

Wild Flowers of Sicily

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Catania; transfer Madonie Mountains</u>
Day 2/4	<u>Piano Battaglia, the Madonie Mountains</u>
Day 5/7	<u>Sant'Alfio, Mount Etna region</u>
Day 8	<u>Fly London</u>

Departs

April and May

Focus

Primarily wild flowers

Grading

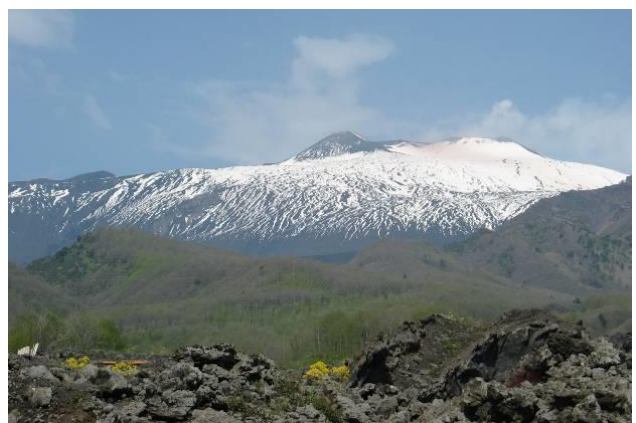
Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ITA10) or brochure

Highlights

- Explore the fascinating and unique flora of Mount Etna, one of Europe's most active volcanoes
- Discover such endemic flowers as Etna Violet and Etna Greenweed amongst Etna's lava flows
- Enjoy the rugged limestone scenery in the Madonie Mountains
- Search for characteristic Madonie flora with its own range of specialities such as the Nebrod Pine (*Abies nebrodensis*)



From top: *Lathyrus odoratus*, Mirror Bee Orchid, Etna from Sant' Alfio. Images by Kerrie Porteous and Paul Harmes



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximize best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Lying in the central Mediterranean Sea, separated from the toe of Italy to the east by the Straits of Messina, from Sardinia in the north by the Tyrrhenian Sea and from continental Africa to the south by the Straits of Sicily, the island of Sicily basks in a warm, mainly dry climate. The history of the island can be traced back as far as 13,000 years BC when, legend has it, the land was inhabited by a race of powerful giants, descended from Zeus. Their continued tenancy, however, was short lived as they chose to challenge the authority of the Gods and were banished, in chains, to the underworld below the island's volcanoes to fashion weapons, such as thunderbolts, for the Gods. To this day they struggle and moan to free themselves from the immense weight of the mountains, causing eruptions when they stir.

Between the 11th and 13th centuries, the Elymian, Sicel and Sicani peoples colonised, giving the island its name. In the third century BC, Sicily became the first province of Rome, its fertile soil earning it the title 'Granary of the Empire'.



Mount Etna (Paul Harnes)

Being an island, many of the plant species found in Sicily are endemic, with a distinct selection of species endemic to the limestone Madonie Mountains and a range of species being localized to the Etna region, with its volcanic geology. Other species are restricted to the island as a whole, or also found in parts of mainland Italy. For the orchid enthusiast, there is a complex array of endemic species, hybrids and variants, especially amongst the *Ophrys fusca* types! However, the full range of natural history will be enjoyed.

This two-centre tour proposes to study not only the wild flowers of the Madonie Mountains and Mount Etna, but we will also have the opportunity to ascend Europe's highest and most active volcano! In addition, we hope to visit the fascinating Fiumefreddo Coastal Reserve. After arriving in Catania, on Sicily's east coast, we will be based in the heart of the beautiful Madonie Mountains, a few kilometres from Piano Battaglia. For the second part of our holiday we will be based in Sant'Alfio on the north-eastern slopes of Etna for the last three nights of the tour. The itinerary is made up of a number of mainly half day walks on mountain tracks and paths, the majority of which are marked and appear in the walking guides to the island. Transportation during the tour will be by minibus.

Day 1

London / Catania & Madonie Mountains

Today we depart from London on an early morning flight to Catania, on Sicily's east coast. We then start the long drive to our first base, high in the magnificent Madonie Mountains. We will stop for a leg stretch along the way, and as we get closer to our destination we will start spotting *Lathyrus odoratus*, the original, wild Sweet Pea, the seeds of which were sent from Sicily into cultivation in England in the 17th century. We will spend the next four nights at the

simple but charming hotel in the mountains. We should arrive in good time to settle into our rooms and also have some time to explore locally before dinner.

Day 2

Valle Madonna degli Angeli

Our main objective today is to make the ascent of the Madonna degli Angeli Valley and Monte Quacella. Firstly we will spend the morning exploring the rock-strewn hillsides along the Generosa road, on the south side of the Piano Battaglia and the Portella Colla. Here we should find a number of orchid species, including Branciforte's Orchid



Ophrys lacaitae by Paul Harnes

(*Orchis brancifortii*), Dwarf Bearded Iris (*Iris pseudopumila*) and the Flax (*Linum punctatum*), to name but a few. After lunch we will descend further to the start of the path to the Valle Madonna Degli Angeli. The ascent is, at first, along a forest track through wooded hillsides, before opening out into craggy montane limestone grassland, used for grazing. The valley we are making for is the site of the thirty or so remaining specimens of the unique Nebrod Pine (*Abies nebrodensis*), a fir tree endemic to this region of the island. Continuing upwards via Piano Iola, the intended destination for the group is the Piano Grande. The more energetic among you may wish to continue up towards Monte San Salvatore, which is well known for its panoramic views. Species we hope to find here include Man Orchid (*Orchis anthropophora*), Nebrod Alison (*Alyssum nebrodensis*), a Candytuft (*Iberis pruti*), Fedia (*Fedia cornucopiae*), and many more. Following a leisurely descent, we will make our way back to the hotel and if time permits there are several likely looking roadside stops we can explore.

Day 3

Bosco di Ficuzza

Today, we will venture further afield, to explore the Bosco di Ficuzza, south-east of Palermo, an area known to be very rich in orchids. Some ninety per cent of the world population of the endemic Pale Ophrys (*Ophrys pallida*), grows in this vicinity, and we hope to locate this delicate species. A long drive (with stops) will take us from our hotel, firstly north, then west, along the autostrada, before we turn south at Villabate, shortly before Palermo. The road winds up through the undulating countryside, before we climb to the little village of Ficuzza, where King Ferdinand had built a royal Hunting Lodge in the early 1800's. Passing through the village, we will make several stops along the narrow roads to explore the surrounding vegetation. As well as the rare *Ophrys pallida*, other orchids occurring in the area include Bumblebee Orchid (*Ophrys bombyliflora*), Bertoloni's Bee Orchid (*Ophrys bertolonii*), an endemic form of Sawfly Orchid (*Ophrys grandiflora*), Naked Man Orchid (*Ophrys italica*), and a range of the *Ophrys fusca* types. The woodland is also a good location for the Peony (*Paeonia mascula*), usually white in this area. Returning to the village for an opportunity to look round and for refreshments, we then make the journey back to our hotel.



Ophrys pallida by Kerrie Porteous

Day 4

Piano Battaglia and Piano Cervi

Today we will return to the highest area of the Madonies, to explore the Piano Battaglia. Here, amidst fascinating geology, we will walk down to the sink-hole and cave of Inghiotto della Battaglietta. Yellow Star of Bethlehem (*Gagea fragifera*), Alpine Squill (*Scilla bifolia*) Bird-in-a-bush (*Corydalis solida*) and *Narcissus tazetta* will be some of the botanical highlights we will search for here. We will also explore the Piano Cervi. After parking at the Portella Colla, we take the well marked track northwards through Maple and Beech woodlands that are interspersed with flower-rich meadows. We will, undoubtedly, make relatively slow progress as there is much to see and explore as we go. However, the intention is to make a circular walk past the lake, which may be dried up, turning left into the Valley Marabilice and ascending gently to a signpost where we will return in a south-easterly direction, meeting our original path by the lake. On the way, we will look out for the Sand Crocus (*Romulea bulbocodium*), Grape Hyacinth (*Muscari neglecta*), Spring Sowbread (*Cyclamen repandum*) and Meadow Saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*).

Day 5

Madonie Mountains to Mt Etna

This morning we plan to enjoy a local walk before we bid farewell to the Madonies and travel east across the island to our second base, situated on the north-eastern slopes of Mount Etna. We will make several stops along the way to enjoy further orchids and a different selection of plants, including Blue Stonecrop (*Sedum caeruleum*) a Sicilian endemic. Spotless Starlings sit on the road bridges, and we keep our eyes open for passing raptors as we travel. Our accommodation for the next 3 nights, the Agriturismo Case Perrotta, is situated on the outskirts of the charming village of Sant'Alfio. It started life as a Benedictine monastery, and was later a winery, before now being an organic farm, specializing in fruit, nuts and olives.

Day 6

Piano Provenzana / Fiumefreddo



Viola aethnensis (Jessica Turner)

After breakfast we will make our way up the eastern side of Mount Etna, aiming for the Piano Provenzana, situated on the north-east slopes. This area will give us our first experience of the various levels of vegetative colonisation of the lava. We will make several stops to explore our surroundings, as the road climbs the slopes of Etna. We hope to visit the Rifugio Citelli, at 1741m, where Etna birch (*Betula aetnensis*) and Etna Tansy (*Tanacetum siculum*) are among the species present. We should also find Etna Milk-vetch (*Astragalus sicula*), the endemic Etna Violet (*Viola aethnensis*) and Etna Barberry (*Berberis aetnensis*), as well as seeing the effects of recent lava flows.

After lunch we will have a complete change, as we travel from the mountain, down the fertile volcanic slopes, and across the plain towards the Ionian Sea, to visit the Fiumefreddo Reserve. This is an area of marshland, just inland, fed by the cold water from the snows of Etna, and supporting amazingly lush vegetation, unique in Southern Italy. Here we should record Papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus siculus*), Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*), and it is a good location for both Nightingales and Hoopoe, as well as the Sicilian Long-tailed Tit. There may also be time to explore the beach area at Cottone, where we will find a different array of plants and may record waders and seabirds. From here we will make our way back to our hotel for dinner.

Day 7

Etna & Nicolosi

Today we will have the amazing opportunity of exploring the summit area of Mount Etna, Europe's most active volcano and at 3,350 metres, it is also the highest. Having a diameter of 44 kilometres and occupying some 1,600 square kilometres, this is a truly awesome mountain that dominates the panorama for miles around. After breakfast we will drive round the southern slopes, and climb up to the Rifugio Sapienza, at 1910m asl. This is a bit of a tourist 'hot spot' but we brave the crowds to take the Funivia dell'Etna (Cable Car) up to the Piccolo Rifugio (c2,500m), where we transfer to large 4x4 vehicles to make the slow ascent via man-made tracks through the snow, lava and ash fields to the 2002/3 crater, just below the summit. The views from the top are magnificent. Experienced guides will give us an explanation of the volcanic activity and the history of Etna, and will walk us to various points of interest during our excursion. Evidence of volcanic activity is regular (we will be able to feel the heat of the lava!), but is carefully monitored, and we need to have no fears for our safety. However, it is a high mountain, and you should be able to cope with the altitude (approx 3,000m). There is also likely to be snow, and the weather may be cold (or it may be really hot sun!). We will stop for refreshments in the refugio at the top of the Cable-car, before completing our descent. The Etna ascent is generally considered a 'not-to-be-missed' part of the tour, but if you do not wish to take the excursion, there is an opportunity to explore the Crateri Silvestri, and to enjoy the many cafes, bars and retail outlets around the Rifugio Sapienza. We will continue on down the south side of the mountain onto a minor road, where we will have lunch and explore some more lava flows hoping to see Etna Green-weed (*Genista aetnensis*), French Figwort (*Scrophularia canina*), Elder-flowered Orchids (*Dactylorhiza sambucina*), and Rock Bunting. Retracing our steps, we may stop to explore an area of Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) woodland near Zafferana, where we will look for Yellow Vetch (*Vicia lutea*), a Birthwort (*Aristolochia rotunda*), the yellow and black Pea (*Vicia melanops*) and Violet Bird's-nest Orchid (*Limodorum arbotivum*). Depending on the time, we may also explore the Piano dell'Acqua, a mixture of the 1991 colonised lava flows and very established vegetation, on the other side of Zafferana, before returning to the hotel for our final evening.



Day 8

Catania / London

Today sadly, we have to leave the beauties of Sicily in order to return to Catania airport for our flights home to the UK. Flights usually depart in the late in the morning, arriving back into the UK in the early afternoon.

Tour grading

We have graded this tour A/B – easy to moderate at times. There is no major trekking on tour but there will be plenty of daytime walks in a variety of mountainous habitat types. All walks and excursions are optional and taken at a leisurely pace but they will sometimes be over hilly, rocky or forested terrain, and sometimes in hot, sometimes cold, conditions.

It should be noted that there are several long vehicle journeys included in this tour, especially when driving to the Madonies on the first day, our day trip to Ficuzza and transferring from the Madonies to Sant'Alfio. Please note that the mountain roads in Sicily are in fairly poor repair – exacerbated by the volcanic nature of the island – and along some stretches we will be driving slowly to avoid the pot-holes!



Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the tour price, starting with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8.

Regional Flights

Over the last few years flights from Manchester and London Luton have both coordinated well with the group flight from London. If you would like to travel from your local airport, please just contact the Naturetrek office and we will be happy to investigate possibilities for you.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.