

The Quest for rhododendrons from Fansipan in North Vietnam

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**the text written by Gilles Rouau is in italics.*

Sa Pa, these two syllables had been ringing in my head since I had read Keith Rushford's stories which had been printed in n° 45, 49 and 50 of the RHS publications. The idea of this trek was reinforced by Alan Clark's words when we met him in Scotland. He told us how to get in touch with his guide, Son, who had discovered a new path to climb up Fansipan, which, as we will see later on, was very useful to us.



On Tuesday April 1st 2014, Gilles Rouau, Béatrice and Gilles Stephan, Jacky Bronnec, Alain Bleogad, Jacqueline Petton and myself start with the visit of the garden above the town of Sa Pa where we see a few rhododendrons of the *Maddenia* sub-section but also a beautiful arisaema sp which reminds us of a frightening animal.



From the garden we discover a striking panorama of the town which during the Indochina war, was a resting place for French soldiers who came here to recover from the heat and the wet atmosphere of the plains.

The town is full of Mong women wearing their traditional costume and, for some of them, carrying young children on their back; they try to sell us trinkets.

On April 2nd, things become more serious. We start for Ban Khoan which is situated at 2000m, to explore the road sides and try to get in the thickets above the path. We cannot see any adult rhododendron although there is a multitude of young plants which are growing on the slope ! A big leaf rhododendron without any indumentum, *R. suoilenhense* has already bloomed(let us remember that K. Rushford had previously called it *R. prostitum*) but we will not be able to reach the plant although we went round through undergrowth which had been burnt in places to clear some ground for cultivation.



R. suoilenhense

On the slope we cling on to bamboo stems which unluckily have thorns on their internodes and are very aggressive to our fragile skins.

R. moulmainense, *R. excellens* and *R. emarginatum* live next to one another. A bit further down, in a transverse vale, we discover large specimens of *R. serotinum*. Our guide confirms their late blooming and the strong fragrance of their flowers. He does not want to go on towards Suoi Doi and we go to a village in the paddy fields to spend the night. Surprise, surprise! Our hostess has prepared chips with garlic ! No need to tell you we quickly swallowed this.

On April 3rd, we start climbing Mount Fansipan; the highest peak in Vietnam at a little more than 3100m.

We are escorted by the Head of the National Park, a ranger and seven porters. From the start, at only 1 900m, we see a devastated forest ; numerous trunks have been broken by the weight of the snow which fell in abundance last winter (in Sa Pa they had up to 1m of snow which is , Son told us, very exceptional.)

We have lunch in a clearing and are given some time to botanize. There are many arisaemas, an hydrangeaceae, with nearly black wood and blue leaves (a *Dichroa* maybe?), *Daphniphyllum*, many

epiphytes which are impossible to identify of course and *R.saxicolum* which usually grows between 400 and 1800m.



R. saxicolum

We also come across *R. arboreum* ssp. *delavayi* aff. (*fansipanense*?), introduced in 1992 by K. Rushforth and also *R. ovatum*.



R. arboretum ssp. *Delavayi* aff. (*fansipanense* ?)

Across the path, crushed by the fall of a tree, a 13m high *R. moulmāinense* is fighting for its life. In the same clearing, there is also a *Magnolia cathcartii* and another one with white flowers, called *sapaense* by Alan Clark, an unknown name in international literature.

As we arrive at the camp we are quite surprised and saddened for the accommodations have been highly damaged by the bad weather. This is maybe the reason why the access to Fansipan was forbidden; or maybe it was due to the disappearance in November 2013 of Jimmy Taggart, the Scottish botanist nobody has heard of for months. Our tents are simple blue plastic sheets which are hold up by wood posts; we cannot close them and some of us have the surprise visit of a dog during the night.



Before dinner we have a look around the camp; we marvel at a huge *R. moulmāinense* ; we wonder about the name of some small bushes with red shoots whitout any bloom (*camellias*, *euryas*?) We notice new rhododendrons: *R. leptocladon* with just one wilted yellow flower and also *R. irrorata*.

On April 4th, in the fog, we start towards the second camp at 2 700m, walking among beautiful ferns, Primulas, Scheffleras and gentians. We had heard about via ferrata but in fact, there are solid metallic ladders which help us go across difficult places.

Next to a gully we discover beautiful specimens of *R. sinofalconeri* in full bloom.

In the same place, there is also an unusual *Maddenia* with pink flowers and scales on the upper face of its leaves. The lack of hairs on young shoots and the deep pink of the flowers make us think of *R. carneum*.



R. carneum ?

We resume our journey after this break, our interest raised by a greenish-white *Enkianthus* and a red *irrorata*. The path lined by smallish bamboos is steep and once more we must use the ladders to keep going. A bit higher up, a gorgeous *R. ovatum* was waiting for us and without any doubt it is the most gorgeous rhododendron I have ever seen, although it is totally subjective.



R. ovatum



R. Lapponica

A *R. valentinooides* aff. (but with no hairs on the side of their leaves) and a *R. lapponica* complete our hunting list.

We arrive at the camp in bad weather and the snack break is very short; we alternately take refuge in a smoke-filled shed and flee outside to breathe some fresh air. As soon as the rain stops the group leaves but without myself, towards a site known by Son to shelter old *R. sinofalconeri*. At 2 600m, a *R. facetum* and some *R. valentinooides* again, then, at 2 900m, *Maddenias* with cream colored flowers. The group separates; G. Rouau, G. Stephan and J. Bronnec followed by J. Petton walk into a ravine sheltering a forest of *R. sinofalconeri*.

Prisoners have been breaking stones all day perhaps to enlarge the camp; porters are going to and fro to take building material up. We have even seen young women climbing up the mountain and carrying 50 kilos cement bags. The storm breaks out, so violent that we have to take refuge in the

camp-chief hut to spend the night, crammed together like sardines. Jacky is not there however: he is sleeping with our bags under a tarpaulin.

The next day we have a bad surprise: we are not allowed to spend a third night camping in the reserve and we have to go back to Sa Pa following the same path. The only good surprise is the discovery Jacky made of a rhododendron with a tawny thick indumentum at 2 550m which made us think of a Taliensia. Normally such a plant should not be found in Vietnam. Back home we show our herbarium samples to K. Cox, who gets in touch with several specialists : S. Hootman, D. Chamberlain, T. Hudson, R. Baines and K. Rushford. Their opinions differ and what comes out most often is the name of *R. dachengense* that S. Hootman found in South China.



R. dachangense ?

The visibility is good and the hills are covered with bamboos right to the top of their pointed crests.

At a lower altitude we are back in the area with euryas and camellias; one of them has large leaves and yellow withered flowers. A *R. leptocladon* has only one flower already wilted but we can still see it is yellow. A bit lower down, in the moss by the lane, Béatrice finds a rhododendron with tiny bright yellow flowers: *R. emarginatum* that we will often see as an epiphyte in big trees. Lots of orchids, epiphytic as well, have also fallen to the ground. A tree which has fallen after the period of bad weather has a superb purplish trunk with very smooth bark.



R. emarginatum

On the way we meet Vietnamese people who have come to spend the weekend at Sa Pa and want to 'measure' themselves to the Fansipan; they often wear, to our opinion, inadequate clothes which are not warm enough and tennis shoes.

Faced with the interdiction to spend more than two nights in the park, our guide decides to change his plans and to take us back to the top but through a way he is supposed to be the only one to know. We were due to take it on our way down. It is a break-neck path down towards the paddy fields and then along a beautiful river, we go up to a camp at 1900m. Surprise, Son has found real tents which are going to be planted among *Dendrocalamus*.

On April 6th, we leave camp at 7 o'clock and we are faced with a long, steep and difficult climb. A first crossing of the river is not easy... but luckily there are bamboos! Some of us however fall into the river for the rocks are very slippery.

Climbing again and again among an indescribable undergrowth which the locals use to their advantage: they plant cardamom, their yellow flowers blooming at ground level. Gilles Stephan gets lost and asks a group of children who has appeared from nowhere, to take him back to the group. His misfortune does not stop there: he falls into the river, up to his waist in the water (luckily our passports are plastic coated). On a rock in the middle of the river, a superb *R. excellens* occupies the place of honour. We are then at 2200m of altitude.

The climb keeps going on among bracken, tall styrax, *R. saxicolum* and at 2400m we come across a *R. anthosphaerum* with red flowers and a white throat, a member of the subsection *Irrorata*. We can only get a single inflorescence which has fallen on the ground, for the tree is quite high. We notice the dark nectar pouches at the bottom of the gorge.



R. anthosphaerum

There is a large white *R. moulmainense* in this forest which is otherwise quite damaged. We arrive at the camp with great relief: we are all muddy and Gilles Stephan's trousers and shirt are in rags. But this does not prevent us from exploring the surrounding area and we find a yellow flowered rhododendron with twisted leaves which make us think of *R. ambiguum* (a hypothesis we will have to check for this plant is not supposed to be found there).

A new storm breaks during the night and, bad luck! We have left our bags outside and the old Cotten bags are soaked. The tents are soaking wet just like our sleeping bags and clothes. Cedric Basset's book on Himalayan plants is dripping with water and about to be thrown away but luckily Son is willing to try and 'cure' it.

The morning after, the sun is shining and it only takes an hour's walk to reach the next camp. On the way, we see a *R. emarginatum* on the ground but still in full bloom, *R. leptocladon* or *R. fleuryi* (?) and brassaiopsis with very serrated leaves. As we arrive at the camp, Jacqueline, Béatrice and I put all our stuff to dry while our four other companions, obviously more valiant, start up towards the top of Fansipan.

Gilles Rouau is now going to tell you what follows.

A little higher up...

Son wants to take us to the crest above at 2900meters where interesting plants are supposed to be found. We must leave immediately to take advantage of the day which is still young and the path is, it seems, tricky, even dangerous. He wants the climbers to be in good shape and motivated. Both Gilles, Jacky and Alain are ready!

At first, the path follows the top of the meadows near the forest where obviously, a large number of old trees have been broken by the unusual amount of snow which fell last December; it was so heavy and sticky that the subtropical canopy made of evergreens did not resist. The main victims are the Lithocarpus: large oaks always covered with epiphytes and a very slender tree, unknown to us, remarkable with its bronze colored trunk, smooth and shiny. Trunks are split, huge boughs broken down, all this makes a nearly impassable tangle in places. We have to leave the path and at a venture, cut across steep copses intersected by treacherous ravines! Trying... But it is just an appetizer before what comes next: we have to go up the bed of a torrent; it would be more accurate to speak of a succession of waterfalls pouring down a chaos of granitic balls something between 1 to 5 meters in diameter. Everything is covered in moss amid a thick undergrowth. You can't look at anything but your feet because of these dreaded walking shoes with soles made of pure Marseille soap! Luckily, from time to time, flat sections interrupt these breathtaking stairs and we can then try to catch our breath. And find an answer to previous questions: there, in between these hellish bluffs, is a joinery workshop. Piled in great quantity, timber with a super light -colored wood and a very fine grain is waiting to be cut up. Their aspect doesn't leave any doubt: Magnolia! Son starts explaining that, as far as one can remember, it has always been the favourite building wood of the local people. As time goes by they must go higher and higher in the mountains to find large trees. The species is unknown which could mean only one thing: it is probably dying out.

*Around 2 800m some *R. serotinum* aff., appear in the undergrowth. They are still in buds but they will soon be covered in flowers and they add to their reputation of being very vigorous as they are about 10 m high and just as wide. Their leaves, auriculate and wavy have a glabrous petiole (contrary to *R. hemsleyanum*, closely related, which are very hairy). What a climb to take just a few samples!*

An opening allows us to have a look towards the top and what a shock! Far away, a tree completely covered in deep pink flowers is ablaze. What a motivation to go up the last of the slopes which are becoming, at last, not so steep.



Cattle paths make our progress easier. And all at once we are facing the sky! The world topples towards a far away misty plain where Tan Uyen village is, which gives its name to the whole area. We have come out on a narrow grassy ledge, the lower part of a crest covered with trees which goes up on the left and on the right to more than 3000m. And what about our pink tree? It is there alright but is not the only one. Talking about a tree is not a misuse of language! They are like stone pines! Giant mushrooms 10 m high and wide and dozens of them, towering above bamboos and brushwood on the crest to the exclusion of any other kind of rhododendron, as far as we can see. These strange giants are unlike anything we know.

*To catch a branch is quite an adventure considering the size of the babies! It is Son, who, with the help of his young acolytes, starts climbing. The leaves are dark green and leathery, bullate, with undulate sides and a shiny bronze indumentum and the petioles are canaliculated. The interspace between knots is very short and shows an annual growth of only 2 or 3 cm. The 5 cm funnel shaped corolla has 5 dark nectaries. They are lilac colored when they open then they lighten to a purplish pink with the impression of darker stripes. It looks like an *Argyrophylla*!*





The problem is that theoretically there are none around here. And if we consider the presumed growth, these trees are at least two centuries old and should have been noticed before. There is a mystery: why such trees, all of them old, have no young specimens near them? After a long search, Jacky will only notice two plantlets when last year's seeds seem to be plentiful.

*As we have finished exploring and swallowed a snack, Son wants to take us even higher. The north side of the crest on which we are leads to the main summit of Fan Si Pan and this is the way down we should have taken a few days before. But there is a problem: no path. Answer: we only have to make one! Practical work: you go towards the stream which flows from higher up, well surrounded by bamboos and there with the help of your machette you open a path!! And it works... with a rope and a lot of sweat you finally end up on a very promising plateau covered with trees. A wonderful forest of *Lithocarpus* towers over rather pale *R. moulmainsense*, deep red *R. Parishia* (*R. Onii?*) and mainly, fabulous specimens of our new friend *Argyrophylla* which grows on the side of the plateau, fighting for space with the bamboos on the cornices and pinacles as far as we can see. It is such a magical place that we have the feeling we are about to discover many other things. But time flies and, oh frustration, we have to go down... But the thought of a nice warm fire lends us wings and the fact that we have a major discovery in our haversacks helps, too!*

We might as well say it right now, the photos of this plant will cause a sensation among the (real) Anglo-Saxon specialists. An exceptional, not to say a unique bearing, like a compact stone pine. Beautiful specimens are not very common in the wild owing to the climatic vagaries. When you find hundreds of them all well formed, it is the jackpot! If you add to that the fact they are so floriferous (which is rare in nature), they have a gorgeous colour and are probably very hardy (3000m), it is the graal! But there is a mystery left: how could our predecessors, Alan Clark to start with, not be aware of this?

While our four friends are getting worn out climbing towards the top, we are gleaning around. There are numerous *Hydrangeas*, bamboos, *Arisaemas* among which a specimen with 12 folioles and magnolias. Jacqueline discovers a heap of fallen marble and, surprise! Large numbers of young rhododendron plants which obviously grow in chalky soil: *R. ovatum*, *R. moulmainsense*, *R. emarginatum*.

The following day, April 8th, we leave the camp to take the Y Linh Hô trail and quickly we find a yellow orchid, an aristoloché, an illicium and, higher up, a *R. leptocladon* with large yellow flowers and salmon pink *Irroratas*.

Another surprise was awaiting us: a white flowered camellia with long wavy leaves *C. caudata?* *C. fansipanense?* We have only very rarely seen camellias during our treks in Yunnan, Sichuan or Arunachal Pradesh.



A heavy drizzle starts falling and makes the path extremely slippery. The lunch break is very short and we start down towards the valley. Thank you Béatrice! She had taken ropes, a very useful precaution as you can see in the photo!



In addition to *R. moulmainense*, at 2300m, there is a *R. Pseudovireya*: the *R. emarginatum* with bright yellow flowers.

In the fog, on the side of the path, we catch sight at 2000m of a *Maddenia* which could well be *R. lyi*. A bit further, tree fern trunks have been cut and piled and we can see the very unusual organization of their sap vessels which are in a central position contrary to many other plants.

The descent towards the valley is endless and there are frequent and sometimes spectacular falls. First, Gilles Stephan, like in a bowling alley, knocks Beatrice and Jacqueline down ; then it is more serious : Alain falls into a very deep ditch but gets out of it without too much trouble : just a costal trauma (and the fracture of... his walking stick) . He will be unable to carry his rucksack for some time however and for several weeks he will be handicapped.

The camp is set on the river side and we have in perspective a quiet night and a well needed rest but before going to bed we must wash: two of us bathe in the river. It is an over alcoholic evening for the locals and some of them are taken back home on their wife's back. You could think they do not have wheelbarrows in Vietnam!

The following day, escorted by lots of women wearing the traditional costume, hoping to sell us the bags, bracelets and other handicraft objects, we walk up a recently cemented road. At the top, four-wheel drives are waiting to take us to the hotel in Sa Pa. We had reminded Son that we had not seen any or hardly any *R. suoilenhense* and as his memory comes back, he tells the strongest two of the group, Gilles and Jacky, that he can take them to an interesting place. They are back as soon as 11h30. Gilles Rouau is going to tell you about it.



R. suoilenhense

It is Alan Clark precisely who, from this place, introduced R. suoilenhense, a big leaf rhododendron, quite similar to R. prostratum. And two days before we go back to France, it is the only listed species of which we have no picture in situ. Luckily, Son suddenly remembers the place where it was discovered (yes, he was already the guide at that time!). It is at Ban Khoan, near the Laotian border. It is only 30km from Sa Pa and we can easily get there. We must however go and come back in half a day if we want to stick to the timing. And walk fast. Jacky and I are in for it.

*Here we are, then, early in the morning, wandering in a melon plantation which occupies the bottom of the valley. The wooded slopes above are steep and full of superb *Cornus Controversa*. This is it! Son says. And yes, giants with big leaves can be seen a dozen meters higher up. It is more with the help of our arms than our legs that we progress towards these lads which are precariously balanced over our heads! Ivory campanulate flowers with carmine red gorges, large oval leaves: here they are! We must be around 2200m and a cliff towers above us 300m higher. We catch sight of other big leaves and plenty of small mainly red rhodos around. Here are the best motivations to climb!*

*Above the melons, where the slope allows it, cardamoms are everywhere, half wild, half cultivated for their fruit used as a spice. Their leaves in large rosettes evenly planted under the trees, evoke cannas. The farmers' paths make our progression easier. On the contrary, above, when the slope becomes too steep, the wilderness reappears. It is Son alone who will succeed in reaching the dizzy areas where the plants which attracted us are blooming. *Maddenias* with red coloured corollas without any detectable scent but certainly among the most coloured ever found!*



This small area of the Fan Si Pan massif (roughly 40kmx40km) confirms that, more than anywhere else, each valley has its own endemic species. Each expedition can hope for something new due to the chaotic nature and the acrobatic paths. And the hardiness of the local plants is supposed to be exceptional.

*To discover these enormous *Argyrophylla* made us ever so happy! And realizing the importance of this, we have made a taxonomy card and kept a herbarium copy.*

