

ORIENTAL AUTUMN



Gentiana arethusae



Gentiana georgei

Dawn was crisp and clear, with just a few wisps of cloud clinging to the distinctive ridgeline of Kawa Karpo that soared above a blanket of silvered mists. We both waited in keen anticipation as first a pinkish, then a golden glow settled on the snows of Yunnan's highest peak, framed by the parting clouds. We had only been married a couple of weeks and this was Yunnan's spectacular wedding gift. The rest of the day was spent on the high slopes of Baima Shan where we found the gorgeous lilac trumpets of *Gentiana georgei* along with a few late season *Saussurea medusa* and patches of *Gentiana hexaphylla*.

What is intriguing is that although this enticing land lures many a botanist, the vast majority come only in summer and so few return later on - ignoring a diverse and colourful autumn flora that provides plenty of interest. Certainly summer sees one of the greatest floras on Earth come into bloom with a kaleidoscope of primulas, rhododendrons, orchids and alpines. But, Yunnan also boasts perhaps the richest late season flora to be found anywhere. For example, China has more species of *Gentiana* than anywhere else, approximately 250 species out of a world total of 350. And most of these flower in the autumn.

It's not just these, there is a wonderful suite



Gentiana veitchiorum



Unclimbed Kawa Karpo, the highest peak in Yunnan



Swertia cincta



Swertia patula



First light on Yulong Shan



Aconitum pulchellum

of *Swertia*, *Saxifraga*, *Cyananthus*, *Aconitum*, *Delphinium* and *Codonopsis*, even a few orchids and alliums to provide more than enough interest.

As in summer the same species-rich areas tend to be the most productive in autumn. The areas around Yulong Shan, Zhongdian (Shangri-la) and Baima Shan are especially good, though the net can be cast wider. The wetter slopes of the Gaoligongshan on the Burmese border have some fine plants such as *Swertia bimaculata*, red-purple *Aconitum nagarum* and *Allium wallichii*. Those with the travel legs can head onto the Tibetan Plateau and see vast quantities of gentians covering the steppe lands of Qinghai too.

However, as ever north-west Yunnan offers a tremendous amount in a more 'compact' area. Locations near Zhongdian offer stunning drifts of *Gentiana arethusae* adjacent to marshy flats with countless *G. sino-ornata* along with a dozen other gentianaceae (of various genera). Drifts of *Comastoma traillianum* quite literally carpet the roadsides in places, and there are plenty of *Lomatogonium rotatum*, various *Swertia* and *Halenia elliptica*. The latter is common throughout the province. *Swertia* is an especially appealing and diverse genus and includes the bull's-eye flowers of *Swertia cincta* and its very lovely cousin *S. patula* with prominent golden nectaries.



Clematis ranunculoides



Delphinium grandiflorum



Comastoma traillianum



Autumnal *Sorbus*.

Back to the gentians proper and the deep blue of *G. veitchiorum* is common in grassy places, sometimes mingling effectively with the abundant silver-woolly edelweiss and the reddening stems of *Euphorbia jolkinii*. Different areas produce their own gems and Hong Shan's shaley slopes have *Gentiana caelestis*, dainty *Aconitum pulchellum*, blue *Allium beesianum* and the gorgeous big blue *Cyananthus formosus*. This is the showiest of another widespread genus at this season and we found several more species including *C. delavayi* near Lijiang. In June I would see lakeside thronging with thousands of lurid pink *Primula beesiana*, in autumn an entirely different cast appears, with various balsams, the raspberry bells of *Clematis ranunculoides*, intense blue *Delphinium grandiflorum*, the orchid *Satyrrium nepalense* and on limestone rocks golden tufts of *Saxifraga brachypoda* and the pretty gesneriad *Corallodiscus lanuginosus*.

Let's not forget that autumn landscape either which can be quite something - those ravishing mountain views, golden rice fields and colourful deciduous trees such as *Sorbus* igniting the dark conifers.

Yunnan's season ends with a bang as loud as any Chinese New Year.



Cyananthus formosus