AGS tour to the Peloponnese looking for autumn flowering bulbs

by Louise Hay
Sponsored by the Merlin Trust

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Merlin Trust for sponsoring me to be a part of the Alpine Garden Society tour to the Peloponnese. John and Sheila Richards deserve a huge thank you for organising the trip, leading the group and sharing with us all their knowledge and passion for the Peloponnese and its natural history. Thank you also to the other members of the tour who freely shared their enthusiasm for Greece and its alpine plants.

Contents

Introduction

This report is an account of the AGS tour to the Peloponnese from 30th October to 8th November 2013 lead by John and Sheila Richards. Travelling in a mini bus we travelled from Athens airport through the Eastern Peloponnese, and down to the most south easterly point of the mainland at Cape Teneron.

The description of the tour is written in chronological order. The plant species I have mentioned covers only a handful of the number of plants we actually saw. I focused mainly on autumn bulbs and other species I believe to be the most interesting. My primary aim is to describe my experience of exploring this beautiful part of Greece. In doing so I also hope to provide the reader with an insight into what species grow in which locations and habitats and to discuss some of the characteristics of the different species.

Shortly before the trip I had accepted a job at the Eden project as a horticulturist in their Mediterranean biome. The opportunity to travel to the Mediterranean and botanise the flora growing in their natural habitat and understand how they fit into their local ecology would provide me with invaluable knowledge for this new job. It would help me to cultivate the Mediterranean biome more successfully and to more accurately replicate ideal conditions for growing Grecian autumn bulbs. Like many gardens, the Mediterranean biome reaches its prime in the spring. I hoped that by growing many of the plants we saw I could extend the season of the garden.

Climate and Geography

The Peloponesse is the southern most part of the Greek mainland. It is connected to the mainland by the Rio-Antirio Bridge which straddles the narrow sea line, the Corinth canal. It has a typical Mediterranean climate with long hot and dry summers with clear skies and cool wet winters. The flowering times of the autumn bulbs are regulated by this weather pattern. The winter rains, which begin in late September to October, prompt the flowering of the *Crocus, Colchicum, Sternbergia* we were searching for. During the scorching summer these plants have died down and spent the time protected underground as a bulb.

Habitat

The terrain is mainly mountainous with its highest peak reaching over 2400m. The greatest influence on the Greek habitat is man. Over many centuries we have been cultivating the land, terracing it for orchards and groves. Very little of the native pine forests now remain. In their place different vegetation types have grown.

The dominant vegetation types are maquis and garigue. Maquis vegetation consists of dense evergreen trees and shrubs reaching 1-3m in height. Maquis has the incredible ability to rejuvenate after burning. Many of the trees and shrubs which make up maquis vegetation will sprout from the base of the plant if the top is destroyed. This is also a good defence against grazing goats.

Garigue vegetation is more open than maquis and is made up of much smaller evergreen shrubs. It is characterised by many aromatic small shrubs. Being more open allows annuals, orchids and bulbs more opportunities to grow. Amongst garigue vegetation is where we mostly found the autumn bulbs we were looking for.

In reality there are many different heights of vegetation in between the dwarf, open garigue and the taller dense maquis.

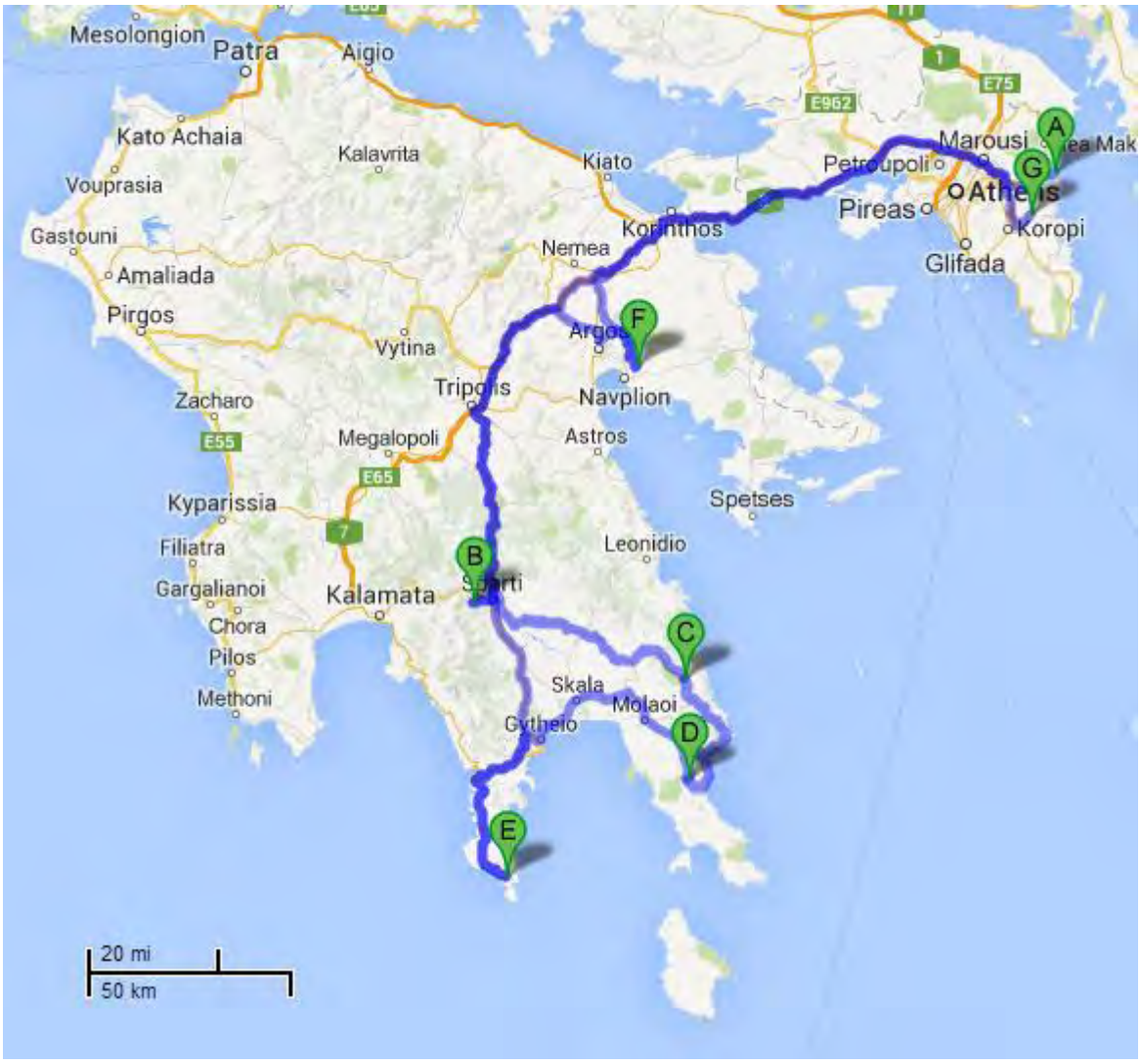
Both vegetation types are dominated by evergreen trees and shrubs with tough leathery, dull green leaves. Many species have evolved characteristics to protect them from grazing and the scorching summer sun. Thorns or prickly leaves might deter all but the hungriest of goats. Tough leaves, protective oils and the ability to regenerate from fire help to protect them from the summer sun.

Itinerary

Wednesday, 30th October	Fly from London to Athens. Overnight stop in Rafina near.
Thursday, 31st October	Drive from Rafina to Mistras. Road side stops en route near Mantherea and Alepochori. Overnight stop in Mistras.
Friday, 1st November	Grounds of the Byzantine monasteries of Mistras and Neokaria gorge. Overnight stop in Mistras.
Saturday, 2nd November	Drive from Mistras to Gefira. Stops en route near Richia, at Lambokambos and several other road side stops. Overnight stop in Gefira.
Sunday, 3rd November	Monemvasia island and the mountains above Kalives. Overnight stop in Gefira.
Monday, 4th November	Drive from Monemvasia to Gytheion. Stop en route at Marathonisi island, walk near Ageranos and 2 other road side stops. Overnight stop in Gytheion.
Tuesday, 5th November	Drive to Mani Peninsula. Walk from Stavros to Cape Tigana. Overnight stop in Gytheion.
Wednesday, 6th November	Drive deep into the Mani. Porto Kagio headland and walk to Cape Tenaron. Overnight stop in Gytheion.
Thursday, 7th November	Drive from Gytheion to Napflio, Stop en route at KrioNero Overnight stop in Napflio.
Friday, 8th November	Depart Nafplio for Athens airport.

Map

This map shows the route we travelled. The letters pinpoint key stops and help to determine our direction of travel.



A Rafina
B Mistras
C Lampokampos
D Monemvasia
E Cape Tenaron
F Nafplio
G Athens International Airport

Thursday, 31st October – Rafina to Mistras.

At 10 o'clock on a typically warm, blue skied October morning we left the hotel in Rafina near Athens airport, for the Peloponnese. We stopped en route to peer down the vast steep cliffs under the Rio-Antirio bridge to the Corinth Canal below.

Our next stop was along the roadside near Manthirea. Here is where our botanising began. Just inches from the tarmac on the edge of Prickly Oak scrub land, *Crocus hadriaticus* (Fig. 1) bloomed. Clambering up into the prickly scrub we found their white blooms with yellow throat and tube in abundance. A sharp eyed member of our group spotted a lone *Crocus biflorus subsp melantherus* (Fig. 2) amongst the maquis vegetation. This species is easily distinguished by its black anthers and its deep purple feathering on the outer tepals which dramatically contrast with their white colour.

Fig. 1 *Crocus hadriaticus*

Fig. 2 *Crocus biflorus subsp. melantherus*

As we neared Alepochori the passengers on the bus simultaneously spotted a yellow sea of *Sternbergia sicula* (Fig. 3) We pulled over for a closer look. *Crocus hadriaticus* was also at this site. The perianth tube of this specimen was purple as opposed to the yellow ones we had seen earlier. A subtle, but very handsome variation.

Later that afternoon during stops along the south bound road we went on to see two more *Crocus* species, a *Colchicum* and *Cyclamen hederifolium.* The *Crocuses* we saw were *C laevigatus* (Fig 4 and 5) and *C boryi* (Fig 6). John explained that these *Crocus* are usually found together and distinguishing between them is very difficult. They both have white tepals which may be feathered with purple (this is less common in *C boryi*) deep yellow throats and creamy white anthers. Both can have orange styles although those of *C boryi* may be red and those of *C laevigatus* may be yellow. They can both have 3-4 short leaves present at flowering time, but *C boryi* may have up to 7. The most distinguishable difference is between them is their size and shape. Compare Fig. 4 and

Fig 3. *Sterbergia sicula under Pyrus pyratica*

Fig. 4 *Crocus laevigatus*

Fig. 5 with Fig. 6 to see that *C laevigatus* is slightly shorter and more chalice shaped than the taller more slender *C boryi*. The differences were often very subtle, but these two examples show the differences at their extremes. Fig. 6 shows how when *C boryi* dries it remains the same colour as the new blooms, whereas *C laevigatus* dries to a primrose yellow.

Fig. 5 *Crocus laevigatus*

Also at this site we spotted more examples of *C biflorus subsp. melantherus*, and a lilac tinted *C hadriatus* making this the most diverse *Crocus* site we visited.

Friday, 1st November – Grounds of the Byzantine monasteries of Mistras and Neokaria gorge.

After a night at Mistras we spent the morning exploring the steep hill on which the ruins of the ancient monastery of Mistras remain. Growing amongst the cracks in the stone walls were too many beautiful taxa to mention. The following pictures show a small selection of what we saw.

Fig. 7 *Campanula andrewsii*

Fig. 9 Asplenium ceterach

Despite this area being rich in plant life, we found only one autumn flowering bulb, *Crocus boryi*. A single near perfect clump of seven had somehow survived untrodden right in the middle of the path.

The spear shaped leaves of *Iris germanica var. florentina* were evident in several clumps around

Fig. 6 *Crocus boryi*

Fig. 8 Stachys candida

Fig. 10 Scolymus hispanicus

the monastery, but as the name suggests this is not a native species. It was cultivated by the monks for use as a perfume and has colonised the monastery ever since.

From the town of Mistras an ancient path leads along the wall of the Neokaria gorge. Down in the shelter of the gorge, where the sun rarely reaches and there are no goats grazing, trees can flourish. *Pinus brutia, Cupressus sempevirens, Abies cephalonica* could all be seen growing up from the depths of the gorge below. Edging the path was *Acer monspesulanum*. This can be differentiated from the closely related *Acer sempervirens* by its deeper leaf lobes, its deciduous habit and its parallel fruit wings. At our feet we saw numerous *Arisaema vulgare* (Fig. 11) blooming with their


Fig. 11 *Arisaema vulgare*

curious striped cobra like flowers. Further along the path growing alone was a striking *Colchicum*. Its faint tessellation helped John to identify it as *Colchicum lingulatum* (Fig. 12) an unusual find at this time of year as it has usually finished flowering by October. Also flowering out of season were a few *Spiranthes spiralis*, identified by the spiral of white flowers twisting around the stem. The biggest surprise of the afternoon was seeing *Ranunculus creticus* so far away from its native home in Crete.


Fig. 12 *Colchicum lingulatum*

Saturday, 2nd November – Mistras to Gefira

After another night at Mistras we headed off on the long drive south west to Gefira, not of course without several botanising stops en route. By the roadside we stopped for our first sight of *Crocus niveus* (Fig. 13) and *Crocus cancellatus* (Fig. 14). These are another pair which are very difficult to distinguish from each other. Both are similar in size and shape and can often be found in the same location. The yellow throat of *Crocus niveus* is a deeper colour than the pale yellow throat of *Crocus cancellatus,* but the main difference is in the style. Crocus *niveus* has a red style with three main branches, these are dissected at the end into fan like lobes, whereas *C. cancellatus* has an elongated style, whose numerous slender orange branches greatly overtop the anthers. (Grey-Wilson, 2010) Fig. 13 and 14 show relatively typical examples of either species, but we also saw every combination in between. This led John and the team to wonder whether interspecies hybridisation is going on.

On several of our road stops today we were bulb hunting amongst classic examples of garigue vegetation (Fig. 15). Making up this iconic, open environment were many dwarf, aromatic evergreen shrubs. Most notable to me was the aptly named barbed wire bush *Sarcopoterium spinosum* with its

prickly geometrically shaped branches and herbs such as the powerfully scented *Satureja thymbra* and *Coridothymus capitatus*.

Fig. 13 *Crocus niveus*

Fig. 14 *Crocus cancellatus*

Fig. 15 Garigue vegetation

Fig. 16 Autumn colour

Spectacular autumn colour was not something I had expected to see on the trip, but our roadside stop in the hills above Lambokambos showed me otherwise. (Fig. 16) Here we saw the bright red and orange, strawberry like berries of *Arbutus andrachne* along side the red leaves of the well known garden favourite *Cotinus coggygria*.

One of the highlights of the trip was today's stop in Lambokambos, renowned for its displays of autumn flowering bulbs. We were not disappointed. Here not only did we have our first sight of the perfectly formed *Crocus goulimyi* (Fig. 17), we saw hundreds of them en masse throughout the village. Its cheery purple goblet flowers could be found throughout neglected gardens, in the childrens playground and growing out of the corners of the roads and driveways where just enough

debris to sustain them had collected.

Whilst exploring the village Andrew, the other Merlin on the trip, came across a woodland of *Acer monspessulanum*. Upon entering he found it carpeted with *Crocus goulimyi* (Fig. 17 and 18) and *Cyclamen graecum* (Fig. 20 and 21). The ground was speckled throughout with pink and purple. It was a veritable fairy land! (Fig. 19)

Fig. 17 *Crocus goulimyi*

Fig. 18 *Crocus goulimyi*

Fig. 19 Woodland floor at Lambocambos

Fig. 20 *Cyclamen graecum*

A lot of time today was spent driving, and so at times high speed botanising was a must. From the bus we saw several clumps of *Erica manipuliflora* in flower. Fine grasses frequently lined the edges of the road and their foliage, dried by the intense summer sun shone magnificent gold.

Our final stop before reaching Monemvasia, was in a cultivated olive grove. (Fig. 21) Amongst the twisted olives trees we saw *Crocus boryi* in greater numbers than before. A single gnarled old Carob tree, *Seratonia siliqua* was in bloom. The male flowers, a raceme entirely of anthers, protruded from the thick woody trunk.

Our tour was a little late in the year to catch many *Scilla autumnalis* and *Heliotropium europaeum* in flower, but here in the far South East were a couple of hangers on still in bloom. Both are very common throughout the Mediterranean, and it is a joy to watch their dainty flowerheads bending this way and that in a breeze. *Heliotropium europaeum* can be recognised by its delicious smell of cherry pie.

Sunday, 3rd November – Monemvasia island and the mountains above Kalives.

A spectacular sunrise from behind the island of Monemvasia awoke us on our fourth morning in Greece. We had an exciting day ahead of us, visiting the unique island. Monemvasia lies separate from the mainland, but is linked by a short causeway. It was populated originally after it became an important port in the 6th Century.

Monemvasia has populations of several autumn bulbs (Fig. 24 and Fig. 26), its own endemic species of *Stachys*, *S spreitzenhoferi ssp. virella* (Fig. 23) and maritime vegetation. The vegetation here contained quite different species to the maquis and garigue vegetation we experienced over the previous few days.

Fig. 21 *Cyclamen graecum*

Fig. 22 *Pennisetum sp and Allium ampleoprasum*

Fig. 23 *Stachys spreitzenhoferi ssp. virella*

Fig. 24 *Sternbergia lutea*

Fig. 25 Monemvasia Island

Fig. 26 *Colchicum cupanii*

The sheer cliffs of the island look uninhabitable, but somehow seeds still manage to germinate there. John has a very interesting theory to explain how seed germination is possible in these extremely hostile conditions. Spiders! They spin their webs between the cracks in the rock and wait for some unfortunate prey to become tangled amongst it, but prey is not the only thing which gets caught. Seed which drops from the nearby vegetation can easily get stuck in the web. When the spider wraps its prey and takes it back to its nest to devour it, it may have inadvertently brought the seed with it. A spiders nest in the crack of a rock has just enough organic matter to germinate the seed and just enough room for the roots to anchor themselves. Many species have adapted to grow in this hostile environment. Amongst the ones we saw today was *Inula candida*, with its silvery rosettes of wavy margined leaves, *Ruta chalipensis* and *Scrophularia heterophylla.*


Fig. 27 Monemvasia island cliff face

Amongst the vegetation on the island is the lime green leaved shrub *Euphorbia dendroides*, *Anagyris foetida* which protects itself from the summer sun by dropping its leaves and regenerating in autumn and *Ptilostemon chamaepeuce* which has the look of an enormous sea thrift.

The afternoon took us up into the mountains above Kalives. The soil here is ericaceous, unusual for the Mediterranean. Fabulous examples of *Arbutus unedo*, was the highlight of these mountains. Some shrubs were covered in ripe and semi ripe, red and orange berries and white bell flowers. Others were the pink form *A. unedo var rubra*. *Lonicera impexa* rambled amongst the shrubs. This *Lonicera* with unusual clumps of orange seed produced at the shoot ends and cupped by the terminal leaf, is the parent of many *Loniceras* now in cultivation.

As expected autumn bulbs thrived on the island. *Cyclamen graecum* grew aplenty, as it has on many tour stops. Amongst the *C graecum* grew another *Cyclamen, C crassifolium*. Its leaves are larger, thicker and glossier than those of *C graecum*, but it's the strong sweet scent coming from the petals which really gives it away. Numerous *Allium callimischon* grew at the road edge alongside the tiny, delicate *Brizia maxima* the Greater Quaking Grass. Finally, a *Crocus* which we all agreed resembled *C. laevigatus* was found here.


Fig. 28 *Arbutus unedo*

Monday, 4th November – Monemvasia to Gytheion.

Our fifth day in the Peloponnese took us to the deep south, the Mani peninsula. En route we stopped 5 times to botanise and several times to wait for goats to disperse from the main road. This region is sparsely populated and the pace of life here seemed slow. Our first stop was unplanned, its purpose being to access the boot of the bus. By the side of the road was *Narcissus tazetta* (Fig. 29), a multi headed, sweetly scented Daffodil. We had not expected to see this beauty and finding it like this was a little bit of serendipity for Sue our *Narcissus* enthusiast. The *Allium callimischon* (Fig. 31) on this road side was an unusual specimen with prominent purple blotches at the tip of each petal.

On Marathonisi Island *Cyclamen graecum* covered the ground. Here we saw the full extent of the variability of *C graecum* leaves. Some were on a huge scale and each one was marked with a different bold silver and green pattern.

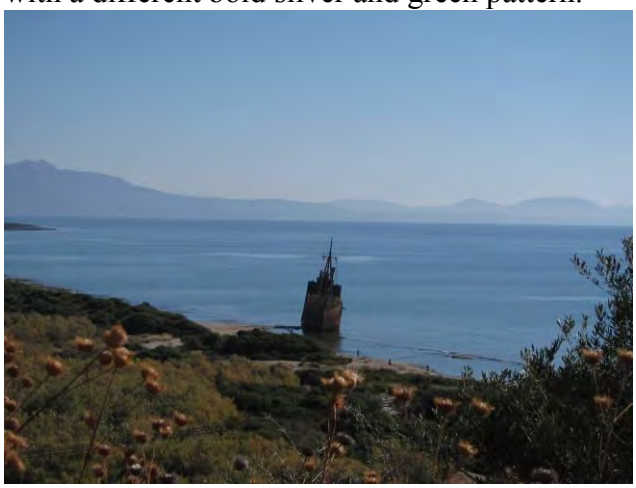


Fig. 30 Boat wreck on the Mani

Our third stop took us on a walk alongside a wood of *Quercus macrolepis* (Fig. 33), a type of woodland which has declined considerably and is now uncommon in the Mediterranean. Here we had our first sighting of narrow stemmed *Narcissus serotinus* (Fig. 37), something we were hoping to see a lot of as we drove deeper into the Mani. Our only sighting of *Colchicum parlatorlis* (Fig. 34) was also along this woodland edge. The pinkish purple flowers are usually solitary with a white tube and yellow anthers. Another first and only sighting, albeit a straggly specimen, was of *Colchicum psaradis* (Fig. 32).

Fig. 29 *Narcissus tazetta*

Fig. 31 *Allium callimischon* with purple markings on petals

Fig. 32 *Colchicum psaradis*

The pale pink flowers often form in small posies and the anthers are usually greyish yellow. This is easily confused with *Colchicum cupanii* which is slightly smaller and has deeper pink petals and black anthers. Distinguishing greyish yellow anthers from black anthers doesn't sound too tricky, but the task is made much harder when black anthers are disguised with yellow pollen.

Fig. 33 *Quercus macrolepis involucre*

Fig. 34 *Colchicum parlatoris*

Our final stop was littered with *Crocus boryi*, single and bicolor *C niveus* (Fig. 35) and a remarkable, deep purple *C. goulimyi* (Fig. 36) which wowed us all.

Fig. 35 *Crocus niveus ssp bicolor*

Fig. 36 *Crocus goulimyi* with deep purple tepals

Fig. 37 *Narcissus serotinus*

Tuesday, 5th November – Mani Peninsula.

An overnight storm got us all wondering whether the autumn bulbs had taken a battering or flourished in the rain. Today we were hoping to see *Narcissus serotinus* (Fig. 37) Their delicate flowers on slender stems could easily be wiped out by big rain drops. Fortunately, all that were in bloom remained intact and were scattered amongst the olive groves near Stavri along with *Sternbergia lutea, Colchichum cupanii* and single and bi colour *Crocus goulimyi* (Fig. 39). We also found enormous *Crocus niveus ssp. bicolor.* These two *Crocus* are very similar in appearance, save for the yellow centre of *Crocus niveus ssp. bicolor* which is absent in the bicolor *C. goulimyi.*

Fig. 38 *Limonium albo marginata*

Fig. 39 *Crocus goulimyi ssp bicolor*

We were on our way on foot to the headland of Cape Tigana. As we neared the headland the vegetation changed. Spikes of *Orobanche alba* parasitised *Thymus, Brassica cretica* an ancestor of the cauliflower, the Stinking Aster *Dittrichia graveolens*, *Asperula taygetea*, all grew amongst the garigue vegetation. The headland vegetation was almost solely *Allium ampleoprasum,* the small leaved Sea Lavender *Limonium vergatum* and the plant we were really looking for today, *Limonium albo marginata* (Fig. 38)**.** This endemic perennial had unusually large leathery leaves and tall racemes of lilac flowers which swayed in the sea breeze. They added a particular character to the islands vegetation.
That afternoon we made several inland stops in search of *Allium cercinatum* and *Narcissus elegans* Although this *Allium* does not flower at this time of year, we were hoping to spot it from its characteristic curly leaves. Until a recently reported sighting in the Mani, *Narcissus elegans* was known to only grow in Italy, Scily, Malta, the Balearic Island's and north West Africa. Unfortunately we didn't find either species.

The Mani landscape is known for its tall narrow rectangular houses. The reason for the unusual shape lies in the history of the region. John explained to us that long ago feuds between families were common place on the Mani. The houses were built this high to protect them from their neighbouring enemies. Many houses also had secret entrances so unwanted intruders could not enter.

Fig. 40 Abandoned Mani village

Wednesday, 6th November – Deep in the Mani.

On our last day in the Mani we explored two seaside locations. The first was a walk out to the headland at Portio Kagio to a tiny church (Fig. 41) at its point. These small churches are common throughout the Peloponesse, but this was the first which we found to be open. Inside the church white washed walls were dressed with paintings of religious icons. A box of candles, matches and an ornate gold coloured candle holder allowed visitors to light a candle in prayer. A few moments in the church was a welcome break from the heavy rain outside. The autumn bulbs in flower along the headland were *Allium callimischon, Colchicum cupanii, Crocus niveus* and *Cyclamen graecum.* As we commonly found throughout the trip, *Cyclamen graecum* was flowering in abundance. Growing along the coastline was *Beta vulgaris ssp maritima* the parent of spinach beet. After centuries of selective breeding, it bears only a loose resemblance to the crop we cultivate today.

The southern most point on the Greek mainland, Cape Tenaron was our destination this afternoon (Fig. 46). Our minibus driver Yannis parked at the top of the headland and we walked the several hundred metres to the tip of Greece. Cape Tenaron is famous for its well preserved remains of the tiled floors where there was once a Roman settlement (Fig. 42). *Narcissus serotinus* (Fig. 45) flowered on the headland, but not in the numbers we were expecting. Members of the team told stories about previous visits to the headland when they had seen carpets of the dainty daffodil. Seed heads on many of the flower stalks told us that we were too late for the big spectacular show. As consolation, many other taxa could be found in flower including *Colchicum pusillum, Crocus niveus* and our reliable favourite, *Cyclamen graecum* (Fig. 43). *Prospero latifolia* (Fig. 47) still bloomed as did the vibrant sea thistle *Atractylis cancellata* (Fig. 43). The leaf rosettes of *Colchicum lingulatum* were plentiful on the headland and hinted of a superb display earlier in the year.


Fig. 41 Church and garigue vegetaion on Napflion headland

Pausing next to a *Sarcopatoria spinosa* from the family Rosaceae and *Euphorbia acanthothamnos* (Fig. 43) from the family Euphorbiaceae we mused at how two plants which have evolved along very separate routes have developed such a similar form. Both have geometrically angled stems and many thorns. We were fascinated to think that two plants from such removed families can come up with the same solution to surviving in arid, windy conditions.


Fig. 42 Roman mosaic tile remains

Fig. 43 *Atractylis cancellata* and *Cyclamen graecum*

Fig. 44 *Euphorbia acanthothamnos (*above) and *Sarcopatoria spinosa* (below)

Fig. 45 *Narcissus serotinus*

Fig. 46 Southern most point of the Greek mainland

Thursday 7th November – Gytheion to Nafplio.

Today was the beginning of the end of our trip as we began the long journey north towards Athens airport. John had one last treat for us on our last day of botanising. It was the plant that many of us had been waiting for, *Galanthus regine-olgae* (Fig. 49 and Fig. 51), the autumn flowering Snowdrop. In order to find this rare beauty we had to climb up to 1100 metres up steep winding roads until we reached the golden Plane forests of Krionero. (Fig. 48).

Fig. 47 *Prospero latifolia*

This alpine landscape was barely recognisable as the Mediterranean. It was cool and damp with tall vegetation, much of it mossy and covered with lichen (Fig. 50) and leaf litter covered the ground. This is the environment where *G. regine-olgae* flourishes. The plant is almost indistinguishable from *Galanthus nivalis*, except perhaps for its lack of leaves at flowering time. This lack of leaves exposes the delicate stem, enhancing the fragility of the plant and making the hanging white flowers even more prominent. It seems we caught the tail end of their display and they were no longer carpeting the woodland floor as they are known to do, but we enjoyed them none the less.

Fig. 48 Plane forest

Fig. 49 *Galanthus regine-olgae*

Fig. 50 Lichen

Fig. 51 *Galanthus regine-olgae*

Friday 8th November – Nafplio to Athens airport.

Before heading to the airport on our last day in Greece we visited The Fortress of Palamidi located on a hill summit above Napflion. From the boundary walls, with the sun beating down on us we looked out on the city below and the country of Greece beyond reflecting on a wonderful 10 days in this fascinating and beautiful country.

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