

# MOUNTAINS AND MOONSCAPES

Jack Southan takes a pick'n'mix approach to the Dolomites, on a bespoke trip combining sections of long-distance trails Alta Via 1 and 2 with day trips onto these magnificent peaks

DOLOMITES





I STOP FOR A MOMENT to stamp my feet on an exposed rock and shake off a little of the snow clogging the tread on my boots. The sun is high in the sky and is blindingly bright against the expanse of white which stretches out around me in every direction. I can't see any sign of the red painted markers which line the route ahead, and as the snow starts to fall again I have become disorientated.

I pull my map from my shirt pocket, hold my compass against it and look ahead for a reference point. A tall isolated peak stands tall to the west while a narrow, rock-strewn valley stretches out to the east. I check the contours of the map and manage to get a rough idea of my position on the snow field. I seem to have veered off the trail, following the lone footprints of what must have been a goatherd – though these prints have now been completely covered by new snowfall.

I retrace my steps until I finally spot the small red stripes on a rock in the distance, bare and grey against the sparkling white. I'm back on course and the detour has only cost me about an hour: not too bad



“Rugged rock faces rise up to the sky, the perfect juxtaposition of blue and gold”

– but there's still a long way to go before I reach my refuge for the night, located on a high plateau deep in the heart of this magnificent mountain range.

### HISTORICAL PEAKS

I'm in the north-east of Italy, trekking in the stunningly beautiful Dolomites. This is a range with a tumultuous, dramatic history. From ancient Rome to WWI, the area has been the source of great strength to some, and a thorn in the side to others. It's easy to see why – these mountains can be harsh and unforgiving, but at the same time a wonderfully fertile and hospitable paradise for walkers.

Just two weeks before this moment, as I sat at home planning my next walk, I had known very little about the Dolomites. But the more I read, the more boxes they ticked as a trekking destination. The routes



[previous spread] Trekkers take in the extraordinary view [far left] Fanes mountains [left] Lake Braise [above] Col Bechei valley

here are varied and numerous; hundreds of different trails crisscross the relatively small range of mountains, each offering a different and unique level of difficulty and drama. There really is something to suit every level of hiking experience.

As a newbie to this area, I opt to pass over route-planning responsibility to a company based right in the heart of the mountains: Holimites, a tour operator that specialises in active holidays. After a couple of days, they send me my map and an itinerary, which covers the best of the Alta Vias 1 and 2, the two main long-distance routes in the range, both roughly as challenging and diverse as the other. For parts of my trip, I'll be walking as part of a group trek, but there are also solo days.

After landing in Venice, I get a bus north towards the little town of Badia, which sits nestled among a ring of

high-topped mountains. I arrive by late afternoon, but already the sun is sinking behind the peaks, casting deep blue shadows across the valley. Although the light is low, I can already sense just how magnificent this place is, manicured green slopes backing directly on to rugged rock faces which rise up to the sky, the perfect juxtaposition of blue and gold.

That evening I sit down with my guide for the first two days of the journey and begin to mark up my map with a circling route which snakes through the mountains. After an hour or so, I fold the paper up carefully, put it back into its clear pouch, slip it into my bag and turn in for the night.

### EARLY START, HEAVY PACK

I wake early and set about packing for the trail. Holimites provides a shuttle service for bag drops to points along the route, but I've decided to carry as much as I can, so I only send on a few clothes and push the rest into my rucksack. The pack is heavy, about 18kg with my water and camera gear, but I'm feeling fresh and ready to go. After a light breakfast I meet the rest of the group and, pleasantries done, we jump in a minivan and head off towards our starting point of Lago di Braies.

Located on the northernmost border of Fanes National Park, Lake Braies is mind-blowingly atmospheric. No matter which direction you face, there seems to be some perfect photo set-up, like a digital screensaver in 4D. The iridescent blue lake shimmers in the low morning light, reflecting the lofty white mountains

### A TUMULTUOUS HISTORY

The first evidence of human settlement in the Dolomites dates back almost 9,000 years. For the next 7,000 years people began to settle and build communities in this isolated area. Then the Romans invaded and all but wiped out these tribal settlements, absorbing them into the Roman Empire.

When Rome finally fell, chaos took sway over this peaceful region as tribes from around Europe fought to hold the trade routes through the mountains between the mainland and the ocean. Bavarians, Lombards, Franks and Slavs held power over most of the South Tyrol lowlands, with the last remaining ethnic groups being forced high into the hills.

The Dolomites were invaded again by Napoleon, who brutally controlled the area, and then in 1915 the mountain range saw some of the bloodiest battles of WW1.





[above] Incredible mountain architecture above ranch on Route 11

and lush pine forest in perfect clarity. A small boathouse juts out into the water and several wooden row boats sit serenely on the still water.

The trail, which at this point is mostly populated by day-trippers and sightseers, loops around the waterline, rising and falling with the contours. It is a stunning way to start the hike and really does set an aesthetic precedent. It is an hour before we depart the water's edge, leaving behind the families and picnickers to head uphill.

The ascent is steep and tough-going: a recent landslide has sent thousands of tons of rubble and shale cascading down the valley, covering the old pathways so the ground is slippery and uneven. The sun has risen above the mountain skyline and beats intensely down on the open

ground. Already I am struggling with the pace. Too much weight on my back and too little physical preparation for this trip. I forge on as best I can and after several hours (and many breaks) we reach a mountain pass. But one last obstacle stands in the way— a steep scramble up bare rock and along a section of cliff which is bolted with via ferrata cables. From a distance these sections seem incredibly daunting, but as I make my way up and over the obstacles, adrenaline fuels my progress.

Over the pass, we look out over a barren, rocky plateau. A cool wind sweeps over this moonscape, which extends for miles into the distance. It's drastically different to the picturesque valley I have just left behind. I catch my breath for a few

minutes and then continue into this new and uncertain landscape.

The hours disappear as we head further into the heart of the mountain range. It's misty this high up and the warmth of the sun no longer holds its own against the bitterness of the wind. The way starts to twist downwards after several kilometres, cutting through dusty boulder fields and inhospitable terrain, until grey rock fades into yellow grassland once again. With each passing hour the trail brings a stunning new outlook and before I know it, we've covered some serious ground.

It is a challenging first day and although I have only been on the go for eight hours, I feel I have crossed through a dozen wildly different countries. It doesn't take long to fall asleep at the refugio.

I settle down for a bowl of goulash at the back of the lodge's dining room. The windows are beginning to steam up as the temperature outside drops with the setting sun, but just before the view is completely obscured I see snowflakes begin to fall. By the time I go to bed there is a thick blanket of white covering the landscape.

It's still dark when I leave the lodge. The air is bitingly cold but I'm aiming to make it to the top of the valley before the sun breaks – it'll be a hard push through the knee-deep snow in the pre-dawn twilight, on a path obscured by snow. But as I reach the top and turn to look behind me, I'm greeted by a paintbox of vibrant blues and greens, with brilliant white flashings and burning golds as the sunrise bursts over the mountain tops and bathes the landscape in morning light.

The view is difficult to pull myself away from, but I'm ready to discover what the day holds, so I take one last look before trudging on through the snow.

Perhaps the glare of that early morning sun went to my head. By midday, I've already been lost for several hours, negotiating my way through the snow fields, climbing down thick drifts and realising quite how unprepared I was for such challenging conditions. But as the day goes on and the snow melts, I manage to reorientate, find confidence and allow myself to relax into the pace.

I rest for 10 minutes at the crest of a particularly steep climb and look down at yet another vast expanse of land. Somehow this valley has remained largely untouched by the snowfall and instead has a warm Midwest American glow. I can see a small horse ranch in the distance; animals grazing by a cool blue river. Sandy trails crisscross the land, snaking between pine trees and low thorny shrubs. I'm astounded at the difference between these valleys.

I spend the next two days crossing similarly varied terrain: sometimes precariously icy; sometimes bone dry and dusty. Eventually I emerge from the wild side of the Dolomites and find myself once again walking through the manicured green slopes of the ski resorts. It's disorientating to hit civilisation quite so quickly, but before I know it, I'm drinking a beer outside a hotel in Badia, looking up at the mountains as if they are simply a backdrop to the town. ▀



**TREK THE DOLOMITES**

**Travel:** Fly to Venice from the UK for best access to the Dolomites, with airport pickups provided by most tour operators. EasyJet and BA fly daily to Venice Marco Polo out of Gatwick.

**Tour operator:** The author's trip was organised through Holimites ([holimites.com](http://holimites.com)) who offer a selection of predesigned guided and self-guided routes graded by difficulty to match your experience level. They provide personal maps, luggage transportation day to day, meals and accommodation booking for the length of your stay. They will also work to design custom routes to suit personal requirements.

**Author's route:** To start his trip, Jack joined an Alta Via 1 guided tour for two nights into the Fanes Natural Park. The group then continued on while he stayed two more nights in Fanes to do several self-guided day hikes on the local peaks. He then joined the 'Best of Alta Via 1 & 2 Trekking' group, walking for three days around the Lagazuoi region. Separating once again, he walked the Alta Via 2 for two days alone until Passo delle Erbe.

**Guidebooks:** Cicerone Press publish guides to the Alta Via 1 and 2 and to other multi-day routes in the Dolomites. Buy direct from [cicerone.co.uk](http://cicerone.co.uk).

**When to go:** Late spring after the snow melts or late summer after the temperatures begin to drop.

**Preparation:** Be prepared for all conditions as weather in the Dolomites can change dramatically day to day.

**INTO THE QUIET**

I wake early. It's a two-day walk to my next proper destination stop deep in the belly of the Fanes Valley, so I set off soon after breakfast at a solid pace. The trail over these next two days, although beautiful, feels like an acclimatisation period, building my strength up and getting used to being back on the trail. The weather is poor, but I feel stronger and more confident with every passing mile.

By the time I reach the lodge in Fanes, I'm soaked through and cold, but exhilarated by my surroundings. The valley is shrouded in a low-hanging mist as evening descends. There's no phone signal, no proper road access and a silence which only real isolation can provide. No day trippers here.