



This road trip in  
northern Italy engages  
the muscles and  
indulges the senses

BY STEPHANIE PEARSON

EPIC ACTION **ITALY**



of arresting steeples, pinnacles, and rock walls; then west to Lake Garda, an inland freshwater sea partly ringed by peaks. The itinerary had my boyfriend, Brian, and me riding bikes, hiking to mountain *rifugi* (shelters), climbing via ferratas, and sailing on Lake Garda, all while sampling the region's sublime proseccos and meeting some of Italy's most dedicated craftspeople. We packed this journey into 10 days, but you'd be wise to linger as long as you can.

#### VENICE: ROCK THE BOAT

"The gondola is the only perfect boat for rowing a single oar," says Saverio Pastor. He's one of five *remieri*, or oar craftsmen, left in Venice. The walls of his shop, Le Fórcole, are lined with wooden oars he's made, and the floor space is filled with oarlocks, or *fórcole*, that look like sculptures. That's why collectors around the globe buy his work as pieces of art rather than as utilitarian boat parts.

The stop at Pastor's shop is just one of many on a walking tour I've arranged with Luca Zaggia, a marine scientist, in an effort to further understand Venetians' intricate relationship with water. Zaggia, in turn, invites Giovanni Caniato, a scholar and expert on Venice's boating history. Our timing in Venice is ideal. Tomorrow is the 45th annual Vogalonga regatta, a 20-mile boat tour in which 8,000 rowers, kayakers, and canoeists will paddle a labyrinthine course around the city.

"Coastal morphology is the main issue in Venice, especially the impact of large boats," Zaggia tells us as we walk cobblestoned streets infamously sagging under the effects of overtourism. An estimated 20-million-plus tourists visit annually, while the resident population of 55,000 shrinks by the year. I wrongly assume that the monster cruise ship I saw being tugged through the canal yesterday is the worst offender, but Zaggia corrects me.

"Cruise ships often create less damage than cargo ships," he says. He adds that while cruise ships are far from ideal vessels for Venice, one of the best ways for tourists to mitigate further damage is to avoid taking private, high-speed water taxis. Their waves cause more erosion than slower moving ferries.

At Squero San Travaso, an out-of-the-way 17th-century boatyard, owner Lorenzo Della Toffola is building a wooden gondola spine under the bright sun. It will take him 500 hours to complete one boat. Brian notices the stern *ferro*, the high point at the back of the boat, is hinged.

Whoops of joy escape my lips as towering peaks and bursts of yellow wildflowers whiz by. I'm in the northern Italian region of Alta Badia riding a juiced-up electric mountain bike on a downhill flow trail, each bermed corner steeper and tighter than the last. Where I'm from in Minnesota, e-bikes aren't allowed on trails, which makes this ride feel extra rambunctious. I want to put the bike into "turbo" mode, but crashing would put a damper on our trip.

I've spent the majority of my 25-year career reporting stories from out-of-the-way places, and my travel philosophy has always been the more rugged and remote the better, which has led me to catching a ride on a fishing trawler to an albatross colony off the Falkland Islands and to being stranded on Class V rapids in Tasmania. As glorious as it seemed, Italy was never high on my priority travel list. It felt too manicured, too stylized, too perfect—the exact opposite of me. Where in Italy, I wondered, could I find the adrenalized beauty I craved?

I found it on a road trip from Venice north to the prosecco-producing hills of Valdobbiadene; on to the towering Dolomites, a mountain range



COLIN DUTTON/SIME (GONDOLA); NG MAPS AND CRAIG MOLNEY/CARTDECO; PREVIOUS PAGES: MARKUS GREBER/ISK/SHOT (MOUNTAINS)



**The Bridge of Sighs,**  
which spans a canal  
from the marble-clad  
Doge's Palace, proves  
that the beauty of Venice  
quicksens pulses as much  
as an extreme mountain  
bike trek in the Dolomites  
(previous pages).



"Gondolas have big problems," Cianiato tells us, explaining that because of rising water levels, the boats no longer fit under the bridges during high-water peaks and have to be modified.

Our final stop is a 15th-century boatyard that houses the private association Arzaná. Cianiato, a curator of the association dedicated to preserving Venetian boat culture, turns the key in the lock. Inside are ancient rudders and oars, the largest collection of fòrcole in the world, and one of the association's 50 period boats. Cianiato pours us a glass of red wine, and we make a toast to his beautiful city, which has survived 14 centuries. Despite its woes, he says, "I would never leave Venice."

#### STRADA DEL PROSECCO: EFFERVESCENCE EVERYWHERE

"The power is in the ladies; there are no men," Giovanni Zanon jokes as we power-sip an extra dry brut from Sorelle Bronca estate. We're halfway into a 32-mile mid-morning cycling loop on a hot Sunday, and this highly regarded prosecco, with hints of honeydew and pear, tastes refreshingly crisp. It's made by Antonella and Ersiliana Bronca, two sisters who took over their father's winery in 1988. The women and their families grow their grapes on a patchwork of 67 acres scattered throughout the region of Valdobbiadene. This, along with the neighboring region of Conegliano, became Italy's 55th UNESCO World Heritage site on July 7, thanks in part to its aesthetically pleasing checkerboard landscape, where rows of vines grow parallel and vertical to the sloping hills. The resulting prosecco is currently the most popular Italian wine worldwide.

Zanon owns Villa Abbazia, an 18th-century palace converted to a five-star hotel in the village of Follina. It sits across the street from a 12th-century monastery founded by Cistercian monks. Villa Abbazia also houses the only Michelin-starred restaurant in the region. Last night its Puglian chef, Donato Episcopo, prepared us an elaborate, whimsical five-course meal that included trout marinated with citrus fruits for the entrée and ended with tiramisu—the same recipe Zanon's family has used since 1955—and too much grappa. We dined on an outdoor patio overlooking the grand palace and a garden brimming with lemon trees, rhododendron, and hydrangea, feeling like royalty.

Zanon, the quintessential host, stayed up with guests until 2 a.m., but this morning, his cycling-fanatic side has taken over and he's riding with us on a route of his design that climbs 1,600 feet through jasmine-scented hills. The terrain is exhilarating, with punchy climbs; long, leisurely downhills; and minimal traffic. We stop every few miles to eat and drink with Zanon's friends. At Pasticceria Villa dei Cedri, a café with pastries that are almost too beautiful to eat, I try the traditional southern Italian cream puff, *tette delle monache*. The name, I later learn, translates to "nuns' breasts." Despite this reminder that Italy is slightly behind the curve in #MeToo political correctness, it's a luscious treat that pairs well with espresso.

It fuels me for our final climb to the new tasting room at Garbara winery, in Cartizze. Cartizze Zero is a light, smooth

prosecco known for being so pure that there's no sugar. We sip it while overlooking the verdant vine-covered hills. Only three days in, I'm already wondering how Italy can get any better than this.

#### CORTINA D'AMPEZZO: SPORTY & CHIC

"Cortina is considered the fancy town of the Dolomites," says Carlo Cosi. "But this is my garden." A professional mountaineering guide originally from Padua, Cosi has climbed all over the world, earning a nomination for the Piolet d'Or, mountaineering's highest honor, for a route he opened in Peru. But it's the Dolomites that Cosi loves best.

We're at the base of Tofane mountain, surrounded by red-rock vertical faces with dozens of climbing routes. Ten miles east, down Falzarego Pass, is the village of Cortina d'Ampezzo. In 1956 the chic alpine resort hosted the Winter Olympics, which brought the Dolomites to the attention of the world's glitterati, from Frank Sinatra to Brigitte Bardot. In June the International Olympic Committee awarded the 2026 Winter Games to Milan-Cortina.

Yesterday morning Brian and I hiked five miles on a path hemmed in by red dolomite walls to 6,532-foot Prato Piazza Hut, a beautifully maintained rifugio sitting in a wildflower-filled pasture under the shadow of Croda Rossa peak. After lunch we hiked a few miles higher on a World War I path, past a crumbling Austrian fortification to the summit of 7,569-foot Mount Specie. Tonight we'll stay at Rifugio Lagazuoi near the 9,114-foot summit of Lagazuoi peak. A few hundred feet below the rifugio, a door opens into a half-mile-long tunnel the Italians bored through the rock in 1915 to haul up explosives in order to dislodge the Austrian troops who were stationed above them.

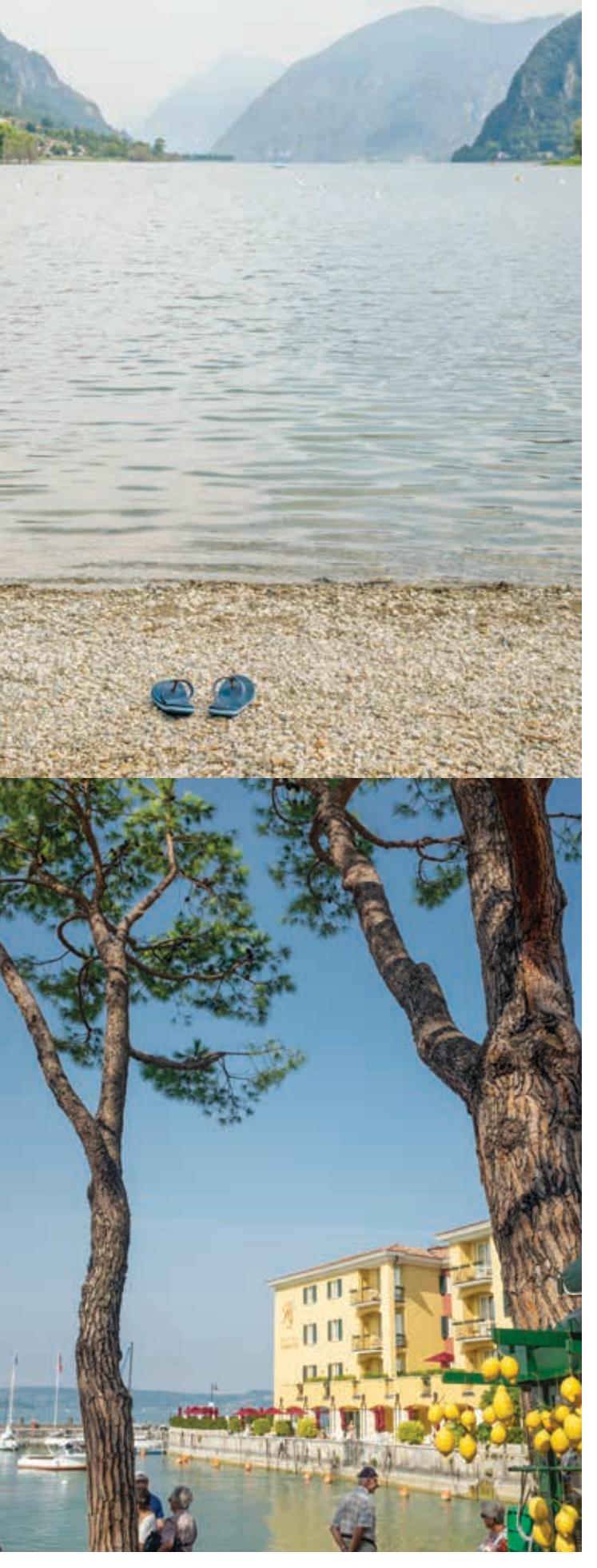
Now, however, our focus is on climbing a thousand feet straight up on Ra Bujela, a via ferrata that starts near the top of Cortina's women's World Cup downhill run. Via ferratas, or "iron ways," are climbing routes that World War I soldiers built by pounding iron-runged stairs into the rock in order to climb otherwise impassable peaks. The historical routes are so popular with recreational climbers that ski resorts and mountaineering associations across the Dolomites continue to build new ones, such as the route we're about to climb. Gazing upward, Brian is frowning. He's an ultramarathon cyclist, and for the first time in the three years I've known him, he looks unnerved.

"You go first," he tells me. "The heights make me a little queasy." I haven't climbed much lately, but I'm more comfortable with the vertical exposure than he is. Sensing Brian's unease, Cosi ropes the three of us together for an extra safety measure, in addition to connecting individually via two carabiners that fasten

ANTONELLO NADdeo (BIKERS); COLIN DUTTON (DISH, BOTTLES)



The steep hills of Farra di Soligo, at about the halfway point along the Prosecco Road, have long grown grapes that go into producing Italy's most popular wine.



SIMON BRAY (STREET, SHORE, LEMONS), RASMUS KAESSMANN PHOTOGRAPHY (WINDSURFER); PREVIOUS PAGES: COLIN DUTTON (VINEYARD)

our harnesses to the cable route. We climb the first pitch straight up a vertical wall to a narrow footbridge suspended between two pinnacles. The reliable footholds and ever present cable give rusty climbers like me an opportunity to once again feel the exhilaration of summiting otherwise unreachable heights.

"The nice thing about the Dolomites," Cosi says on our hike back down the mountain, "is that they are for everybody."

#### ALTA BADIA: BIKES & BAROLOS

"For us it is very important to keep Ladin—the food, the clothes, the language, the music," says Matthias Thaler, our mountain biking guide, who also happens to be a former ski racer for the Italian national team. "I play the trumpet."

We're only 16 miles northwest of Cortina, with the same drop-dead views of mountains, but we have entered the world of South Tyrol, an enclave of Austria before it was annexed to Italy after World War I. Here 70 percent of the residents speak German, 26 percent speak Italian, and less than five percent speak Ladin, a language from a culture that has existed in these valleys in South Tyrol for 2,000 years. Thaler is one of 30,000 Ladin people who remain in these valleys. He's lived here his whole life.

To cover more territory than we could on a mountain bike, we rented e-mountain bikes this morning from a shop in the village of San Cassiano. We pedaled them up to the Pralongià Plateau, a wide-open space that sits at almost 7,000 feet and serves as a natural viewing platform to 10,968-foot Marmolada Glacier, the highest peak in the Dolomites; Sella Ronda, a legendary ski touring circuit; and Sasso di Santa Croce, a massif on which Reinhold Messner opened a famous climbing route in 1968.

Just below the plateau sits Piz Arlara, a rifugio with a deck facing the Sella Ronda. We take a long lunch here, drinking lemony radlers (similar to shandies) and soaking in the view before riding the squirrelly flow trail down to the base of the mountain. Before we leave, I ask Thaler a question I've been wondering about since I arrived in the Dolomites. "Are the crosses at nearly every summit World War I memorials?"

"No," he responds, "they're a sign that we're closer to God."

South Tyrol may be closer to heaven, but the residents still love their Italian wines. The Costa family, which owns the Hotel La Perla in the village of Corvara, has one of Europe's largest collections of Sassicaia, a highly valued Italian wine. To access this wine and the 30,000 or so other bottles in their cellar, the three sommeliers slide down a firefighter's pole, then walk back up a spiral staircase with chilled wine in hand. The Hotel Ciasa Salares, in the village of San Cassiano, features a 24,000-bottle wine cellar that specializes in biodynamic small-batch varietals. Sixty percent are from Italy. During our wine tasting in the hotel's cellar restaurant, Jan Clemens, whose family owns the hotel, brings us a cutting board piled with bread, cheeses, and meats, most of which have been cured by his grandfather. After tasting six varietals, I'm not surprised that my favorite is what Clemens calls "the king of Italian wines"—a 2005 Barolo produced in

Piedmont. It's got smoky notes, reminiscent of coffee and leather. "This," says Clemens, "is the elegant part of Italy."

#### LAKE GARDA: SMOOTH SAILING

Thanks to George Clooney and his passion for Lake Como, Lake Garda, to the southeast, is largely overlooked by Americans. That's fine by us. Within 10 miles in any direction there are mountain bike trails, via ferrata and rock climbing routes, hiking trails, and road cycling routes. But we've come for the water—the northern third of 143-square-mile Lake Garda is off-limits to private powerboats, which makes it a mecca for windsurfers, kitesurfers, and sailors because the winds whip up like clockwork and hold steady for hours.

"The wind machine is working," says Luca Spagnoli, the owner of Sailing Du Lac, the lakeside windsurfing and sailing school at the Hotel Du Lac et Du Parc.

Lake Garda's two main winds are the Pelér and the Ora, thermals set up by a change in temperature over a change in distance. The Pelér, a northerly morning wind, blows off the mountains and is known as the "good-weather wind," creating sets of small waves that are ideal for beginning windsurfers and kitesurfers. It normally dies down before noon, just as the Ora comes from the south, generally blowing 15 to 20 knots, the perfect wind for experts.

Sure enough, this morning the lake was glassy enough to paddle stand-up boards to the other side, but it's 2 p.m. and the winds have picked up. It's time to go fast on the catamaran. Our sailing instructor, Ivan Pastor, mans the rudder. We sail until we reach a part of the lake farther south devoid of rippling windsurfers—an impressive amount of them women—and schoolchildren racing in single-masted Optimists. Then he hands the rudder and sheets to me. I used to sail catamarans as a kid, but it's been a long, long time.

"The most important thing with sailing is learning how to read the wind," Pastor tells me. It's good advice, but I'm in the weeds trying to wrap my brain around the counterintuitive way I have to push the rudder away from me while simultaneously uncleating the sheet as I'm going about. Eventually, my sailor's muscle memory returns enough for me to steer the boat downwind. We start to heel, laughing out loud and clipping along at a pace that feels dangerously close to flying. It's a fitting way to end our prosecco-and-adrenaline-fueled road trip through Italy. And we haven't even burned a full tank of gas.

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The 75-mile Alta Via 1 is among the most popular hiking trails in the Dolomites. The stretch around the Passo Falzarego (nearly 7,000 feet in elevation) is a thrilling walking path.



**A Flying Phantom**  
catches wind on  
Lake Garda, one  
of the world's best  
regatta locations,  
with international  
sailing competitions  
held throughout the  
year. Visitors can pick  
up skills at lakeside  
sailing schools.



## Travel Wise: Dolomites Region

### WHERE TO STAY

#### VENICE

##### Hotel Casa Verardo

This three-star hotel housed in a 17th-century palace is a less than 10-minute walk from Piazza San Marco, but it sits away from the fray, down a quiet alleyway. Breakfast on the terrace and an evening Aperol spritz in the walled courtyard garden frame an ideal Venice day. [casaverardo.it](http://casaverardo.it)

#### FOLLINA

##### Hotel Villa Abbazia

Joy emanates from every corner of this eclectic, relaxing estate, from the Buddhist statues at the entrance and the lemon trees in the garden to the brightly decorated rooms and the gladiolas on the linen tablecloths in La Corte, the Michelin-starred restaurant. Cyclists should reserve in advance for a ride with hotel owner Giovanni Zanon. [hotelabbazia.com](http://hotelabbazia.com)

#### CORTINA D'AMPEZZO

##### Hotel Cristallo Resort & Spa

This five-star hotel, built in 1901, was temporarily converted to a hospital—twice—for wounded soldiers in both world wars. After the 1956 Winter Olympics, it became the preferred choice for stars like Frank Sinatra, who had a suite named after him. While it has world-class amenities such as a state-of-the-art spa, visitors most appreciate the unfettered view of the Tofane mountain range across a green valley. [marriott.com](http://marriott.com)

#### SAN CASSIANO, ALTA BADIA

##### Hotel Cias Salares

Luxurious yet comfortable, with light, airy rooms accented by pine, this third-generation family-owned hotel is as playful as its surroundings. An outdoor garden contains a mini zipline for kids, and cheese- and chocolate-tasting rooms adjoin the Cocun Restaurant. [ciasalares.it](http://ciasalares.it)

#### CORVARA

##### Hotel La Perla

Founder Ernesto Costa and his wife, Anni, oversee every detail in this

classically elegant, Ladin lodge. Most rooms overlook Mount Saslongher. Five restaurants and bars onsite include one with a Michelin star. Pinarello Lounge is the most sporty, with a changing rotation of biking memorabilia on display, which might include signed Tour de France jerseys. [laperlacorvara.it](http://laperlacorvara.it)

#### LAKE GARDA

##### Hotel Du Lac et Du Parc Grand Resort

Fronted by sprawling gardens that lead to the shore of Lake Garda, this resort with multiple room styles is an ideal location for both water sports and the shops and restaurants of palm tree-lined Riva del Garda, just a 15-minute walk away via lake path. Don't miss the rooftop breakfasts. [dulaceteduparc.com](http://dulaceteduparc.com)

#### WHERE TO EAT

##### VENICE

##### Ristorante Al Giardinetto da Severino

Glass chandeliers hang amid wandering, wine-producing grapevines in the backyard patio of this traditional Venetian restaurant a quick walk from Piazza San Marco. The same family has been serving



meals here, such as spaghetti with squid ink, since 1949. [algiardinettito.it](http://algiardinettito.it)

#### CORTINA D'AMPEZZO

##### El Brite de Larieto

At the base of Monte Cristallo in the middle of a cow pasture, this quaint rifugio offers classic northern Italian dishes such as casunziei, ravioli stuffed with beetroot. Follow it with grappa laced with cumin, a powerful digestif. [elbitedelarieto.it](http://elbitedelarieto.it)

#### ALTA BADIA

##### Rifugio Gardenacia

The reward for climbing the brand-new Les Cordes via ferrata above the village of La Villa is that it leads to the Gherdenacia Plateau and this idyllic mountain lodge with a restaurant that serves thirst-quenching radlers and hearty polentas. [gardenacia.it](http://gardenacia.it)

#### GUIDES

##### DOLOMITE MOUNTAINS

With deep knowledge of the Dolomites and Sardinia, owner Agustina Lagos Marmol and her staff have a far-reaching network of freelance hiking, mountaineering, via ferrata,

cycling, and mountain biking guides and can customize anything from a one-day family journey to a month-long solo odyssey. [dolomitemountains.com](http://dolomitemountains.com)

#### CONTEXT TRAVEL TOURS

Context Travel started in Italy more than two decades ago and now has scholars as expert guides in cities worldwide, but the Italians are perhaps still the most passionate guides of all. [contexttravel.com](http://contexttravel.com)

#### ITALY CYCLING TOUR

Effusive, charming, and fanatical cyclists with great attention to high-quality bikes, Alessandro Da Re and his partners are based in Follina but offer trips throughout Italy. [italycyclingtour.it](http://italycyclingtour.it)

#### SEGNANA WATERSPORTS

With several locations on Lake Garda, including one at the Hotel Du Lac et Du Parc, Segnana offers a simple formula for successful sailing, windsurfing, and kitesurfing: At the end of five days of two-hour-a-day lessons, everyone will be able to sail alone on the water. [surfsegnana.it](http://surfsegnana.it)

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