Wildflower Rambles in the Picos de Europa

Explore the exquisite habitats of rare and celebrated species on a week of idyllic walks in one of Europe’s best destinations for alpine flora

https://www.colletts.co.uk/tours/picos-wildflower-walking-holidays/

enquiries@colletts.co.uk
Picos - Wildflower Rambles

At a glance

Whilst every year is different, due to changing seasons, we know exactly where to find the rare and celebrated species of the Picos de Europa. This is undoubtedly one of Europe’s best destinations for alpine flora and it all unfolds in an area breathtaking mountain scenery.

“I have never seen such a wonderful display of mountain flowers. The whole area was a magnificent natural rock garden with gentians, saxifrages, daffodils, pasque flowers and many other species. A great variety of orchids - no fewer than 33 species were seen, some in huge numbers, and several excellent locations were explored. A beautiful meadow, pink with hundreds of pyramidal orchids, was particularly memorable.” David Charlton, our Wildflower Walker in the Picos in 2014, 2015, 2018 & 2019.

Our Wildflower Rambles are dedicated to the magical flora and fauna of this beautiful mountain range close to Spain’s spectacular north coast. Numerous tracks and paths at village level provide us with fantastic access to the glorious flora that flourishes on our doorstep. From the moment the first spring flowers burst forth through the snow-melt, the floral magic of the Picos is there for all to see. Whatever it is that ultimately attracts you to these special mountains, you cannot fail to be overwhelmed by this natural phenomenon.

Dates and Prices

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
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<tr>
<td>15 – 22 May 2022</td>
<td>£895</td>
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<td>22 – 29 May 2022</td>
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<td>29 May – 5 June 2022</td>
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Self Drivers* £50 discount per person
Single Supplement £125

Prices are based on two people sharing a double/twin room. Single occupancy supplement applies. This is a Sunday to Sunday itinerary.

*Self Drivers would be expected to use their own vehicle to drive to the walk trailheads during the week - unless we have space in our designated minibus(es).

Included in the price

- Accompanied days with a Collett’s Wildflower Walker – a wildflower enthusiast with a passion for mountain flowers
- Accommodation - 7 nights in Posada El Corcal, Tama
- Buffet breakfast each day
- Packed lunch each walk day (6 days)
- 3 course evening meal, wine included (6 nights, not Thursday the rest day)
- Two evening presentations by our Wildflower Walker
- Transport to/from the wildflower rambles each day
- Transfers to/from Bilbao Airport. See “Travel” section below for more details

Not included in the price

- Flights & Insurance
- Evening meal on the rest day - Thursday
- Transport/activities on the rest day - Thursday - excluding the optional Cares Gorge trip.
The Itinerary

Day 1 (Sun) - Arrive & Settle in
We will collect you from Bilbao and transfer you to the delightful Posada El Corcal, our base in Tama, a hamlet in the Liébana valley nestled in the foothills of the central massif just outside the vibrant Mediaeval town of Potes. Settle into your room after a quick check-in process. Dinner will be served at 8.15pm during which there will be an informal welcome meeting.

Day 2 (Mon) - Lebena Circular Walk
A beautiful 7km walk showcasing the floral jewels of La Hermida Gorge. We start from a fine 9th century church (next to an olive tree that may well be even older) and ascend through dry woods rich in Mediterranean flora to magnificent, rich hay meadows with many orchids amidst exquisite scenery. The higher woods are home to colonies of Pyrenean lilies and Peonies.

Day 3 (Tues) - Puerto San Glorio
A short drive (c 30 mins) takes us south into the Cordillera Cantabrica to a high pass from where superb views and unusual geology can be enjoyed. Swathes of Narcissi on the ascent and lovely dwarf bulb species may be found in a forest at the summit. Then a 9km circular walk (shorter options are possible) across meadows and down a river valley where endless species abound.

Day 4 (Weds) - Fuente Dé and Pido Lower Meadows
Today we will explore the meadows beneath the sheer cliffs at Fuente De and then take a circular walk through pretty woodlands and into the rich orchid meadows at Pido with hundreds of Sawfly orchids and much more.

Day 4 (Thurs) - Rest Day (or Cares Gorge)
You are free to have a well-deserved lie-in today. Breakfast is served until 10.30am. Spend the day relaxing. Perhaps you will take a leisurely tour of the excellent Picos de Europa Visitors Centre, which is nearby, or take the pleasant stroll into Potes along the river for a late lunch. On Tuesday night we will be on hand to help you to book dinner and arrange taxi shares in order to make it easy for you to dine in one of Potes' restaurants.

Cares Gorge - For those interested, whilst not a Wildflower Ramble, the Cares Gorge is arguably the signature walk of the whole range, a true Picos classic. We will be offering this as an optional walk for your rest day. This deep narrow canyon separates the western and central massifs and is home to a route which only exists because of a mind-boggling feat of engineering in the 1920s when the water canal for the Poncebos hydro-electric power station was built. The transfer time is approx. 60-90 mins depending on which end of the gorge we start from.

Day 6 (Fri) - Fuente De & Aliva High Pastures
The impressive Fuente De glacial cirque features one of the most spectacular cable car rides in Europe - 753m of ascent in 3 mins 40 seconds. It is also an outstanding location for alpine flora - perhaps as good as anywhere in Europe. Carpets of tiny Asturian daffodils flower as the snow melts with Pasque flowers, Hepaticas, the endemic Anemone pavoniana and then beautiful Spring and Trumpet gentians. A circular walk is one option, but depending on conditions we may also spend the day exploring the rocks and high pastures that teem with floral gems.

Day 7 (Sat) - Piedrasluengas or the Orchid Extravaganza
We have two popular options to choose from:

- **Piedrasluengas** is a mountain pass a short drive south-east with dramatic but accessible limestone rocks that form a perfect natural rock garden. We will walk from there down into a river valley with Daffodils and woodland plants then on into a short, picturesque limestone gorge, home to crevice dwelling alpine species. A further drive south leads to a village where you can see a colony of Storks nest amid huge numbers of Green-winged orchids.

- **The Orchid Extravaganza** is a drive to around seven locations to spot as many Orchid species as we can in a day - 19 is our record! - though during the whole week you may see as many as 33. Lunch is taken high above La Hermida Gorge where raptors soar and Swallowtail butterflies are usually seen.

Day 8 (Sun) - Departure
Depending on the exact time of the transfer, after breakfast you will be transferred to Bilbao Airport.

*Please note - This is a sample itinerary and might be subject to change in order to take in the best flower habitats at the time of your holiday. Adverse weather can also cause a change to any proposed itinerary.*
Travel

Airport Transfers

Getting to the Picos de Europa is easy and airport transfers are included in the price of your holiday.

Inbound

We offer transfers every Sunday to/from Bilbao Airport to pick-up people who have flown with Easyjet from Edinburgh, Stansted, Manchester & Bristol; with BA from Gatwick; and with Aer Lingus from Dublin. Please do not book a flight that lands later than 17:00.

Outbound

Please do no book a return flight that departs earlier than 10:30.

Exact transfer timings will be confirmed approx. three weeks before your holiday. Our transfer service is not a personal taxi service and waiting can be unavoidable, so please do not book a transfer unless you are relaxed about the possibility of having to kill time in Bilbao or at the airport. Places are limited, so please check availability with us before you book your flights.

Self-Drivers & Fly-Drovers

Some people may like to travel to Northern Spain with their own cars using Brittany Ferries services into Santander and Bilbao. Others might fly and then hire a car via Santander (1½ hours), Bilbao (2½ hours) or Asturias (2 hours). Either way, in such cases, we reduce your holiday price by £50 per person but you would be expected to use your own vehicle to drive to the walk trailheads during the week - unless we have space in our designated minibus(es).

Car Hire - For a competitive car hire quote please visit the Travel Tab on our Picos Wildflowers webpage.
Like much of northern Europe in 2018, the Picos, a mountain range facing north onto the Atlantic Ocean, experienced a cold, late Spring. When I arrived in mid-May there was still deep snow on the high mountains and yet, paradoxically, the valleys and gorges were hot and bone dry with scarcely a flower to be seen. How could I show guests the magnificent flowers normally on full display by this time?

Thankfully my anxiety was premature as rain soon arrived, the valleys burst into growth and the mountain snow began to melt. The pattern of growth was however quite different to earlier years I have experienced. At lower altitudes there were hundreds of daffodils in places that usually display thousands or even tens of thousands. The various species of wetland orchids were much reduced in both size and number. But Mediterranean orchid species that relish warmer, drier conditions flowered earlier and in more profusion than I have ever seen. Flamboyant Pink Butterfly orchids (Orchis papilionacea) were particularly glorious. In one small corner of a meadow below the village of Tudes we stopped counting after the first three hundred!

The circular walk from the village of Lebena in the Hermida Gorge was especially rewarding this year. It starts from the beautiful and architecturally important 10th century church of Santa Maria with its adjacent olive tree that may be even older. The path climbs through wooded slopes in which Mediterranean flower species flourish, this year relishing the dry, hot weather. A higher wood is home to a population of gorgeous, deep pink Peonies (Paeonia mascula), that I saw in flower for the first time this year. In previous years I had been too late. Also, for the first time, we discovered a colony of yellow Pyrenean lilies (Lilium pyrenaicum) that normally could be expected to flower a few weeks later. Finally, the floral tapestry in a series of hay meadows high above the Gorge was simply magnificent. We stood and gazed, marveling at the subtle pattern of colours before us backed by high mountain crags.

The snow on the high mountains meant that this year the superb alpine flora on Fuente De peaked in June, after I had left. But the early snowmelt species that were just emerging in late May are perhaps the most beautiful of all mountain flowers. The tiny trumpet daffodil Narcissus asturiensis was everywhere in huge numbers. Gardeners who grow dwarf bulbs are encouraged to feed them after flowering to encourage them to flower well the following year. The truth of this advice was illustrated by a splendid, robust colony growing through a large mound of horse droppings left from the year before!

The Pasque flowers were in flower in profusion. Earliest are the Spring Pasque flowers (Pulsatilla vernalis) with exquisite white petals tinted with purple outside and golden stamens within. Next come the Common Pasque flowers (Pulsatilla vulgaris, a rare British native) with deep purple flowers. There is also a lovely species, endemic to the Picos and surrounding mountains, with dark red flowers that appear almost black in bright sunlight – Pulsatilla hispanica subspecies rubra. It can be found in high meadows below the mountains but could we locate it on Fuente De? Many flowers were examined and photographed with much debate about whether the flowers were red, reddish purple or pure purple, which proved surprisingly difficult to tell with certainty. Guests with purple and red anoraks kindly lent them for comparison purposes! With some regret the conclusion was that we had not found the rare endemic, only the familiar but still very beautiful P. vulgaris.

I left the Picos at the end of May for Panticosa, Collett’s excellent base in the Spanish Pyrenees, just as the snow on the high mountains was finally melting and the carpet of Gentians, Saxifrages, Primulas and other species of high spring was coming into its own. My visit had confirmed that the Picos is one of the best places in Europe to see not only the splendour of the high mountain flora but also lovely flower meadows, woodland species and an unequalled range of orchids. Superb!
Holiday Notes

Your 'Wildflower Rambles' holiday will be spent at your own risk as part of an autonomous group, in which each member of the party is responsible for their own safety and has a duty of care to their fellow walkers.

The following is an explanation of the status of our organised 'Wildflower Rambles' - which we refer to as organised, not guided.

Our ‘Wildflower Rambles’ holiday is a series of self-guided days out which are made available to you on a basis of goodwill so that you might enjoy a route you might not otherwise have undertaken if you had visited the area independently. It represents nothing more than the opportunity to go out on a beautiful walk in the company of like-minded individuals.

It is a fact that mountains, mountainous areas and activities undertaken in them are associated with personal injury and death. By coming to such areas, you are exposing yourself and your party to the possibility of personal injury or even death. In such an event, Collett's Mountain Holidays will not be held responsible for your interest in mountainous areas and your involvement in mountain pursuits, which can occasionally have tragic consequences.

In these days of litigation it is important you know that you (and each member of your party) join us on this holiday at your own risk as part of an autonomous group, in which each member of that group has a duty of care to the other. This is no different from the responsibilities you have on a casually arranged weekend walk with friends or family in the UK.

Our Wildflower Walkers are all volunteers and have experience of the mountains, some more than others. Some may have qualifications relevant to mountain activities, but they are not qualified mountain guides. In addition you will also be joined on your wildflower walks by one or more of our walk organisers who we recruit and train in line with a Health & Safety Policy, which is based on Risk Assessments and recognised mountain safety procedures. Not being professionally responsible for you on our organised itineraries does not mean we ignore safety, nor does it make us exempt from owing a duty of care to each person who joins us on an organised itinerary.

Your safety is paramount and we therefore take our own measures to maximise safety. We do this in line with legal requirements pertaining to duty of care. We apply codes of practice to the procedures carried out by our outdoor staff. We assess, manage and communicate risk. We try to make people aware of the importance of mountain safety and to highlight their responsibilities when part of a group.

Our codes of practice should not really be taken into consideration or relied upon by you when deciding to join this ‘Wildflower Rambles’ holiday, for at the heart of our procedures are basic mountain safety measures, which should be undertaken by every individual when preparing for a day in the mountains.

Finally, during your holiday with Collett's Mountain Holidays you act at your own risk on any ideas, information and opinions you might acquire from our wildflower walkers or walk organisers or from material prepared by us to help you get the most from the area.