

The Mighty Dolomites

Don't wait until summer – Italy's Dolomite mountains are equally as impressive for a ski trip, says **Rosie Fuller**

“**Y**ou think you've seen mountain scenery, and then you see the Dolomites.”

says Claire Leigh, who works for ski tour operator Scott Dunn. “This is where I send people when they're looking for something a bit different.”

A bit different is an understatement. We're surrounded by huge cliffs, soaring rock faces and lumps of rock of monstrous proportions. All mountain scenery is good, but this is dramatic as well as stunning.

In northern Italy, the Dolomite mountains are in the Southern Alps. They aren't as high as other parts of the Alps, but they make up for it by being so spectacular, with breathtaking limestone formations.

The skiing is a bit different too. A ski pass called Dolomite Superski gives access to 12 resorts, offering 1,200km of runs between them. The best way to explore is on a ski safari, linking a selection of the resorts and staying in huts (or *rifugios*) up in the mountains. I've come on an early season trip with Claire and other tour operators who are re-creating the experience. We're travelling with the company Dolomite Mountains, which offers ski safaris from four up to 10 days. You can choose from a self-guided trip staying in mountain huts, to gourmet holidays focusing on fine dining and wine. Not that you'll struggle to eat well whatever you choose. This is Italy.

Unfortunately, our early season gamble hasn't paid off, with the Alps suffering from a poor start to the 2014/2015 season. There isn't enough snow for the mountain huts to have opened. I can't feel too disappointed when the alternative is another night in a spa hotel in the upmarket town of Cortina d'Ampezzo.

'The Sellarondaski tour is described as a merry-go-round of pistes and lifts around the impressive Sella Massif'

Cortina is where we do our first day of skiing, catching a lift first up to the Toiana area of the resort. “Ten years ago this cable car was old. Now it's retro,” jokes mountain guide Marco Spazzini. I wouldn't normally use a guide for on-piste skiing, but with so many resorts to link together, and over 300 mountain huts offering accommodation, it's really helpful. Marco is full of interesting information about the region too.

Even though there isn't much snow the pistes are in good condition, it's sunny and not much beats the feeling of those first few runs of the season. After lunch we take a short transfer to the other side of town so we can ski the Fadoria area of the resort.

We'd planned to spend the night in the Rifugio Averau, close to the Cinque Torres rocks, and then ski down to the Falzarego pass after breakfast for

a transfer to the resort of Alia Badia.

Instead we travel north to the town of Brunico (Brunick in German) and a ski area called Kronplatz. This is the northernmost resort of the 12 covered by the Dolomite Superski pass and it feels more Austrian than Italian – the area used to be part of Austria, until World War I. We also learn that the Dolomite region is home to an ethnic group called the Ladin people, who speak their own language.

In terms of scenery, Kronplatz feels different too – it's more typical of the Alps, with mountains rolling in to the distance rather than the dramatic up-close rock of the Dolomites. After we've enjoyed its wide open pistes, we drink mulled wine in Brunico below.

Our final nights are spent in the village of San Cassiano in the Alia Badia valley, which is a good base if you want to do the Sellaronda ski tour, described as a ‘merry-go-round’ of pistes and lifts around the impressive Sella Massif. The tour is suitable for intermediate skiers and takes five or six hours, covering about 25 miles in total (including lift travel and slopes). It connects four Ladin valleys and four Dolomite passes, so you get to see a large part of the area in one day. And the route is easy to follow, with signs in orange if you're going clockwise, green if you're going anti-clockwise.

Despite the conditions we've got a feel for the spectacular skiing in the Dolomites, and I'm determined to come back to stay in a mountain *rifugio* for the real ‘safari’ experience. Even if it does mean forgoing the spa... **✎**



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Get there

Fly to Venice – I went from Gatwick with EasyJet. Also try BA, which might not be much more expensive. Cortina is about two hours by car or bus from Venice – see www.cortinaexpress.it for buses, which cost about €55. Or if you want to start in the north of the Dolomites, you can fly to Innsbruck in Austria and take the train. See www.oebb.at.



Stay there

In Cortina we stayed in the four-star Faloria Mountain Spa Resort (www.parkhotelfaloria.it) which has a swimming pool, spa and delicious restaurant. Double rooms start from about €135. In San Cassiano in Alta Badia we stayed in the five-star Rosa Alpina hotel, again with spa and pool, and both a Michelin-starred restaurant and a more informal wine bar and grill. See www.rosalpina.it; double rooms start at €450 a night.

There are a huge number of mountain huts to choose from, with varying levels of

comfort. You'll often be in dormitory-style accommodation (pack earplugs) and they generally serve a hearty dinner and breakfast. We were planning to stay in Averau Refuge (www.dolomiti.org) with views of the Marmolada, the highest peak in the range. It has dormitories starting at €60 a night half board and smaller rooms starting at €85 a night half board.



Tour operator

I travelled with Dolomite Mountains which offers a variety of ski safaris in the Dolomites, available as group departure dates or private departure dates. Trips range from four to 10 days, and can be luxury, gourmet, guided or self-guided. See www.dolomitmountains.com.



Ski level

There is skiing for all levels in the Dolomites, from beginners' runs to serious off-piste, but to do a hut to hut safari you should be at least an intermediate level. Despite being called a ski tour, the Sellaronda is on-piste and suitable for intermediate skiers.

