



THE HEIGHT OF GOOD TASTE

ALAMY

The small chapel seems halfway to heaven already. High in Italy's Dolomite mountains, it straddles a ridge above a grassy alpine meadow, with a view that, in a natural sense, might be said to include the holy trinity.

The chapel and adjoining Rifugio Locatelli stand across a high valley from the Tre Cime di Lavaredo, a mountain composed of a trio of dark, monolithic towers that seem to erupt from the scree slopes that wrap around them.

It's a mountain that's every bit as dramatic as famed alpine counterparts such as the Matterhorn and Eiger, even though it stands hundreds of metres lower than either. From outside the chapel one thing seems clear: the Alps may embody European mountains, but the compact Dolomites may be the continent's most spectacular range.

In all practical ways, these great white mountains are a natural border, as they've been throughout most of human history. Italy legs it away to the south, and German-speaking lands reach all the way to their northern slopes in the autonomous Italian region of Sud Tirolo, otherwise known as Alto Adige.

I've come to explore the less-trafficked Sud Tirolo side of the Dolomites on foot with tour company Hedonistic Hiking. It's an area that was part of Austria until the end of World War I, and the chalet-filled towns still look alpine and Austrian, while the predominant language remains German.

Though we're based near the Sud Tirolo town of Sesto, we begin our hiking on the Dolomites' Italian side. From Val Grande, we will hike back into Sud Tirolo, crossing the battle scars that remain along the one-time international border. We set out walking into a world blanching white. The stone on the trails is white, the streambeds beside me are white, and the mountains rise ahead as sheer white walls of rock. It's like walking in a world with the contrast set to extreme.

We ascend through an ancient pine and beech forest, with the stream beside us performing disappearing acts. One moment it's pouring strong, the next it has dived underground, always flowing, but not always above the earth. By the time we step out of the forest

Mountain spectacle and fine food on a Dolomites trek

ANDREW BAIN



Chapel across from Tre Cime di Lavaredo, main; hikers near Rifugio Pian di Cenglia, above

at Rifugio Lunelli, the serrated peaks of the Dolomites are seemingly rising directly over our shoulders.

Compared with more weathered and worn ranges, including the Alps that wrap around them, these mountains appear so raw as to seem almost unfinished. With their craggy, razor-sharp skylines, they are the mountains of the mind, the sort you more often see in mythology and Tolkien-esque fantasies.

From Rifugio Lunelli, the steepest climb of our trip begins, ascending in fierce but brief fashion towards the base of the mountains' summit cliffs. Here, through a lost world of giant boulders, the trail climbs on to the grass-covered roof of a wartime fort peering down on Paso Monte Croce. Before World War I, this low pass served as the border between Italy and Austria. As a result it was

heavily fortified during the war, when Britain promised Sud Tirolo to Italy if it joined the Allied fight.

Today the pass simply marks the border between Sud Tirolo and Italy's neighbouring Veneto region, but the cliffs remain punctured by a long line of windows and pillboxes — gun emplacements protecting the border — all connected by tunnels burrowed through the cliffs.

Though such defence posts are clustered tight here on the former border, they're not unique to this particular spot. Throughout the Dolomites, the cliffs are scratched with unlikely trails that are also remnants of wartime ingenuity.

Italian soldiers built these routes during World War I so troops could move through otherwise impenetrable terrain. Steel cables

were fixed to cliffs, and ladders clipped to the rock to make the impossible possible. Over subsequent years, they've become recreational routes known as via ferrata, or iron way, providing an exciting middle ground between hiking and rock climbing on the cliffs.

We pause atop the fort for lunch and, as the company name implies, the focus of Hedonistic Hiking trips is as much food as feet. Dinners are in some of the finest restaurants of the area, and lunches are as gourmet as the restraints of a hiking trail allow. This day it's a picnic spread of spelt salad, cheese from a local village, bull's heart tomatoes, salami, mortadella and wine carried up the mountain to further civilise the day.

Beside us, two Italian hikers also rest and eat, with a pair of chihuahuas in pink ribbons on the blanket beside them. Did a massive war ever really rage here?

After lunch we explore a neighbouring World War I fort — a ghostly warren of ammunition stores, pillboxes and soldiers' dormitories running deep into the slopes — and then continue rising up the slopes. Soon we're just metres below the cliffs, crossing gravelly scree fields, with rock walls and spires towering hundreds of metres above.

From the trail, we look deep into a forested valley below, where, for a time, the only thing that breaks through the tree cover is a caravan park. It would be an unremarkable sight, except that on this night the Caravan Park Sexten will offer us something remarkable.

Housed in a series of cellar-like rooms, Patzenfeld is curiously the finest restaurant around Sesto. As evening turns the Dolomites from white to black, we dine on saffron risotto with prawns, followed by a tender beef fillet, slow-roasted and then hand-smoked on a bed of straw inside a wine box. It's a meal I've never imagined in a caravan park anywhere in the world.

The next morning things get truly spectacular as we set out on foot for the Tre Cime di Lavaredo on what is the longest and toughest day on any of Hedonistic Hiking's Italian-based trips. It's also arguably one of the finest day walks in Europe. The 19km hike circuits the connected peaks of Cima Una and Crode Fiscaline, but it's the simply named Tre Cime

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ABOVE AND BELOW LEFT: ANDREW BAIN



ALAMY

(three peaks) that monopolise all attention.

The trail sets out across a flat valley floor, amid mountain scenes that remind me a little of walking in the Yosemite Valley. At the base of Cima Una, we turn up the Sasso Vecchio Valley and ascend into the bare and barren heart of the Sesto Dolomites.

The sun bores down from a cloudless sky, reflecting mercilessly off the white rock, with the prediction of an afternoon thunderstorm seeming like fanciful forecasting.

The valley ends in a sheer wall of rock split by a waterfall, but the trail winds easily up past its edge. After three hours, the Tre Cime suddenly bursts into view, three massive bullet-shaped rock towers dwarfing Rifugio Locatelli and the tiny white chapel just a few steps above it. We have arrived in the nick of time, with the outcrops beginning to spin cloud around themselves like cocoons. Soon they will be gone.

I share this view with dozens of other hikers, though the crowd is like loneliness compared with the hundreds of people I can see

IN THE KNOW

Hedonistic Hiking runs a nine-day Austria and the Dolomites tour, starting in Innsbruck, Austria, and ending in Verona, Italy. It includes three nights in a spa hotel near Sesto, with two days of hiking in the Dolomites. The tour costs €3025 (\$4900), single supplement €325, including all accommodation, meals and wine. hedonistichiking.com

standing on a ridge opposite, on trails that ascend to the Tre Cime from the more popular Cortina side of the mountains. Even the dozens disperse at this point, with a web of trails radiating from Rifugio Locatelli. We are heading east, tucking in behind Cima Una across an enormous scree field.

For an hour we crunch across the loose

stones, walking through a landscape that appears lifeless until you look closer and notice tiny forests of wildflowers peeping between the stones. Far below, a neon-blue tarn is aglow in sunlight.

We rise to a pass, a small notch in the mountains surrounded by more gun emplacements, and make our way to Rifugio Pian di Cenglia for a well-earned lunch and beer after 1000m of ascent.

Perhaps even more than the Tre Cime, the descent from Rifugio Pian di Cenglia provides a lasting sense of the deceptively massive scale of the Dolomites. These toothy peaks, few of which stand above 3000m, are lower than the mountains of most of the world's other grand ranges and yet I'm continually struck by the illusion they're taller.

Rock walls seem to climb overhead forever, creating the sort of large-scale scenery I imagine of Pakistan's big-wall mountains rather than this coral reef turned to stone. It's high drama matched only by the storm that has finally arrived. Black clouds have

Walking towards Cima Una, left; delicious hiking fare, centre; Rifugio Lunelli, right

been stalking us for a few hours, and the first clap of thunder reverberates like the opening shot of a war. Soon lakes of water, and briefly hail, are falling from the sky in a storm of the intensity only mountains seem able to generate.

The trail becomes a river, and dozens of waterfalls pour down cliffs where moments before none had been. I'm dripping wet, my hands are like ice, and I feel intensely alive.

The sun is returning and my discomfort will soon become absolute comfort, because awaiting us in Sesto this evening is a dinner of tuna tartare, followed by tagliatelle and prawn ragout, washed down with Bolzano's most prized pinot noir.

The heavens may have opened, but a heavenly finish is ahead.

Andrew Bain was a guest of Hedonistic Hiking.

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