

The Pontic Alps of North Eastern Turkey: An Autumn Exploration



James Lidgett

22nd October 2024 -> 30th October 2024

Acknowledgements

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The International Dendrology Society were generous to allow me to join this trip. They welcomed me warmly and I have made countless new friends. In particular thanks goes to Giles Crisp for organising the trip.

Our brilliant guides Ian Green, Andy Byfield, Ozan Balkan and Koen Camelbeke were not only great company but tireless in their answering of all our questions and odd requests. Our experience was made by them.

Thanks also to everyone at the RHS who allowed me time to take this trip.

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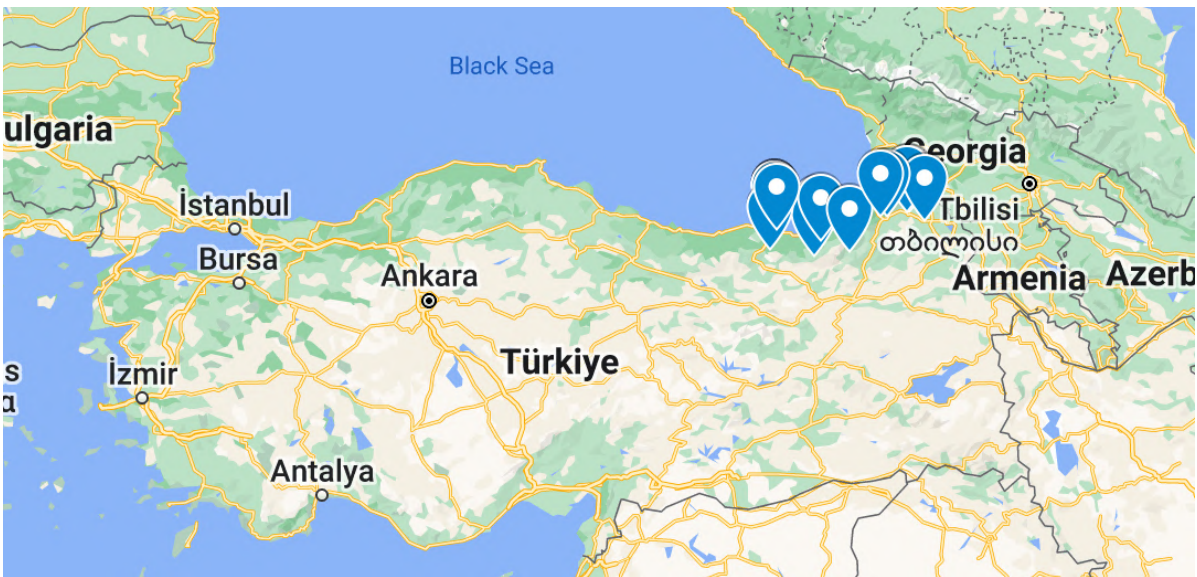
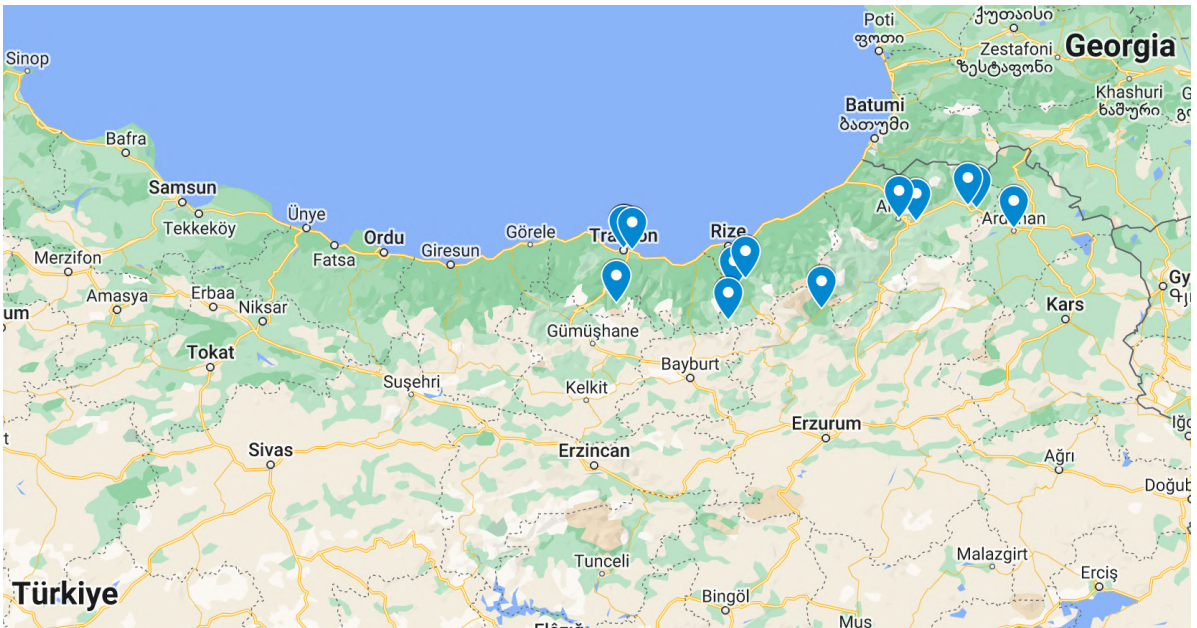
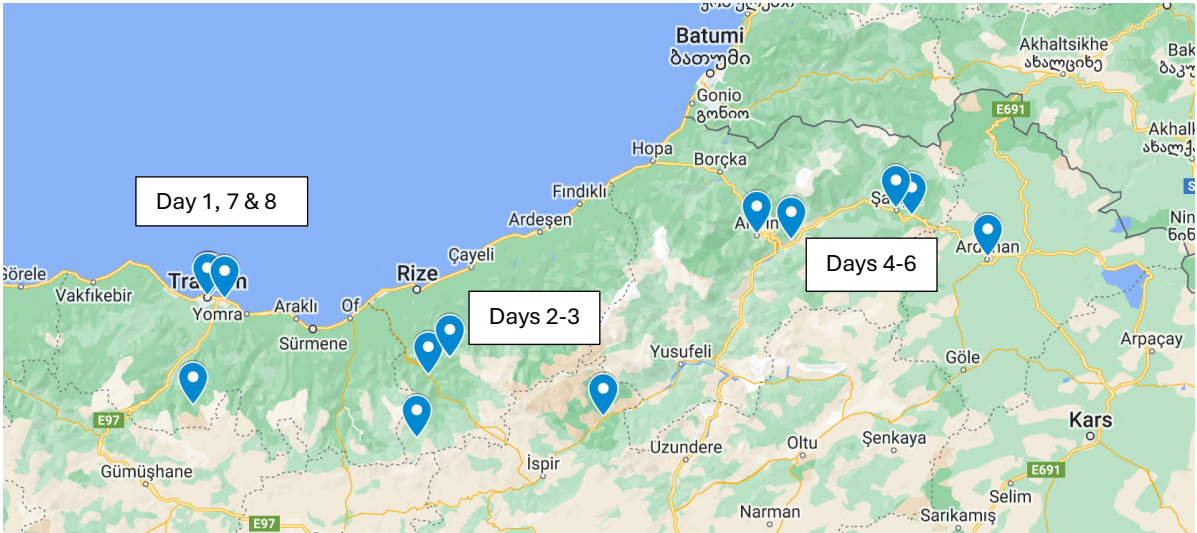
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Itinerary

Date	Location	Notes
22 nd October	Arrived Trabzon 8pm	Evening: Grand Zorlu Hotel, Trabzon
23 rd October	İkizdere Valley	Evening: Ridos Thermal Spa Hotel, İkizdere
24 th October	Anzar Yayla	Evening: Ridos Thermal Spa Hotel, İkizdere
25 th October	Çoruh Valley Dolişhane Church	Evening: Black Forest Hotel, Şavşat
26 th October	AM: Local Walk PM: Karagöl	Heavy snowfall for most of the day limited our travel Evening: Black Forest Hotel, Şavşat
27 th October	Cam pass Ardahan Pinus Sylvestris and Betula forest Sahara Yayla	Evening: Black Forest Hotel, Şavşat
28 th October	Artvin Borçka Valley Black Sea Coastal Drive Trabzon	Evening: Grand Zorlu Hotel, Trabzon
29 th October	Sümela Monastery	Evening: Grand Zorlu Hotel, Trabzon
30 th October	Return to London	



(maps courtesy of International Dendrology Society, 2024)

Motivation and goals

This trip is an 8-day trip with the International Dendrology Society to the 'Pontic Alps' (*Kuzey Anadolu Dağları*) of Northeastern Turkey. This is a mountainous area separating the Black Sea and Anatolian Plateau, which is rich in floral diversity. At the time of year we are visiting the focus will be on deepening knowledge of woody plants.

The area has a transitional climate between temperate-oceanic and Mediterranean. The Black Sea and northern side of the mountain chain is characterised by consistent rainfall year-round and relatively low sunshine compared to other areas of Turkey. In this regard it has a climate with some similarities to the British climate (current and projected), and a study of woody plants in the area will be immensely educative for a horticulturist planning future tree plantings in the UK. The Southern side of the slopes are likely to be drier and sunnier, and will illustrate how vegetation changes through climatic conditions.

I would like to understand where and how both familiar (*Quercus*, *Sorbus*, *Acer*, *Populus*, *Rhododendron*, amongst many others), and unfamiliar genera grow in this area of Turkey.

I have a particular interest in the culture and history of the area. I have visited a small part of this area of Turkey previously, and the landscape of Eastern Turkey, Georgia, Armenia and Western Iran is one of the favourites I have visited. It will be exciting to return.

While this is a tree focussed trip, reading a recent publication 'Wild Edens' has accessibly and engagingly described much flora of the area. In this book however only a single paragraph is written for the area beyond July, noting that by "mid-October, the high tops are empty, the first snows have fallen and the plants are dormant again". I'd like to focus on the tree species of the area when perhaps the show of bulbs and herbaceous perennials has passed its peak.

Finally, it would be valuable to meet with fellow enthusiasts and learn from leading experts in Turkish flora who will be leading our trip.

Report

Days 1 & 2 – Trabzon & İkizdere

The first day was a long one of travel – I set off at 3AM from London and arrived at 8PM at the Grand Zorlu Hotel in Trabzon. As I arrived in Trabzon, the blazing neon lights of shops, hotels and restaurants reminded me of previous trips to Turkey and the wider region in 2011 and 2018. How exciting to arrive!

Our fantastic guides, Ian Green, Andy Byfield and Ozan Balkan, arranged for us to leave at 9AM the next morning for our first journey – the İkizdere Valley. The sun was shining as we passed along the Black Sea road exiting Trabzon. This was the last we were to see of the sea for a week. As we veered southwards away from the sea fog and spitting rain – characteristic of the region – rolled in. We passed miles and miles of tea plantations in the foothills. From afar, some looked like soft lawns while others wound up impossibly steep slopes that made us marvel about how anyone could possibly harvest the crop.

Although in the UK we like to think of coffee when we imagine Turkey, it's clear that tea is most important here. In fact, Turkey has the greatest per person consumption of tea in the world – an incredible 3 kilograms each per year. The relatively cool and persistently moist northern foothills facing the Black Sea are where it is all produced and it was a joy to drive through the area.



Tea covered hills + *Alnus glutinosa* riverbanks

Although the area covered in our trip is not one I'd characterise as particularly troubled by invasive vegetation, we did get our first sighting of *Robinia pseudoacacia* and *Phytolacca americana*, the former seemingly able to adapt to any areas no matter how wet or dry.

After an hour or so we left the tea plantations and ascended into magnificent, forested hillsides. By eye the predominant trees in these humid, misty forests were *Fagus orientalis* and *Picea orientalis*. I gained a new appreciation of this familiar *Picea*, as their towering forms punctuated the yellow beech forests in delightful quantities. We made several stops which allowed an appreciation of the staggering diversity in these forests.

Rhododendron luteum and *Vaccinium Arctostaphylos* hung from rock-sides with sharp reds – this culminated in a particularly exciting red haze on one hilltop (as below). Otherwise, present in great quantities were *Carpinus orientalis*, *Euonymus europaeus*, *Osmanthus decorus*, *Sambucus nigra*, *Sambucus ebulus*, *Castanea sativa*, *Rubus caucasicus*, *Pyrus* sp., *Viburnum orientalis*, *Carpinus betulus*. No doubt there were many more I struggled to identify, but seeing as this was the first morning of the trip, I was content with at least knowing these. Taken as a whole, these trees and shrubs handsomely covered the hillsides until the point clouds hung over the hilltops, after which it was hard to tell how much further they rose. Lower exposed rocks were covered with curtains of *Hedera colchica*, a highlight of the day.



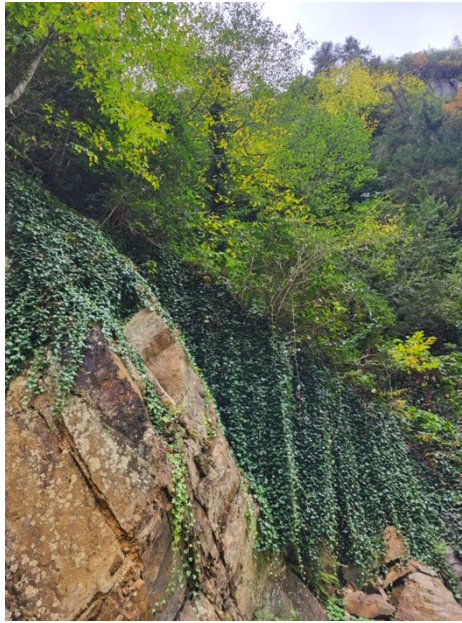
Fagus and *Picea* forest



Typical rock faces with red of *Viburnum Arctostaphylos*



Rhododendron luteum



Hedera colchica



More forest



Fagus orientalis



Rubus caucasicum

Our drivers put on a delicious picnic with warming çay, bread, cheese and vegetables for a quick break. We then climbed further, where we were met with unseasonally early snow from around 1500m on the granite hills. We were in search of the elusive *Quercus pontica* (an ongoing theme of the trip). Sadly, the snow became thicker and thicker (50cm in places) as we reached 1750m and we decided to turn back. It was an enjoyable experience to see the vegetation become sparser at altitude, where still *Picea*, *Fagus*, *Alnus*, *Robinia*, *Castanea*, *Vaccinium* and *Rhododendron* still held strong.



We drove on to our stay for the next two nights. I took this as a chance to practice my Turkish with hotel staff, to mixed results.

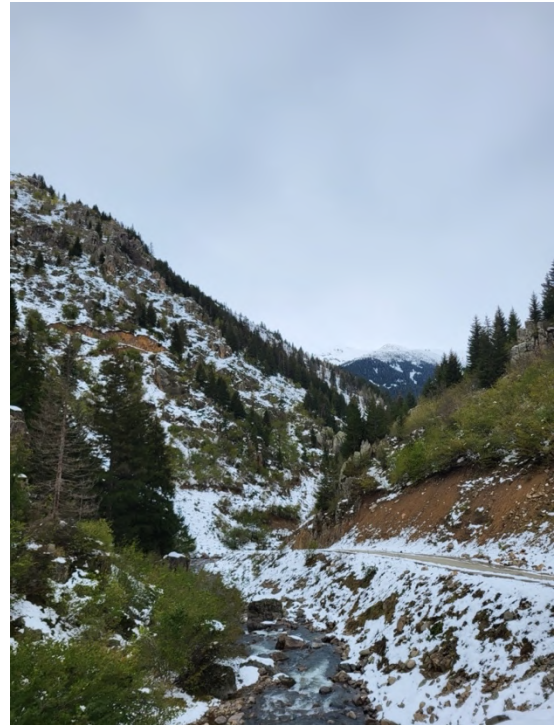
Day 3 – Anzar Yayla

A trip to Anzar Yayla. A yayla is an upland pasture, which are used for grazing when at their most productive in late spring to early autumn. These are particularly rich areas for flora in spring/summer, such as bulb meadows and herbaceous meadows. We were visiting in autumn, where the trees and landscapes took greater importance. Traditionally, seminomadic pastoralists would have returned to the kışlak (lowland pasture) to graze over winter.

We drove through a landscape of, once again, forested hillsides and mosques – one of my abiding memories of this trip will be filming such scenes from my passenger window. As we rose, we drove past a roaring river where the hills started to become almost exclusively *Picea orientalis* (with a few *Alnus*, *Fagus* and *Vaccinium* for company). We reached a logging village and passed by into the snow zone. Here towering *Abies nordmanniana* joined the *Picea*, though at rather low quantities.

We walked beyond the village uphill to 1960m and entered a landscape of exposed sand coloured craggy hills, with glorious stands of *Populus tremulus* competing with the *Abies* and *Picea*. Golden eagles flew high up in the air as some blue sky emerged. We walked in this area for several hours, never leaving the river on our right. The rosettes of many alpiners and herbaceous plants clung to the rocks (e.g. *Sedum stolonifera*, *Silene compacta*, *Digitalis ferrunginea*) while it was enjoyable to see forked spleenwort (*Asplenium septentrionale*), a fern which only occupies 2 sites in the UK. Several *Colchicum speciosum* were spotted on the way down in flower. We didn't get to explore the Yayla itself, sticking to roadsides.

We drove home with a few stops on the way to see quince (*Cydonia oblonga*) and hazel (*Corylus maxima*) planted alongside vast beds of an unidentified brassica near villages. The warm spa pool of our hotel provided respite after a long and memorable day.



Rocky
Landscapes
Picea,
Abies,
Aspen





Colchicum



Abies + Picea



Asplenium septentrionale



An older home

Day 4 – The Çoruh Valley

A groggy head and a false start due to losing my binoculars were not an auspicious start to the day. It turned out this mattered little as we left the humid, northern Pontic Alps, went underneath the snow covered tops through a 14km tunnel and re-emerged in a different world – the sun-baked south facing slopes. These were more Anatolian in character, a landscape that has captured my heart several times previously.

The hills turned a grey-orange hue and the vegetation was sparser in the strong sun. The road was raised above the river valley villages, which were lined with towering *Populus x uzbekistana* ‘Afghanica’ and groves of olive, quince, pomegranate, persimmon and more. *Cotinus coggygria* and *Rhus coraria* (source of edible sumac) raced up the hillsides, the *Cotinus* having a fiery shade at this time of year.



For the first time on the trip we had warm sun, not quite hot, as we walked and explored an untouched part of the Çoruh river. These riversides and adjoining hills were particularly diverse. Several *Salix* and *Populus* species populated the river banks, while the hillside vegetation included *Quercus hartwissiana*, *Juglans regia*, *Juniperus oxycedrus*, *Juniperus foetidissima*, *Crataegus orientalis*, *Paliurus spina-christi*, *Tamarix*, *Artemisia fragrans*, *Berberis orientalis*, *Acer divergens*, *Celtis glabrata*, *Ziziphus lotus*. My plant highlight was *Ephedrus major*, whose sharp silvery needle-like leaves highlighted a particularly handsome sub-shrub. This was a rich and wonderful walk.



Quercus hartwissiana



Walnuts



Ziziphus



Landscape



Acer divergens + Juniperus oxycedrus



Cornus mas + Berberis



Juniperus foetidissima

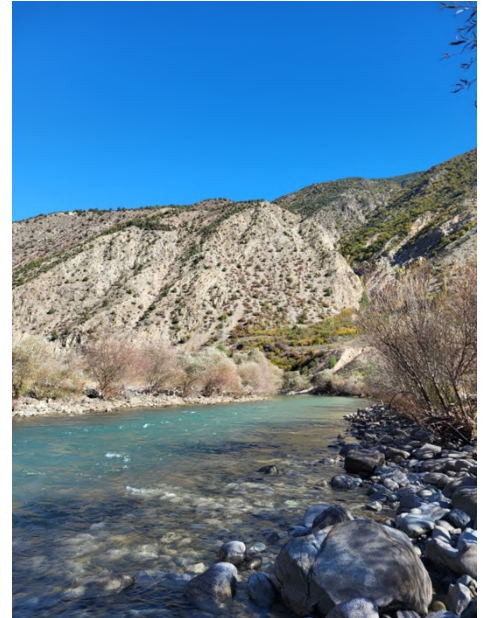


Ephedra major



<- *Paliurus spina-christi*

River Çoruh ->



We continued a long drive to our next hotel, stopping regularly to see Ibex and eagles. This was initially spectacular wild and wild country, however the area became increasingly dominated by dams. The most recent of which has seen a whole village, Yusufeli, be relocated up the hill as it is now submerged under water.

A quick stop at Dolişhane Georgian church as evening descended allowed us to see pomegranates (*Punica granatum*) and persimmon (*Diospyros kaki/lotus*) planted at gravesides. A curiosity was a mistletoe (*Arceuthobium oxycedri*) clinging to *Juniperus oxycedrus*.



Pomegranate



Juniperus oxycedrus with *Arceuthobium oxycedri* mistletoe



We arrived very late at the Black Forest Hotel near Şavşat, where heavy rain and temperatures no more than 5 degrees were forecast for the next day.

Day 5

We woke up to heavy snow, which continued until the early evening. While it was a beautiful scene, these were not ideal conditions for exploring. A few hardy souls and I went on a 2 hour snowy walk in the morning, but otherwise this was a day of rest and staring out at the window at a bleak snowy scene.



Day 6 – Cam Pass & Sahara Milipark

The sun started shining and blue skies emerged, rarely leaving us for the remainder of the trip. The views from our hotel balcony were staggering – snow dusted forests rising through the hills in the foreground (*Picea* and *Aspen*) with high white mountain tops in the distance. Our hotel host showed us a photo of a wolf near the entrance of the hotel a few days previously, but this was nowhere to be seen.

Our destination today was the Cam pass at 2450m – this road is a main thoroughfare through to the Georgian border, so our company was large lorries on the roads. Before reaching the top of the Cam pass, our guide Ian took us to trudge through the snow to a mysterious hillside to his great excitement (more below later). Sadly when we arrived the fog was so thick we could barely see a metre ahead. We took a group photo, returned and continued to the top of the pass.



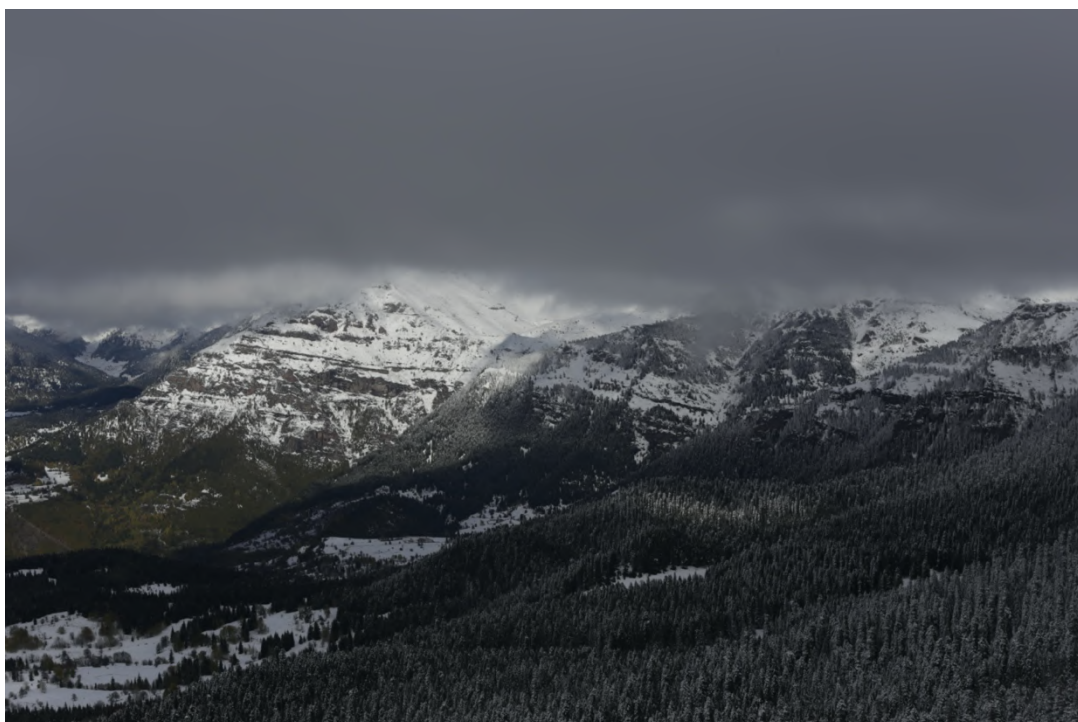
The sun returned as we wound our way to the top of the pass. This was a rather treeless landscape but still memorable. The top of the pass had a thick covering of snow, but fantastic visibility meant views spread all around showed the rocky exposed plains below leading onto further chains of snowy mountains in the distance. A lone fox greeted us at the top as we took in the views. We descended to the steppe below, photographed buzzards and bought a curious spicy fermented black carrot and turnip

juice at a petrol station (şalgam). We spent an hour exploring a *Pinus sylvestris* and multi-stemmed *Betula utilis* in planted woodland near Ardahan – the most worrying thing about this was the fact it used to be off limits due to mines.

On our way back to the pass we stopped and explored a sparse landscape of *Juniperus communis* 'Nana', *Juniperus sabina*, *Salix*, *Rosa rugosa*, numerous bare *Acer*, *Daphne mezereum*. It was strangely beautiful against the pure blue skies as eagles again circled above.



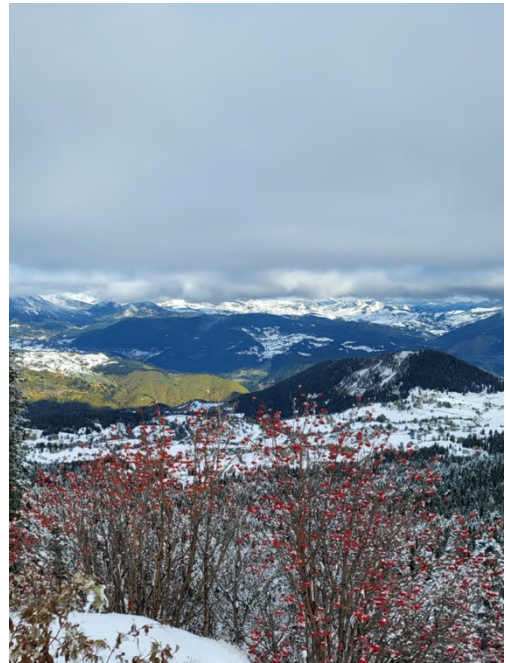
After exploring this area, our guides insisted we returned to the disappointing misty stop of the morning – Sahara Milipark. As soon as we arrived we understood why. As we turned a corner the heavy snow had created a magical scene, with colossal *Abies nordmanniana*, the red berries of *Sorbus aucuparia* lining hillsides leading to snowy tassles of *Betula pendula* above. The pathways were lined with remnants of *Centaurea*, *Datisca cannabina* and the common raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*). Also present were *Acer trautvetteri*, *Lonicera nummulariifolia* and *Rhododendron caucasicum*. We walked in speechless wonder taking in views as the sun hit Aspen, Oak, Acer and conifer forests.





Abies nordmanniana





Sorbus aucuparia

Viburnum lanatana buds



Rhododendron caucasicum



We were told the bulb and herbaceous meadows here in late May are a sight to behold, so I will aim to return in future years.

We returned to the hotel to a stunning sunset over the high mountains and low valleys, and later at night went out to enjoy the stars.

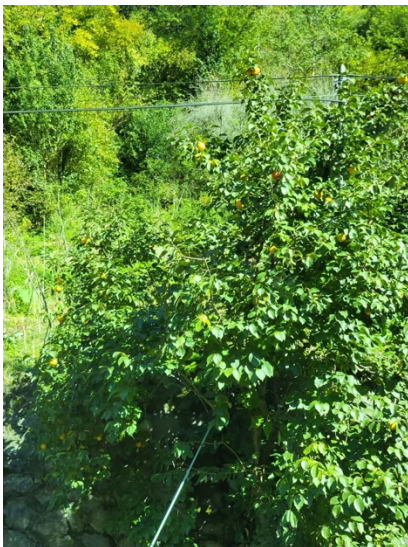


Day 7 – Drive back to Trabzon via the Borçka Valley

We left our enjoyable home for the past 3 days to return to Trabzon. This was a long drive with many stops on the way. Very quickly after leaving the high mountain purity surrounding our 700m altitude hotel the scenery again became dry and rugged. We were in red *Cotinus coggygria* and *Juniperus* territory once more. *Paliurus spina-christi*, *Pyracantha coccinea*, *Quercus petraea*, *Tamarix*, *Ephedra major* were all clipped by the harsher conditions to well below 10m tall. Onwards the scenery became greener, which led us past the easternmost *Pinus pinea* forests, a familiar sight of umbrellas.

However, a turn towards the Borçka Valley revealed yet another surprise of this wonderfully varied area. This was a relatively populated valley, tightly hemmed in to steep mountains with a powerful river running through its centre. This created conditions similar to our first few days – deep forest, verdant rock faces and groves of crops such as hazel (*Corylus maxima*). Particularly enjoyable, as a vegetable grower, was the sight of intense intercropping with maize, squash, brassicas growing closely together in fields surrounded by Hazel, Persimmon and *Carpinus orientalis*.

The tight hills created sharp contrasts between south and north facing, which resulted in appealingly dark and damp wall sides with a variety of ferns including the strappy *Pteris cretica*. It was fascinating to see a plant I keep in pots on my flat balcony clinging to moist rockfaces in the wild. We pulled up and had a picnic lunch in a hazel grove.



Persimmon



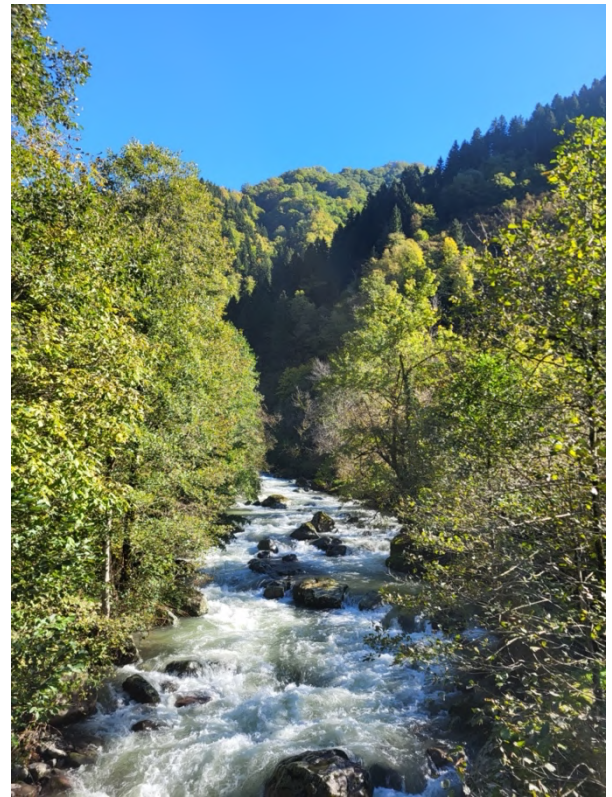
Carpinus orientalis



Hazel



Fern covered roadsides, with *Pteris cretica* amongst others



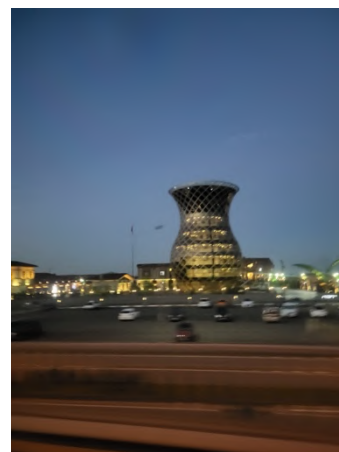
Edible gardens and rushing rivers

This being our last day fully exploring, we decided to walk higher to see if we could finally find the elusive *Quercus pontica*. This adventure had us walking up cobbled roads (which surprised us at these altitudes – in fact all roads in Turkey were of superb quality) where a few familiar plants from home emerged such as *Prunus laurocerasus*, *Rhododendron ponticum* and *Taxus baccata*. Sadly *Quercus pontica* remained unfound, so we contented ourselves with photos sent on the WhatsApp group of those found in previous travels. The soft undersides of *Rhododendron ungerii* were an appealing find on the way down.



Rhododendron ungerii

We drove away from this valley and powered home along the Black Sea coast. It was perhaps unusual to see this famously cloudy area basking in unbroken sunshine and blue skies. We were treated to a pleasing sunset, before the dazzling evening lights of restaurants and shops took over. A mention must be made of a modern, possibly 20 metre tall tea house building shaped like a Turkish çay glass in the town of Rize (famed for tea growing).



Day 8/9 – Sümela Monastery and Return to London

Our last day saw a trip to Sümela Monastery. There has reportedly been a monastery on this sheer cliff face at 1200m for around 1600 years. Aside from the dramatic location of the monastery, special interest is thanks to its 18th Century Biblical frescoes. The Monastery was occupied until 1923.

I had visited this monastery over 10 years ago in foggy conditions, so it was enjoyable to see it in clear skies and take in the breathtaking views all around. We were able to enjoy a walk down from the monastery, but this provided little opportunity for botanising.

We spent the night again in Trabzon, before an early flight took us back to London.



Conclusion

In respect to all my motivations for joining this trip, this Bursary was a huge success.

I learnt an enormous amount about the woody plants of this region of Turkey. I was able to see plants in the wild, ranging from sea level up to 2450 metres – this meant I covered a wide range of climatic and altitudinal zones. These included oceanic low altitude areas, with a climate approximating that of Western England, up into moister hills, over snow covered mountain tops and down the dry, sun-baked southern slopes towards the remainder of eastern Turkey.

With the help of my knowledgeable companions and guides I was able to identify over 80 species (many of which were unknown to me before this trip) from at least 30 plant families. These are invaluable in my development as a Horticulturist.

I have been able to meet many new friends and contacts in the horticultural World, and have a range of different places to visit and friends to seek advice from in future. I have also been able to discuss opportunities for learners at Wisley to be involved in conservation activities, which will help improve our offering in work-based learning within the RHS. Through social media posts I have been able to connect with people and promote RHS Bursaries and the Merlin Trust.

Additionally, I was able to appreciate and learn more about a culture of interest to me, particularly enjoying trying to get my head around basic Turkish verbs and phrases!

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Costs

This was a pre-organised trip with the International Dendrology Society, run by Green Tours. For this reason it is not possible to provide itemised costings of the trip, however the total cost was £3215. This included all food, accommodation, travel and entry costs.

Return flights from London Heathrow to Trabzon via Istanbul cost £364.59