

CELESTIAL SILK ROAD TRIP REPORT 2018



ViRA NATURA
TOURS

Day 1 30 May To Tashkent via Istanbul

Day 2 31 May To Samarkand & Tactakaraca Pass

After a few hours shut-eye we were whisked to Samarkand on a fast train. Driving out of the city we neared the dry granitic hills of the Hissar Range and soon saw stands of *Eremurus olgae* on the low hills. There were more as we gained height, stopping at the pass for an interesting local market of dried fruits and nuts. Lunch was some way down on the other side of the pass, in the shade of plane trees with a stream running pass. Along the nearby roadsides were the fun round pom-poms of *Astragalus eximia*, lovely clumps of salmony-pink *Dianthus uzbekistanicus*, nodding blue *Lindelofia macrostyla*, deeper blue *Anchusa azurea* and pale blue *Trichodesma incanum*. A track led to a slope with a few flowering *Eremurus olgae*, but much more was to come from these. Further along there were some stands of *Eremurus aitchisonii* in good flower as well as grassy areas with many *Gentiana olivierii*, purple *Dodartia orientalis*, some lovely flowery bushes of a purple-centred *Rosa sp.* and deep pink *Allium barsczewskii*. on the other side of the pass we stopped for a fine *Salvia sp.* in the rocks and nearby was pink *Phlomis salicifolia*.

The dainty wands of *Eremurus sogdianus* were seen as we descended and then we arrived at a superb site with a great abundance of *Eremurus olgae*. In a fenced field were also many soft yellow *Delphinium semibarbatum* and an assortment of steppe flora with *Astragalus alopecias*, *Cousinia sp.*, and yellow *Centaurea solstitialis*. However, star of the show was undoubtedly *Eremurus olgae* with some superb dense stands. Mingled among them were broad plants of pink *Phlomis thapsoides* and the odd *Onosma dichroatha*. A fine botanical start, to our tour.

Tomorrow a slice culture.

Day 3 1 June Samarkand

A hot day, but one full of impressive sights with the blue-tiled mausoleum of Gur-e-Amir (constructed for the modest butcher-cum-art-lover Timur),



Eremurus olgae

the amazing ensemble of the Registan, the remarkable achievements of Ulugbek (astronomer) and the blue-tile fest that is Shah-e-Zinda.

Day 4 2 June To Bukhara

The road rumbled the long way to Bukhara (if only the train left at a better time!), but this is an unmissable part of the Silk Road. We stopped at the remains of a caravanserai and its nearby water reservoir, an intriguing building that was much cooler than the surroundings today. Lunch was in a ceramics workshop where also saw a demonstration and heard about the methods employed to make the traditional ceramic. And then we arrived at the palace of the last Emir, a place where Russian architectural influences were attempted alongside traditional in at times disastrous fashion! It was quite a contrast, but despite its shortcomings, some of the interior exhibitions (e.g. gold embroidered clothing) was interesting.

Day 5 3 June Bukhara

The museum city of Bukhara is best walked and we began with a fascinating all brick mausoleum, taking in the outside of the Ark (were two foolish Brits were executed back it the days of the Great Game), the wonderful Kalon complex of medrassas, blue domes and the impressive minaret. Moving through the trade domes the shoppers among us were tempted and the afternoon was free to buy, revisit the monuments or relax. After dinner, we drove to the airport and took our short flight to Tashkent to prepare for the botanical feast ahead.



Registan, Samarkand

Day 6 4 June To Beldersay

Morning rain quickly dispersed as we left Tashkent, stopping to buy necessary supplies before heading into the green countryside and climbing higher towards mist-shrouded mountains. A short stop produced a selection of common roadside plants including *Anchusa azurea*, *Salvia sclarea*, *Verbascum songaricum*, *Achillea filipendulina* as well as *Rosa kokanica* and a tree of *Acer semenovii* weighed down with countless fruits. There were many more of the latter as we climbed and then nearing our hotel the first stands of the impressive *Eremurus robustus*, the titan of the genus.

After lunch, we took a long walk down the road seeing many new plants. First up were *Allium tschimganicum*, *Arum korolkovii* and a stand of slender *Eremurus turkestanicus*. Its' magnificent cousin was in perfect condition lower down, with a stand of a dozen pale pink spikes towering above us all. the rich violet *Allium jodanthe* grew beneath. The roadsides were very rich, with three different bee-friendly roses; *Rosa kokanica*, *R. ecae* (both yellow) and abundant white or pink *R. corymbifera*, as well as *Lonicera tartarica*, *Elaeagnus angustifolius* and the curious shrub *Atraphaxis virgata* was smothered in pink seedpods, which created the illusion of flowers from a distance. That was the wood section, but there were many other herbs and bulbs. A fine stand of *Prangos pabulifera* was followed by *Dictamnus albus*, *Iris halophila*, *Salvia korolkovii*, *Ferula penninervis*, *Scorzonera tragopogonoides* and tumbling masses of *Vicia tenuifolium*. By now the sun was out and all was bright and flowery.

There was a tea break and then we walked a bit further as golden orioles yodled in the background. There were wonderful displays of *Eremurus robustus* mingled with *Dictamnus albus* on a high bank and closer to hand some good spikes of *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* and bristly-stemmed *Onosma dichroantha* dripping with yellow or reddish tubular flowers.

Day 7 5 June Beldersay

A fabulous sunny morning with flocks of house martins whirring about the hotel and the sun warmed the hills. We set off on the chairlift, which whisked us



Iris korolkovii

another 600 metres higher. Below us passed stands of *Ixiolirion tartaricum* and *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*, then slopes red with the seed-heads of *Rheum maxcimowiczii*. At the top were good stands of bright yellow *Phlomoides fulgens* and in wetter places big grey leaved of *Ligularia macrophylla* was flowering. A track let up to a summit, passing through vast stands of *Prangos pabularia*. Amongst these we found the first of many lovely fine-lined *Iris korolkovii*. These continued as we walked find more and better specimens. The reddish-brown spires of handsome *Eremurus regelii* also grew in stature with some superb stands with wonderful mountain backdrops. Tucked among all of this were a few *Phlomoides speciosa* and pink *Pseudosedum lievenii*. Pretty mats of mauve-blue flowered *Lagotis korolkovii* plastered the open ground before we reached the summit with expansive views of the Ugam-Chatkal region. Our picnic site couldn't have been more dramatically positioned, above a steep slope with the same superb view. There was also the bonus of a good number of white *Eremurus lactiflorus* still with some flowers. An idyllic spot.

After lunch, we back tracked to the chairlift, stopping for some even bigger and better *Iris korolkovii*. Then most of us walked back to the hotel, quickly finding a flowery shrub of *Atraphaxis pyrifolia*, a multi-spiked *Eremurus turkestanicus* and stands of *Allium tchimganicum*. *Ixiolirion tartaricum* grew increasingly common as we descended, reaching a rocky slope plastered in the rusty, aging leaves of *Rheum maximowiczii* above which were countless rich-red seed-heads. Among these were some superb pink *Cousinia fetisowii*, the unopened buds wrapped in wonderful cobwebs of hairs. Continuing down there were banks with dozens of *Gentiana olivieri* with blue flowers like stain-glass window with backlight. Lastly great swathes of *Ranunculus grandifolius* flanked the big metal gates that marked the hotel boundary.

Day 8 6 June Chimgan Valley

Another glorious morning. Walking into the lower valley was like entering a fabulous flower garden. Everywhere was colour, with vast stands of *Prangos pabularia* punctuated by hundreds of spires of *Eremurus robustus*, with floriferous bushes of *Rosa ecae* smothered in flowers as masses of mauve *Vicia tenuifolia* tumbled over everything. The deep violet of *Allium jodanthum* completed the ensemble. It was a stunning scene, improved no little by the mountains beyond. Wandering slowly up the track we found many other interesting plants including *Spiraea pilosa*, *Phlomoides ostrowskiana*, the sanguine seed heads of *Rheum maximowiczii*, foamy masses of *Polygonum alpinum*, *Dracocephalum integrifolia* and thousands of spires of *Eremurus turkestanicus*. Then by a late snow patch the red and yellow stars of *Tulipa dubia* shone out. In fact, there were quite a few and more were seen higher up near our lunch spot. However, before we reached there we saw abundant *Geranium collinum/saxatile*



Eremurus regelii

in various colour forms and some elegant *Primula matthioli* beside a small stream. Lunch was in a small grove of wonderful, battered silver birch *Betula pendula*.

Close by our lunch spot was a clump of *Paeonia hybrida*, with a few more (pristine) flowers scattered across the scrubby slope. A drift of *Anemone narcissiflora* subsp. *protracta* was near the stream with more tulips, which were actually quite numerous. Across the slope were also some clumps of pink *Linum heterosepala* subsp. *olgae*. On the way back down, we saw a few *Macrotomia ugamensis* and then a solitary but lovely *Allium oreophila*. More photographs were taken of the *Eremurus robustus* garden with snow-streaked Chimgan peak in the background before we reached the vehicles. There was a honey buying stop on the way back after a rewarding foray into the warm flowery hills.

Day 9 7 June To Aksu-Dzabagly

The confusing geography of the 'stans' means the 'as the crow flies 100km journey to our next destination actually meant three times the distance and an international border. We left the pleasant environs of Beldersay and drove back to Tashkent on a fast warming day. The first part was easy and then a scrum to get through passport on the Uzbek side. The Kazakh side was a bit less chaotic and we got through okay and met our guide. The road to Chimkent is now fully paved a fast and we sped past big stands of *Alcea nudiflora* to the city. Lunch was thankfully air-conditioned.

Then the remaining hot hour and a half to Dzabagly, which at 1100 metres was a bit cooler. The guesthouse had pleasant tree-filled gardens, a nearby shop for cold beer and most importantly for many, wi-fi!

Day 10 8 June Aksu-Dzabagly Nature Reserve

This superb nature reserve is a pristine part of Central Asia, and has been protected and significantly ungrazed by livestock for a century. The extensive juniper woodlands and swathes of meadows are untrammelled and stunning. We drove up into the park stopping by a stream from where we intended to walk further along the valley. Rumbles of thunder and moody skies had us worried at first and indeed there was a brief downpour but this didn't last long and it was the only significant rain we had. Despite the untimely wet, there were still fine stands of *Ligularia macrophylla*, *Pedicularis dolichorrhiza* and various roses including our first *Rosa alberti* and lots of yellow *R. kokanica*. On the heavy scree, we found many broad-leaved *Allium karataviense*, some in reasonable condition. Then



by the stream a couple of lovely red-brown *Aquilegia atrovinosa*, *Pyrola rotundifolia* and *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*. Back on the main track we walked past flowery slopes with lots of flower-laden white *Rosa fedschenkoana* and then stands of *Dictamnus albus* and the lovely *Morina kokanica*, the white flowers aging to red-pink. There was also *Campanula albertii* on the rocks above the gorge, *Gentiana olivieri* and neat shrubs of *Spiraea pilosa* covered in white flowers. Lunch was by the small house used by ranger/researchers in the park.

Then we walked back out to the entrance, past superb displays of roses with yellow *Rosa ecae* and *kokanica*, and some stunning shrubs of *R. fedtchenkoana*. The scent of the roses perfumed the air during the entire walk. On the banks were many *Linum heterosepala* subsp. *olgae*, *Veronica spuria*, *Hedysarum semenowii*, many *Iris halophila*, some more stunning clumps of *Gentiana olivieri*, the pink drumsticks of *Allium fetisowii* and the shimmering plumes of *Stipa pulchra*. Further along and we found *Allium barsczewskii* mingled with *A. fetisowii* attended by dozens of Black-veined Whites. In fact, the meadows had been in a constant state of movement all day with hundreds of fluttering butterflies. Near the end of the walk was *Hedysarum plumosum* and the bluish onion *Allium caesium*. It had been a delightful walk back through a pristine flowery landscape.

Day 11 9 June Aksu-Dzabagly Nature Reserve

Our second foray into the reserve began somewhat inauspiciously with early rain and moody-looking mountains. But after a short shower on arrival the sun came out and stayed out for the rest of the day. And what a superb plant day it was. Making our way up past great stands of *Ligularia macrophylla* we followed a low ridge to the river where there was *Allium carolinianum*(?), *Hedysarum semenovii* and *Codonopsis clematidea*. Crossing over we found a solitary *Trollius altaicus*, but this was but a taster of this species. Scanning the scree, we picked out a solitary red *Tulipa greigii*, which was still in good condition. However, walking to the lower snow patches (which were extensive this year) and past superb clumps of *Dictamnus albus* we reached a tulip wonderland with thousands of red-and-yellow *Tulipa kaufmanniana*. Mingled among the tulips in places was the soft pink of *Corydalis ledebouriana* and right next to the snow were a few egg yolk yellow *Colchicum luteum* too. Continuing slowly up (that was all we could manage!) we found fine clumps of *Aster alpinus*, *Linum heterosepala* subsp. *olgae* and then a superb *Iris orchoides* with five spikes of flower. This was shortly before lunch and next to swathes of white *Anemone narcissiflora*.

The rocks nearby had plenty of pink *Primula minkwitzsiae* and a couple of small *Paraquilegia caespitosa* a bit higher near fine drifts of *Trollius altaicus*, mixed with the pure white anemones. There



Primula minkwitzsiae

was also the sombre black-purple of *Macrotomia ugamensis*. we reconvened near the lovely *Iris willmottianum* Tamar had found and then crossing the tulip field we found a few *Tulipa bifloriformis* and a second iris. Back at the small mountain house we had a late lunch and then started back re-crossing the scenic plateau grasslands. It was hard to resist another wander here and we had a short walk across the plateau enjoying more superb shimmering drifts of *Stipa pulchra* with the snowy Tien Shan and green hills of the nature reserve behind.

Day 12 10 June To Talas

Country number three lay a couple of hours to the east. We drove across the steppe to Taraz and took the refreshingly calm, simple crossing into Kyrgyzstan. Somehow, I missed our guide Aika at first but we were soon united and then on our way. Reaching a large reservoir, we could see hundreds of pink domes of *Acanthophyllum pungens* scattered across the dry steppe. We stopped in a good area and spent time photographing these, also finding *Hultemia persica* (Persian rose), a pretty yellow *Cousinia* sp. and *Convolvulus pseudocantabrica*. We now drove for a while, turning off onto a side road and heading towards the cloud-shrouded peak of Mount Manas. Alas the recent heavy rains had washed out the road and we were halted in our tracks at the entrance to a little gorge. Fortunately, it was a fair spot for a picnic of freshly roasted chicken, bread and tomatoes.

On the surrounding rocky slopes were a few *Eremurus fuscus* and plenty of *Verbascum songaricum*. Best of all were the superb big clumps of *Campanula albertii* sprouting from the rock crevices. Rumbles of thunder all around suggested we turn back and the rain did start as we left, but nothing too meaningful in the end. There was stop on the way down for not only a moody mountain view but also a peculiar sports arena. Two mud mounds with rubber tyres incorporated into the sides were at either end of a field and this was where the sport of buzkashi was played, i.e. two teams on horseback competing for a dead goat. The winner is team who puts the goat into one of the mounds. From here we continued onto Talas and our pleasant homestays.



Acanthophyllum pungens

Day 13 11 June Otmok & Ala-Bel Passes

There were various bits and pieces to deal with in Talas first thing, but then we were off, heading east, first through rural landscapes with villages, blue fences, gas pipes and interesting hay lofts and towards the rising mountains. Progress was slowed at regular intervals by big flocks of sheep or herds of horses on the move to their summer pastures. An area of fields was painted pink with sainfoin and another nearby fallow field had plenty of *Roemeria refracta* purple *Orobanche amoena*, yellow *Handelia trichophylla* and across the road the peculiar green-flowered borage *Cynoglossum viridiflorum*. We hadn't gone much further when we noticed a slope painted pink with magnificent drifts of *Linum heterosepala* subsp. *olgae*. Climbing up to the slopes these were mixed with a small yellow rose, a few *Delphinium confusum* and the adjacent drier slopes had abundant *Gentiana olivieri*. A brooding grey sky gave it all an extra edge and provided a fine background for our photos, but the rumbles of thunder hinted we should be moving on. Now the road climbed a lot high and we stopped for lunch at 3000m with snow streaked slopes and the valley plunging below. There were a few interesting flowers here but the stop after lunch was much better with abundant *Primula algida*, speckled with deep violet *Viola altaica*, yellow *Chorispora macropoda*, the silver leaves of *Potentilla hololeuca* and stream gulleys with *Trollius komarovii*. Patches of yellow *Tulipa dasystemon* and *Gagea emarginata* added to the mix and nearby were *Smelowskia calycina*, pretty pink *Pedicularis albertii* and banks with *Dracocephalum nutans*. We topped the snowy (misty) pass stopping for a photo of the impressive valley on the other side with flocks of sheep flowing across the landscape and a scattering of yurts on the slopes.

Now we turn towards our second pass stopping where a plateau was painted with flowers. There were oceans of white *Cerastium cerastoides* and *Primula algida*, mixed with blue *Myosotis asiatica*. Closer examination of the turf revealed many *Pulsatilla campanella* too and more sheltered gulleys had yellow or orange *Papaver croceum* and *Phlomis oreophila*. Boggy streamsides had a mixture of *Pedicularis rhinanthoides*, *Primula pamirica* and *Leontopodium ochroleucum*, though the latter is more plant of stony flats and there was some right next to the cars. The yurt peppered landscape grew more impressive as we neared the pass with vast swathes of orange *Trollius altaicus*, endless *Primula algida* and stands of *Allium fedtschenkoanum*. The road descended into a spectacular valley with increasing and vast numbers of *Phlomis oreophila* and then the greyish leaves of *Eremurus fuscus*. The latter was in staggering quantities of many millions, coating the slopes and we eventually stopped for a population in flower lower down. Continuing down the valley became more forested with lovely shaggy-barked *Betula tianshanica* and the elegant, slender Tien Shan spruce *Picea schrenkiana*. Our hotel was beside a fast-flowing river and exploring the other side we found *Zabelia corymbosa* and a huge display of *Codonopsis clematidea* with hundreds of yellow-tinged grey bells, beautifully marked inside. A fine finale to a great flower and landscape day.



Codonopsis clematidea

Day 14 12 June To Kochkor

The rushing river was still rushing on a morning of clear blue skies. Driving up towards the pass once again we stopped to buy honey and by the roadside was *Scutellaria adenostegia*. Reaching the pass there were fine clear mountain views with little reflective tarns. A little further along and a slope was a kaleidoscope of orange *Trollius altaicus*, blue *Myosotis asiatica*, pink *Primula algida* and yellow *Ranunculus albertii*. There was a smattering of *Tulipa dasystemon* and *Gagea emarginata* too all with snowy mountains behind. The trolliuses combined well with a big population of *Allium fedtschenkoanum* lower down, the latter a mixture of colours from yellow to bronzy gold. Descending to the expansive pastures below the landscape was peppered with white yurts and we stopped at one with an attendant decrepit bus. They were in the midts of milking the horses when we arrived and we had a chance to see inside the yurts, talk to the owners and sample the various products from yogurt balls to ghee and delicious creams. It was all very enjoyable and photogenic. Moving on across the plain, flanked by mountains ranges on either side we arrived at an innocuous-looking slope. Closer examination revealed hundreds of deep pink *Paeonia hybrida* in flower. It was a stunning display of these charismatic herbs enhanced by their soft scent on the air.

Next stop was a site where a famous local wrestler had brought a huge granite balbal to the grave of a local imam. Then we entered a spectacular valley following the course of the Aral River to where granite-gravel slopes had the pretty *Chesneya ferganica*. The landscape grew increasingly dramatic with complex geology and an immense scree slope that stretched hundreds of metres from ridge to river below, dwarfing the fully grown *Populus afghanicus* at the river's edge. A stunning ensemble of multi-coloured hills and it's fair to say we were bombarded with scenery. We had a tasty (late) lunch in a homestay to recover.

Afterwards we visited a large cemetery with an amazing array of mausoleums and grave styles and then drove on to a big display of *Thermopsis turkestanica*. The grey skies behind were all very photogenic but they also meant rain was coming. And it arrived a bit too soon, meaning we had to boycott our final stop for *Acantholimon alatavicum* and head straight to Kochkor and our homestays.



Linum heterosepala

Day 15 13 June Song-Kul

There were sunny views on the valley leading to Song-Kul, showing the stark contrast between dry slopes and the lush green irrigated valley floor. Settlements were scattered along the valley and we stopped at one to photograph the rural life and the smiling children living there. The road abruptly swung uphill and a few switchbacks later we were among the flowers with many golden-yellow *Trollius dzungaricus* speckled across the turf. On rockier outcrops were *Androsace sericea*, *Lonicera semenovii* and a deep purple *Dracocephalum pausonii*. Fine mountain views extended across the valley and whilst lounging on the turf and enjoying this was very pleasant there was much more to see uphill. The next stop near a big snow bank was packed with alpine plants. There were drifts of *Allium atosanguineum*, patches of hundreds of *Tulipa heterophylla*, a few *T. dasystemon*, yellow *Chorispora macropoda*, the hairy-stemmed white *Eritrichium villosum* and best of the all the incomparable ice-blue *Trollius lilacinus*. This refined beauty was scattered across the slope wherever the snow had recently melted. A little further up were views of the big Song-Kul lake and in the marshy ground were a few *Oxygraphis glacialis*. On the adjacent rocks were mauve *Oxytropis chionobia* and *Androsace lehmanniana*.

Lunch was a rock outcrop with a good view of the lake and before we left we found a few *Thalictrum thalictroides* in shady nooks among the boulders. Then it was down to lake level where yurts could be seen strung along the shore and many horses were grazing. A dry flat had a surprising number of new flowers with pink *Chorispora bungeana* and yellow *C. songarica*, many tiny *Gentiana karelinii*, *Androsace fedtschenkoi* and a few *Viola tianshanica*. The road turned away from the lake near its' outlet and climbed to reveal the huge broken granite plateau that it sat within. There were a few *Iris loczyi* in one spot alongside *Pedicularis alataucis*, the silver-leaved *Potentilla hololeuca* and some good mats of *Androsace sericea*. Next was a big swathe of *Allium atosanguineum* before we climbed to a dramatic viewpoint. Below the road switch-backed down and there were spruce clad north-facing slopes and colourful sun brushed hills. The walk down was productive with our first *Callianthemum alatavicum*, yellow *Corydalis gortshakovii*, *Cortusa brotheri*, *Dracocephalum imperbe*, *Lonicera hispida*, *Valeriana dubia* and then the remarkable black-purple flowers of *Macrotomia euchroma* the whole plant dressed in wispy silver hairs. everyone was picked up from various places along the way and we drove out stopping for the odd impressive view before reaching our comfortable hotel in Naryn.



Macrotomia euchroma

Day 16 14 June Tash Rabat

A fine start had sunlight shining through the many horned poppies *Glaucium squamigerum* that lined the road cuttings near some fine examples of Kyrgyz concrete art, including a horse with the snowy ramparts of the At Bashi mountains behind. Moving closer to them we entered a valley where limestone cliffs were decorated with fine clumps of that choice alpine *Paraquilegia caespitosa*. On the shady turf was *Cortusa brotheri*, whilst the slopes had the purple of *Macrotomia euchroma*. The adjacent marshy flats had lots of *Primula pamirica* sprinkled across them. Reaching the peculiar stone caravanserai of Tash Rabat we pondered its origins and admired the dramatic backdrop of the sweeping valley as clouds gathered around us. Indeed, the site proved irresistible to John who was temporarily locked in! reaching our yurt camp lunch we got inside just before a powerful storm swept through, which at least proved the waterproofness of yurts.

Rain continued to threaten, but we managed stops for meadows filled with *Iris halophila* and *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* as well as the decidedly odd reddish spikes of *Cynomorium coccineum* a holoparasite that did not smell good. Our final stop was in a small valley where we walked to a waterfall emerging straight from the rock. There was *Ligularia narynensis*, *Caragana bongardiana* and the lovely creamy-flowered *Clematis alpina* subsp. *sibirica* draped over the roses and honeysuckles. The slopes also had *Stellera chamaejasme* and *Onosma irritans*(?). We got into the hotel in good time, although Margaret's broolly-free walk into town afterwards proved a damp decision when a heavy downpour swept in.

Day 17 15 June To Tamga

Overnight rain stopped by the time we reached a pleasant side valley partially clothed in spruce forest. An hour was spent enjoying the superb clumps of *Primula matthioli*, *Clematis alpina* subsp. *sibirica*, *Codonopsis clematidea*, *Sorbus tianshanicus*, various *Ligularia* and a group of frog orchids *Dactylorhiza viridis* (syn. *Coeloglossum viride*) The it was onto Kochkor where we saw a felt-making demonstration and had time to buy afterwards. From Kochkor we drove through a rather dry landscape towards the immense blue waters of Issyk-kul, where we had lunch among trees in sight of the lake.

We drove on through the more surprisingly dry, rocky landscapes that contrasted with the green irrigated orchards and fields nearer the lake. However, for more impressive dry landscapes none is finer than that of Fairytale Canyon a complex of multi-coloured clays, and sharply tilted



Paraquilegia caespitosa

sedimentary rocks. We wandered about the intriguing landscape also finding many interesting plants with *Lagochilus seravshanicus*, *Dracocephala bipinnulata*, *Limonium kashgarica*, *Perovskia abrotanoides*, *Dianthus crinitus*, *Acantholimon sp.* and some impressive shrubs of *Clematis songarica* smothered in scented white flowers and set against wonderful orange-stone backdrops.

It was only a short final drive to Tamga and our pleasant guest house with its garden full of irises, delphiniums and roses. There was some relief to find drinkable wine could be found in town.

Day 18 16 June Barskoon

Rain had left the track up to Barskoon very muddy, but fortunately this is a good all-weather road that serves the huge gold mine nearby. The rain had more or less stopped by the time we reached a thriving population of *Iris ruthenica*. However, it still looked moody ahead, reaching the pass with thick mists and decidedly cold temperatures. However, as we explored a streamside with pretty ice dusted *Primula nivalis*, *Saxifraga macrocalyx*, *S. hirculus* and *Smelovskia calycina* the mists began to lift and blue sky began to appear. And sure enough, as we crossed the alpine plateau and spectacular lake studded landscape was revealed. And with this came astonishing displays of that jewel of Central Asia, *Trollius lilacinus* with truly uncountable numbers. We stopped in one very rich area and spent time revelling in these lovely plants. Alongside them was abundant *Oxygraphis glacialis*, *Oxytropis chionobia* and tight mounds and mats of *Sibbaldia tetrandra*.

Moving further a snow bank stopped us so we walked the remaining distance to some scenic largely frozen lakes where we found yellow *Allium semenovii*, *Aster alpinus* and the peculiar *Chrysoplenium nudicaule*. The beguiling landscapes continued as we climbed a little higher onto some big screes with *Lagotis decumbens*, and huge numbers of *Callianthemum alatavicum* with some superb patches of scalloped leaves and pure white flowers. Mounds of greyish *Saussurea gnaphalodes* were tantalisingly close to flowering and the screes themselves were encrusted in colourful lichens and as photogenic as the flowers.



Trollius lilacinus

We drove back a short distance and had lunch again with the trollius before heading back down. Surprisingly, the weather immediately below the pass was still shrouded in clouds and we had just enjoyed a wonderful weather window of blue skies. It was cold, but this did not stop us exploring a rocky slope for more superb *Primula nivalis*, flower-encrusted mats of *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and the unusual scree alpine *Desideria flabellata*. It was now driving snow so we returned to the cars and drove further down. The snow had largely fizzled out when we found a lovely bank of sweet-scented *Erysimum humillimum*. There was a final stop for the tacky relief of Yuri Gargarin before we drove onto karakul and our comfortable hotel.

Day 19 17 June Kegen

The weather forecast suggested we stayed low today so we drove put towards the Kazakh borderpassing through a colourful rural landscape with strip fields of pink sainfoin and yellow mustard stretching towards the southern Tien Shan. Also on the roadside were various herbs including *Cannabis sativa* and *Echium vulgare*. Reaching an area of low hills there was the red-centred form of *Glaucium squamigerum* and purple spikes of *Verbascum phoeniceum*, red-tipped *Scutellaria przewallskii* and *Tragopogon capitatum*. A little further along and there was a wonderful flowery slope coated in *Hedysarum*, against the grey foil of *Artemisia* leaves. From among this tall *Ligularia songarica* stood out and further up the slope were delightful combinations of big hummocks *Stellera chamaejasme* with *Linum heterosepala*. *Geranium collinum* was scattered throughout. Further along and roadside screes had some fine *Allium carolinianum* growing with *Eremurus fuscus*, *Dianthus crinitus* and grassy areas with the red-rimmed orange discs of *Hieracium aurantiacum*.

The mountains had shrunk to hills and we entered a wide flowery plain of damp meadows choked with countless *Pedicularis dolichorrhiza*, *P. macrochila* and the bright yellow of *Papaver croceum*. Closer examination also produced the delicate blue campanula-like *Adenophora himalayana* and the purple-leaved orchid *Dactylorhiza hatigera*. The flowers were wonderful but there was a cool wind so we found a spot in the lee of some trees for lunch. It also turned out to be a very productive meadow with the ivory flowers of *Lathyrus gmelinii* that aged to orange, *Aconitum leucostomum*, *Geranium rectum*, *Thalictrum minus* and *Trollius dzungaricus*. The meadows were getting better all the time and our last foray was onto a slope with a huge population of *Veratrum lobelianum*, the architectural pleated leaves in great stands. Around them were bogs with many more *Dactylorhiza hatigera*, *Geum rivale* and the sweet-scented *Pedicularis rhinanthoides*. Drier slopes had abundant *Phlomis oreophila* mingled with the dainty white wands of *Polygonum bistorta* and forget-me-nots.



Veratrum lobelianum

There was a final stretch to where we hoped to see Kang Tengri peak (the highest in the Tien Shan), but it was both cloudy and we were stopped from going any further as most of the mountains we could see were actually in Kazakhstan. We drove back in time for wine and felt buying.

The evening meal was a real treat. It was in a Dungan household and the food had a delicious Chinese element. On top of this we were treated to two traditional dances by five local girls.

Day 20 18 June Chon-Ashu

Our final day in the field for flowers and the day started brightly with plenty of blue sky. The road once again passed through rural areas striped pink and yellow, turning inland to where we stopped in an area of spruce forest and meadow with many bushes of white *Rosa albertii*. The herb flora was rich including *Aconitum leucostomum*, *Polemonium caucasicum*, *Cerastium davuricum*, some fine flowering *Veratrum lobelianum*, *Aquilegia atrovinosa* and *Codnopsis clematidea*. The weather ahead looked changeable so we pushed on along a wide valley with a broad braided river. The scenery grew increasingly dramatic as we climbed higher and higher eventually reaching areas with a lot more snow and the pass itself. There were superb views from in both directions from here and the blue skies encouraged us to start walking down. There were some big *Chorispora bungeana* and *Draba oreades* on the way. The team had set up a picnic lunch in a green area as well as samovar brewing hot water for tea. The changeable nature of high mountains was brought into sharp focus when it began to snow. But this didn't stop lunch, in fact it made it more enjoyable and besides the snow was only light and passed after fifteen minutes. There were some fine *Primula nivalis* nearby too and drifts of *Trollius lilacinus* (though nothing to rival what we had already seen elsewhere, just a few hundred).

Driving a little lower we stopped at an area of scree with many stunning *Corydalis fedtschenkoana* glistening with water drops. They were joined by *Allium platyspathum* and a ridge of *Thermopsis alpina* with *Lonicera semenovii*. Below the stony ground had plentiful fragrant *Erysimum humillimum* and *Aster alpinus* with a few *Gastrolychnis apetala*. Wandering down further we found *Acoriphragma lancifolium* and *Androsace lehmanniana* too. The weather had now improved greatly and the sun was shining by the time we stopped for another mountain valley view. The stunning landscape was enhanced by clumps of red-orange *Rhodiola linearifolia*, *Lonicera hispida*, *Lindelofia stylosa* and colourful meadow mixes with *Trollius dzungaricus* and *Geranium collinum*. One last treat was not a plant but a pair of lovely ibisbills, beautifully marked waders that live on braided river channels.



Corydalis fedtschenkoana

Day 21 19 June To Bishkek via Cholpon-Ata

Today was the long but unavoidable journey to Bishkek. However, all started well with clear skies and stunning views of the seemingly endless snowy Tien Shan stretching alongside the blue waters of lake Issyk-Kul. The familiar colourful fields continued for quite a way and then we reached more touristic towns geared towards beach holidays and scantily clad dry skiers. Indeed, the bizarre sight of near naked skiers greeted us as we neared the interesting petroglyph site of Cholpon-Ata. Here we found a number of large petroglyphs depicting various deer, ibex, snow leopard and camels along with three more recent (6-8th Century) balbals.

We rumbled on, pausing for coffee and then eventually reaching the Burana Tower, all that remains of the once extensive Balagasan city, a place to rival Bukhara. There were also some good flowers with *Xeranthemum annuum*, *Alcea nudiflora* and *Allium caeruleum*. The last leg to Bishkek and then a drive to the rather fancy Sarapa yurt restaurant for a final delicious meal.

Day 22 20 June Departure

Various departures took us home.



Rhodiola linearifolium & Trollius dzungaricus



For information on our tours
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