

Wildlife & Geology of the Carnic Alps

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

\Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Trieste; transfer Forni di Sopra in the Carnic Alps.

Day 2/7 Geological and wildlife walks and excursions from Forni di Sopra.

Day 8 Transfer to Trieste and fly London Stanstead.



Departs

June

Focus

Alpine geology and flora, though birds, butterflies and other natural history will also be enjoyed.

Grading

Grade B. Moderate day walks.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ITA17)

Highlights

- Examine the geological history of Europe through the magnificent Alpine geology.
- Stay on the outskirts of Forni di Sopra, a village in the Carnic Alps on the headwaters of the River Tagliamento
- Butterflies including Sooty Copper, Apollo, Asian Fritillary & Olive Skipper
- Look for Flax-leaved Bellflower (*Campanula carnica*) and the Carnic Lily (*Lilium carniolicum*)



Naturetrek Mingletdown 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

Introduction

Friuli Venezia Giulia is a small, unspoilt region located in the heart of Europe, between Austria, Slovenia and the larger neighbouring Italian Region of Veneto. The north of the region is a wild and beautiful land where the tall jagged mountains of the Carnic Alps are deeply cut by powerful watercourses and spectacular gorges. Beech and spruce cover almost the entire area below the treeline which is predominantly mountainous.

The Carnic Alps are famed throughout the world for their remarkable geology, visible on the surface at many sites, covering almost 500 million years and probably without equal in Europe. The oldest rocks – siltstones formed in a shallow sea - date back to the Ordovician between 485 and 444 million years ago (mya), while the youngest deposits were laid down less than 20,000 years ago during the melting of the vast glaciers that covered this area during the most recent ice age.

The Carnic Alps are also home to more than 2,000 species of plant, many of which are unique to the south-eastern Alps. We will explore a range of diverse habitats of the Friulan Dolomites Regional Natural Park, including gravelly river valleys, flower-filled Alpine meadows and tracksides running through beautiful forests, mountain pastures and screes, seeking out the flower species synonymous with this beautiful area, many of which bear the name '*carnica*'.

We will also enjoy the birds, mammals and butterflies that this beautiful area has to offer. Up above 1600m there are Wallcreepers on the steep bare cliffs and other birds we will hope to see include Griffon Vulture, Alpine Swift, Alpine Chough, and Black Woodpecker (quite a common species in these forests) while Grey-headed Woodpecker is also a possibility, although rare. Butterflies may include Sooty Copper, Apollo, Asian and Marsh Fritillaries. Red Deer, Wild Boar, Chamois, Pine Marten and Wolf inhabit the forests in good numbers and the latter is increasing rapidly, though remains decidedly elusive! In the Regional Natural Park, meanwhile, there are also Ibex, Marmots and Golden Eagles to be found.



Itinerary

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

Day 1

Fly Trieste, transfer Forni di Sopra

We begin our holiday with a middle of the day flight from London Stanstead Airport to Trieste. On arrival, we transfer by minibus to the Albergo Nuoitas in the countryside outside Forni di Sopra, our base for the week on the banks of headwaters of the mighty River Tagliamento. The journey takes us roughly ninety minutes, and so we expect to arrive by early evening, giving ourselves some time to get unpacked, settle into the hotel, and enjoy our first evening meal together.

Day 2

Rifugio Giau & the area around the hotel

We will begin our explorations of the Carnic Alps in the local area outside our hotel, walking from our base towards the *rifugio* Giau at 1400m above sea level along a steep but straightforward path. There's no rush, so we will take our time and enjoy exploring the scrubland and woodland along the path, beginning to familiarise ourselves with some of the beautiful alpine plants that the area has to offer. Orange Lily (*Lilium bulbiferum*), Alpine Heath (*Erica carnea*), Shrubby Milkwort (*Polygala chamaebuxus*) and Twayblade (*Neottia ovata*) can all be found, and as we make our way along the paths close to the hotel, we may add White Helleborine (*Cephalanthera damasonium*), Dark Red Helleborine (*Epipactis atrorubens*), Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), Alpine Catchfly (*Silene alpestris*), Grass-of-Parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*) and *Hacquetia epipactis*. We may also find the rare Lady's Slipper Orchid (*Cypripedium calceolus*), as well as Wood Anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), the leaves of *Hepatica nobilis* and the first flowers of Lily of the Valley (*Convallaria majalis*). We'll carry our picnic lunch with us and stop to enjoy it along the way.



White Helleborine

We will no doubt also encounter opportunities to take in the local geology, examining the gravels of the nascent River Tagliamento that passes in front of the hotel. Here we will be able to examine the cobbles, most of which are white, and made up of the various limestones that were laid down in the Tethys Ocean of the Devonian (419 – 359 mya) but dotted here and there in many of the stream-beds are red boulders belonging to the Val Gardena sandstones.

Day 3

The *rifugio* Marinelli

This morning we will travel to the *rifugio* Tolazzi (1,370 m a.s.l.) near the village of Collina, 80 minutes from our hotel. From the Tolazzi we will walk uphill along the road towards the *rifugio* Marinelli (2,120 m a.s.l.) over a distance of about 6 kilometres. The refuge is named after a famous geographer, Olinto Marinelli (1876-1926) born not far away in Udine. Our walk begins in rich beech and pine woodland, before grading into a more open forest of Norway Spruce and European Larch and eventually giving way to open south-facing grasslands. The road we are following (closed to regular vehicle traffic) is an important link in the Carnic Alps because it enables the transport of livestock up to the mountain pastures, and soon the road opens out into beautiful mountain

grasslands, rich in flowers including a wide range of saxifrages, Martagon Lily (*Lilium martagon*) and other alpine flowers.

The open grasslands are home to many birds including Water Pipit, Alpine Accentor, Black Redstart and Wheatear while Alpine Choughs are often to be seen cadging scraps close to the refuge itself.



Alpine Accentor (John Willsher)

The local pairs of Golden Eagle can sometimes be seen hunting Marmots and occasionally a Griffon Vulture from the feeding station in the Carnic Pre-alps passes by for a cursory glance at the health of the local livestock and Chamois.

Above the refuge stands the imposing Monte Creta delle Chianevate (2,718m) made up of massive limestones dating back to the Devonian. The limestone walls are subject to intense fracturing in the winter cold, and the numerous giant fans of crushed stone have covered most of the morainic cirque deposits from the last ice age, dating back to the retreat of the glaciers between 16,000 and 13,000 years ago and that occupy the valley floor.

We will take a snack with us and have a lateish lunch in the refuge, before making our way back to the vans and on to our hotel for dinner.

Day 4 The Monte Colmaier ring from the Passo del Pura

Today, we drive east for about half-an-hour by minibus along the river Tagliamento until turning up towards the Passo del Pura and the Tita Piazz refuge (1,428m). From here, we will set off on the Monte Colmaier ring. From the refuge we take the forest track, before moving on to the Alpine Club path which winds through Norway Spruce and European Larch forest towards Casera Nauleni (1,641m). Here, the forest gives way to meadows dotted with Globe Flowers (*Trollius europaeus*) and other subalpine plants such as Spiked Bellflower (*Campanula spicata*), Yellow Bellflower *Campanula thyrsoides* subsp. *Carniolica* and Rayed Broom (*Genista radiata*). We continue on towards Forchia Nauleni, where there are active screes with large limestone blocks with species such as Blue Paederota (*Paederota bonarota*), Crusted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga crustata*), Dwarf Alpenrose (*Rododhamnus chamaecistus*), Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) and Mugo Pine (*Pinus mugo*). Towards the summit of Mount Colmaier there are some splendid views towards the village of Sauris. We return along the path we arrived on, as the circuit of Mount Colmaier has some dangerous stretches.

On our return we'll stop at a couple of meadows and gravelly moraines close to Passo del Pura itself. Here we may find Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), the lousewort *Pedicularis elongata*, and Dragonmouth (*Horminum pyrenaicum*).

Day 5

Malga Pramosio & Lake Avostanis

An early start this morning takes us east again from our base towards the Austrian border. At the village of Cleulis we turn uphill towards the mountain farm of Malga Pramosio. How far we manage to get along the road will depend upon the condition of the road as we approach the lower of the two mountain farms. Hopefully, reaching the lower farm (1,521m), we can then continue up on foot towards the upper farm (1,940 m), noting the boundary line between the pale Devonian limestones and the dark Carboniferous quartz sandstones. The Devonian limestones feature splendid examples of epikarstic phenomena where rain and ice have carved the rocks into strange shapes, creating gulleys, sink-holes and a wide range of patterns. Here we are standing on the one of the main European watersheds (or drainage divides) between the Adriatic and the Black Sea. Up above the still functioning mountain farm, or *malga*, is the small glacial lake of Avostanis that stands at the foot of an enormous cliff of Devonian limestone, created by a fault that developed during the Alpine Orogeny during the Miocene 10 million years ago. The lake basin was formed beneath a glacier about 20,000 years ago at the peak of the Würm glaciation, filling with water 14,000 years ago as the permanent ice disappeared. The lake has gradually shrunk as material is eroded from the cliff and will eventually disappear completely! The area is important in floristic terms with both Edelweiss (*Leontopodium nivale*) and Alpenrose (*Rhododendron ferrugineum*) putting on beautiful shows.

Day 6

The Palaeozoic-Mesozoic boundary & Val Preone

Today we travel about 40 minutes from our hotel to a point along the Bût Torrent between Arta Terme and Zuglio, where erosion has revealed an outcrop more than 400m high that preserves testimony to perhaps the most crucial event in global geological history, the boundary between the Palaeozoic and Mesozoic (251 million years ago). This was one of the most dramatic mass extinctions, even more extensive than the more famous one 67 million years ago which finished off the dinosaurs, and we will be able to see the evidence for this during our morning excursion.



After lunch, we will return towards the hotel, stopping at a famous fossil site in the Val Preone. In the Valle del Rio Seazza Stavoli Lunas close to the town of Preone, the site is one of the most important geological sites for Mesozoic palaeontology where thousands of fossil shellfish, plants, fish and terrestrial reptiles have been found. We will walk the palaeontological path looking at the local geology, dominated by dark Forni Dolomite from the mid-upper Norian (about 210 million years ago). There are lots of woodland and meadow flowers along the way including Orange Lily (*Lilium bulbiferum*) as well as Herb Paris (*Paris quadrifolia*), Wolf's Bane (*Aconitum lycoctonum subsp. vulparia*), and Round-leaved Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rotundifolia*) on the way.

Day 7

Casera Razzo

For our final day, with the emphasis on flora and butterflies, we will visit the Dolomites just into Veneto and the extensive grasslands around the Casera Razzo between Sauris (Udine) and Vigo di Cadore (Belluno) about 50 minutes away. To reach the area we will go upstream from the hotel into the Region Veneto before heading back towards Sauris in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Just before the administrative border is a mountain farm, Casera Razzo, surrounded by splendid grasslands and beautiful scenery. Grazing by cattle and sheep maintains a tight turf and high biodiversity. Interesting plants include the beautiful (and now sadly rare) Alpine Blue Sow Thistle (*Cicerbita alpina*), heavily collected for food in the Eastern Alps, damp patches with Elder-flowered Orchid (*Dactylorhiza sambucina*) and various species of Cotton-grass (*Eriophorum* spp.) as well as orchids such as Small White Orchid (*Pseudorchis albida*) and Black Vanilla Orchid (*Gymnadenia nigra*). Butterflies include Olive Skipper, Chalkhill Blues and Small Blue, all of which abound around the puddles left by the cattle while, more rarely, there are high altitude fritillary species such as Shepherd's Fritillary and various species of Mountain Ringlet.



We will have lunch in a quiet car-park not far away, followed by a walk along a quiet road, closed (as of 2019) by the horrific effects of Storm Vaia (27th – 30th October 2018). Much of the devastation has now been cleared, and although scars still remain, nature is fighting back and on our walk we will see where windthrow of trees is allowing many wild flowers to flourish in the clearings created, including Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*), Great Yellow Foxglove (*Digitalis grandiflora*) and Great Bellflower (*Campanula latifolia*).

Day 8

Rivoli Bianchi Dejection Cone / Fly London

This morning we load our luggage onto the minibuses and depart Forni di Sopra for the final time. About forty-five minutes into our journey we pass the extraordinary Rivoli Bianchi dejection cone, where we will spend our final morning. The pyramidal mass of Monte Amariana dominates skyline of Tolmezzo and Amaro. The mountain's rocks were laid down during the Upper Triassic 210 mya. As the glaciers melted at the end of the last ice age, a torrent formed that began to erode the mountains creating a huge detritus cone that is one of the largest in Europe, covering 2 km² and with a maximum height of 240 metres. The hot, free-draining gravels are a fascinating habitat with some unusual plants and animals including Tufted Horned Rampion (*Physoplexiscomosa*) and Tawny Pipit. Finally, after lunch, our time in the Carnic Alps draws to a close and we must return to Trieste Airport in time for our flight home.

Tour grading

Grade B – Moderate day walks. We will be on foot, on mountain trails, for the best part of each day. We tend to cover between 8 and 10 km (up to around 6 miles) on a typical day, including some moderate climbs of up to around 500m. Some of the trails are narrow, steep and rocky in places. Enjoyment of this tour, therefore, demands a reasonable level of fitness and a love of walking in the hills. All walks will be taken at a leisurely 'botanical' and 'geological' pace rather than a route-march, and a built-in flexibility will take account of the overall abilities of the group.

Focus

The holiday will focus on the outstanding geology, flora and fantastic scenery of the area, but we will also enjoy the rich diversity of butterflies, along with mammals and birds.

Food & accommodation

This is a one-centre holiday and we stay in the Albergo Nuoitas on the banks of the headwaters of the River Tagliamento. All rooms are en-suite. Breakfast and dinner will be at our hotel each day, with lunches mostly consisting of picnics in the field.

Our daily schedule

We usually rise for breakfast around 8 am and aim to leave our hotel no later than 9 am for a full day in the field. We break the day to relax and enjoy a picnic lunch, which we will normally take with us, purchased fresh, daily in Forni di Sopra. We will aim to return to our hotel between 5 and 6 pm, depending on the weather and our success in the field. This should allow a little time at the end of each day to relax, shower, and enjoy a drink before dinner. Please note that we may well choose to vary our day to day schedule depending on the weather forecast, to ensure we save the sunniest days for when we venture to higher ground! The Carnic Alps are famous for their high rainfall, and if a day seems set for heavy rain then alternative arrangements can be made to visit one or more of the many museums and cultural sites available.

Weather

At this time of year, the weather should be sunny and warm with daytime temperatures typically ranging from 15 to 25°C. However mountain weather is always variable, with cloud and rain always a possibility, especially in the afternoons. At higher altitudes, overcast conditions can rapidly reduce temperatures, and here waterproofs and a warm jacket should be carried at all times.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Italy. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice prior to travel.

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 Naturetreke-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.