

ASTON MARTIN MAGAZINE



THE ORCHID OBSESSION

Who would have thought the sighting of a single translucent flower, hauntingly beautiful on an ethereal white stem only five centimetres tall, could send a global community into high alert? Rory Ross explores the mysterious world of orchids – a world of enraptured enthusiasts and bemused scientists





The discovery in September 2009 of a 'ghost orchid' – unglimped for 23 years, officially declared extinct in 2005 – caused such a potent mix of shock, thrill and obsessive reverie within the botanical world that the location of the plant was kept secret. Only six months later was the 'news' of the discovery released, allowing amateur botanist Mark Jannink to share with the world that incredible moment when he identified botany's Holy Grail, *Epigogium aphyllu*, deep in an oak wood in Herefordshire.

'Hello you – so there you are!' he confessed he had whispered aloud, in a mix of awe and familiarity that is the trademark of a treasure hunter finding his long-sought trove. 'I was ready to give up,' Jannink admitted, recalling years of dogged detective work in identifying possible sites in the Welsh borders. 'And the feeling when I saw it was of relief more than anything. It was the following day that I felt the euphoria.'

The 'disappearance' of the mysterious ghost orchid was never going to stop the more forensically obsessive botanists from the quest to re-discover it. Orchids have that effect on people. The lure of the rare and delicate flowers is a powerful one. It is something about the sheer unnaturalness of this species in Mother Nature's repertoire that is strangely compelling – the waxy thickness of the petals, either plain or adorned with veined, spotted or firework trails of colour; the intricacy of shape; the embellishment of frills; the extraordinary 3D flower formations; the magic complexity embodied in a single blossom.

The Victorians had a name for the orchid fancier's madness: orchidelirium. Keeping up with the Joneses in that era meant wealthy orchid fanatics sent personal explorers (heavily armed to protect themselves against other orchid seekers rather than against hostile natives or savage wildlife) to uncharted regions, swamps and jungles, in search of new varieties.

'People get very passionate about orchids; they just seem to get hooked,' says Susan Orlean, author of *The Orchid Thief*, a best-selling page-turner about a larcenous horticulturalist intent on cloning a rare orchid. There is even a World Orchid Conference, held every three years (2011 in Singapore; 2014 in Pretoria, South Africa) and supported by the American Orchid Society and the Royal Horticultural Society, where enthusiasts gather in mass admiration for shows, sales, competitions and lectures.

Orchids are everywhere in the modern world: on the hall table or mantelpiece, in the boutique hotel, on the fashionista's office desk, in almost every supermarket flower section. It is not as if they are a rarity as a species. On the contrary, orchidaceae are believed to be the second-largest family of flowering plants, with between 21,950 and 26,049 currently accepted species. Remarkably, the number of orchid species equals more than twice the number of bird species and almost four times the number of mammal species. Since the introduction of tropical species in the 19th century, horticulturists have produced more than 100,000 hybrids and cultivars. The family also includes vanilla.

Why so strangely compelling? What is it about orchids that so stir the passions? The astonishing variety of the peculiar beauty of orchids is the draw. These diverse flowers can be found in almost every habitat. The majority grow in the tropics of South America, Central America and Asia, the Arctic Circle, southern Patagonia and even on Macquarie Island, close to Antarctica. But each genus grows only in conditions that are strangely, bizarrely, individually perfect – hence the mystique and euphoria when a new stem with an exotic flower face peeks its head through the undergrowth.

Take the ghost orchid. It is the most mysterious wildflower in Britain. According to naturalist Peter Marren, author of *Britain's Rare Flowers*, the species is hard to find because it does not appear every year and behaves more like a fungus than a flower. 'It has no green leaves. It doesn't depend on photosynthesis at all, and it doesn't manufacture its own food,' he explains. 'Instead, the food is manufactured for it by a fungus on its roots. It lives largely underground; in fact it can live underground without flowering properly for years on end, and it only flowers when conditions are just right.'

When it does bloom, the ghost orchid flowers in the thick leaf-mould in the darkest parts of the woodland, where there is no other vegetation. 'It's the hardest British flower to see,' adds Marren. 'It looks extraordinary. It produces these flowers without chlorophyll which in the dim light look like ghosts, and if you shine a torch beam on them, they appear to be translucent white in the pitch darkness, almost like a photographic negative.'

With between 21,950 and 26,049 currently accepted species, the number of orchid species equals more than twice the number of bird species and almost four times the number of mammal species





That hunter's revelation is available to orchid spotters throughout the world – from Thailand to the Caribbean, Majorca to Central America – which imbues orchid fanaticism with an almost 'Indiana Jones' sense of adventure. For true orchidistas, a visit to the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo eco-hotel (pictured here) is the ultimate pilgrimage. Its 12-acre Cloud Forest garden, penned between the Urubamba river and the steep sides of the Urubamba Valley is home to 372 native species. Cloud Forest (so-called because of the clouds that sometimes engulf it) thus boasts the world's largest variety of indigenous orchids found in their natural environment on privately owned grounds.

You can take a personalised guided tour of Inkaterra's Orchid Trail with one of the nature specialists or, on special request, with the resident Chief Biologist. Never mind Wordsworth wandering lonely as a cloud with his host of daffodils – imagine walking through actual clouds and technicolour swathes of orchids in bloom, from the largest orchid flower in the world (*Phragmipedium caudatum*) to tiny flowering specimens best appreciated through a magnifying glass. Not to mention species new to science, which have been discovered on the hotel grounds.

The great advantage of Inkaterra's Cloud Forest is that you see the orchids with their natural pollinators, in this case 18 species of hummingbird, 111 species of butterfly and many other insects. For it is not just the look of an orchid that fascinates, it is the dynamism of their living process. Famously, Charles Darwin was so enthralled by the flowers that in 1877 he published an epic tome devoted to *The Various Contrivances by which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects*. He noted, for example, that some orchids rely on just one specific pollinator – a particular species of moth, for instance – for survival.

Over millions of years, orchids have evolved remarkable ways of attracting, and sometimes entrapping, birds and insects. The so-called 'bucket orchid' *Coryanthes*, for instance, lures in male euglossine bees with a perfumed oil that the bees need to attract mates. Unable to gain a foothold on the slippery substance, the bees fall into a pool of the slimy fluid. There is only one exit: a tight-fitting channel the bee must squeeze through to escape. As it does, the orchid secretly glues two plump pods of pollen on to the bee's back, which will be removed when it falls into another flower's pool of desire. Yes, even the sex life of an orchid is beguiling – filled with all the drama of desire and deception.