

In the Italian Dolomites, get your turns in well into spring.



The Italian Spring Skiing Safari

IN THE DOLOMITES, SWISS, AUSTRIAN, AND ITALIAN CULTURES MEET AT 10,000 FEET TO CREATE THE PERFECT DESTINATION FOR POWDER AND ALPINE CUISINE. THE BEST PART: IT'S JUST \$60 A DAY.

by JAYME OTTO

IT USED TO BE IMPOSSIBLE TO cross the Dolomite Mountains on skis. There were no roads connecting its alpine villages, let alone chairlifts. The peaks (18 of them at more than 10,000 feet) are mostly sheer cliffs and menacing steeples, housing deep, narrow valleys that are difficult to traverse without a little help. In fact, it wasn't until the first chairlift went up in Alta Badia in 1947 that anyone imagined the area as a ski destination. And it wasn't until a few years ago that much of the range became linked into one Dolomiti Superski area: 300,000

acres of skiable slopes (the size of 50 Vails), all available on what's possibly the world's most luxurious ski bargain. For \$60 a day, you can access 450-plus lifts leading to every type of terrain — from chutes to steeps to bumps to glades.

Each of the 12 Dolomiti Superski resorts has a distinct geography peppered with dozens of *rifugi* — mini, high-end lodges that provide skiers with food, drink, and down-filled beds. Europeans call it the ski safari, because while the downhill skiing is some of the best on the planet, half the fun comes from rifugio-hopping. It's like big-game hunting,

except that you're scouting out smoked venison and Grana Padano, regional grappas, and downhills unlike anything we have in the States.

You can schlep your belongings in a backpack every day or hire a guide to haul your luggage from hut to hut (*from \$120 per day; dolomitmountains.com*), freeing you up to ski unencumbered. Lifts connect most valleys within and between ski areas, and for those more difficult to reach, the Superski bus line (*dolomitisuperski.com*) stops at every village with a chairlift — usually just a five- or 10-minute ride away. Still, some places require more creative methods of transport: At the end of a run in the Cortina d'Ampezzo area, two pairs of Clydesdales wait to tow you and other skiers across a flat path to the closest bus stop.

Best Run TOFANE

The women's Alpine World Cup takes place here every year on a demanding run called Olympia of the Tofane. Besides Olympia, red and black slopes abound in the area, which is encircled by towering peaks and sweeping views of Cortina, a charming village nestled in the Ampezzana Valley below (*dolomiti.org*).

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM LEFT: PATTIUCO/PHOTO; GUSEPE/GETTY IMAGES; MAP: HASAM HUSSEIN



A late-afternoon snack at *Ristoro Belvedere*, in the shadow of Monte Civetta



The best way to plan your course is to take it one day at a time, focusing on one or two ski areas, breaking the runs up with lunches and afternoon drinks at mountainside rifugi. If you want to hit all 12 ski areas, it will take about a week, but we can get you started with this three-day plan.

DAY ONE
A SKI CAROUSEL AND HOMEMADE GRAPPA
The Alta Badia ski area

Start on the Sellaronda circuit, a 25-mile loop that circles a massive chunk of the Dolomites called Sella and has every type of run you could dream of. There's no need to pack your things, as the loop will take all day and bring you back to where you began. Like the rest of the Dolomiti Superski area, the route is almost entirely linked by lifts and easy to navigate — it's like a giant carousel that connects the region's four valleys. From the San Cassiano village lift, begin on five easy downhill runs spread among five lifts — 10 miles total. These gentle groomers let you focus on the views and take in your first impressions of the craggy, colossal range — 360 degrees of 270-million-year-old limestone bluffs and spires — as you make your way to Passo Campolongo. Travel clockwise along the circuit until you hit Passo Pordoi. Take the cable car to the top of the 9,500-foot Pordoi, one of Sella's more prominent plateaus, for a panorama of the valley, and warm up with a cappuccino.

After taking the cable car back down (there's no safe ski route), ski about 45 minutes to Passo Gardena, where you'll find the Jimmy Hut (jimmyhuetto.com), just in time for lunch. Lounge on the patio, and dry off from a long morning of steady downhills

with homemade grappa and one of the best views of the rugged Sella group. Inside, you'll find simple wooden furniture, a Germanic vibe, and Michelin-starred cuisine that includes caramelized speck over potatoes, a minor miracle found only here.

From Jimmy, continue by following the trails and ski lifts about an hour to Ütia de Bioch (fornata.it), near the nature parks Puez Odle and Fanes-Sennes-Braies and one of the most spectacular stops on the trip. Order a warm Bombardino, a drink made from brandy, cream, and an egg liqueur called *vov*, then take your final turns down the mountain to complete the circle before sunset. Overnight at the Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa ([starting at \\$540; rosalpina.it](http://rosalpina.it)), which has been run by the Pizzinini family for 70 years. Don't let the traditional Germanic exterior fool you: It's pure contemporary indulgence with sleek fireplaces and oversize tubs inside.

DAY TWO
THE QUEEN OF THE DOLOMITES AND MORE KILLER DOWNHILLS
The Arabba, Marmolada, Val di Fassa, and Carezza ski areas

From Rosa Alpina, walk to the San Cassiano lift and ski onto the Sellaronda, heading

Best View
RIFUGIO LAGAZUOI
 Perched on the 9,000-foot Mount Lagazuoi, this rifugio showcases views of the densest cluster of peaks in the Dolomites — jagged edges and stair-step profiles mixed with ledges and plateaus that seem almost close enough to touch. Access it via a short hike from the Lagazuoi cable car (rifugiolagazuoi.com).

clockwise, but this time follow the signs toward Arabba, a picturesque alpine village marked by a church from the 1600s. From here, it's a quick, pleasant walk across town to the Padon 1 chairlift. Ski down a long, sweeping valley to the Malga Ciapela cable car to hitch a ride to one of the highest mountains in the Dolomites, the 10,965-foot Marmolada glacier. Angle for a spot near the window — away from the 70 or so other passengers, most reeking of perspired garlic and stale wine — for a vertigo-inducing panorama of rocky snowfields beneath your feet. Your lungs will need all the oxygen they can get once you emerge on top of Marmolada — the Queen of the Dolomites — and are confronted with the Bellunese, the longest, most breathtaking run in the region. You'll want to stop periodically to take in the constantly changing views and get your legs back.

To recover from the 7.5-mile descent, hop onto the Superski bus at the base of Marmolada and ride to the village of Canazei in Val di Fassa, a valley with 125 miles of gentle slopes. Ski a series of fun rollers over to the village of Pozza di Fassa for a late-afternoon lunch at La Soldanella (39-0462-763389), where you'll find a ski rack outside, a quaint wood-paneled interior, and some of the best pasta in the valley. Our favorite is anything with the pizzoccheri, a short, flat ribbon pasta made mostly of buckwheat flour that's native to the region.

The Superski bus stops just outside the restaurant, and a 15-minute ride takes you to the off-the-beaten-path Passo San Pelleggrino. End your ski day here, where only a few lifts break up the snowy landscape and the waning sun lights up the rugged rock faces to a pinkish hue. From the base of San

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for a dip.



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NOTEBOOK

Pellegrino, it's a five-minute snowcat ride (arrange transport in advance with the rifugio) to the beautifully remote Rifugio Fuciade (\$100; fuciade.it), which offers four bedrooms with private bathrooms (not a given in every rifugio) and a small, family-run restaurant on the main level. The owner's wife serves a five-course meal built around regional meats — like smoked venison fillet served with grilled zucchini — that will keep you busy until bedtime.

DAY THREE HALFPIPES AND ICE BARS

The Civetta ski area

From Fuciade, snowcat back down to the base of San Pellegrino, then catch the bus to the Civetta area, in the southeast corner of the Dolomites. With three valleys, nearly 20 rifugio, five ski schools, two terrain parks (yes, there are snowboarders in the Dolomites), three kids' areas, and Nordic trails for cross-country skiers, you'll need the whole day here. Because of its tree-lined runs, Civetta's landscape is reminiscent of resorts in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Start in the village of Alleghe, where the cable car takes you all the way up Monte Civetta, the climax of a long, broken ridge that looks like gnarled teeth and — at 10,550 feet — rivals Marmolada.

For lunch, try the laid-back and friendly Ristoro Belvedere (ristorobelvedere.it), located just off the Belvedere lift. Set high above the valley, this rowdy restaurant and rifugio has a self-serve buffet featuring the local favorite, a sunny-side-up egg with speck over potatoes, plus an outdoor ice bar famous for its house-made grappa and a grill to fire up cheeseburgers. The owner, Lio Torre, gets live music here as often as he can, serves his house grappa free of charge, and doesn't seem to mind that everyone leaves their skis scattered on the ground.

With a light buzz, take it easy after lunch. Ski an hour down a gentle slope into the village of Santa Fosca, and board the ski bus to Passo Giau. Take the lift up to Cinque Torri, and ski down to Albergo Alpino Passo Giau (\$130-\$160; passogiau.it), or hitch a ride — a winding five-minute drive — directly from Passo Giau. Make sure to get there in time to see the sunset: Your bedroom balcony is west-facing and the sheer, V-shaped cliff behind the hut acts as a massive projection screen for the setting sun. After a shower, make your way down to the bar for an *aperitivo* of perfectly cured prosciutto and cham-

Taking a quick ride to the slopes from Rifugio Fuciade



pagne with Igor Valleferro, the owner. A gearhead (the rifugio is popular with both cyclists and motorcyclists in the summer), Valleferro has a half-dozen immaculate antique cycles displayed throughout the common areas, the metal and chrome providing a smart contrast to the old-world wood and stone decor. Dinner involves the whole Valleferro family: Igor's father, Diego, cooks it (he's partial to pork loin), and it's served by his mother, Claudia. With the wine flowing, the meal usually lasts well into the night. When you wake up the next morning, it's a 10-minute off-piste descent to Passo Giau, the ideal place to begin exploring Cortina d'Ampezzo and start planning your next ski safari. ■

Best Food RIFUGIO AVERAU

The views of Civetta and Marmolada would normally overshadow the cuisine, except that you can smell the homemade pasta sauces wafting from this rifugio long before you take your seat. Specialties include *casunziei*, a ravioli filled with beets, herbs, and cinnamon. It's close to the Giau lift (+39 0436 4660).



HOW TO GET THERE

It's best to fly into Innsbruck or Venice. Innsbruck is a little closer, but Venice has a shuttle that runs to the Dolomites' major cities (arvo.it). The cost for the three-hour trip (about \$15) is considerably less than renting a car for the two-hour drive from Innsbruck. You can also arrange for a private car (\$400; avis.at) from Innsbruck.