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Salento

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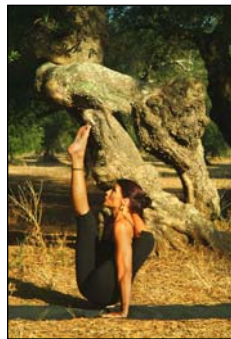
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Italian Yoga Retreat: Saluting the Sun in Salento

It was wintertime in Brooklyn when Stephanie Steiker picked up the postcard. She may have been at a yoga studio or a restaurant in Red Hook. She can't remember for sure. But, she vividly recalls the photographs on the card: A woman posed in a graceful backbend. A lotus blossom. A placid azure swimming pool. The images came from a place called *Yoga in Salento (YIS)*.



"It was beautiful and peaceful. I said to myself, 'I must get to this place of stillness and sunshine.' I held on to that card as a talisman for months," says Stephanie, who was dealing with an intense period at work and a caved-in ceiling in her apartment.

The following July, Stephanie stepped into that idyllic setting on the Salento Peninsula, the tip of Italy's "heel" in the region of *Puglia*. Its fertile soil and pristine coasts have long attracted outsiders—from ancient Greeks to today's urban Italian and northern European sun seekers. Mystery and melody inhabit this rustic land, as evidenced by the conical-roofed stone houses called *trulli* and the exhilarating rhythms of *pizzica* folk music.

For another New Yorker, Katie Rashid, a week at YIS opened vistas onto Ashtanga yoga as well as the region. "It was my first time to Puglia and I loved being there. I loved being near the sea, I loved the rawness of the area,

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Warm Weather + The Dolomites = Perfect Together

Despite dozens of visits to Italy, I'll readily confess that the Dolomite Mountains (*Dolomiti*) in the northeastern corner of the country had barely registered on my radar. I was familiar with *Cortina d'Ampezzo* of course, site of the 1956 Winter Olympics. Plus I knew that Cortina was a famously luxurious town with a reputation for chic après-ski partying à la Aspen. One winter, I thought, I might come here to ski — after I advanced a bit in my talents and when I could afford just the right skiwear (keeping in mind *la bella figura*).

Instead, I was invited to visit the Dolomites on a hiking vacation early last September. Apparently, there's great debate about whether the mountains are truly more beautiful in the summer or winter (an unusual September snowstorm gave me an inkling of what it's like in both seasons) and I jumped at the chance to see for myself. While better-known hiking trails in other parts of the Alps are frequently crowded in the summer, the Dolomites remain something of an unknown — especially to foreign sports enthusiasts. Though that may be changing; a few months before my arrival, the Dolomites were named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

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Salento is dotted with coastal watchtowers.



These mountains were named after *Deodat de Dolomieu*, a French geologist who was the one to discover in 1789, an unusual carbonate rock that had foreign properties. “Dolomite” became the name of both the mineral, as well as the mountain range where he found it. A high manganese content gives the gray rock a uniquely gold and then pinkish hue as the sun rises and sets. The Dolomites sit on the current border between Italy and Austria. Much of the area once belonged to Austria and was annexed by Italy after World War I. There’s also a native local population, the Ladini, who have been here since Roman times. Everywhere — though it varies from town to town — there’s a mixing of three cultures and three languages.

What surprised me about the Dolomites before I saw their jagged edges in the distance? The fact that I could meet my hiking companions at Venice’s *Marco Polo* Airport and be in the mountains in about two hours. I had never considered combining a trip to Venice with a mountain adventure; a contrast of experiences worth considering. (Cortina is actually in the region of *Veneto* while most of the Dolomites are across the border in *Alto Adige*.)

Even if you’re wary of renting a car in Italy it is certainly possible to get to, and around, the Dolomites using an excellent bus system (equipped for bringing your bicycle along). There’s a

bus from Venice’s airport to Cortina that costs 20€ each way (www.dolomitibus.it). Ski lifts also help get you where you’re going in the mountains. The *Sella Ronda* circuit — a famous skiing route also used by hikers and bikers — connects four Dolomite valleys via lifts.

An Introduction

Pulling up to Cortina, the town looked much like I had imagined, blooming flowers, Alpine architecture, neat and clean streets and fashionable shops in the center of a mountain meadow, with some of the Dolomites’ 18 peaks in the background.

My group of travel professionals and hiking enthusiasts dropped our bags off at small, central hotel went to a nearby *pizzeria* for a bite to eat and to meet *Agustina Lagos Marmol*, the owner of *Dolomite Mountains, s.r.l.* and the leader of our trip. A tall, fit Argentinian, Marmol, originally settled in the Dolomites more than 15 years ago as it is the birthplace of her former husband *Marcello Cominetti*, an internationally renowned mountain climber. Cominetti helps to lead some of her groups and their 8-year-old daughter, an experienced outdoorswoman already, is often in tow.

Marmol speaks with such passion about these mountains, you would have thought she was born here into one of the families that goes back

hundreds of years. “The Dolomites are unique in the world. No mountains offer such combination of rock beauty and excellent mountain services. The terrain is great for hiking, climbing, biking (mountains and road), via ferrata (the place where they have its origin from) and skiing. The Italian and Austrian culture blend with the local language in the area (Ladin) and this is reflected in every day people’s life,” she says.

Marmol knows what she is talking about because she has lived and worked all over the world and climbed, hiked and biked in some of the Earth’s most magnificent destinations. She began her travel career in the United States, planning trips for the illustrious Butterfield and Robinson. After founding her own Dolomites-based company, she has hosted trips here for companies like Mountain Travel Sobek. What many travel consumers don’t realize is that they can get the same trip, with all of the bells and whistles, by contracting directly with a local company like Marmol’s.

She believes there is something for everyone — of any fitness level — in the Dolomites — and there is somewhere for everyone with 5,000 miles of marked trails. Marmol is particularly passionate about bringing families to the Dolomites (there’s one with a 5- and 7-year old on our trip). This small business owner took note of how committed Marmol is to her business; she’s constantly on her Blackberry and remembers every detail.



Agustina

Kathy Dragon, TravelDragon.com

Cortina is nicknamed “the



Cortina d'Ampezzo

Agustina pointed out that Cortina is the perfect place for cyclists as designated bike resort with dedicated trails and special cycling events; this summer there's a three-day biking celebration, July 23 through 25. If museums are more your style, Cortina has quite a selection for a town of 6,000 people including ones devoted to World War I, ethnology, fossils and modern art. (cortina.dolomiti.com)

Cortina is a great base for those who want some post-outdoors action; though admittedly it is sleepier than in the winter. The *Hotel Ambra*, where I stayed, or *Hotel De La Poste*, are both in the center of town, within a few feet of places to eat and drink, from the Michelin-starred *Tivoli* to the stylish old wine bar *Enoteca*. *Hotel Park Faloria* is just outside the center of the town, near the Olympic ski jump, offers a spa, swimming pool and a little more room to run around for those traveling with families.

Hiking, Dolomites Style

On our first day of hiking, the weather was crisp, clear and sunny. With the staggering views at every turn in the Dolomites, a clear day truly means you can see forever — or at least as far as Austria. We hopped on a ski lift to get us above the tree line, providing increasingly promising views of *Cinque Torri* — mountain formations that resemble five towers.



At the top of the lift, we stopped at *Rifugio Averau*. A rifugio is a mountain hut that welcomes travelers for food lodging or often times both, especially since camping in the wild is prohibited in the Dolomites. These mountains, hundreds in total, are central to the outdoors experience here. Nearly all serve hearty mountain food such as lamb and *polenta*, which is a staple here.

Our group split into two; those who wanted to do straight hiking and those who wanted to experience *via ferrata*, a mountain route combining cables,

bridges and ladders. Via ferrata allows access to those nooks and crannies that would be otherwise inaccessible simply on foot. Those in this area were originally built to aid alpine units in World War I. You'll



Cortina

find these "iron roads" in neighboring Alpine countries but here they have the most historic significance. In fact there's an unusual one in the newly restored *Lagazuoi* tunnels (both Italian and Austrian troops built tunnels during the war). While *ferrata Averau* is considered an easy via ferrata, there are ones of all levels throughout these mountains. (viaferrata.org)

The rest of us started our climb along an unusual, steep broad ridge to *Rifugio Nuvolau*. I soon got my bearing on the scree (loose rock). Obviously, having a good pair of broken-in hiking boots is essential for a trip like this. I spent the extra money to have mine properly fitted at a sporting goods

store back home.

Is it here where I admit that an elderly couple with a cocker spaniel as well as a five-year-old passed me on the trail? No matter, the views were worth the huffing and puffing. I could see the highest point in the Dolomites, *Marmaloda* (10,968 feet). It is hard to believe that these rock formations are mere babies, well at least in comparison to their neighbors; the Dolomites are the youngest of the Alps.

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Queen of the Dolomites."



Daniele1357, flickr.com

This was one of my two favorite hikes. Later in the week we hiked to *Sasso della Croce* (Stone of the Cross) where we found a small white church that was consecrated in 1484 (how did they get the building materials up here?) and holds an image of Christ bearing the cross, hence the name of the mountain. We traipsed over lush rolling hills (walking poles come in handy) to one of my favorite mountain huts, Ranch Andre. There, friendly goats, a German shepherd named Tequila and food prepped on the outdoor grill (*turtres* — Ladino pastries — and grilled vegetables) were awaiting us.

History Lessons

Yet on that first day, I realized yet again why I always like to travel with a guide. My guide, *Karen Pizzinini*, was pleasant, charming and truly tied to this land by her Ladino heritage. As an expert on Ladino culture. Since the Ladini are a recognized minority in Italy, television time is provided for programming in their native language. Karen produces monthly segments in Ladino that air on the television station, Rai 3. While waiting for the group to return from their via ferrata) Karen gave me a lesson in Ladino culture 101. You can watch my video interview with her at youtube.com/dreamofitaly.

As we took a short walk over to the Cinque Torri open air museum, our conversation turned to war. Between May 1915 and October 1917, this area was the scene of horrific battles during World War I. When gunfire didn't claim lives, exposure did and the win-

ter of 1916 was particularly brutal. Those who had been peaceful neighbors were now killing each other and Karen told me that often the soldiers would often sneak down into the towns at night to get news.

Our reward for the physical exertion and history lessons learned was a trip to highest rifugio in the region, *Rifugio Lagazuoi*. After a short drive, we boarded gondola for the journey to 9,112 feet, where absolutely stupendous 360-degree views and a hearty Dolomiti lunch were waiting. The main dish of beet-filled ravioli topped with poppy seeds were perfectly filling. This is truly the must-visit rifugio in the area and even if you don't hike up, you can always walk down the mountain after lunch as that burns calories too, right?

Rosa Alpina

For the second half of our trip, we drove about 45 minutes over to the next valley of *Alta Badia* to the lovely, well-manicured town of *San Cassiano*. As Agustina told us, "Every valley has its own experience." Alta Badia, historically the most isolated area of the Dolomites, is home to a significant population of Ladini. Nearly every one of San Cassiano's 700 residents speaks Ladino at home.

That includes the gentile *Hugo Pizzinini*, the third-generation owner of the luxurious *Hotel Rosa Alpina*. There are few world-famous luxury properties that are family-owned as well as family-managed. Pizzinini was

so ever-present that we wondered if he ever slept. Hospitality is in his blood for sure as many of the nearby hotels and restaurants are run also by Pizzinini family members.

The welcoming and down-to-earth attitude of the owner is mirrored in the hotel décor with light-colored alpine wood furniture and elegant yellow, white and earthy-colored fabrics. The feel is modern with a nod to history. There's a lovely fire burning in the lobby year-round.

While part of our group spent the day hiking to an overnight at *Rifugio Lavarella*, I settled into my plush room, making an appointment for the Rosa Alpina spa. (Yes, I felt guilty when it started to rain on the hikers.) My esthetician *Elsa* was so lovely that I made a note to tell Hugo how pleased I was with her service. Pride is contagious at Rosa Alpina leading to an 80% return rate among its guests.

In addition to the warm and luxurious atmosphere, guests are also drawn to Rosa Alpina for the food. The hotel's restaurant *St. Hubertus* and chef *Norbert Niederkofler* have been awarded two Michelin stars. To dine here is to experience the flavors of these mountains in a most innovative way. Consider *risotto* with pine needles served with gently smoked breast of guinea fowl or filet of venison with *balsamico* cherries, *cannolo* stuffed with cardamom mousse and *ricotta gnocchi*. I'm not usually a fan of foie gras but months later still dream of Niederkofler's *foie gras crème brûlée*.

“*Co va la pa?*” means “H



Amazingly, St. Hubertus is one of three restaurants within a few miles that hold Michelin stars; there's also *La Siriola* in San Cassiano's *Hotel Ciasa Salares* and *La Stüa de Michil* in *Hotel La Perla* in neighboring *Corvara*. (The bigger town of Corvara offers more shopping, restaurants and hotels to choose from, with the *Hotel Posta Zirm* as a more affordable lodging option.)

To welcome our hearty hikers back to the Rosa Alpina from their night away, Pizzinni prepared a treat that none of us will soon forget — a lavish lunch at his family's personal rifugio within a short hike of the hotel. We enjoyed a feast of mountain cheeses, sausage, grilled meat, polenta and porcini while we once again took in the breathtaking landscape. He's happy to set this up

for any of his guests.

I wasn't quite what to expect on my warm weather adventure in the Dolomites. What I found was overwhelming — nature at its most tantalizing, history and tradition coming alive and welcoming locals who take such pride in their land, culture and families.

Guides and Organized Trips

Agustina Lagos Marmol

Dolomite Mountains, s.r.l.
(39) 0436 7320

www.dolomitmountains.com

Agustina's company can plan hiking, biking, climbing, Via Ferrata, skiing, snowshoeing and photo safari excursions, custom vacations (in any price range) and self-guided trips in the Dolomites.

Rates: The cost for an individual guide starts at 220€ per day. A private two-day hike with one night in a rifugio costs about 430€ for a minimum of two people. An organized trip like "Hiking the Best of the Italian Alps" accompanied by a mountain guide with six nights accommodation (two in Cortina, four in mountain refuges) and some meals starts at 1,060€ per person, depending on the group size.

Where to Stay

Most hotels are closed from April to mid-June and October through mid-December. Many rifugi are open only in the summer.

Rifugi

Staying in a mountain refuge is the most affordable and authentic lodging option in the Dolomites. Rates vary, but plan on spending between 45 and 70€ per person, per night for accommodations, breakfast and dinner. Visit the Web site of the Club Alpino Italiano (www.cai.it) for a listing of local rifugi. Club members save 5% on their stays. Many of the rifugi I mentioned in the story are featured at www.dolomiti.org

Hotel Ambra

Via XXIX Maggio, 28
Cortina d'Ampezzo
(39) 0436 867344
www.hotelambracortina.it

Summer 2010: Opens June 12
Rates: In mid-June, rates start at 80€ for a standard double room and peak at 120€ in early August. All rates are per person, per night and include breakfast.

Hotel Park Faloria

Zuel di Sopra, 46
Cortina d'Ampezzo
(39) 0436 2959
www.parkhotelfaloria.it

Summer 2010: Opens May 26
Rates: A classic double room costs 120€ per night through mid-July. Starting in mid-July, the hotel raises its rates to 156€, and by mid-August, rates peak at 300€ before falling back down to 156€ at the end of August. A superior suite accommodates up to four guests and ranges from 184 to 340€. All rates include breakfast.

Hotel de la Poste

Piazza Roma, 14
Cortina d'Ampezzo
(39) 0436 4271
www.delaposte.it

Summer 2010:
Open June 12 to September 20
Rates: A double room with breakfast costs 200€ during the summer season. Half-board and full-board plans are also available.

Hotel Posta Zirm

Col Alt, 95
Corvara
(39) 0471 836175
www.postazirm.com

Summer 2010:
Open June 18 to September 30
Rates: A double room with half-board range from 91€ per person, at the beginning and end of the summer season, to 137€ during most of August. The smallest apartments, which sleep two to four people and have a kitchenette, range from 139 to 194€ per day, not including breakfast or half board.

Hotel Rosa Alpina

Strada Micura de Rü, 20
San Cassiano in Badia
39 0471 849500
www.rosaalpina.it

Summer 2010:
Open June 18 to September 19
Rates: Double rooms range from 170 to 230€, per person per day, including a breakfast buffet. Junior suites start at 200€ per person, per day.

1 € = \$1.35 at press time

How are you?" in Ladino.