acanthocalyx nepalensis*, *Anemone demissa*, *Maianthemum henryi* and the white bells of the shrub *Lyonia ovalifolia*. A little further on a few pretty *Cypripedium guttatum* were flowering on a bank with their larger cousin *Cypripedium flavum*. Next up we stopped in an area with a drift of *Primula sikkimensis* and *P. secundiflora* (though much better of both was to follow). A couple of big *Meconopsis pseudointegrifolia* were found in a hollow and a hundred metres up the road the blue to purple flowers of *M. aff. racemosa* were found on a rocky bank with bushy plants of *Adonis davidii*. As we continued higher the drifts of *Primula secundiflora* increased and then more and more deep purple *Rhododendron russatum* appeared as we neared the lake. Surrounding the lake were extensive rhodo shrubberies with various species including the big white trusses of *Rhododendron phaeochrysum*, much smaller mauve *R. telmatieum* and their diminutive cousin *Cassiope pectinata*. It was nestled among the dwarf rhodos that we found the first of many black-red *Lilium souliei*, a quite singular lily. Time was spent exploring the area around the lake finding *Cremanthodium campanulatum*, *Lloydia delavayi*, *Primula amethystina* and in wetter areas *Rheum alexandrae*. There were also stunning drifts of *Primula sikkimensis* and *P. secundiflora*, as well as swathes of *Allium humile* under the willows. Fine bushes of soft yellow *Rhododendron wardii* were seen and then a couple of richly-coloured *Iris cuniliculiiformis* as we walked back.

Heading back, we stopped in a wonderful rocky gully with abundant purple *Primula deflexa*, *Hackelia uncinata* and *Rheum likiangensis*. Closer searching found some fine *Arisaema elephas* in perfect condition and on the rocks some lovely purple forms of *Meconopsis aff. racemosa*. There were further stops for clumps of *Primula*



Cypripedium flavum

chionantha, *Clematis montana* and then a fine plant of the tall *Megacodon stylophorum*, a remarkable green-flowered gentian relative.

Another filling Tibetan dinner completed the day.

Day 9 15 June – Baima Shan I

Departing Shangri-La at 8 am we made a stop just outside the town for some lovely *Cypripedium yunnanense* growing with plentiful *Incarvillea zhongdianensis*, *Aster souliei* and *Acanthocalyx alba*. Then we continued along the dramatic Yangtse river valley slowly descending to Benzilan where we left our bags at tonight's hotel. The road then climbed into increasingly green hills swathed in tall forests, and on above the tree line to where we finally stopped for a population of pale pink *Primula chionantha* growing with *Rhododendron roxieanum*. Close to the pass was a superb slope smothered in flowering *Rhododendron calostrotum* and *Cassiope pectinata*, whilst lower parts had flowering *Rhododendron phaeochrysum* and patches of golden *Caltha scaposa*. Pretty white *Pinguicula alpina* was also on the damp ground with a pink *Pedicularis* sp.

From the pass we rumbled higher still, stopping for yet another superb display of rhodos, this time a low-growing mauve species that covered the slopes. After driving as far as we could we set off across the flowery turf with *Potentilla stenophylla*, *Anemone gelida* and plenty of other different alpinas as we slowly climbed. There were tufts of yellow *Thermopsis smithiana*, the tiny *Primula nanobella* and then on a rockier banks tight cushions of *Diapensia purpurea* and the pretty golden-eyed pink flowers of *Androsace delavayi*. Rocky flats had the beautiful cerise pea *Chesneya nubigena* var. *purpurea* and more and more tufts of pink *Solmslaubachia retropilosa* peppered the ground among dwarf rhodos. Then a final huff and puff brought us to the top of the granite slope at 4800 metres, where we reached a thriving population of the wonderful *Chionocharis hookeri*, the dense cushions beset with many blue flowers. There were many of these alpine gems scattered across the slope and rocky flats, each organically engulfing rocks and wedging into crevices with a magnificent mountain backdrop.

Descent was a lot faster than ascent. There was time for one good stop for a wet flush with *Primula zambalensis* mixed with *P. sikkimensis* and the odd *P. secundiflora*. Above this the turf had plenty of the peculiar *Phlomis rotata*, each flat whorl of crinkled leaves beset with a dense head of purple flowers. From among the shrubs grew a number of dark brown *Fritillaria cirrhosa* and the odd *Corydalis atuntsuensis*, whilst other delights included the tiny pink *Polygonatum hookeri* and *Aster souliei*. From here we cut downhill (seeing a White-capped Water-Redstart on the way) and back to Benzilan for the night, stopping for odd view on the way.



Day 10

16 June – Baima Shan II

We returned to the forest clad mountains, climbing above the tree line to an area of limestone cliffs. These were coloured by superb tufts of the wonderful *Paraquilegia microphylla*, each waving purple cups with golden stamens in the gentle breeze. At the base of one cliff was a colony of bright pink *Primula polyneura* and setting off along the valley we found many *Cardamine loxostemonoides*, *Taphrospermum verticillatum* and yellow *Erysimum wardii*. Here and there were pink forms of *Paraquilegia microphylla* and the screes along the path had *Astragalus yunnanensis*, *Corydalis melanochlora* and further up the lovely *Incarvillea compacta*, the outsize flowers dwarfing the leaves. Kay and Einar also found *Corydalis benecincta*. On the opposite side of the valley were extensive shrubberies of *Rhododendron primulaeflorum* along with clumps of yellow *Pedicularis oederi*. Rain was in the air and started to fall more purposefully as we walked back down. The next location was a little higher and certainly more exposed as the rain persisted. Nonetheless, we walked up a found wonderful drifts of *Primula zambalensis*, the electric blue *Corydalis pachycentra* and in the turf, was *Spongiocarpella yunnanensis* and *Androsace wardii*. The higher screes held some fine *Corydalis melanochlora*, but by now the rain had made most of us soggy and we returned to the vehicles.

Driving down we found a place for a hot lunch and coffee before continuing to Benzilan as mists wrapped around the lichen draped firs. There was a stop for the first bend in the Yangste River and then after we'd negotiated a spot of traffic congestion another viewpoint looking down the same dramatic defile from higher up.

There was another filling meal in our local Tibetan restaurant – complete with local moonshine.

Day 11

17 June – Da Xue Shan

The streets of old town Shangri-la were getting started as we left, first driving north past big stands of *Euphorbia jolkinii*, grazing yaks and into the hills clothed in endless forests of pine. The pines eventually gave way to silver firs and the views became grander and grander with the spectacular shark's tooth ridge of Daxueshan bursting from the trees swathed in mists. We stopped for the views also finding *Iris chrysographes*, *Pyrola rotundifolia*, *Cardamine macrophylla* and *Deutzia glomulifera* in the process. Descending a bit there were some good *Cypripedium flavum* and nearly open *Calanthe*



Paraquilegia microphylla

delavayi. Then the road got a bit rougher and we enjoyed a ‘Chinese massage’ as we climbed to towards the pass, stopping for some flowery bushes of *Rhododendron wardii*. Topping the pass there where many rhodos were flowering we descended a little to a side valley. The landscape around was fabulous with ragged ridges and vast orange screes.

We set off up the side valley immediately encountering *Primula sikkimensis*, *P. secundiflora* and pale pink *P. monroi* in a pleasant mix. Delicate *P. florida* was a little higher up. The first screes had the gorgeous *Corydalis benecincta* in various colour forms from purple to white, all sporting the attractive brown, stone-like leaves. Mingled with these was pretty *Hemophila sessiflora* with green-veined white flowers, whilst wetter patches had yellow *Corydalis hamata* coming into flower. Reaching the higher turf there was rusty-backed *Trollius farreri*, *Cremanthodium bulbiferum*, *Pedicularis siphonantha* and some found *Fritillaria cirrhosa* in the shrubberies.

It was a huff and a puff to progress along the valley seeing *Meconopsis integrifolia* along the way as we searched for that most remarkable of all alpine herbs, *Rheum nobile*. Finally, we spotted a beauty on a higher slope and Einar, Gianpiero and myself all made it up to this amazing plant. The creamy-bracted tower erupted from the screes - a most improbable plant – and the backdrop was jaw-dropping with a vast landscape of mountains stretching out below. We all agreed it was worth the effort to reach and trotted back down for a very late lunch. Driving on we hadn’t gone more than two hundred metres when we spotted two *Meconopsis rudis* on the shaley bank. Next up was a lovely carpet of *Androsace rigida* growing beneath larches and pink *Rhododendron oreotrephes*. *Aster batangensis* and *Incarvillea compacta* grew along the roadside. The road wound down slowly (but it at least was lot smoother on the Sichuan side) and we had fine views of the rural valley below with it’s neat Tibetan houses. We stopped to photograph these close up in perfect late-afternoon light, each white house colourfully decorated, especially the windows and doors, with ripening golden barley fields beyond.

Day 12 18 June – Wuming & Haizi Shans

Our journey began well with some stops to look at the interesting local buildings and a small monastery, the windows and doors were all very ornate and colourful. The landscape in this area is very appealing and there were good views down the valley as we climbed – only to stop because of roadworks. There was a delay of an hour and a half before we could move again, but fortunately the new road was quicker and we made up some time, eventually climbing high into hills frosted purple with flowering rhododendrons. Time was spent on Wuming Shan pass where there were many new alpiners including a good number of rich purple *Meconopsis lancifolia*, mats of *Silene davidii*, a few purple *Iris dolichosiphon*, domes of *Arenaria oreophila* and its flatter cousin *A. kansuensis*. A few tall yellow *Primula songii* were still (just) flowering too. On the opposite side

Corydalis benecincta



of the road the stony ground had several *Soroseris sp.* covered in yellow flowers alongside *Androsace wardii*. It was a touch breezy at the pass so we descended to a lower elevation for lunch, stopping beside a stream with *Iris delavayi* and *Primula monroi*. The style of houses had changed and the landscape was different too as we entered a vast granite plateau with immense boulder runs punctuated with stands of *Abies fargesii*. Among the boulders were *Lilium lophophorum*, *Stellera chamaejasme* (white form) and *Lancea tibetica*. Another stop was for stands of *Rheum alexandrae* growing among rhododendrons and former became very common as we progressed and the grasslands became increasingly flowery. Our next location had delightful drifts of *Aster himalaicus*, tight cushions of *Androsace bisulca* and the little white wands of *Polygonum viviparum* colouring the turf.

The vast landscape continued with riverside plains swathed in pink rhododendrons and then at a pass were clumps of the *Megacarpa delavayi* growing alongside lovely blue forms of *Anemone demissa* subsp. *villosissima*. More careful searching revealed a few stunning *Primula tangutica* in various colour forms from brick red to lime green and purple. Descending from the dramatic mountains and boulder runs we reached flatter grasslands and yak pastures that led to Litang and our hotel for the night at a lofty 4000 metres.

Day 13 19 June – Jianziwan Shan

Litang is dominated by the large monastery above the town and we went there first thing to look around the spectacularly painted interior of the main hall (complete with praying monks) along with the gold-topped architecture of the exterior. Gonpo explained the various aspects of Buddhism as we went. We also stopped in town to look at the caterpillar fungus sellers and their wares, with various photo calls and cultural exchanges. Then it was back to our own religion of flowery things and we stopped outside the town on a very flowery slope with abundant *Anemone demissa* subsp. *villosissima*, hundreds of creamy, egg-like *Lilium lophophorum*, purple *Iris dolichosiphon* and *Incarvillea mairiei*. Among all of this colour were *Ajuga ovalifolia*, *Fritillaria cirrhosa* and *Trollius yunnanense*. The next area of grassland had swathes of *Aster souliei* and a honey-scented *Lagotis sp.* (as well as a superb Tibetan Apollo). And then we reached a slope with hundreds of red-pink trumpets of *Incarvillea mairei* and the reddish pyramids of *Ajuga lupulina*. Closer examination revealed two orchids; *Ponerorchis chusua* and *Galeraris spathulata*, as well as *Androsace mairei* and *Allium prattii*.

After lunch, we continued across the vast grasslands and crested mountain passes that offered views over seemingly endless mountain ridges. One pass had an impressive display of prayer



Primula tangutica

flag wigwams and among the surrounding rhodo scrub was purple *Meconopsis henrici*. The last area we visited was also strewn with prayer flags and the dry stony slopes had the peculiar flat *Pleurospermum foetans* and pink *Hedysarum sikkimensis*, whilst along the roadside we found some fine specimens of blue *Meconopsis racemosa*. The road then descended into thickly forested hills into warmer valleys.

Day 14 20 June – Grasslands and Zhedou Shan

We climbed out of the depths of the valley via an impressive spiralling road network and onto the grasslands on a fine sunny day. There was a big sheet of purple colour from many thousands of cultivated *Nepeta* plants, but we were more interested in the real wild thing. However, before that we stopped a couple of times to photograph the distinctive architecture of the houses in this area and witness a (very) newly-born yak take its first steps. We stopped in an area of meadows and young forest, finding *Pedicularis rupicola* var. *flavescens*, a tiny blue gentian, *Scutellaria orthocalyx*, plentiful *Stellara chamaejasme*, flowery bushes of *Philadelphus delavayi* and then two orchids – pink *Ponerorchis chusua* and a diminutive musk orchid - *Herminium ophioglossoides*. Interesting flowers continued to appear beginning with a few fine tall *Meconopsis racemosa* growing on shaley slopes alongside a dainty pink *Primula sp* and the white form of *Ajuga lupulina*. Then a bare bank had the lovely yellow *Primula prattii*, whilst *Androsace integra* grew nearby, the spreading inflorescence of pink flowers dwarfing the leaf rosette. At this point I sustained a freaky leg injury and was confined to the roadside for the rest of the day!

After a good lunch we continued, beginning our climb into the Zhedou Shan and stopping first for some superb *Paeonia anomala* subsp. *veitchii*. Then over the pass a bit of searching found *Primula violescens*, *P. monroi*, *P. sikkimensis*, with a couple of *Sinopodophyllum hexandrum* and *Aquilegia ecalcarata*. The road descended into a lush forested valley and we found some fine *Salvia prattii*, with yellow *Siphonostegia chinensis* and *Lilium duchartrei* – alas in bud. A bit further and the slender greenish-yellow orchid *Calanthe davidii* was growing on a bank with a big *Arisaema consanguineum* nearby.

A bit of poor navigation meant we arrived later than planned!

Day 15 21 June – Jiajin Shan

We took photos of the Danba riverfront as we left the city (or at least thought we had left the city). Driving up the sunny Dabu River valley we stopped to photograph the local buildings and then a bit further on ground to a halt. Sichuan roadworks had struck – there had been no previous indication that the road was to close until 6pm (not even from the police that checked our passports outside Danba!). Luckily, a car



load of locals told us of an alternative route, which though long, would still be quicker. We set off straightaway, stopping to photograph a population of *Eremurus chinensis* and then having driven through Danba (again) we stopped for the well-known stone towers. After a while we took a side road and began to slowly climb into the hills (on a good road), pushing on for a while as we had no idea how long our journey might take. Eventually we reach higher ground and climbed above the tree line into a fantastically scenic mountain landscape, with ragged shark-tooth peaks and some extraordinary geology. There were big swathes of *Primula monroi*, stands of *Meconopsis integrifolia* and then having stopped for the view we found a low-growing pink *Primula sp.* along with an assortment of other alpine turf dwellers. There was white (or pink) *Androsace brachystegia*, *Oxygraphis glacialis*, *Primula melanops* and yellow *P. songii*, as well as some pretty *Leontopodium jacotianum*. We had lunch in this magnificent spot.

The pass was not far away and this too had a wonderful assortment of alpine plants. Among quickly found *Saussurea quercifolia* and then a fine big *S. medusa* on the scree. Big hummocks of a yellow *Rhodiola sp.* and *Potentilla biflora* coloured the rocky landscape and tucked among the rocks were *Saxifraga unguiculata* and *Corydalis tribilobipetala*. Meanwhile, across on the other side David had found *Meconopsis lancifolia*, and further searching added *Saxifraga aurantiaca*, *S. melanocentra*, pink *Corydalis dajingensis* and *Cremanthodium decaisnei* to our burgeoning haul. The floral displays as we descended were superb with sheets of *Primula sikkimensis*, hundreds of *Meconopsis integrifolia*, drifts of *Corydalis atuntsuensis*. We stopped to photograph a feisty bull yak and then passed down through flowery shrubberies of *Rhododendron roxieanum* into the tall lichen clad fir forests. Sadly, we couldn't afford to stop any more, at least until we saw an old Wari King's palace alongside the river quite a bit further on.

The unnamed pass had been a botanically-rich find – thanks to Sichuan roadworkers! However, what the Sichuan roadworkers give on one hand they take with the other and we got the news during dinner that the road to Balang Shan would be closed from 7am. We would have to leave early tomorrow to enjoy the pass.

Day 16 22 June – Balang Shan I

It all looked a bit grim first thing, a big storm had come through and it was still raining hard as we left in the early gloom. But by the time we had gone through the tunnel and descended a bit to have breakfast the rain had stopped and been replaced by mists,



Saussurea medusa

which were lapping the mountains as we ate. Driving back up we stopped for some patches of *Pedicularis artselaeri* in rock crevices and then stopped at a big sloping meadow. Two hours were spent here among the diverse lush growth. Tall white spikes of *Veratrum grandiflorum* stood tallest, at times alongside blackish *V. nigrum* and the deep purple of *Iris chrysographes*. Another deep purple was provided by *Phlomis melanthera* and yet another by the stunning pouches of *Cypripedium tibeticum*, including one clump of ten flowers. Other pink variants of the latter were found near *Iris goniocarpa*. Laced throughout the meadow were the delightful deep blue flowers of *Corydalis barbicephala*, the orange and green of *Euphorbia pekinensis*, *Caltha palustris*, the broad umbels of *Pleurospermum yunnanense*, the wonderful bicolored spires of *Pedicularis davidii* and delicate *Maianthemum szechuanicum*. More localised gems included *Galearis wardii*, *Lilium lophophorum*, *Corydalis pseudocristata* and *Fritillaria sichuanica*.

Moving on spent time on another higher slope, this time among *Omphalogramma viola-grandis*, *Primula monroi*, electric blue *Corydalis curviflora*, white *Gentiana prattii* and the tiny pink orchid *Galearis spathulata*. Lunch was beside a stream and slopes clothed in *Meconopsis integrifolia* and its peculiar dangling cousin *M. punicea*. There were swathes of *Primula monroi* and *P. sikkimensis*, stands of *Cardamine macrophylla* and a fine lousewort *Pedicularis triangularidensis*, as well as the huge leaves of *Ligularia cymbrifera*. Higher still another slope had four meconopsis with purple *M. lancifolia* and blue *M. rudis/balagensis* joining the collection. Other plants included *Saxifraga melanocentra*, *Primula melanops* and *Pedicularis davidii* in its deeper pink variant var. *pentadon*.

There were further stops for slopes covered in the more compact forms of deep blue *Corydalis barbicephala*, *Meconopsis lancifolia* and primulas, but the mist was closing in and when we reached the pass we could see nothing. There was time for a quick barbecue from the sole roadside hawker up here today and then we started down, seeing some superb ice-blue *Corydalis melanochlora* and a *Ranunculus sp* on the rocks. Lower down there were many *Primula conspersa* in various shades of pink. Luckily, we arrived at the Rilong just as the road had been reopened so didn't have to wait around.

A jolly evening was enjoyed with some questionable local firewater!



Day 17 23 June – Balang Shan II

Another early departure was necessary (not what groggy heads needed) but it was worth it as we enjoyed superb views of the Balang Shan on a clear morning. We stopped several times on the way up for Four Girls Mountains and then from the pass we could see the plunging mist choked green valleys below. Eating breakfast at 4483 metres a Grandala appeared and had a few of us chasing down the road to photograph this stunning high mountain bird. We didn't botanise at all, although the slopes were covered in now familiar flowers. Instead it was the landscapes and occasional Red-faced Rosefinch that got our attention. However, there was a botanical finale bar none. Stopping first to look at the green, white and pink foliage of *Actinidia kolomikta* we then drove a short distance further and stopped beside a magnificent sight – two dozen pristine *Cardiocrinum giganteum* subsp. *yunnanense*, that erupted from the ferny understorey like lilies on steroids. Some specimens were beautifully suffused with purple-red and the whole sight was quite arresting.

All that was left was for lunch and then the drive into Chengdu, which this time proved straightforward and painless. We arrived in good time to relax in our very comfortable hotel located in streets still looking authentically Chinese from the days of the plant hunters. Some went to see the local temple complex or planned shopping for the next morning.

Day 18 24 June – Return flights

A staggered departure saw us returning to various parts of Europe, to New Zealand and me onto Japan for more plant hunting exploits.



Grandala



For information on our tours
please contact
info@viranatura.com

Rheum nobile