



Clockwise from far left: The distinctive peaks of Tre Cime di Lavaredo; Rifugio Croda da Lago; signs on the hiking trails of Alto Adige; summer hiking in the Dolomites is increasingly popular. Photos Giuseppe Ghedina, Giovanni De Sandre

decision-making to Agustina. Agustina, like most locals, is an outdoors type. Her job involves leading hikes in summer and ski safaris in winter; on her days off, she does pretty much the same thing.

Agustina is looking forward to today's hike. "It's a really beautiful area," she says. I ask her how long it will take. "Five, six, seven hours ... it really depends on you," she says.

"Um, I think we're more short-trail hikers," I say, cautiously. "Maybe three hours?"

"We'll see how you go," she answers. "There are always options."

This, it turns out, is not strictly true. For the first part of our walk, there are no options at all. The only way is up – straight up. Living in a hilly area, I am used to slopes, but nothing like this. To describe the gradient as vertical would be an exaggeration, but only a small one.

I'm lifting my knees higher than I have ever lifted them outside a yoga studio. To see what lies ahead, I actually have to crane my neck.

I don't bother doing that much, because I have other things to concentrate on. The uneven ground, for one, which makes the whole thing more challenging. Then there is the sweat pouring down my back. It is not a particularly warm day, and I am not a particularly sweaty person. Nonetheless, perspiration is cascading down my back in torrents strong enough to power a hydro-electric plant.

My discomfort has not gone unnoticed. "Let's stop and look at the view," says Agustina. I wipe the sweat from my face and obediently gaze out at the view, a magnificent vista across a ridge of mountains silhouetted behind a sunlit valley. I have other things on my mind, however. I want to

know how much longer we'll be heading uphill. "Not that much further," Agustina lies convincingly.

It takes us an hour of steady slog to reach level ground. Once we do, however, all is forgiven. A whole new terrain stretches out before us, a high plain where wildflowers stud the grass, where the only way to cross a pristine mountain brook is by strolling across a log, where the highest peaks seem to be within touching distance – and where there are no roads, houses or people in sight.

It is simply stunning. From here on in, I hike with a huge smile on my face, dazzled by the beauty that surrounds us.

Now that the hard work is behind us, we actually get to chat. In between trading personal stories, we talk about the area's unique history. As well as its German heritage, Alto Adige has another unique culture,

I HIKE WITH A HUGE SMILE ON MY FACE, DAZZLED BY THE BEAUTY THAT SURROUNDS US.

that of the Ladins, an ancient ethnic minority that has preserved its own language, identity and culture. Many locals still speak the language – at least, one of its versions. There are no fewer than five different dialects, each confined to one specific valley. The fascinating history of the Ladins fuels our conversation right through our delicious lunch of hearty alpine food, enjoyed at a mountain hut.

So far we have only encountered a handful of other hikers. As we begin