

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



La Dolce Dolomites

In the Italian Alps, a local outfitter customizes a cushy inn-to-inn ski trip

BY ROGER TOLL

THE TERRACE OF Rifugio Pomedes, a chalet perched on a ridge in Italy's Dolomite Mountains, was buzzing with chatter. Waiters squeezed past wooden tables ferrying plates of ravioli and tagliolini, spaetzle and goulash, dried meats and cheeses and many bottles of wine. Above the crowded terrace rose the 10,643-foot summit of Tofana di Mezzo, the highest in the crown of peaks that encircles the picturesque town of Cortina d'Ampezzo (also known as Cortina).

It was my second day in the Dolomites, and my guide, Marika Favé, a former Italian ski team racer, had just led me down two fast runs on Cortina's downhill course. We joined four Italian skiers, who offered us space at one of the picnic tables. I ordered pappardelle with venison and a glass of local red wine. "It isn't like skiing in North America, is it?" said one of my tablemates after I said I was visiting from New Mexico. No, it isn't. Skiing in the Italian Alps usually means leisurely lunches and a conviviality with strangers you don't often find at U.S. resorts. "A big part of our ski day," he continued, "is sitting in an old shepherd's hut like this one, eating, drinking and soaking up the beauty of the mountains."

The Dolomites, a two-hour drive north of Venice near the Austrian border, are known for ski safaris—in which you ski from one alpine inn to the next, spending each night at a different location. The range encompasses the world's largest expanse of ski terrain that's covered under one lift pass, an area of roughly 1,200 square miles, 12 ski valleys, 450 ski lifts, 750 miles of groomed ski trails and endless



off-piste skiing, not to mention, about 45 villages, 100 rifugios (rustic mountain inns) and 13 Michelin-starred restaurants.

How does a first-time visitor make the most of the territory when you're this spoiled for choice? You can either fall into the rabbit hole of web research or turn to an expert. I chose the latter and contacted local guiding company Dolomite Mountains. The company organized every step of a four-day ski journey through the mountains for me and a friend, including stays at three rifugios. They also provided daily guides and arranged to have our bags shuttled from rifugio to rifugio.

After a first night at the Cristallo, Cortina's most fashionable hotel, I skied Cortina's slopes with Marika before she led us to Rifugio Averau, sitting on an 8,000-foot pass 6 miles outside of town, where we'd spend the second night. By the time we arrived, at 5 p.m., a blizzard obliterated visibility. If Marika hadn't been with us, I doubt we would've found the building. Owner Sandro Siorpaes and his daughter, Margot, greeted us in the bar/dining room, designed in the typical Tyrolean style with wooden beams and knotty pine walls. Much of Tyrol, for a long time the southernmost region of the Habsburg Empire, was ceded to Italy following World War I. Traveling through the Dolomites today, you occasionally cross the old border, finding yourself jerked between Austrian and Italian cultures. I never knew if my next dinner would be sauerkraut and apple strudel or pappardelle and ricotta dumpplings—truth be told, I was happy either way.

After saying goodbye to Marika (another guide would meet us the following day) and eating a superb meal of ravioli and flank steak at Rifugio Averau, I chatted with Mr. Siorpaes who showed me photos of his family's first hotel, built in 1890 on a mountain slope above Cortina.

The next day, Dolomite Mountains sent a car to drive us, after the passes were cleared, to our next stop, San Pellegrino. Our driver, Amer-

RUN FOR SHELTER From top: Santa Croce Church, a 6,709-foot mountain sanctuary; breakfast at Rifugio Fuciade.



POLE POSITION

Equipment temporarily parked by skiers who stopped for a midday meal at Rifugio Santa Croce, beside the pilgrimage site of Santa Croce Church.

ico, spent 90 minutes negotiating three steep, winding passes while explaining the fraught history and multicultural mosaic of the Dolomites. "Now we are entering a Germanic area," he said as we descended into another valley. Americo dropped us off in San Pelleggrino, where a snowmobile came to pick us up and take us to Rifugio Fuciade, set amid fields of snow.

After skiing all the next day, we boarded a funicular in the town of Ortisei for a trip up the mountainside and walked a half mile to Rifugio Resciesa, our skis slung over our shoulders. Owner Andrea Holzkecht, blonde, pigtailed and wearing a traditional dirndl, looked the picture of a Tyrolean—all that was missing was a cow and a field of wildflowers. My Spartan corner room, with twin beds and thick duvets, offered a 180-degree view, from the saw-toothed ridge-line of the Sassolungo peaks to the cliffs of the plateau-like Sella massif.

Just when I was starting to think about this part of the Italian Alps as Tyrolean, Simon Holzkecht, Andrea's husband, told me about the Ladins. "You may think of us as German-speaking Italians, but we are Ladin first, like all our ancestors," he said as he poured us a grappa following a dinner of barley soup and goulash. Most Dolomite natives are Ladin, a mountain people who still speak a language first adapted from Latin 1,500 years ago. "Austrian or Italian, it's just nationality," said Mr. Holzkecht. "What we are is Ladin."


Clouds scudded across the sky like frigates under sail as we set out with our next guide, Massimo Laurencig, a mountain climber and skier. Scattered sunlight washed

the slopes below Rifugio Resciesa, empty but for us, as we raced down to Ortisei in 2 inches of fresh snow. We skied hard, chasing Massimo's yellow parka through a web of trail junctions, lifts and vil-

lages, with pit stops for a glass of wine, a coffee and lunch—an exhilarating last day of our ski tour.

The next morning, before boarding a bus to Venice, we skied on our own in Val Badia,

stopping at Santa Croce Church, a 15th-century chapel to which worshipers make a pilgrimage every summer. I imagine it's nice then too, but I might opt for an annual winter pilgrimage instead.



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THE LOWDOWN // SAFARI SKIING IN ITALY'S DOLOMITE MOUNTAINS

Getting There From Venice's airport or Mestre Train Station, the Cortina Express provides comfortable two- to three-hour bus trips several times a day to Cortina and other Dolomite towns ([cortinaexpress.it](#)). Outfitter Dolomite Mountains also organizes chauffeured trips ([dolomitemountains.com](#)).

Staying There In Cortina d'Ampezzo, Hotel Cristallo,

which hosted 1960s jet-setters Sophia Loren, Audrey Hepburn, David Niven and the like, continues to be the town's best accommodations (from about \$384 a night, [cristallo.it](#)). We spent our last night in the stylish town of San Cassiano, at the luxurious Hotel Rosa Alpina, a splurge we felt we deserved. The hotel is home to two-star Michelin restaurant, St. Hubertus ([dou-](#)

[bles](#) from about \$550 a night, [rosalpina.it](#)).

Skiing There Dolomite Mountains plans customized ski tours and hikes (in summer), with or without guides. Costs vary widely depending on lodging and meals and whether you want a guide or a self-directed tour. My four-day, three-night guided ski tour cost about \$2,900.