

# Italy's best kept secret

South Tyrol: Where the Alps meet the Med

By Rachel Perry

Italy has no shortage of breathtaking destinations, but South Tyrol, a hidden corner of the north, may be its most unexpected. Here, the borders of Italy, Austria, and Switzerland collide and the lines between their cultures blur. Rustic Alpine charm meets Italian elegance in a backdrop of snow-covered peaks, wildflower-speckled meadows, deep blue lakes, and terraced vineyards.



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**Right:** Tyrol Castle, the ancestral seat of the Counts of Tyrol, stands 2,000 feet above the valley floor.



*"Whether you're looking for an adrenaline rush or a moment of peace, you'll find it amongst these mountains."*

Nicknamed the “sunny side of the Alps”, South Tyrol is bathed in 300 days of sunshine each year. You’ll want to savor its sun-soaked villages slowly as you hear the clang of cowbells from nearby pastures and see medieval castles nestled into mountainsides.

It’s known formally as Alto Adige, but most residents prefer its original German name of Südtirol, or South Tyrol—which complements North Tyrol of Austria. One of five autonomous provinces in Italy, the region boasts one of Italy’s highest qualities of life. From the active lifestyle it offers to its farm-to-table foods, it’s easy to see why. Yet, South Tyrol is not without its own controversial history.

### Adventure abounds

A central feature of South Tyrol are the dominating Dolomite Mountains. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009, the Dolomites define a whole different type of Alpine beauty. While the pinnacles tower nearly two miles above sea level, they were born beneath it: 250 million years ago the Dolomites were a sprawling

mass of corals and shells under the ocean. They emerged about 70 million years ago and now tally more than 2,000 distinct peaks.

Whether you’re looking for an adrenaline rush or a moment of peace, you’ll find it amongst these mountains. It’s one of the largest ski areas in the world with 750 miles of slopes—which will be on full display during the 2026 winter Olympics in the town of Cortina. Locals and visitors from around the world also enjoy cross-country skiing and snow shoeing during the winter. Hiking, rock climbing, and biking are popular in the summer.

Tucked in between the summits are wellness resorts fed by curative natural hot springs. These mineral-rich waters, along with the pure mountain air, are the perfect place to unplug. The quaint mountain villages aren’t so bad either. Here you can discover artisans keeping traditional handicrafts alive such as wood and leather working and basket weaving, or browse markets overflowing with cured meats and cheeses.

Though many villages appear to be from the pages of a storybook, South Tyrol wasn’t always a tranquil mountain paradise. As the favored corridor between northern and southern Europe, South Tyrol saw thousands of years of battles and conflicts unfold in its backyard. Roman legions, Germanic tribes, and medieval crusaders all held claim on the valleys at some point. There are 800 castles and ruins to show for it—a higher concentration than anywhere else in Europe.

All you have to do is look up, and you’ll find storybook citadels to explore. Perhaps the most historically significant is Tyrol Castle which sits high above the town of Merano. It served as the residence to the Counts of Tyrol until 1363 and continues to serve as a symbol for the region—in fact, Tyrol got its name from this imposing fortress.

### Italian, Austrian, or Ladin?

South Tyrol spent the majority of the last millennium under the German-speaking rule of Austria’s Habsburg Dynasty. Because of this,

it feels more like Austria in many ways than it does Italy. It was only about a century ago that Italy annexed the region, claiming control of the Southern Alps following World War I.

After the annexation, Benito Mussolini was determined to eradicate German and Austrian culture and Italianize the area. Despite German speakers outnumbering Italian speakers by nearly 10 to 1, German was forbidden in schools, courts, and public offices. Towns and even some people were forced to adopt Italian names while German inscriptions were chipped away from tombstones.

Tensions further increased in 1939 when Mussolini and Hitler agreed to give German speakers a choice—stay in South Tyrol and fully integrate into Italian culture and language or give up their ancestral homeland and emigrate to the German Reich. While this agreement was only partially upheld once the war was in full swing, it left behind a painful legacy. Nearly 75,000 people left for Germany, and those who stayed behind were branded as



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Signs in South Tyrol often include three languages: Italian, German, and Ladin.

**Left:** From challenging hikes to leisurely strolls, South Tyrol’s mountains and valleys offer quite the scenic backdrop.

**Right:** As with every region of Italy, local cuisine is driven by which vegetables are fresh and in-season, and local markets have the full rainbow on display.



Traditional South Tyrolean dumplings are made with white bread and locally produced cheese.

### Alps, Dolomites, Lombardy and Venice



Created by Steven dos Remedios, 18-time traveler from Oakland, CA

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**Right:** More than half of the wines produced in Alto Adige are white varietals, including several you'd also find in Germany: Gewurztraminer, Riesling, and Gruner Veltliner.



Because of this complicated history, many villages and towns have both an Italian and Austrian name—and sometimes a Ladin one too. Unrelated to German or Italian, this third language is the oldest of Italy's Alpine region. Today about 30,000 people keep the Ladin language and culture alive in five distinct valleys of the Dolomites. About 4% of the population identifies as Ladin while 62% of the population identifies as German or Austrian and 23% as Italian.

### North meets south in the kitchen

This amalgamation of cultures is particularly evident on the plate. The cuisine is a fusion between Italian, Alpine, and Central European specialties. It takes inspiration from the hearty, country cooking of the north and the fresh fare of the Mediterranean to the south. Pasta exists alongside sauerkraut, stews, and schnitzels—yet this juxtaposition works. In fact, South Tyroleans officially trademarked their food to ensure a certified quality in 1976, making it the first of Europe to achieve such a designation.

Humble restaurants and taverns in cobbled squares are the perfect spot to slow down and enjoy the region's cuisine. On the menu



you may find Austrian-style *knodel* (bread dumplings), *strangolapreti* (spinach and cheese gnocchi with browner butter and sage), or *casunziei* (beet-filled pasta with poppy seeds). A smoked ham known as speck is particularly popular in addition to other varieties of beef, pork, and venison. Chefs also love to incorporate apples and mushrooms into many of their meals—including authentic apple strudel.

Not unlike the rest of Italy, cheese is an essential food group in South Tyrol. Here, local cheeses are sourced from small farms where cows freely graze in serene mountain meadows. At altitudes of 2,400 to 6,000 feet above sea level, the milk has an unmatched purity that cheesemakers translate into more than 200 different types of cheese. Many are produced in limited quantities or at designated times of the year to ensure top quality.

The Alpine elevation also makes for exceptional wines. Though it's Italy's smallest wine-producing region, it's one of the most multifaceted. Thanks to its unique geographic

position and geological mix of volcanic soils and limestone, its wines—especially white wines—are exceptional.

98% of South Tyrol's wines are of *Denominazione di Origine Controllata* (DOC) qualification. This classification system in Italy guarantees a high standard as well as regulates grape varieties, maximum harvest yields, and wine aging. Wine growers are disciplined and educated through centuries of traditions passed down from one generation to the next. They also take conservation of the land seriously for use by future generations.

From finding a moment of Zen along hillside vineyards to immersing yourself in cultural festivals, adventure runs as high as the Dolomite mountaintops above you. In South Tyrol, both *gemütlichkeit* and *la dolce vita* (the good life) are right at your fingertips.

**Left:** The woodcarving tradition in Val Gardena began in the 1600s, when farm families needed a way to pass the time during the winter.

### From Milan to the Alps, Dolomites & Lombardy



Created by Saul Tave, 16-time traveler from Dunedin, FL

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