



The iconic pink
spires of the Dolomiti
basking under the
Italian sun.

A Moveable Mountain Feast

IN THE DOLOMITES, EATING AND LIVING *LA DOLCE VITA*

BY LESLIE WOIT



Photos: Courtesy of Dolomite Mountains by Milo Zaneccchia



I AM ON “SKI-FARI”—A MOVEABLE MOUNTAIN FEAST THROUGH THE SOUTH TYROL

Wearing the softest cashmere sweater on earth and a wide grin, Stefano Barbini hops in his car to lead the way.

The mountain is steep. The road is narrow. But we’ve seen *The Italian Job*, so following this guy is easy. Not least of all, the paint job on his Land Rover is a lurid white-and-black zebra pattern, an exact replica of the Roberto Cavalli rug that lies on the floor of his Roman villa. “It’s the perfect anti-theft device,” he laughs. “Who would steal this thing?”

Viva Italia, where a blinged-out four-wheel drive with a snorkel is just one more decadent detail. I am on “ski-fari” after all—a moveable mountain feast through the South Tyrol, Italy’s northernmost province—tailored by experts at a tour company called Dolomite Mountains. I’ve opted for peripatetic splendor by riding a combination of skis, gondolas, snowcats, and cars. My mountain guide and I will crisscross the stunning coral-laced terrain of Alta Badia, skiing and eating our way to the door of a different spectacular hotel or atmospheric refuge each night. The true magic: luggage is transported as we ski.

Our adventure begins in cashmere-wrapped San Cassiano, population 859. Peek through the windows of its single pedestrian street: Fragrant bread rolls, rows of buttery leather boots, and two well-polished Michelin stars. Those tiny symbols signal our sparkling arrival at the Hotel Rosa Alpina, an address as legendary as it is understated. As the iconic Dolomiti pink spires shimmer in the near distance, we are within a fork-stab of the St. Hubertus restaurant, a cork pull away from a cellar full of top South Tyrolean wines, and a few slipper-padded steps from the award-stealing Daniela Steiner spa. This is the *vita*.

At 9 a.m., my guide Luca Gasparini is already dressed for skiing. Following breakfast introductions, I am soon carrying my second strong frothy cappuccino upstairs—too good to

waste—to hurriedly slip into my ski gear. Hailing from Verona, Luca chucked his profession as an electrical engineer to qualify as a mountain guide in 1993. He wanted to spend his life exploring the mountains he loves. He’s never looked back.

Soon, we’re both looking down. Way down.

Luca teed up our options: First was to ski one of the steep, iconic couloirs that lace the outer faces of the Sella Ronda circuit while cautioning that the tricky snow could make it a challenge. Having recently skied a similar chute, Alta Badia’s notorious Val Mezdi, and lived to embellish the tale, I opted for Luca’s less adrenaline-addled choice: a short climb on skins above Piz Boe aiming for the soft, untracked powder below—an easy pace with awesome scenery. “And this way,” says Luca, “we can take our time.”

Time. High among Crayola-like pastel peaks, we’re virtually travelling through eons. A million years ago, the Dolomites were a Talking Head’s dreamscape: craggy coral reefs at the bottom of an extinct ocean. Today, Sass de Forcia is a limestone tower nearly 9,800 feet above sea level. We halt steps from its edge—a straight line down that could make a geometry teacher’s eyes water. Far, far below, a two-lane alpine road snakes like a thin strip of black licorice. Tiny cars look like crumbs rolling around the bottom of a Cheerios box. Then comes the most surreal diversion of the season. On hands and knees, we hunt for fossils—relics of the sea life that dominated when these Dolomites were under water.

Fossil treasures pocketed, we are weighted for the trip down. We angle between hulking walls as shimmering snow sprays like water from a fountain at Trump Tower. Skiing through this Manhattan of mountains, we stop to gaze in awe at one particularly vicious, needle-thin slit. As if conjured like helmeted *Alice in Wonderland* rabbits, out pop two of Luca’s friends. I am introduced to Mauro Dorigatti, one of South Tyrol’s finest rock climbers. Mauro enquires

SLOPE FOOD

From fine Italian wine to pastries, pork, and soft pillows of perfect pasta, feasting in the Dolomiti is an essential aspect of the gourmet ski-fari.



Photo: Mattias Fredriksson



Photo: Mattias Fredriksson



Photo: Mattias Fredriksson



Photo: San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge

A MILLION YEARS AGO, THE DOLOMITES WERE A TALKING HEAD'S DREAMSCAPE: CRAGGY CORAL REEFS AT THE BOTTOM OF AN EXTINCT OCEAN.

MANY SPLENDORED THING

With more than 300 miles of pistes, views of Northern Italy on high are plentiful and powerful.

about our route and Luca explains in Italiano rapido. Having chosen the easy path, I brace myself for a pro's rebuff. Instead, he smiles and nods with approval: "*Bella, ci bella.*"

No matter what your level or aptitude for extremes, this UNESCO-protected playground is a many splendored thing.

"Sometimes I take the last cable car at 4:30 p.m. to be up there on my own," Luca tells me after skiing. We've stopped in St. Vigilius for a Hugo, the refreshing local tippie made of Prosecco, elderflower, and fresh mint on ice. "The sunset sky turns dark red and for a few minutes it's all very silent...and then I go full speed down."

With more than 300 miles of pistes, it can be hard to know where to start. For some, riding the Sella Ronda circuit is the ideal familiarization exercise. The well-signposted route circumnavigates the landmark massif in a 16-mile loop. Or, 25 miles if you count the lifts up, as well you may; a largely mechanical exercise since there's as much riding up as sliding down. But it's especially satisfying if you follow the orange signs clockwise, the sunnier path, and enjoy a Bombardino break (creamy egg liqueur called Vov with hot rum and whipped cream) along the way. These mountains are their own reward. And the food's not bad either.

"For many people here, their only decisions are where to ski and where to have lunch," observes Agustina Lagos-Marmol, founder of the tour operation, Dolomite Mountains. "And not in that order." It's a tempting conundrum in the land of calories aplenty. From hot chocolate you can stand a spoon in, to lush pillows of pumpkin and sage ravioli, trails and hamlets are liberally sprinkled with gastronomic restaurants and cozy huts. One of the delights of Alta Badia skiing is the celebrity chef-blessed "Slope Food" tour, part of the Gourmet Skisafari dining program. Ski from one *rifugio* to another, savoring specially designed dishes by some of Europe's

finest Michelin-starred chefs. Slope Food is so popular, the tourist office publishes a piste map for restaurants.

"*Per travarti, devi perderti.*"

"To be found you have to be lost," Luca tells me.

One moment I'm at the foot of the Sassolungo, lingering over a huge platter of lobster spaghetti washed down with lashings of Pinot Grigio at Rifugio Comici (one of my favorites, its deep red walls are dotted with black-and-white photos of the likes of Michael Schumacher, Prince Albert, and glamorous Italian film stars). The next, I am sitting cross-legged on top of my backpack mired in a cloud of pea-soup fog and surrounded by polenta soft snow, eating crusty bread and cheese.

Even a simple picnic in this part of the world is no dereliction of a gourmand's duty. We spent the night at the remote Rifugio Lavarella hut in the heart of Fanes-Sennes-Braies Natural Park somewhere between the Marebbe Valley, Val Badia, and Cortina d'Ampezzo. At this modest hotel (shared showers, twin-bunk rooms), hearty, simple cooking is a treat. Guests ride up in a snowcat and spend the day ski-touring lost, untouched mountains—rustic, yes, but with a difference.

"For me, it's a luxury to be up here in the middle of wild nature," says Luca. "Without a sound."

Though practically whispering, his voice bounces like crystal off the rock. This 650-foot-high monolith had emerged suddenly before us like an apparition, eerie clouds shifting in and out in the blink of an eye. We left at 8 a.m. to skin up to Cime Redi at 9,242 feet—earning our turns—and arrived at the top at high noon. Actually, I'm fibbing. We quit 150 feet from the top because I stopped dead like a mule. Still, I'd like to think there's something capricious about turning around just before the peak. Perhaps it means I am bound to return.





"As he showed me a photo of his kinsmen making their magical journey through the most beautiful mountains in the world, his eyes welled with tears—and so did mine."

Next I am led to our final Dolomiti destination—with a little help from the zebra-patterned Land Rover, of course.

Back in the 16th century, San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge was the hunting retreat of the Bishop of Brixen. Come the 21st, the reincarnated estate is a luxurious pine-lined hideaway, a labor of love by Stefano and Giorgia Barbini.

In one flamboyant life-changing moment, the CEO of Escada and granddaughter of the Brioni fashion empire family bid *arrivederci* to haute couture, moved themselves and their children to the mountains, and committed to painstaking renovation and sumptuous decoration of the 10-guest lodge. Giorgia spent the better part of two years sourcing and selecting the finest fabrics for curtains, hand-woven Italian bed linens, elegant silver and porcelain. Her flawless cooking, one imagines, was already well in place. She learned cooking from Grandmother Brioni and says all the women in the family were very competitive about it. Renaissance man Stefano, a self-taught carpenter, put his hands to good work; among many projects, is a beautiful bedstead built from 200-year-old beams using an awl and a metal detector. “I had to extract the ancient iron nails like a surgeon,” he explains excitedly.

Factor in a host of mod-cons, including a spectacular panoramic outdoor whirlpool big enough for swimming laps, full indoor spa, and a private helipad, and the effect is sumptuous functionality oozing gorgeous style.

Oh, and did I mention the PGA Jim-Kirby-designed 18-hole winterized golf course?

“*Veni*, I want to show you the two sexiest things in the place,” says Stefano. I imagine we’re heading straight for the bijou course; its three compact tees connect to an ingenious six-hole green (overshoot it and your ball sails to the valley floor). But no, Stefano aims for the ski room built in a traditional *stube* style, smelling of warm pine. His second surprise: The old goat stall, hand-chipped to reveal its original stonework, reveals the perfect setting for his showcase wine cellar some 800 bottles strong. *Apero* hour is up on us.

“Only one percent of Italian wine comes from the Südtirol,” Stefano explains, “but its quality is among the best.” Alongside a glass of excellent Lagrein, we taste a 20-month aged speck sliced on his shiny red 70-year-old Berker (speck slicers turn out to be the ultimate South Tyrolean man toys: Hugo Pizzinini of the Rosa Alpina has more than a dozen in his collection).

The wine, the cuisine, the *terroir*...early on in the tourism wave, South Tyrol strategically fused a cache of high quality goods with its unique culture, which—by fanciful fate of war—blends Italian *gusto* and Ladin tradition with Austrian-Teutonic efficiency. The region should be a Harvard case study.

In their new incarnation as innkeepers, Giorgia and Stefano are the ultimate luxury ‘powder’ couple, poster children for their adopted province. “Everything we do, we do it with passion,” Stefano declares. His enthusiasm for the mountain good life is infectious. He claims to have converted that larger-than-life mountain man, Reinhold Messner (a native South Tyrolean who was the first to summit all 14 of the world’s 8,000-meter peaks without supplemental oxygen) to that most decadent pastime: golf. Stefano insists Messner enjoyed his go on the course, yet

diplomatically; he’s tight-lipped on how good of a shot he is.

Me, I’m a bad shot but I know a good thing when I see it. When you visit these magnificent mountains of the South Tyrol—and visit you must—be sure to pack an appetite for food, wine—and for life itself. After one more night in the Rosa Alpina, I could scarcely pull myself away from being caught up in one of Hugo Pizzinini’s tales.

Each year, Pizzinini explained, the men from the tiny village of San Cassiano embark on a pilgrimage to a distant chapel. By tradition, they go on foot and are obliged to beg for a bed along the way. As he showed me a photo of his kinsmen making their magical journey through the most beautiful mountains in the world, his eyes welled with tears—and so did mine. As my luggage was whisked away one last time, we shook hands and I made a pact. I’ll be back... even if I have to beg. **S**

WWW.DOLOMITEMOUNTAINS.COM



San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge

Photo: San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge