

DEPARTURES

A close-up photograph of a necklace featuring several large, brilliant-cut emerald pendants set in a diamond-encrusted metal. The necklace is draped over a light-colored, textured fabric, possibly silk or satin, which is visible in the background. The lighting highlights the facets of the diamonds and the rich green color of the emeralds.

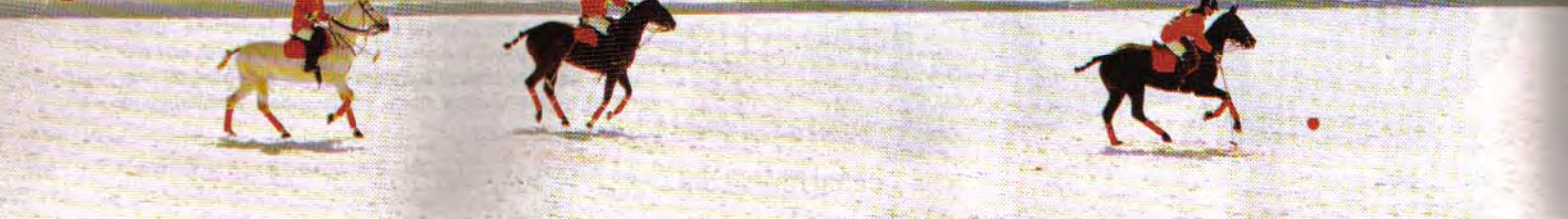
NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2007

**THE
SHOPPING
ISSUE
EMERALDS
SLEEP CHIC
ROBES, SLIPPERS
SATINS AND SILKS
SKIING ITALY
YOUR OWN PRIVATE
CARIBBEAN**

DYNAMITE

THE ITALIAN ALPS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FASHIONABLE AMONG A CERTAIN SET, AND THE RESORT CALLED VAL BADIA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A SORT OF HIDDEN JEWEL IN THE DOLOMITES' CROWN. **ELISABETH FRANCK-DUMAS** JOINS A NEW GLOBAL JET SET FOR NOT ONLY ITS SCENIC SLOPES BUT ALSO ITS CIVILIZED COMFORT.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOBBY FISHER



DOLOMITES



A high-altitude view from Rifugio Lagazuoi, one of the many mountaintop eateries in Alta Badia.

Opposite: Polo on snow in Cortina.

Après-ski in the Italian Dolomites usually involves stopping for a drink at La Perla in charming Corvara, one of the postcard-perfect villages in the horseshoe-shaped valley of Val Badia. It's a late afternoon in February as I leave my skis at the edge of the slopes and the sun sets on the famed jagged summits, its last rays bouncing off the roofs of the Porsche Cayennes and Volkswagen Touaregs parked outside the Tyrolean-themed four-star hotel. I walk through La Perla's rustic wooden entrance to the cozy bar filling up with assorted guests—skiers in formfitting Gore-Tex, men in flannel shirts and V-neck sweaters, women in turtlenecks and much gold jewelry. Italian conversation and piano tunes tangle in a pleasant din, with the occasional snippet of German or posh-accented English. I'm a half-day's skiing away from the more renowned Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy's answer to fashionable Aspen, but Cortina makes the low-key luxury of Val Badia, a 45-minute helicopter ride from Venice, even more appealing.

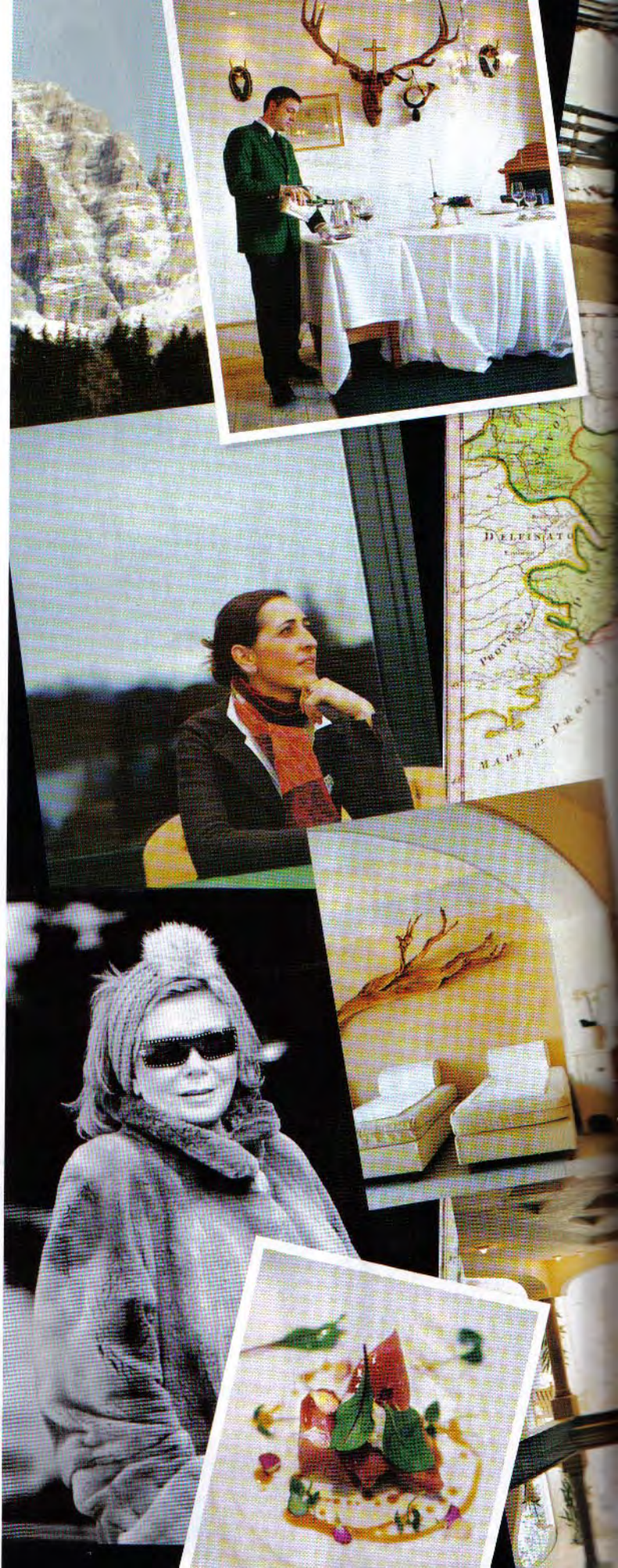
La Perla's owner, Michil Costa, takes a seat next to mine as I sip a cocktail spritzer and nibble on warm crostini. In a silk foulard and light blue sweater, with his bald spot and glasses, Costa is the very picture of old Europe. He's president of the local Ladino community, which claims to be the oldest population in the Alps, and he's currently engaged in an all-encompassing battle to thwart development in this remote valley, working to ban motorcycles, implement hydrogen buses, and halt construction. "If I don't do this," he tells me with an obvious note of disdain, "we would have another Courchevel here."

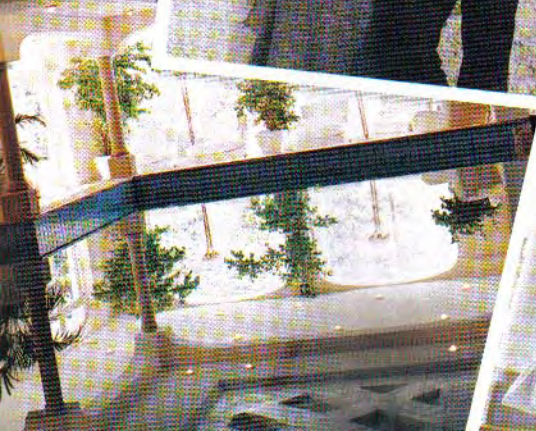
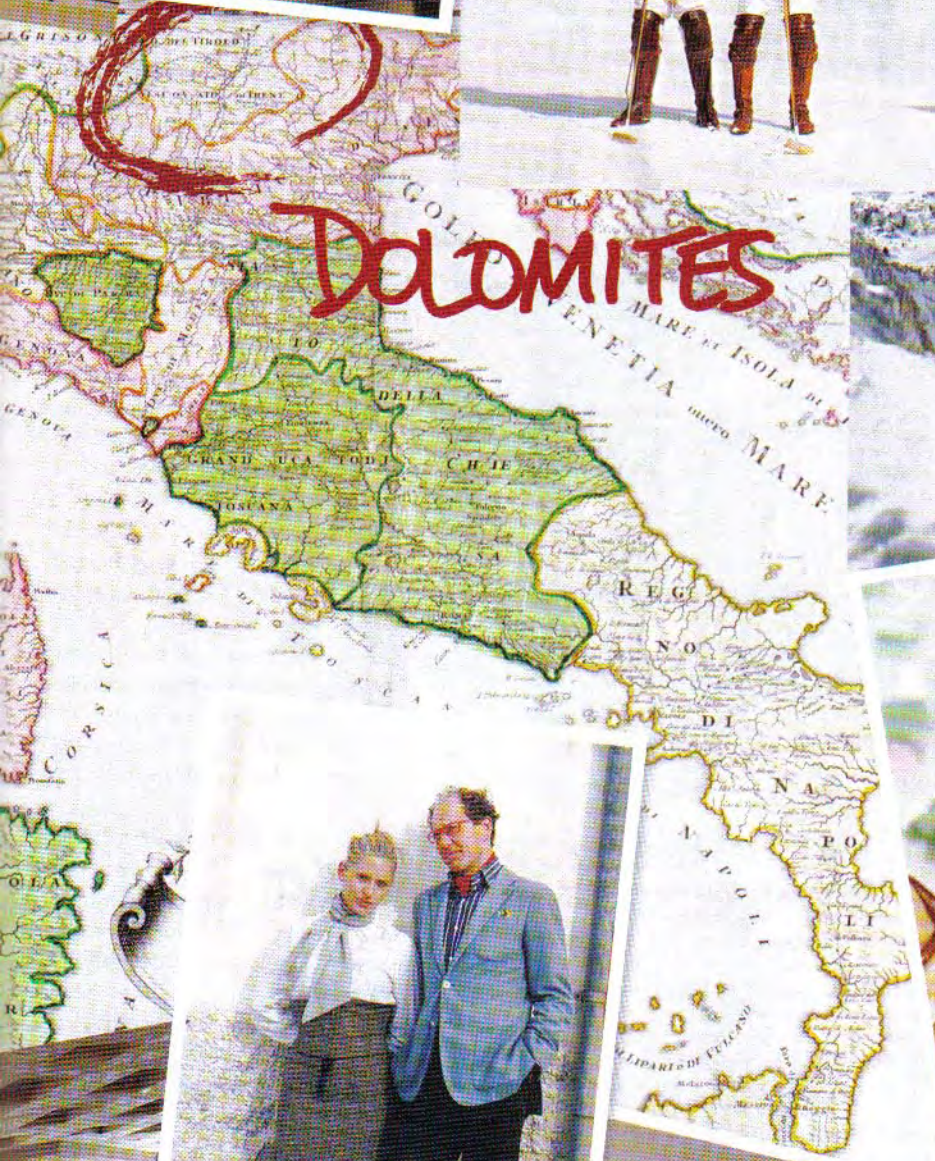
Although Val Badia counts leather-goods heiress Domitilla Gucci and globe-trotting chef David Bouley among its growing list of cosmopolitan fans, the valley is indeed nothing like Courchevel, the overdeveloped, glitzy jewel of the French Trois Vallées. The string of six villages that make up the ski resort of Val Badia and form the community of Alta Badia are small and typically South Tyrolean—think Baroque churches, wooden barns, and lots of large white houses with dark roofs and small windows. There isn't one designer boutique or new construction site to be found. Among Florentines and Venetians, the villages of Corvara and San Cassiano are known for their Michelin-starred restaurants, unparalleled hotels, and prohibitive real estate prices. But they remain very much an insider's secret, patronized by families who come back annually, often for the exact same weeks.

In recent years, however, this mix of sophistication and secrecy has started to attract visitors from other parts. At the Rosa Alpina, the stellar Relais & Châteaux property in the center of San Cassiano, where I'm staying for three days, the foreign guests are of the kind that signal a destination on the rise. There is an elegant English couple with their teenage son and daughter, who tell me they usually ski in the Trois Vallées but had started hearing terrific things about the Dolomites. And there are the three thirtysomething Russians, worldly and fluent in English, whom I spot on my way to bed every night having last call at the bar.

Like La Perla, Rosa Alpina has been in family hands for generations and its other guests are, of course, Italian. Most of the remaining rooms are filled by a large party of friends from the Emilia-Romagna region, some of whom have been coming here for more than two decades. In fact, hotel owner Hugo Pizzinini

The Dolomites are all about la dolce vita and the people who know how to live it, such as the Costas (opposite, center), owners of La Perla; Ursula Pizzinini in a room at her hotel, Rosa Alpina (opposite, bottom); Monica Weiser (right, center), owner of Hotel Ciasa Salares, and one of her guests, Karin Ferle, (right, bottom).





confides that his return rate from year to year is 80 percent. "It's why nobody knows this place," he adds, tongue in cheek.

Pizzinini's humility is endearing, but "nobody" in his language translates to "a happy few" in mine. His hotel, for one, came with high recommendations from New York-based Chiara Ferragamo, wife of Ferragamo CEO Massimo, who is on a first-name basis with the 38-year-old, third-generation hotelier. "Tell Hugo I am so sorry we didn't make it for Christmas; we'll come later this year!" she says when I call for advice before my trip.

Months after my visit I am enchanted—but not surprised—to learn that design wunderkind Marc Newson is a huge fan, as is his wife, stylist Charlotte Stockdale, and his good friend Paul Deneve, CEO of the fashion house of Lanvin.

"Of all the places I have been," Newson tells me, "it's the first I would go back to. It's such an interesting mix of Italian hospitality and food with Germanic organization. Charlotte and I keep saying to each other, 'We must book Rosa Alpina, we must book Rosa Alpina!'"

Unlike the more reputed, jet-set playgrounds of Gstaad and Mégève—which, it can be argued, sit on what the French call *montagne à vaches* (cow pasture mountains)—San Cassiano boasts some of the most breathtaking ski scenery in Europe. My first morning on the slopes, after several chairlifts whisk me above the valley, the toothed chain of the Dolomites comes into full view. It's an exhilarating sight: At one end of the valley, miles of forest emit a whiff of Austria; at the other is the Armentarola run, with its tableau of pine trees, red rocks, and snow, eerily reminiscent of Monument Valley.

The fun is to hop from one village to the next, catch lifts in the middle of town, and gently swish down near-empty runs. Domitilla Gucci tells me she compares skiing the wide, easy avenues near San Cassiano to "taking a promenade," and I soon find out that Alta Badia is hardly an Olympic training ground.

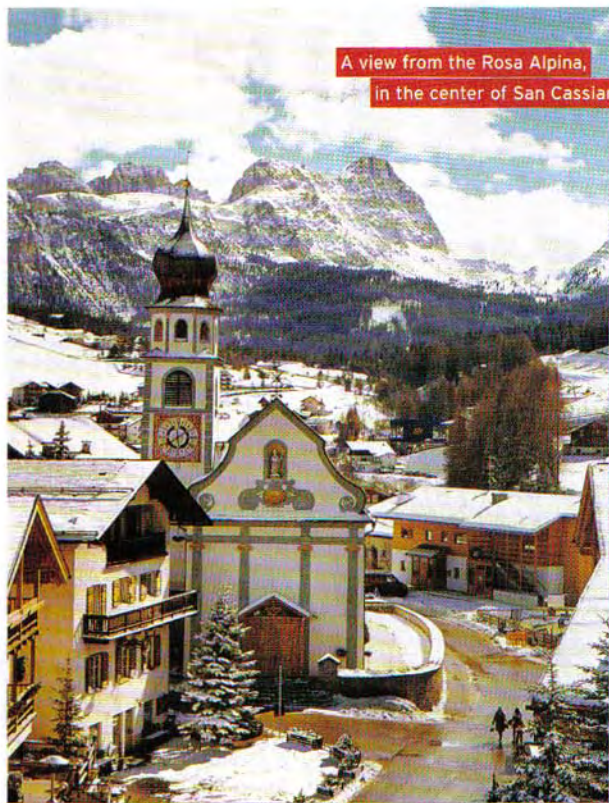
There are very few black runs and virtually no snowboarders, that telltale sign of extreme skiing. Rather, you're shuttled along an outrageous number of plush chairlifts, escalators, moving walkways, and even horse-drawn carts that help you get through the flat sections—no pushing required! As my guide, renowned mountain climber Marcello Cominetti, tells me with a grin, "Skiing is not a sport here, it's a recreation."

To find more challenging slopes, one must head into Dolomiti Superski, the large network of pistes that comprises 745 miles of runs and extends over 12 resorts, including Corvara and San Cassiano. Lanvin CEO Deneve says some of the best black runs he has ever skied are here, just below the Marmolada glacier. I try them with Cominetti on my second day—let's just say, to call the experience an incredible rush is putting it mildly.

The Marmolada glacier is the highest point in the region, with views of the Austrian border; on a clear day the church spires of Venice can be spotted. The steep runs lead through a narrow canyon of ice cascades and all the way down to the bucolic village of Sottoguda, with its hay-filled barns some 6,600 feet below.

For those less athletic types who'd rather leave fresh powder and abrupt inclines out in the cold, the Superski offers the added perk of linking Alta Badia to Cortina d'Ampezzo and its myriad shopping opportunities. It is not uncommon, I'm told, for wives staying at the Rosa Alpina to ski into Cortina, prowl the designer boutiques, then taxi it back to Alta Badia.

In late February and early March, they also flock to nearby Misurina Lake for the Cortina Winter Polo on Snow, one of the chicest events of the season. Yachting companies and private banks invite their best clients for small lunches around the field, all catered by the Rosa Alpina.



A view from the Rosa Alpina, in the center of San Cassiano

The Guides to Get

For everything from hotels to private house rentals and guidance on the slopes, Custom Italy (39-055/264-5526; customitaly.com) and its terrific local contact, Agustina Lagos Marmol (agustina@guidestarmountain.com), are the ones to call. A former guide for Butterfield & Robinson, Marmol hails from Argentina but has lived in Alta Badia for years. She knows the best runs, routes, and restaurants—as well as the right days and times to visit them. She will take into account your preferences and changes in the weather to tailor your trip to the last detail, going so far as having you picked up at the bottom of a run if the alternative involves pushing on your poles. Her husband, Marcello Cominetti, is a mountain-climbing guide who leads wonderful ski tours. Marmol also recommends Luca Gasparini and Corrado "Icaro" de Monte. Gasparini is a passionate cyclist and ice climber who has ascended nearly every volcano in New Zealand. Icaro (as he's known) is an excellent telemarker who has traveled the world over, from Tibet to Brazil.

Bitingly out of shape after my first day of skiing, I decide to skip the socializing in Corvara and head to the hotel spa instead. An essential part of life here (advance bookings are imperative), spas are delightfully known as beauty farms. Since I have been feeling like fallow land myself, because of months of inactivity following the birth of my first child, I sign up for the arnica treatment, which promises to soothe my sore muscles. The treatment is a body wrap prepared with arnica flowers handpicked from local slopes in July and left to steep for a few months. It will take more than that, I think skeptically, to make me feel brand new. The following morning, however, I'm amazed to find that I feel no pain whatsoever in my thigh muscles.

Rested and restored, I'm ready for dinner at the Rosa Alpina's Michelin two-star St. Hubertus restaurant, with its tastefully appointed foyer, blazing open fire, glass wine cellar, and loden curtains handmade in Venice. Chef Norbert Niederkofler **CONTINUED ON PAGE 350 »**



There's nothing strenuous about
skiing in Alta Badia, where horse-
drawn carts pull groups of skiers
through the flat sections.

DYNAMITE DOLOMITES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 310

is renowned for his cutting-edge cuisine that incorporates local traditions. The extraordinary tasting menu starts with lobster and red mullet in tomato sauce, turbot with artichokes and an exquisitely bitter local chicory called *puntarella*, followed by ravioli filled with a San Cassiano specialty of gray cheese. A refreshingly minty, pine-needle-flavored risotto comes paired with a grassy local Sanct Valentin Sauvignon. "Norbert collects food from the wild to cook," chef David Bouley later raves to me. "The dishes I eat there I usually remember for a long time after."

The second evening, when ski fatigue is a lesser problem, I drive into Corvara, a mere five minutes away. Bigger than the quaint San Cassiano, whose main spectacle is its picturesque Baroque church and tiny cemetery filled with wrought-iron crosses, Corvara offers more in terms of shopping and nightlife. An excellent cheesemonger and a good pastry shop complement the tea parlors and several hotels. Alongside the requisite sporting goods stores, a few small boutiques sell colorful embroidered linen. I venture into the most fashion-conscious store, called Style, where a kind saleswoman, fingering a \$3,300 Prada lamb and fur pelisse, explains that the look here is "*tutto molto asusto*"—everything close to the body.

I witness this myself at L'Murin, a converted windmill that is the resort's most popular bar during the high season. A young crowd is spread over two levels under a cathedrallike ceiling, dancing to Italian pop tunes. They come straight from the slopes and skip to the beat in *molto asusto* ski outfits, their clunky boots open halfway, a drink in one hand.

The last evening arrives too soon and I'm torn between booking another Michelin-starred restaurant (there are three in the area, the highest concentration of stars in the Alps) and trying a Ladino meal at Maso Runch, a quaint, low-ceilinged farmhouse where the seven courses are served in wood-paneled rooms with checkered curtains. There's also the option of dining at high altitude in a mountaintop *rifugio*, another Alta Badia specialty. My personal favorite is Rifugio Scotoni, a squat stone chalet sitting so isolated in the snow on the Armentarola run that reaching it makes one feel part of a select club whose rewards are specialties of grilled meats and cheesy polenta.

The thrill of zipping to the mountaintop on snowmobiles in the darkness James Bond-style wins me over. I'm off, warmly bundled on a chairlift, the last hundred yards on snow scooter. Reaching the rustic, family-run Rifugio Averau is all the more welcome after the blasting cold wind.

Inside it's a simple setting of checkered tablecloths and a menu of homemade pasta. Most of the guests have come with their chil-

dren. A dozen or so made the journey from Cortina. The women exhibit impeccably coiffed hair (even after the ride up) and nearly all are bare shouldered, Fendi and Gucci bags at their feet. It's a lesson in Italian poise.

Walking out at the end of the evening, the air is of that crisp quality only high altitude can provide. The lifts have closed and it's a snowmobile race back to town. One last thrilling downhill slalom. ■

Around Alta Badia



Drinks alfresco at Maso Runch in Pedraces

HOTELS

ROSA ALPINA, in the village of San Cassiano, is a tastefully refurbished 51-room former parish priest's house that gives new meaning to the words "understated luxury." Untreated red pine floors, thick white duvets, and sparingly displayed local antiques cohabit easily with a Michelin two-star restaurant and state-of-the-art spa. The hands-on, third-generation owner, Hugo Pizzinini, is a knowledgeable source on local history and dining options. Another plus: The hotel organizes drinks every Sunday night with area ski instructors to help you plan the week ahead. Rooms 101 and 102 are especially charming and feature their own private terraces. 39-0471/849-500; rosalpina.it

LA PERLA in Corvara is a good alternative in a busier village. It has a decidedly more Tyrolean approach—think red-and-white-checkered cushions, low ceilings, and wood-paneled everything. Stone hearths with roaring fires create a relaxing atmosphere in the spa. The bar is a must for après-ski drinks. 39-0471/831-000; hotel-laperla.it

RESTAURANTS

MASO RUNCH, in Pedraces, is the place to go for an authentic seven-course Ladino meal. The quaint 17th-century farmhouse features small dining rooms spread out over two floors and the owner's family recipes, which include bread dumplings and ricotta-and-spinach ravioli made daily in the traditional kitchen. 39-0471/839-796

LA SIRIOLA, in the Michelin four-star Hotel Ciasa Salares, is the most cutting-edge of the three Michelin-starred restaurants in the area. Its 35-year-old chef, Claudio Melis, hails from Sardinia and is known for dishes like reindeer fritters. 39-0471/840-092

RIFUGIO SCOTONI, by the breathtaking Armentarola slope, offers the most atmospheric setting for dining. A wood-and-stone chalet, it serves a mouthwatering mixed grill accompanied by Gorgonzola polenta and roasted vegetables. 39-0471/847-330

ST. HUBERTUS at Rosa Alpina is an elegant gourmet's dream. Michelin-starred chef Norbert Niederkofler creatively pairs some of the best wines of the Alto Adige region with locally inspired fare. The hotel's more casual **HUG'S BAR & GRILL**, with cowhide-and-red leather banquettes, industrial light fixtures, and a pizza oven, is perfect for a salad, focaccia, or potato purée with truffles—and the ambience is terrific. 39-0471/849-500

STUA DE MICHIL at La Perla is a romantic eight-table gastronomic restaurant with rooms dating back to 1400. It's also another Michelin-starred winner. 39-0471/831-000

SHOPPING

Alta Badia isn't a shopping destination, but a few retailers are worth a visit.

DELIZIUS in San Cassiano is the gourmet store for stocking up on chestnut flour and mushroom polenta. 39-0471/849-328

FORMAGGIO DEL LUCH DA PCEI, also in San Cassiano, is the place for local dairy specialties like gray cheese. 39-0471/849-286

SPORT KOSTNER JUNIOR in Corvara sells adorable traditional clothing for children. 39-0471/836-465

STYLE is the adult version of Sport Kostner Junior. Also located in Corvara, the store features Prada jackets and Cesare Paciotti boots. 39-0471/836-560

TESSUTI ARTISTICI GRANRUAZ, also in Corvara, is an unassuming shop that carries embroidered linens, tablecloths, and kitchen towels. 39-0471/836-475