

The land of PILLAR & PINNACLE

The Dolomites: a land of silver spires, mountain cuisine, wartime history and little creatures that whistle at you...

WORDS: DAMIAN HALL PHOTOS: DOLOMITE MOUNTAINS & DAMIAN HALL

DISCOVER The Dolomites



PHOTO: DAMIAN HALL



DREAMING SPIRES

Hiking in the Puez-Geisler Nature Park, with the Sella range beyond. Inset: The idyllic shore of Lake Lagazuoi.

I'M NOT USED to being whistled at. I'm 41, a victim of male-pattern baldness, and I have crooked teeth. But it must be me who's being whistled at, because there's no one else around. Although, hold on – if no one else is around, who's doing the whistling? (Answers later – I like the suspense).

I was cockahoop about visiting the World Heritage-listed Dolomites, 90,000 acres of marvellous mountains in northeast Italy. Two friends had been in recent years and wouldn't ruddy shut up about the place. I wanted to come back to Blighty and be as irritating as them. Plus I already liked the word *Dolomites*. It sounds both friendly, in a Tellytubby kind of way, but also the second half of the word is a little bit feisty.

The Dolomites are part of the Alps geographically, but they're very different geologically. They take their name from the carbonate rock dolomite, named after 18th-century French mineralogist Déodat Gratet de Dolomieu, who first described the mineral. The region is distinctly culturally different too. In fact my week-long itinerary has me walking between two very different regions: Alta Badia and Cortina d'Ampezzo. Alta Badia was part of Austria prior to the First World War and is a mix of three cultures – German/Austrian, Italian, and ancient Ladin. Signs are written in three languages – some places even have three names – while architecture and cuisine are different too.

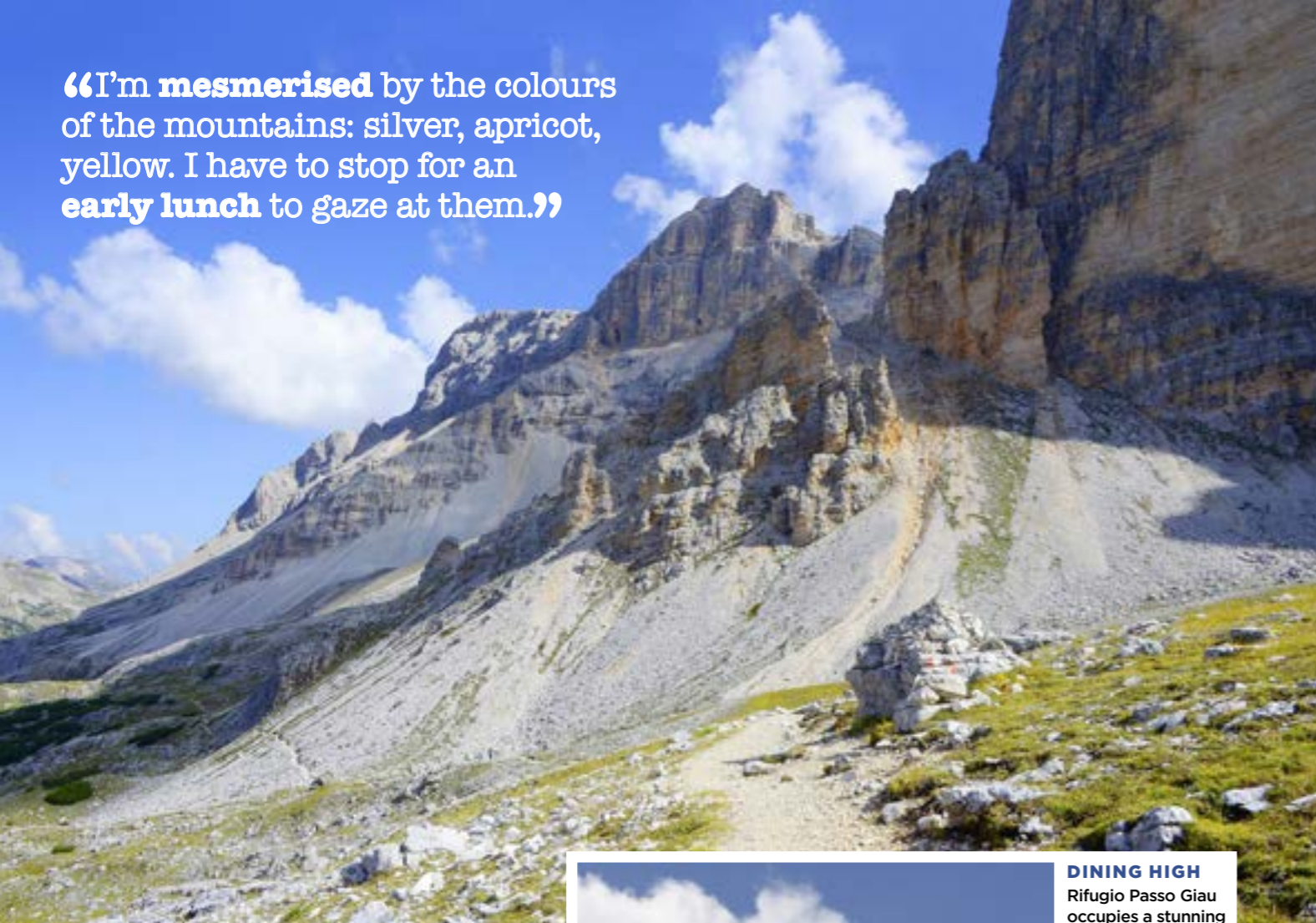
It's dark by the time I get to the super-swish Hotel Tablè in Alta Badia (Corvara), but this just means I get the magic moment of opening the curtains next morning to be greeted with pure, unadulterated Dolomites. The sun is kissing the summits and it gets me dizzy with longing.

I travel round to the village of San Cassiano, from where I have the choice of an uphill hike or a cheeky cable car. The latter feels like cheating, so I get my head down and climb. But my eyes are soon up and my camera out, as the higher I get, the bigger the mountain views grow.

I can already see how different in character the Dolomites are from the Alps. They have so many more colours, from grey to silver, to peach and yellow. They look so ancient and magnificently

PHOTO: RANDY JAY BRAUN/DOLOMITE MOUNTAINS

“I’m **mesmerised** by the colours of the mountains: silver, apricot, yellow. I have to stop for an **early lunch** to gaze at them.”



DINING HIGH
Rifugio Passo Giau occupies a stunning spot at the foot of the Averau range.



PHOTOS: DAMIAN HALL; RANDY JAY BRAUN/DOLomite MOUNTAINS

dusty. And the shapes! Towers and spires, pillars and pinnacles, a dozen times more jagged than any hills I’ve seen elsewhere.

The track is well marked, with regular red and white stripes painted on waymarkers and rocks, and routes are numbered. At the top of the Pralongia plateau I pass a series of desirable chalets that have me dreaming of life on a mountain, and the views get twice as good: there are even more mountains the other way, so I now have 360 degrees of Dolomites, including all the way to Marmolada, Queen of the Dolomites, the largest of the lot at 3343m/10,968 ft. Also on the horizon are Sella, Conturines, and Santa Croce mountains, and the spires of the Puez-Odle group. Refuges abound, offering lunch and a glass of wine while enjoying the panorama. I totter along to a rifugio-café, where rows of deckchairs are perfectly placed for mountain gazing.

The trails have been broad so far, so when they become single-track and rockier it feels exciting. The terrain gets more testing for a breathless detour up a stout peak, to enjoy more pointy panoramas – but this time all to myself. It’s a gradual descent from here through spacious woods to a road, and a museum to the Dolomites’ involvement in the First World War. This was the frontline of conflict between the forces of Italy (allied with Britain and France) and Austria-Hungary (allied with Germany), and troops from both sides used tunnels and *via ferrate* to move among the peaks as they fought. Little wonder the Austrians called it *Gebirgskrieg*: mountain war.

A cable car carries me to Mount Lagazuoi and Rifugio Lagazuoi (2752m/9029ft). A huge patio offers almost a full circle of mountain gazing.

I feel powerless to do anything but get a local wheat beer from the bar and sit and worship the giant rocks. Each range has a different character; the most charismatic are behind the rifugio and remind me of the Utah desert.

It’s dormitory accommodation here (double rooms are available at some rifugios), but there’s a full restaurant, bar, showers, even a mountain-edge sauna. A memorable day ends with beer in hand on the balcony, as like a cinema crowd we watch the sun sink and the mountains change colours.

At dinner, as what I assumed to be the main course turns out to be merely the starter, I listen to a myriad of languages spoken. I chat and share wine with an American postgrad student who’s staying up here for his fourth night in a row.

After a hearty breakfast, I’m the last to reluctantly depart. The early morning light casts huge lumps all around us in new colours and shadows. I descend on the famous Alta Via No.1 route into a lunar landscape, a valley of rocks with steep mountain ridges on either side. The mountains look powdery, ancient, denuded.

But before I get far, I’m intrigued by little wooden doors in the rock wall. Information boards tell me these are restored Austrian tunnels from the First World War. This was the frontier with Italy. The Austrians used the height of the mountains to great effect, controlling the vital road below and harassing the Italians (and Ernest Hemingway, who was with them). Their opponents were in turn building tunnels up through the mountain to place bombs and try to dislodge their foe (it didn’t work). The heartbreaking paradox of being in such a beautiful place but in such a brutal situation stays with me for the rest of my hike.

After pausing at beautiful little Lake Lagazuoi,



PHOTO: DAMIAN HALL



PHOTO: DAMIAN HALL

▲ **NO SWEAT**
The Finnish-style sauna at Rifugio Lagazuoi has a pretty decent view...

▲ **THE HIGH LIFE**
...and the scene from the rifugio’s sun terrace isn’t too shabby, either.

I climb steeply up to Forcella del Lago (2450m/8038ft), halting regularly to catch my breath and admire the views. I reach the col, which gifts me fresh, huge views down the other side into a much wider, greener valley. As I descend into the Val di Fanes, I’m again mesmerised by the colours on mountains around me: silver, apricot, yellow. I stop for an early lunch to ogle them, and chat to American and European hikers going the other way.

Down on the valley bottom it’s much greener. Cow bells jangle and rivers tinkle. It feels like the Wild West. I spy Rifugio Fanes, which looks like

▼ **YEE-HAW!**
With its lush green plains and grey rocky peaks, Val di Fanes has a Wild West feel.



a fancy restaurant, with colourful umbrellas, beautifully set in the valley with peaks towering above it. I drop off my pack and head back the way I came for a recommended optional hike up 2794m/9167 ft Col Bechei de Sopra. It's breathless going at altitude and I pause frequently, which is no bad thing as I get to enjoy the big views. At the top, I see huge crags in every direction. Not one glimpse of a road or town.

I'm soon joined by a German teenager holidaying with his family. He's been to the Dolomites many times, he says. "And I hope many times more."

Soon enough I'm reading my book in the sun, accompanied by a pre-dinner beer and making friends with an Alaskan couple.

Again in the morning I'm one of the last to leave Rifugio Fanes. It's cloudier and slightly cooler today: perfect hiking weather. It's a gradual descent into the valley, still on Alta Via No.1, with those huge, crumbling peaks on either side.

After Rifugio Pederu it's a feisty slog up again, but I'm soon in quiet woods, among sparse spruce trees. I spy a dark brown squirrel. A woodpecker hammers away impatiently. Most gaps in the trees are filled by huge mountains across the valley. Before the next rifugio, there's a delightful hanging valley. It's all mine. All quiet.

Except for... who's whistling?

I stop and peel my eyes across the lumpy landscape. Then I finally spy one – a marmot! No, two! I approach slowly and to my surprise they don't dart off immediately. I take a few snaps and continue to approach with caution. When I'm five metres away, the nearer one darts into his hole, but then pokes his head out again. He's a curious little fellow. He ducks in again. Peeps out again. I approach from his blindside and get pretty



PHOTO: RANDY JAY BRAUN/DOLOMITE MOUNTAINS

close before he pops down his tunnel for good.

I'm soon in Natural Park Fanes-Sennes-Braies. After Refugio Sennes, picturesquely positioned by a lake, it's a long descent through trees on a broad track, but with the mesmerising cliffs of the blood-red Croda Rossa Massif to gawp at.

At the edge of Cortina, famed for hosting the 1956 Winter Olympics, chalet-mansions are festooned with flowers and I feel both happy at a gorgeous walk and sad it is over. But there are still huge Dolomites all around this chic Venetian-alpine resort, which caters for the high-society crowd. I settle into cosy Hotel Beppe Sello, before another evening feast.

As I take the short walk to the bus station the next morning, to head back to Venice – and then home, full of annoying stories of how amazing the Dolomites are – I can't resist a full-360 spin to take in the last views of the pillars, pinnacles and colossal rock walls that have been my home.

And in marmot style, I can't resist giving them a wolf-whistle either. **CW**

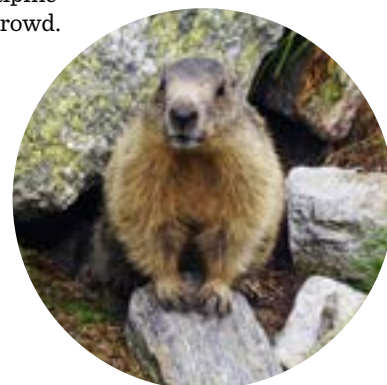
▲ **CINQUE TORRI**

Heading for one of the 'Five Towers' that give this area its name.

▼ **WHISTLER**

Go for a hike in the Dolomites and you might get whistled at by a marmot...

PHOTO: NICK HALLISSEY



Plan your trip

GETTING THERE

Fly from Bristol (two hours and 15 mins; from £34, Ryanair, (www.ryanair.com), London Heathrow (two hours and 10 mins; £70, British Airways, (www.britishairways.com) or Manchester (two hours 40mins; £39, Monarch, www.monarch.co.uk) to Venice Marco Polo.

GETTING AROUND

For a group, try **Taxi Vico** for transfers from Venice airport to Alta Badia (Corvara), taxivico.it/en, +39 335 6116528.

WHERE TO STAY

Corvara and especially Cortina are well set up for tourism and offer excellent accommodation. In the former *Country Walking* enjoyed the

mountain views, welcoming staff and excellent food at the luxurious three-star **Hotel Tablé** (www.table.it). In Cortina **Hotel Beppe Sello** (www.beppestello.it) was homely, well positioned at the end of the trail, with views across town to more mountains. Rifugios – or mountain huts – are the classic accommodation for hikers, offering sleeping facilities and meals of a surprisingly high standard – also often a bar. Set in spectacular locations high in the mountains, most rifugios are accessible only on foot.

WHEN TO GO

April to September (inclusive) offers superior weather. The Dolomites are generally warmer and have less rain than the Alps.

GUIDED OPTIONS

Dolomite Mountains (www.dolomitmountains.com) offer guided and self-guided itineraries, luggage transfers, maps, accommodation bookings and expert info, with trip extensions including via ferrata, WWI history and tours of Venice. This seven-day trip from Alta Badia to Cortina D'Ampezzo costs from €790pp, excluding flights and airport transfers.

ACTIVITIES & FESTIVALS

Cycling, mountain biking, skiing and trail running are popular activities here. There's a great atmosphere in Cortina when the **Lavaredo Ultra Trail** (ultra-trail.it) is on in late June, while the mega-popular **Maratona dles Dolomites** (Dolomites Marathon; maratona.it) sees

9000 riders hit the mountain passes in early July.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

All Dolomite Mountains guests are given maps for guided or self-guided itineraries, plus a full briefing and a mobile phone (if self-guided): see www.dolomitmountains.com/en/summer_fall_trips/self_guided_hiking.htm. Cicerone have five guidebooks to the Dolomites, including **Walking in the Dolomites** (£17, www.cicerone.co.uk). Kompass produce 1:25,000 scale maps: 624 and 617 cover this area (£11, www.stanfords.co.uk).

