

My new love affair - with the divine Dolomites (and its amazing snow-making): MARK PALMER on why this 'special part of Italy' trumps the Alps for ski holidays

- Mark skis the famous Sella Ronda, 'arguably the greatest ski circuit in Europe'
- You can now fly direct into the Val Gardena region of the Dolomites, Mark says
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By [MARK PALMER FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY](#)

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The Alps or the Dolomites? As someone who has skied almost every year of his adult life in the former, it feels almost disloyal to come down on the side of the latter.

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No, there's not a lot of ski-in, ski-out hotel options or hosted chalets, and natural snow cover can be an issue – but what the Dolomiti lack is made up for in its charm, friendliness and spectacular mountain scenery.

And, let's be frank, you're in **Italy** not **France** – a special part of Italy, where Italian, German and Ladin is spoken by most people. And you can now fly direct into the Val Gardena region with a twice-weekly service from Stansted to Bolzano, rather than into Innsbruck nearly two hours away.

What's more, snow-making is more extensive here than anywhere else in the world. On a previous visit, when there had been hardly any snow, the pistes were still open for business.

We are staying in the village of Ortisei. It's just off the famous Sella Ronda, arguably the greatest ski circuit in Europe.



The Alps or the Dolomites? Mark Palmer says 'it feels almost disloyal to come down on the side of the latter'. He stays in the village of Ortisei, just off the famous Sella Ronda (above), 'arguably the greatest ski circuit in Europe'

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Left: Mark is delighted with the Dolomites. Right: St Anthony Church in Ortisei, which dates back to 1673

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There are 12 linked valleys, which, if you can resist the fabulous restaurants along the way, can be skied in a day by following the Sella Ronda signs.

Before tourism came to the fore, Ortisei's prosperity was largely due to its woodcraft industry. By the village, we pass shops selling life-size statues of Jesus, Mary, Joseph and a whole celestial legion of saints. Locals will tell you there is not a Catholic church in the world that does not have something in it that was made in this pretty little town.

Wandering around the pedestrianised area feels like a reminder of gentler times. This is not lads-on-tour territory.

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Base yourself at Gardena Grodnerhof and you'll be cosseted in a warm, welcoming atmosphere. The hotel opened in 1923 and has been run by the same family ever since. It shows.

I even have someone helping me put on my ski boots in the morning and take them off again in the evening. Perfecto.



Mark stays at the Gardena Grodnerhof hotel (pictured) and says here 'you'll be cosseted in a warm, welcoming atmosphere'

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A room at the Gardena Grodnerhof hotel, which opened in 1923 'and has been run by the same family ever since'

The hotel runs a shuttle to the various lifts that link into the Sella Ronda. If you're a black-run fiend, you might be disappointed, but those who like immaculately groomed, wide-open pistes can't ask for more.

You ski closer to massive rock faces here than anywhere in the Alps, and when the sun sets on these jagged peaks they glow deliciously pink.

One evening, we have dinner up the mountain at a restaurant called Friedrich August Refuge. Inside, it's wood panelled, with the lights of Canazei twinkling in the distance. The tomahawk steaks are Herculean in size but extraordinarily tender – and the local wines are outstanding.

It would now take a lot of persuasion for me to take a ski trip to a purpose-built resort. This strikes me forcefully when standing outside the little chapel of St Anthony (built in 1673), the door open just wide enough to see the altar, with flickering candles and an exquisite painting above it.

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Then I see the snowy Dolomites looming on the horizon in the evening light – and they look utterly divine, too.

TRAVEL FACTS

IB&B rooms at Gardena Grodnerhof from £310 (gardena.it). Stansted to Bolzano from £342pp (skyalps.com).

Ski passes and guides at [dolomitemountains.com](#). More information at [valgardena.it](#).



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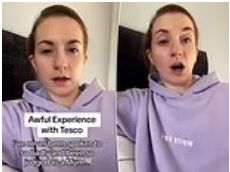
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