

Greece-Turkey-Iran-UAE-Oman Tour 2002/2003

April 1st > April 30th 2003

We got up early on this morning of April 1st, it had rained in the night and with temp. as low as 17°C. we felt very cold after our stay in the Emirates and Oman. We continued to Bam and saw some beautiful plants of *Astragalus* along the road. The landscape changed into a desert as we approached Bam. Just before the city we came into a sand and rainstorm, giving strange effects. Once in the city we wanted to visit the ancient city and citadel called: Arg-e-Bam. But when we came to the entrance it was very busy with Iranians who had the same intention. They still had their holiday for Nowruz, so we made the decision to come back later because we could not leave Lex back in the car with so much people walking around. They certainly would see him and because it is very unusual to have a dog in your car go to the car and upset Lex. Because Lex is a Belgian shepherd dog(Malinois) he always wants to protect us and our car.

From Bam we followed the main road to the city of Kerman, just before the Kuh-e-Jupar mountains we took a turn off to the town of Rayin and from here followed a rough and muddy track to the town of Jupar. In the late afternoon we found a track leading into the Kuh-e-Jupar and found a place to stay for the night at an altitude of 2300m. After a cold night, temp. had dropped to 7°C, we wanted to go for a walk up higher into the mountains in search for *Dionysia raptodes* and *Dionysia oreodoxa*. But just before we wanted to drive up a bit higher 2 cars came along the same track and stopped, 2 families jumped out and came to us. They were of course very curious about us and wanted to know why we were here. They were here for a picnic and after they had continued their way, one of the cars got stuck on this very rough and bumpy track. We pulled the car free again and were invited to have tea. After we said good-bye we went further with our car until we saw some rocks where we thought we could find *dionysias* growing. José and Lex stayed with the car, I had to climb my way up and already at the base of the cliffs found *Dionysia raptodes* in full flower! Each time again its really thrilling to find these magnificent plants in the wild! After I had climbed to an altitude of approx. 2700m., I found some more plants in full flower on vertical cliffs. After this successful first search in Iran we stayed on the same spot for another cold night.

Next morning we went to Kerman, we needed to change money and do some shopping. After we parked our car in a quiet street, leaving Lex in the car, we walked into the busy city centre in search for a bank. Most banks did not want to change Emirate money into Iranian rials and when we were in yet another bank a young man offered to help us. He introduced himself as Behzad and guided us through the city. After we had done all the things we had to do, he invited us to his home. Here we met his mother and father and a younger brother, we also had a meal with them. Lex was allowed to stay in the garden. After this we went back to the city again to send some e-mails. After we agreed with Behzad to visit the town of Mahan next day, we went back to the place in the Kuh-e-Jupar mountains to stay for the night.

In the morning of the 4th of April we picked up Behzad at one of the roundabouts in Kerman, we first had to find a petrol station to refuel. With fuel prices being very low in Iran we always liked to refuel, 90liters diesel for only 1€ !! In most cities in Iran petrol stations don't have diesel, so you always have to go to the main roads outside the city. Also there are not many petrol stations in Iran, you always have to refuel in time. This time we also had to go outside Kerman, when we finally found one there was a long queue of trucks waiting! This could take days if we had to wait too, some of the

trucks having double 1000liter tanks! Luckily we had Behzad with us, we just drove up to the first truck and Behzad asked if we could refuel first. No problem for this driver, he could wait another few minutes after he maybe had waited for hours! After this we continued to the town of Mahan , here we visited the Bagh-e Shahzade. A charming garden, with a collection of pools leading to a palace. This day being a Friday it was busy with families having a picnic. There was also a taxi driver talking to us, he spoke excellent English and asked all kinds of difficult questions like: what is the meaning of life and things like that. Of course I could not answer all his questions and advised him to read some books about Buddhism or just enjoy life!

We also visited the mausoleum of Shah Nematollah Vali, its renowned for its tilework. But when we had to pay to enter the actual mausoleum, Behzad started to argue with one of the officials at the entrance. He said it was ridiculous to ask money to enter a holy place like this, when other people got involved we said to Behzad just to forget it before there would be trouble. Foreign visitors to museums and other attractions always are charged far more then Iranian visitors.

From here we went to a nearby restaurant with a nice garden and had a traditional meal outside on a kind of wooden platform. When we returned to Kerman, I went together with Behzad to a barber to have my hair cut. In the evening we said good-bye to Behzad and promised to keep in contact through e-mail. We went back to the Kuh-e-Jupar mountains again to stay for the night.

Next day we went back to Bam again, to visit the old city. We hoped it would not be so busy like the first time, the Nowruz holidays had ended. But first we visited the outside of the mosque of the town of Jupar which is similar in design to the mausoleum in Mahan. While driving to Bam we saw another track leading into the Kuh-e-Jupar mountains, we just had to follow it and found some more plants of *Dionysia rhamnoides*. Most of them past flowering.

When we arrived at the old city of Bam this time it was quiet again, almost no other visitors and we found a shaded place to park the car. From the citadel we had a great view over the old city which was already founded between 200-600. From Bam we returned back to the Kuh-e-Jupar again to stay for the night.

In the morning of April 6th we continued our journey to the city of Yazd, some 360km. to the northwest along the boring main road. Again we saw long queues of trucks at petrol stations, also this time we were allowed to refuel without having to wait!

Before we reached Yazd we decided to visit some mountains not far from the main road, we found many plants starting to flower. Also orchards were in full flower now, providing fine views with the background mountains. We also had a walk in search for dionysias, but did not find them here. After we found a place to stay for the night 2 men came to us, after we tried to explain to them that we would stay here for the night they said good-bye and went away. Later that evening they came back again, this time accompanied by a police officer. They wanted to know what we were doing here and they wanted our passports, I tried to explain to them that we were here in search for plants. Again I showed them the book of dionysias, with pictures of flowering plants. But they only wanted to have our passports which I refused to give. I said to them that we were only staying for the night, next morning we would be gone again. I also tried to explain that we did not do anything wrong, after this I returned to our car leaving those 3 men a bit confused behind. However, they went away!

Later that night they returned again, this time with 8 men! There were also some soldiers and even an English teacher, who had to translate! After telling the whole story again, they just wanted to have our passports, which I refused again. I said to the English teacher that they were treating us like criminals, but he said they wanted to protect us! Strange way to protect people like this! After a

while we had enough of this stupid game and we just drove away from here to find another place where we could continue our sleep. Luckily they did not follow us, at last we could have our sleep! Later during our stay in Iran we had more such stupid situations, giving us the impression that we were some kind of attraction for at least some of the Iranian police officers.

Next morning we returned to the main road to Yazd, just before the city we took a turn-off into the Shir Kuh mountains. Here we hoped to find both *Dionysia curviflora* and *Dionysia janthina*, but when we tried to get higher into the mountains along a track there was a big bang from somewhere underneath the car! The left front side had collapsed, it looked like the left front side shock absorber had been broken! Luckily we still could drive and the only thing we could do was to go to Yazd as quickly as possible. After some searching we found a Mercedes garage willing to help us. In first instance they too thought that this shock absorber had been broken. But after the shock absorber was taken out, checked and replaced again the car still went down once from the jack! Now some more people got involved, this is the way it goes in Iran, one of them had the brilliant idea that the leaf spring between the front wheels was broken! I knew about this leaf spring because the German company who had rebuilt our car into a 4WD. had replaced this spring for a stronger one. But at that moment I just forgot about this. After the mechanics had removed some protection covers and some other parts, it became clear that this leaf spring indeed was broken. Now we had a problem, this part would not be obtainable in Iran. We also had a translation problem now things became more complicated, fortunately the people of the garage knew somebody who spoke some English. It was Samir, a refugee from Iraq who lived in Yazd already for a long time. He worked and lived at another garage at the opposite side of the road. He was of great help throughout the time we had to stay in Yazd and we will never forget this kind and gentle man.

In first instance the people of the garage thought they could make a new spring themselves, but after they had asked around this was not possible. Now we contacted the company in Holland where we had bought the car, they contacted the German company to ask if they could send a new leaf spring to Iran. In the mean time we could stay in the garage which was a large hall with one open side. The people of this garage were also of great help, every day they brought a nice meal and we could make as much phone calls as we wanted. It became clear that the new spring would be sent from Germany to Tehra, arriving in a few days.

While we were waiting, one of the mechanics had made a leaf spring out of a used one. But this 'new' spring was not as thick as the original one and we decided to wait for the real new spring from Germany. 12th of April the new leaf spring arrived at the airport in Tehran, we hoped it would arrive in Yazd that evening on a domestic flight. In the evening I went together with the garage owner and Samir to Yazd airport, but no spring had arrived! It was the beginning of a long and frustrating struggle to get this spring to Yazd. Every day the owner of the garage made several phone calls to get some information about why this spring was not sent further to Yazd. After a few days we decided that they could replace the broken spring by the self-made one, this way we were able to drive again. Because this spring was not as strong as the original one, the front suspension had changed too. We could not drive too fast and had to avoid bad parts in the road, at least we could drive again! We first went back to the mountains, we hoped it would not be too late to see the *dionysias* in flower.

In the late afternoon of April 14th we found *Dionysia janthina* in a gorge near the town of Taft, unfortunately past flowering. We stayed at this spot for the night, next morning we went somewhat

closer to the Shir Kuh mountains. In another gorge close to the town of Dehbala we found *Dionysia curviflora*, this time most plants were in full flower. Because of the problems with the car suspension, we did not go higher up into the Shir Kuh and stayed another night at the spot where we had found *D. janthina*.

Next morning we went back to Yazd again and hoped the new leaf spring had arrived. But again this time: no spring had arrived! It turned out to be that the spring was sent to a company with the same name in Tehran, again promises were made that they would send it to Yazd. But after we had waited for another few days, we decided to drive to Tehran and get this spring ourselves! After we said good-bye to all the helpful people in Yazd, we started our 660km. journey in the afternoon of April 19th to Tehran. 3 o' clock in the night we stopped just before we arrived in Tehran to get some sleep. Early in the morning we made our way through the horrendous traffic of Tehran in search for the company where our leaf spring should be. After we asked for directions in a sort of office, one of the people there came with us to show the way. After some searching we found the company, the man who helped us said that they indeed received a message that a part had arrived from Germany. Because they did not know for whom this part was, they did not get it from the airport. So, our spring was still at the airport, luckily this company offered to send somebody with us to the airport. Once at the airport we had to go through a long bureaucratic hassle again, after we had paid a 200€ import tax we finally had our leaf spring! Now we had to find a Mercedes garage that could help us, again the person who assisted us at the airport brought us to the only official Mercedes garage in Tehran . After the people of this garage had taken a closer look to our car, their conclusion was that this would be a too difficult job for them! After I said that I would guide them, they agreed. All mechanics that were there got involved in this job after some time, a few hours later the six men had successfully finished the job!

We decided to leave Tehran that same afternoon, our plan was to go back south again towards the city of Shiraz . We wanted to continue our search for *dionysias*, before it would be too late to see them flowering. Because of all the problems with the car, we already had lost too much time! In the evening of the 21 st of April we arrived in the Kuh-e-Khataban mountains to search for *Dionysia esfandiarii*. Just before dark we found a place to stay for the night, weather was cold and rainy and the track had become very muddy. Next morning we walked further into the mountains, we did have coordinates of the location of this *dionysia*. But when we had reached the waypoint, there were no *dionysias* in sight. We also thought this location was not suitable at all for *dionysias*, we think somebody made a mistake writing down the coordinates.

We turned around some of the coordinate numbers and started searching again, this time with our car. Now we came closer to the highest peaks of Kuh-e-Khataban, we also saw vertical rocks where this *dionysia* could grow. But after a lot of searching we still could not find *Dionysia esfandiarii*! After a while the weather turned bad again and we decided to give up our search. We continued our way towards Shiraz and found a nice place to stay for the night at the entrance of a gorge. Next morning we went for a walk through this gorge, already at the entrance we saw the yellow flowering cushions of *Dionysia diapensiifolia*. Most of the plants were totally inaccessible and I had to make some dangerous climbs to make pictures of this *dionysia*. Further down the gorge we also found some plants of *Dionysia revoluta*, all past flowering. We also saw a beautiful flowering *Silene* species. After this success we went to Shiraz , here we hoped to find *Dionysia michauxii*. We also had coordinates of the location of this *dionysia*, but when we came closer to this location we could not find a road leading to this point. Shiraz is surrounded by mountains on several sides, houses and

other buildings are built on the flanks of these mountains making it difficult to find a way through. We went back to the mountains on the east side of the city, being the actual Kuh-e-Bamu where Jim Archibald found *Dionysia michauxii* in 1966.

Also these mountains are difficult to enter, close to the city a big part is fenced off being a military area. Further east we saw a small building beyond another fence, this did not look like a military building and there were no guarding soldiers. It had turned late again and we decided to go back to the spot near the gorge to stay for the rest of the weekend. We had to come back to Shiraz anyway to extend our visa, so we could go back to this building and ask for permission to enter the Kuh-e-Bamu.

In the morning of the 24th of April I made another walk through the gorge and higher into the mountains. José and Lex stayed with the car. In the summit region of this mountain I found some flowering plants of *Dionysia revoluta*, flowering tulips and some other unknown species. In the afternoon we went to a nearby town to do some shopping and returned back to this place where we made a fire in the evening. In the night we were waked by our dog Lex, he was very restless and wanted to go out of the car. He was suffering from bloody diarrhoea; we think he ate some chicken bones left by picnicking families causing these problems.

We stayed at this spot the next day; I fixed the front wheel stabilizer rod again which was probably forgotten by the mechanics in Tehran . Because of the trouble we had, we lost a lot of confidence in this car and we had serious thoughts of selling this car once back in Europe !

In the early morning of 26th of April we went back to Shiraz, first to extend our visa and after this visit Kuh-e-Bamu. After we had found the 'Aliens bureau' mentioned in our Lonely Planet, it turned out that they had moved to the Police headquarters at the other side of the city! A guy who we had asked for directions offered to drive in front of us to lead us through the crazy traffic of Shiraz . Luckily we found a parking place right in front of the police station. After our 'guide' gave his telephone number in case we needed him again, typical Iran, and said good-bye I went inside with all the necessary paperwork. After filling in some forms I had to go to a bank to pay the 7€ fee for this extension, also typical Iran !

Once I entered the bank there was a long queue waiting, I only had 1 hour before the visa office would be closed! Just in time I arrived back at the visa office, this time there was a young police officer in the room who asked if I could speak German. He had studied this language and asked my opinion of his German; I said to him that his German was excellent especially because he never had been outside Iran, let alone in Germany ! In the meantime he did the translation for the other 2 officers and it turned out that I had to pay a small fee again, but I had spent our last Rials at the bank thinking this was the only money I had to pay! The German-speaking officer said he would solve this, after he had explained the situation to the other 2 guys I could go without paying, again typical Iran !

Now we could stay for another month, we first went to a bank to change some money. After this, we went back to the small building behind the fence in the Kuh-e-Bamu mountains just outside Shiraz . This time we saw an old weathered sign at the entrance saying: Kuh-e-Bamu National Park! When we came to the building there were 2 men, they were the guards of this 'National Park'. Unfortunately they did not speak English, but when I showed them our book of dionysias they understood why we had come to them. They recognised the photos of flowering dionysias and said they were growing in the nearby mountains. But they also explained that most of the plants were past flowering already!

Nevertheless, one of the guards offered to come with us to show us some plants, while José and Lex stayed with the car I climbed together with the guard at about 2000m. where we found the first plants of *Dionysia*. Indeed they were past flowering, but I could make some close up pictures of the plants to make a (later) determination possible. When we returned to the guardhouse we were, of course, invited to have tea and a chat. The main task of the guards was to protect the Ibex in this park. They said there was a lot of poaching here, one of their colleagues even was killed in a battle with poachers some years ago! Because it had turned late again we asked if we could stay at this nice place for the night, this was not a problem at all and they wanted us to sleep inside the guardhouse which we kindly refused.

After we said good-bye to the friendly guards next morning, we went on in the direction of the town of Semirom. Along the road we saw some people with their goat and sheep herds travelling into the mountains. In this region there are still nomadic tribes like the Ghashgha'is and Bakthiaris who travel to the mountains in spring each year, sometimes blocking the road with their herds.

On our way to Semirom we came through a gorge where we found *Dionysia bryoides*, still in flower on cliffs on the opposite side of this gorge.

In Semirom we hoped to meet, for alpine enthusiasts, well-known Harry Jans and Chris Grey-Wilson and two others who were in Iran for a plant hunting trip too. They had planned to be in Semirom on the 28th and 29th of April. When we arrived close to Semirom we directly went up the Kuh-e-Pashmaku mountain. We had been here before during our visit to Iran in 2000.

There is a track leading up a plateau, but this time the track was muddy and at times very slippery. When we arrived on the plateau at an altitude of approx. 2800m., temp. had dropped to a cold 8°C. We just hoped it would not rain that night, making the track impassable!

Next morning the sky was clear again, on this 28th of April we found the first plants of *Dionysia iranshahrii* in full flower. The rest of that day we spent waiting for Harry Jans and his group, we drove back down the mountain a bit to get a better view on Semirom. From this spot we could see the beginning of the track leading up the mountain, but on this day nobody did show up.

In the morning of the next day I made another walk along the ridges of beautiful Kuh-e-Pashmaku and again found many plants of *Dionysia iranshahrii* flowering, sometimes together with *Dionysia revoluta*. In the afternoon we went down to Semirom to see if maybe some 'strangers' had arrived, but as far as we could see we were the only strangers in town. After some shopping we went for a search for *Dionysia mozaffarianii*, this species is growing very close to Semirom. Indeed, just as we were outside town we saw a flowering plant on vertical cliffs. I climbed my way up once again and found some more flowering plants of *Dionysia mozaffarianii*. Until now this species is found only on these cliffs close to Semirom, if there are no other plants found in the surrounding mountains in the future this is really a rare species. Also very vulnerable in this close proximity of Semirom, hopefully this beautiful species will survive!

In the evening we went back to Kuh-e-Pashmaku to stay for the night and to wait for Harry and friends. Next day we waited until afternoon for Harry and friends, but again nobody showed up. We just wondered what could have happened. Somewhat later we received an e-mail from Harry: they had to change their schedule because of bad weather and because Chris got ill and had returned to the UK.

In the afternoon we went on to the town of Lordegan, we first wanted to do some shopping in this town. In this part of Iran people are not used to foreigners, let alone foreigners in a foreign car and even accompanied by a dog! As we entered Lordegan everybody in the street, mostly men and children, stopped and gazed at us 'aliens'! When José tried to buy vegetables in one of the many small shops, a lot of curious men and boys followed her inside! At one time she had to ask the shop keeper to send them away because they made her feel very uncomfortable. Of course we already were used to some 'extra' attention of many Iranians, but this attention was never annoying. We even think this is one of the highlights of a visit to Iran . But in this part of Iran people behaved a bit different, as we would experience later on during our visit.

In the meantime a large group of men and boys had gathered around our car, some of them climbing on the back of the car to get a better view! This made our dog mad and he tried to attack those 'intruders', making them of course even more curious! I tried to chase them away, but after a short time the whole show started over again. Luckily José had returned and we left this town as quickly as possible! During our first visit to Iran in 2000 we had been in this region too and experienced the same unbelievable annoying curiosity.

From Lordegan we went to a nice spot somewhere along the Karun river, we knew this place from our first visit, here we could recover between the willow trees. Amidst a frog concert this 30th of April came to a peaceful end....