

OCA's European orchid tours with Jon Dunn of Mariposa Nature Tours



Britain's position, an island sitting off the northwest corner of mainland Europe, is a mixed blessing. As a nation we've had ample cause in the past century to be grateful for the English Channel, a body of water that separates us from our European neighbours. But from the perspective of a naturalist, and an orchid-hunter in particular, we cast envious eyes across the Channel.

Our native orchid flora is pretty impoverished – 50 or so species are to be found in Britain and, in many instances, they cling on in little pockets here and there in what's otherwise countryside that's threadbare from a biodiversity perspective. Many decades of ever-intensifying agriculture have wrought some dire consequences, with vast losses of bird, butterfly and plant life – and, as we all know, orchids tend to be capricious and fussy customers, needing their environments to be just right in order for them to flourish. What few species we have are all much diminished compared to just a few generations ago.

Step into Europe, and head south towards the warmer climes of the Mediterranean, and it's a very different story indeed. Our paltry 50 species of orchid can't hold a candle to the many hundreds to be found in blazing colour across the continent as a whole every spring and summer. In particular the Ophrys bee orchids – we have just four species in Britain, but there are hundreds of these spectacular gems in southern Europe. As an orchid-obsessed youngster growing up in Britain, it was inevitable that I'd spread my wings at the earliest opportunity and start exploring the delights of further afield...



One location above all has become my second home in the past decade. My time on Rhodes, a relatively small and compact Greek island in the eastern Mediterranean, has grown year on year. I now spend a month there every spring, from mid-March to mid-April, exploring the nooks and crannies of the island in search of orchids. It's not hard to find them there – the island is an orchid-hunter's nirvana, and I think there can be barely a spot on the island outside urban areas where there won't be something in flower within a few hundred metres.

Many areas we visit are carpeted with hundreds of flowering orchids. Inevitably some species are scarcer than others, and it's these specialities – and natural hybrids, and colour forms – that consume me. I love the sense of treasure hunting that accompanies me when I'm tracking down the rarities, and the intense rush of adrenaline that comes when Lady Luck hands me the gift of a completely unexpected hybrid, perhaps a combination of species that very few people, or nobody at all, has seen before.

I always stay at the same small, family-run hotel, set on the slopes of Mt Attaviros in the heart of the island, commanding sweeping, panoramic views to the coast in the distance. The family have become my close friends over the years, and there's a sense of coming home when I return each spring. And in autumn too – I visit even when there are no orchids to be seen, just to enjoy the warmth of the welcome and a chance to enjoy Mama's cooking!



Rhodes has been renowned among European orchid hunters for many years, so some sites are well-known among our tribe. Others are well-kept secrets. Over the years I've built a network of contacts who return regularly to the island, so every spring I know I'll bump into friends from Germany, Hungary, Romania, France, Italy – all drawn there for one of the ultimate European wild orchid experiences.



In the space of a week we now expect to see at least 45 species in full flower – and in the most recent years, we've seen over 50. Not to mention many hybrids and colour forms. My European friends and I swap news when we find something interesting – it's in our collective best interests to help one another out. And that means that, for my guests on my orchid tours, we have an unrivalled and extended team of eyes on the ground. Combined with my accumulated knowledge of where the rarities are hiding, we're always set for a brilliant week.

There have been some wonderful individual moments, down the years. On one occasion I found one of my guests with tears running down his face. Naturally, I was concerned – what had happened? Nothing to worry about – seeing his first Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea* had reduced him to tears of joy. I love that orchids can inspire such passion in us all.



Then there are the moments when a guest is the one who enjoys the big moment of being the person who finds something unique – a couple of years ago one of my OCA guests, Spiro, quietly announced that he'd found a strange-looking orchid. This turned out to be a one-of-a-kind Ophrys bee orchid, *Ophrys reinholdii*, an incredible lusus form with three fully-formed labella. Cue several frankly astonished orchid-hunters doing a happy dance on a Rhodes hillside! We dubbed this beautiful three-headed creature Cerberus, named after the mythological three-headed dog that guarded the gates of Hades – but this was no Hades, we were in orchid heaven.

And not just orchid heaven – in spring Rhodes is a feast for the senses, with many other wildflowers competing for our attention – butter-yellow fritillaries, snow-white peonies, sweetly-scented cyclamen, and fields of nodding purple and white anemones are there to distract us. Small wonder I can't stay away.

In recent years, however, Italy is trying to steal my attention and my heart later in the spring... And she makes a strong case, too... the orchids of Sicily have been drawing me back time and again, and this past year I finally made good a long-held promise to hunt for orchids in the renowned surroundings of the enormous limestone massif of the Gargano Peninsula on Italy's Adriatic Coast. I was in good company, with a veteran Gargano plant-hunter at my side and, of course, armed with site details shared by my generous European friends – in this instance, Swedish orchid-hunters.



I share the following in confidence with you... *shh*, don't tell Rhodes, but the orchids in the Gargano rivalled their Rhodian equivalents for beauty and diversity. A similar array of genera there to be seen, but almost entirely different species within them, displaying a marvellous new variety of shapes, colours and forms. And hybrids... always with the hybrids!

Gargano also held its own on the culinary stakes. As an orchid-hunter, and as a tour-leader, I'm a firm believer in the old adage that an army marches on its stomach. Mama's wonderful meals in Rhodes were matched by the world-famous Italian cuisine on offer every evening in Italy. I may have had to let my belt out a notch by the time I finally headed for home – relaxing days wandering in achingly beautiful countryside with carpets of orchids to stop to admire, photograph, and admire some more don't burn through the calories of a delicious four or five course dinner, let alone if we've stopped for a gelato on the way home in the afternoon!

I'll be back to sample the orchid and cultural delights of Rhodes and the Gargano again this coming spring, proud to get to share them with Orchid Conservation Alliance members once more. It means the world to me to be able to support in even a small way the great work OCA does worldwide. As usual, my co-leader in Rhodes will be professional plant photographer Sarah Cuttle –



Sarah takes photos for, among other clients, the Royal Horticultural Society, and her generous and helpful nature is always a hit with our guests, who come away with the very best photographs of our finds to show for themselves at the end of the week. In Gargano, my co-leader is my dear friend and Sicilian brother, the legendary Italian naturalist Andrea Corso – Andrea is a talented guy in more ways than one and, if we're lucky, we'll be able to persuade this classically trained singer to give us a little impromptu opera solo!

Orchid-hunting should always be fun, and with Sarah and Andrea at my side, I know we'll not only find the best flowers, but have the best time doing so. I hope you might consider joining us next year.

[OCA Orchids in the Wild Ecotour – Orchids of Rhodes, March 17-24 2026](#)

[OCA Orchids in the Wild Ecotour – Orchids of the Gargano Peninsula, April 13-20 2026](#)

