

VIVA ITALIA! THE DOLOMITES

Life

The Good

Besides the Chianti, cannolis and jawdrop scenery, the Dolomites offer the largest interconnected ski playground in the entire world. By David Goodman

It was dumping in the Dolomites. Snowing so hard it sounded like rain spraying against the windows of my hotel in the Alta Badia ski valley. On most ski days this would be cause to rejoice, but my Italian host, Gerhard Vanzi, a balding, bookish young man, looked forlorn as we prepared to head up the lift. We had planned to ski the Sella Ronda, a kind of Italian ski pilgrimage that involves circumnavigating the Sella Mountains, an enormous rocky massif in the Dolomites of northern Italy. The tour, which covers 17 miles of intermediate skiing and is considered a rite of passage for Italian skiers, was nicknamed the "wait arounda" by locals for the seemingly endless amount of lift riding that's required to complete it. But while the skiing may be tame, the views are world-class. At least when you can see past your hands.

Today, visibility through the blowing snow was about 100 yards. Gerhard was aiming his pole into the mist and describing for me the views that I would be seeing were it not for the whiteout. By our third lift ride, he finally conceded the obvious: "I think is not good day for Sella Ronda."

Indeed, skiing the scenic Sella Ronda in a whiteout is akin to walking through Florence's

famous Uffizi Gallery in the dark: It's pointless. I suggested that an acceptable alternative would be to ski powder all day. But Gerhard countered by proposing that we indulge in a great Italian ski ritual: not skiing at all. More precisely, he suggested that we stop for lunch at a mountaintop *rifugio*, where meals range from a mere *panini* (sandwich) to a five-course gourmet spread.

With untracked powder piling up, it seemed obvious to me that we should make a quick pit stop for lunch and promptly resume plundering the freshies. Gerhard smiled in a piteous way that implied "you really don't get it, do you?" He knew what I was only beginning to understand: There is no such thing as a "quick" meal in this part of the world. We settled into our mountaintop perch and several waiters began delivering course upon course of food and drink.

Sometime after the second bottle of Chianti I began to see the light. I noticed the boisterous good time the nearby Italians and Germans were having over their generous meals. What struck me most was that no one seemed to be in a hurry. In fact, lingering over the meal is as honored a tradition here as skiing. Among these skiers the mountains



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are a place of respite, not a place to go fast. Even on a powder day. I chewed on this notion along with my cannoli.

Called “the most beautiful mountains in the world” by legendary mountaineer and native son Reinhold Messner, the Dolomites stretch across northeastern Italy, straddling the Austrian border. The landscape is right out of Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*: Enormous rock towers, spires and precipitous cliffs scrape against the sky for as far as one can see, conjuring up images of fairy castles, nymphs and trolls. This jawdrop skyline so impressed Sylvester Stallone that he insisted that these mountains be the setting for his extravagant mountaineering thriller, *Cliffhanger*.

From afar, the Dolomites, rising more than 10,000 feet, appear to be impenetrable. But as you drive the deep serpentine valley roads in winter, one activity is ubiquitous: skiing. In fact, this fantastical landscape is home to the largest interconnected ski trail network in the world: 780 miles of slopes and 464 lifts, made all the more accessible by the Dolomiti Superski pass, a single lift ticket honored at 44 resorts.

But surprisingly, the ski terrain is relatively docile: 60 percent of the trails in the Dolomites are rated intermediate, with another 30 percent classified as novice. Most of

the lifts service the moderate slopes that lie at the bottom of the rocky cliffs. Few Italians seem interested in testing themselves on the steep couloirs, or *canaloni*, that plunge down from the summits; such daredevil pursuits seem contrary to the Dolomitic ethos that the mountains exist for relaxation and pleasure. As the snow piled up on the window sill, Gerhard finally stood up to go. “Had enough?” he inquired.

“Actually,” I replied, “how about splitting another bottle of vino?” Gerhard settled back into his chair with an approving smile.

The Dolomites are as unique culturally

as they are physically. The 40,000 residents speak Ladin (or Romansh), a Romance language used in select parts of the Alps by Italians, Austrians and Swiss. The mountain range, which is only 60 miles wide by 65 miles long, harbors strong Austrian influences. Indeed, much of the Dolomites were part of Austria until the end of World War I when the Treaty of St. Germain awarded the region to Italy.

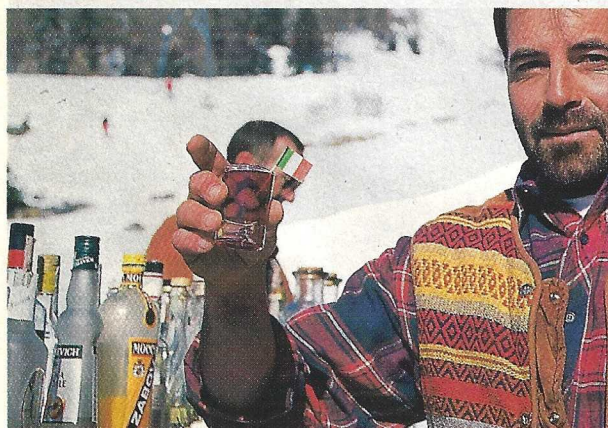
The result of this multicultural influence is that Dolomite towns often have strikingly different flavors. The ski areas of Cortina, Arabba and Val di Fassa are primarily Italian in language and custom; Val Gardena, Alta Badia and Kronplatz have a decidedly Austrian bent. In the course of a day, skiers can traverse back and forth between these cultures, having beer and knockwurst and hearing German at lunch in one village and concluding with wine and pasta and listening to Italian in another. Some traditions, however, are shared by all Dolomite skiers, as I discovered on my first gondola ride.

“*Spingere! Spingere!*” (Push!) shouted the crowd at Val Gardena as it surged toward the gondola. This was no place for the prudish American notion of “personal space.” For the Italians, Germans and Austrians who ski here, lift-line jockeying is a contact sport. It’s not considered rude to slamdance onto the lift—it’s all part of the fun.

Blue skies returned by my second day

and the view from the top of Val Gardena, the site of an annual World Cup downhill event, was spectacular. The sheer pale yellow rock walls of the Sella Mountains towered over the trails below. As I turned to the skiing terrain, I was surprised to find miles of untracked open slopes.

“You want to ski *that*?” asked Gerhard in amazement, pointing to a liftline run smothered by an 8-inch blanket of new snow. Like most Dolomite skiers, Gerhard, the marketing director for Dolomiti Superski, was evidently allergic



(Above) While some Dolomite resorts have an Austrian flavor, Arabba is decidedly Italian. The drink of choice is grappa, a fruit liqueur. (Right) This chapel commemorates World War I mountain troops killed in avalanches. (Far right) The Lagazuoi ski route is a popular way to go.



to powder, far preferring the manicured *pista*. As I floated blissfully down the liftline trail, passengers overhead pointed and giggled at the “crazy” powder skier below.

After several more leisurely powder runs, we found ourselves on the sidewalks of the quaint mountain town of Selva. Houses with scrolled Tyrolean woodwork dotted the valley floor and the main street was tightly packed with cafes and shops. Skiers simply stepped out of their skis and onto the streets, transitioning effortlessly from skiing to shopping or dining.

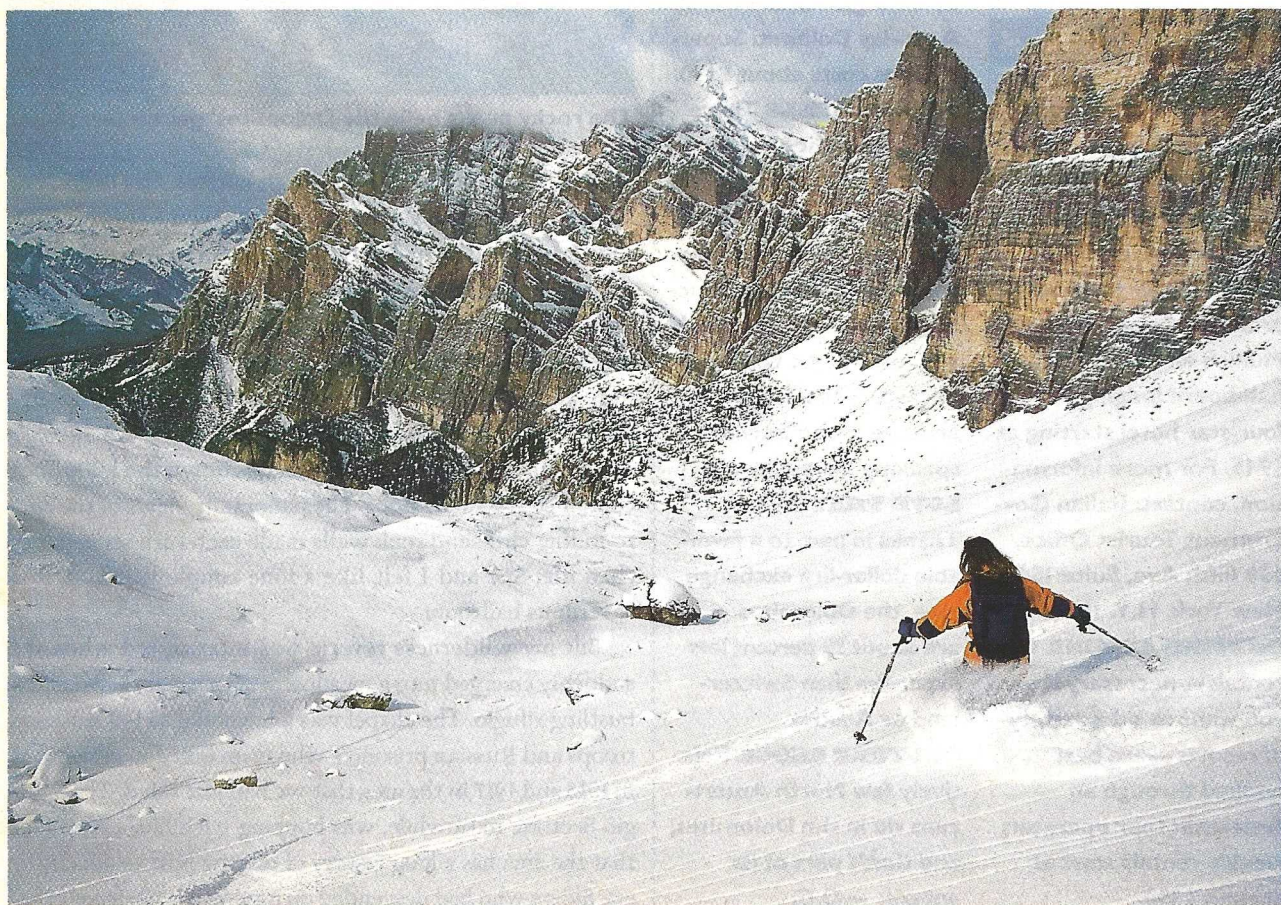
After two days of pleasant, genteel skiing, my eyes wandered to the wilder reaches of these mountains and I wondered what it would be like to ski the steeper couloirs that tumbled down from the peaks. For that, I would have to find a guide who could lead me through the off-*pista* labyrinth.

I soon found myself in the company of Marcello Cominetti and Luis Kostner, who sped down the groomed *pista* of Lagazuoi Mountain toward the ski area boundary. Marcello wore the distinctive red jacket of a *guida alpina*, a member of the elite fraternity of Italian mountain guides, and Luis was a local ski instructor. I was joined by my wife, Sue, who had just arrived in Italy (to the relief of my con-

cerned hoteliers, who were horrified that anyone would travel solo on a Dolomite ski holiday). Where the *pista* turned sharply left we continued straight, flying off the groomed snow into miles of untracked powder. Within seconds, the ski area disappeared behind us.

Marcello, a jovial, dashing mountaineer, stopped and pointed across the valley to a wall of stone that rose several thousand feet. “This is Tofane,” he murmured respectfully, pointing to the caves and holes in the side of the mountain. “These caves were made by the Alpini” (the Italian mountain troops) during World War I. When Italy declared war on Austria in 1915, these mountains became a savage battleground between the Alpini and the Kaiserjager, the Austrian mountain troops. Soldiers tunneled through the mountains to attack enemy positions, and entire mountain faces were blown up in efforts to rout out opponents. The casualties were staggering: In the harsh winter of 1916, when a record 33 feet of snow fell, more than 10,000 men were killed in avalanches.

As we skied higher into the mountains, we encountered more tunnels and war ruins. We briefly took shelter in one of the caves to suit up for our descent of the Forcella Fanis, a steep canaloni that drops onto the popular Lagazuoi ski



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GATEWAY AIRPORTS

The Dolomites are about a three-hour drive north from Milan or Venice, Italy, and about three hours south of Munich, Germany. Alitalia (800-223-5730) flies direct to Milan from several major U.S. cities and Toronto.

BOOKING IN Many U.S. tour operators offer ski packages to the Dolomites. Central Holiday Tours (800-935-5000) offers a Val di Fassa package that includes round-trip airfare from New York, seven nights' half-board lodging in a three-star hotel and a six-day ski pass for \$1,050; packages to Cortina and

GO In January or March.

STAY HOME During the Italian school holiday period, Dec. 22-Jan. 6; and Carnival, Feb. 16-23.

BRING YOUR BERLITZ

The main languages spoken in the Dolomites are Italian, German and Ladin. English is not widely spoken except in Cortina, the most international of all Italian resorts.

YOU'LL NEVER CROSS

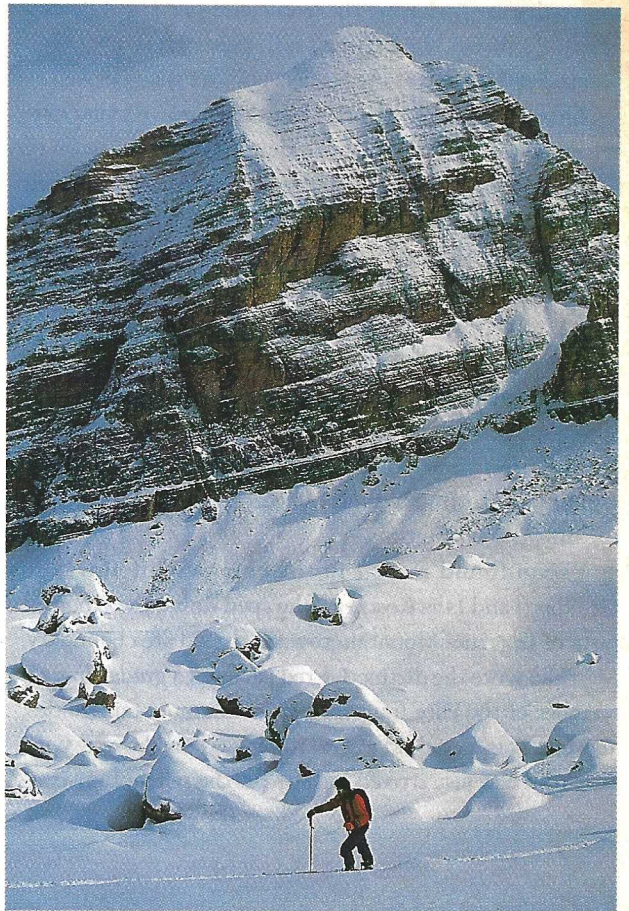
TRACKS Nearly four dozen resorts are located in the 12 Dolomite valleys; four of the valleys are interconnected: Val Gardena, Val di Fassa, Alta Badia and the Arabba Valley. These valleys comprise the largest interconnected ski region in the world. A six-day Dolomiti Superski pass costs about \$150.

SCHOOL BELLS There are 60 ski schools with 2,000 ski instructors in the Dolomiti Superski resorts. However, there's no guarantee you'll find an instructor who speaks English. If you are using a U.S. tour operator, check if it can arrange for an English-speaking instructor.

LOVE THAT LIRA

Thanks in part to a favorable dollar-lira exchange rate, the Dolomites are about 30 percent less expensive than Switzerland or Austria.

CULTURE SHOCK Relatively few North Americans ski in the Dolomites, and that's part of its appeal. —D.G.



The rocky peaks belie the Dolomites' gentle terrain.

route that would lead us back to our hotel in Alta Badia. We kicked steps down the narrow upper section of the gully until it widened enough for us to make turns. Marcello leapt in first, only to be tossed over his tips when he encountered thick sun crust. Sue had better luck. She struck an elegant pose gliding turns down this grand mountain runway, the huge rock pinnacles framing her small figure. "Bella!" exclaimed Luis. "Bellissima!"

We laced a neat set of four tracks down the 1,500-foot couloir to the valley floor. The panoramic views of the surrounding cliffs and rock walls made each turn seem larger than life; Sue and I felt like a lone couple waltzing in a cavernous ballroom.

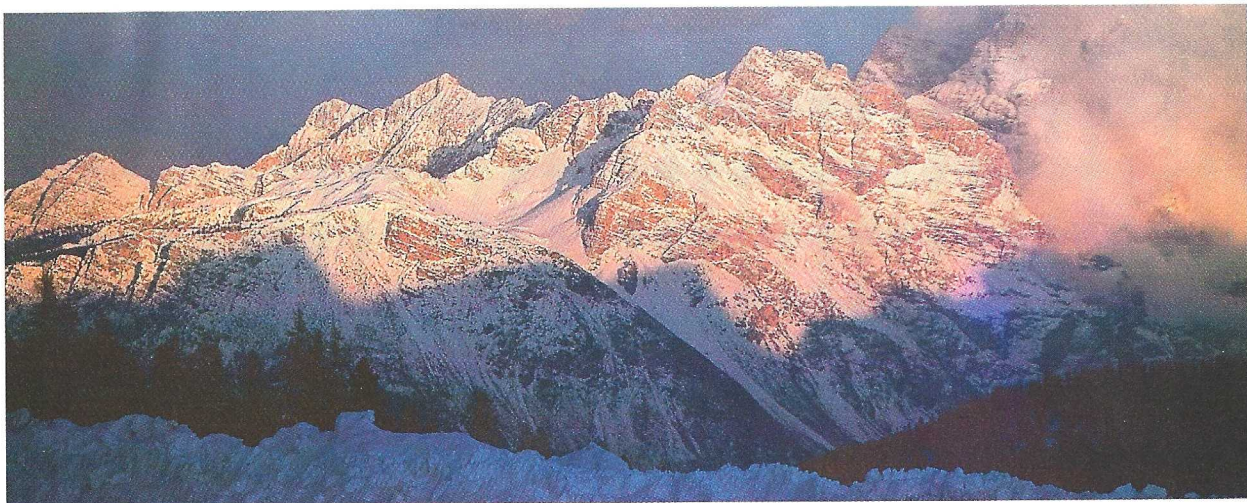
But my wilderness reverie was interrupted when we suddenly emerged into a meadow with a small chapel and a bustling rifugio. The chapel was a memorial to 140 Austrian troops and Russian prisoners who were killed in avalanches in 1916 and 1917 in the area that we had just skied. The Rifugio Scotoni, meanwhile, was hopping with life, a reminder that the area has a long history of playing host to adventurers. Skiers who had descended on groomed trails from Laga-

FAST FACTS

Madonna di Campiglio are also available. Adventures on Skis (800-628-9655) has a Val Gardena package that includes round-trip air from several East Coast cities to Munich and seven nights half-board lodging in a four-star hotel starting at \$945. For more information, contact: Italian Government Tourist Office, 630 Fifth Ave, Suite 1565, New York, N.Y. 10111.

GETTING AROUND Car rentals—necessary if you want to ski a variety of resorts—are best booked through an American tour operator; weekly rentals start at around \$300.

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zuoi were lounging and drinking beer and grappa, the popular Italian fruit liqueur. We joined the festivities and Marcello crooned an Italian love song to celebrate our perfect tour through the mountains.

Nowhere is the skier's pursuit of *la dolce vita* as honored and refined as in the Dolomites. Indeed, coming to the Dolomites just to ski would be like attending a wedding only for the service—you would be missing out on most of the fun. Here the culture of the mountains embraces far more than just sliding on snow.

It was midnight and the disco at the historic Hotel Rosalpina in San Cassiano was packed with gyrating revelers. Inside the hotel—which is known for its exotic new \$6-million “beauty farm,” a high-end health spa—the whole cultural menagerie of the Dolomites was on display. Christian Pizzinini, who directs the town's tourist office, interpreted what was happening around me. “The Germans,” he said, motioning to a blond woman in a red sweater and gold necklace, “wear bright colors. They like to come off the slopes, have an early dinner and then go to sleep early. The Italians are elegant—they wear simple colors, black and white,” he continued. “They come out for a late dinner and then party all night.”

Old cultural rivalries that once fueled a war took on curious new forms in this Dolomite nightclub. Like the Jets and Sharks jousting for position in a scene from *West Side Story*, the fair-skinned Germans and Austrians were swept aside as the Italians took the dance floor by storm.

“Vivas!” (Ladin for “cheers”), interrupted Christian, clicking his bottomless glass of grappa to mine. With that, he breezed onto the dance floor and whirled away with a smiling dark-haired beauty.

The sun was racing for the horizon as we skied toward the Val Mezdi. Dubbed the “Vallée Blanche of the Dolomites,” the Val Mezdi is a classic 4,000-foot descent that begins at Passo Pordoi—whose sheer cliffs were the backdrop for the dramatic closing scenes of *Cliffhanger*—and ends in the bustling alpine village of Corvara. Our passageway out of the mountains was invisible until we skied right up to the edge of the route. Luis Kostner, our curly-haired, bespectacled comrade who had joined us for this final descent, paused at the top.

“I think I must die!” he said, shaking his head. I looked at him with alarm and asked him what was wrong.

“This is so bea-UTI-ful,” he exclaimed, peering down at the passageway unfolding beneath us. Rock towers soared thousands of feet overhead, framing this narrow valley like giant pillars on an Italian museum. The cliffs were bathed in gold afternoon light that highlighted the dull yellows, deep reds and browns of the Dolomite rock. Slicing through these sheer rock walls was a broad white carpet that tumbled down for as far as we could see. This was an other-worldly place, an equal to epic ski runs anywhere on the planet.

It was time to descend. Long shadows were reaching across the valley floor and threatening to swallow us up if we did not make progress. We plunged downhill, swinging turns back and forth across this giant natural art gallery. It had been at least three days since the last storm, but there were still plenty of fresh lines to ski. We were all physically exhausted, but fueled by our exhilaration at being in such a place.

“Bel-LIS-simooooo!” Luis cried out as he descended, the echo reverberating off the giant rock walls. How true. You can probably still hear it today. ♦