

Peak viewing

Those infinite vistas aren't the Dolomites' only crowd-pleasers. Rib-sticking food and pulse-quickenning drives come with the territory, too, says **Celia Woolfrey**



When Italians are wilting from the heat of the cities, there's only one cure: a few days immersed in the mountain air of the Dolomites. If you've dismissed these spectacular peaks as the sole preserve of winter-sports lovers, the refreshing reality is that they're a summer paradise, delivering gourmet dining, leisurely hiking and, most importantly, heavenly driving – in the twisting shape of the Great Dolomites Road.

Starting in Bolzano, the main market town of the Alto Adige region, you could do it in a day, reaching the ski resort of Cortina, 160km off in the Veneto region, after many a white-knuckle hairpin bend and mountain pass. But it's well worth dawdling – perhaps spending a night or two in a family-run inn with creaky pine floors and a Tyrolean tiled stove. That way you'll get to stretch your legs and take in Italy's dreamy high country, with the low clank of cowbells and the sound of timber being cut in the woods, reinforcing how far you are from urbanity.

For driving devotees, it makes a perfect extension to a weekend in Venice, say, or – if you want to follow the direction described here – Verona. In a hire car, you find Bolzano north up the A22, turning off after 113km at the San Michele all'Adige-Mezzocorona exit. Follow the signs for Cortina sulla Strada di Vino/Kurtinig an der Weinstrasse; the Wine Road is a fine warm-up for the Great Dolomites Road, past terraced rows of vines and sun on Lake Caldaro. Here people take life slowly: Caldaro village, 20 minutes from the A22, blends Tyrolean balconies of geraniums and Italian Renaissance facades; German and Italian conversations mingle in the air.

An hour's pause will suffice to drink it all in, and drink you should: white-grape varieties do well here, making clear, structured wines, and the *méthode champenoise* sparklers are superb. But don't miss the chance to try niche indigenous reds made from vernatsch and lagrein grapes, the latter producing a dark-fruited wine with subtle spice. The place to quaff them is Punkt, the bar on a corner of the main square run by a wine consortium.

Designated driver? Be sure to stash some bottles in the boot. You'll be leaving the wine road after Coraiano to make for Bolzano, where its Austrian heritage shows in its Gothic spires and Baroque floral plasterwork, and

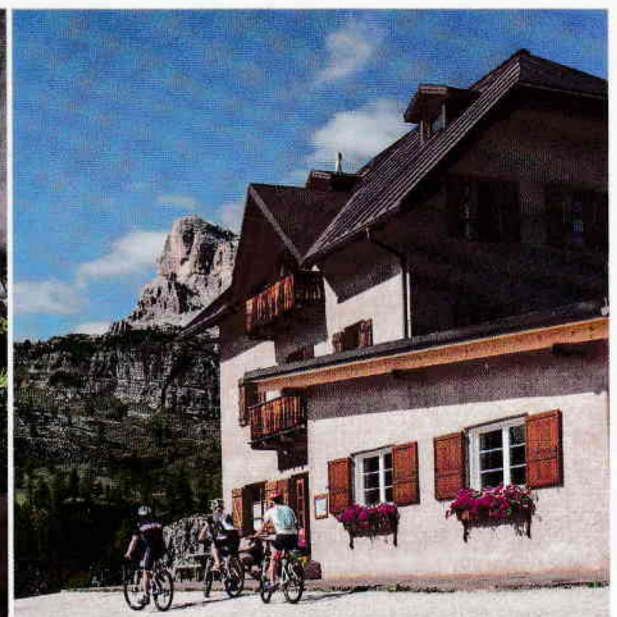
'Grüss Gott' is uttered far more often than 'Ciao'. (Alto Adige was in the Südtirol region until it was annexed by Italy after World War I.) Stay at Greif (greif.it; doubles from £213, B&B), in Piazza Walther, full of arty elegance – one room even has a grand piano. It's a place to crash out for half an hour, listening to a church clock striking, before rising to explore.

Bolzano's star sight is Otzi, the naturally mummified remains of a Copper Age man discovered in glacier ice on the Italian-Austrian border and now in the Museum of Archaeology (iceman.it; £7.70). So well preserved is the tattooed figure from 3,400BC that coming face-to-face feels oddly emotional. The video detailing his final hours (based on evidence unpicked by archaeologists) doesn't stint on his final ordeal at a cold, snowy, high altitude, clad in bear- and goat-skin clothes – breaking his bow and falling to ambushers even as he carved a new one.

Mull it over at dinner – a plate of hearty *würstel* sausage, beetroot dumplings or barley pasta at Hopfen & Co (boznerbier.it; mains about £8), one of several pubs around Bolzano that brew their own beer. Later, back at the Greif, the shadowy peak of Kohlern, outlined in the star-filled sky, is a hint of what's in store on the road tomorrow, as you drift off to sleep.

It's five minutes' drive from Bolzano to Val d'Ega next morning to the Great Dolomites Road, a thread of the SS241 and SS48. Until the '50s, it was stone and gravel, the archetypal Italian *strada bianca* ('white road'). Now tarmacked and signposted, it's still a thrill as you cross the first pass, Passo Costalunga, turning into the Val di Fassa beneath the towering Rosengarten range. Pine forests and meadows flash past, bends in the road altering your perspective on the *Monti Pallidi*. These 'pale mountains' turn rosy orange as they catch the glow of sunrise and sunset, the inspiration for epic tales full of characters with superpowers in local Ladin culture. ▶

Peaks, meadows and pine forests flash past, and the 'pale mountains' turn rosy as they catch the glow of sunrise and sunset



Lofty ambitions: villages dotting the hillsides in the Dolomites. Opposite, eel with smoked broth at Rosa Alpina; drivers take care – cyclists are out in force locally



Snug as a bug: the charmingly intimate La Stüa de Michil restaurant in Corvara

You'll relish a mid-morning break at Pera di Fassa: chairlifts, in three stages of 5-10 minutes, take you up to Ciampedie for an easy hike (1hr 30min) to the Gardecia refuge in time for lunch (rifugidelcatinaccio.it). Even at this height, almost 2,000m above the valley, you'll find first-rate food: polenta and sausage, or *canederli in brodo* (dumplings of ham and cheese in a clear broth). And there's a regular shuttle bus (£5) back to Pera.

Climbing out of Canazei, leaving the Val di Fassa's roadside hotels behind, you'll need concentration and racy gear changes as you encounter an oncoming biker cornering at speed, or share a hairpin with a pack of cyclists on a club ride. Twisting and turning back on itself, the hay meadows shrinking in the valley far below, the road finally reaches the Pordoi Pass. Park, drink a mid-afternoon reviver and admire the view of Marmolada with its glacier, and ridge after ricocheting ridge of mountain disappearing into the haze.

If the passes here are high, the cuisine is stratospheric. As the day turns golden, turn off the SS48 at Arabba, passing through Corvara (home to Michelin-starred La Stüa de Michil (hotel-laperla.it; two dishes £69) into San Cassiano valley, to lay your hat at snug-luxe Rosa Alpina (rosalpina.it; doubles from £405, B&B; six courses £172; fondue mains £28). Here the mountains land on your plate in the form of pigeon-and-porcini dumplings or homemade lamb prosciutto, presented on a nest of pine and juniper. If you're going to splurge anywhere on this trip, this is the place to do it.

Get back on the SS48 at the Falzarego Pass next day and you're actually on the World War I frontline: take a hike and you'll find the relics of gun emplacements and trenches peppering the terrain. If you want to complete the route, continue to the finish line, Cortina d'Ampezzo, but little goes on outside ski season. Better to turn and head north to Brunico, where a gondola whisks design pilgrims up the vertiginous Kronplatz mountain to Zaha Hadid's curvy MMM Corones (messner-mountain-museum.it; £8.60), one of six museums founded by local mountaineer Reinhold Messner, the first to climb Everest without oxygen. It's almost silent up here, looking north to the shimmering Zillertal Alps and south to Marmolada. You'll feel as if you've stepped out onto the roof of Italy.

GET ME THERE

Verona is the nearest airport. Three days' car hire costs from £104, via holidayautos.com, picking up at Verona airport.

4 more Italian hilly idylls

Glaciers

Stay in Val Senales, a quiet valley near the Austrian border, and you won't need a car — the local transport is wide-reaching, including to Kurzras (Maso Corto). From here, a cable car serves Glacier Hotel Grawand at 3,212m (www.grawand.com), where you can get a guided glacier tour. Included is a scenic 500m ascent on foot, a visit to where Otzi the Ice Man's remains were found (see previous page), and an intro to rock-climbing. *Inntravel* (inntravel.co.uk) has a self-guided seven-night South Tyrol trip, from £895pp, half-board, with flights and four-star hotel in Val Senales.

Cycling

Leave Sardinia's packed coast behind and pedal up into remote mountain areas — the Gennargentu range is the beating heart of the island, with spectacular village festivals. You need fitness rather than technical ability for a fun mix of dirt tracks and mountain roads that take you through pine woods, olive groves and rugged wilderness. Look out for traces of Sardinia's unique prehistoric Nuraghe (fortified houses), which dot the landscape — the ones at Barumini are a Unesco World Heritage site. Then head for the secluded beaches at Chia and La Pelosa. *Skedaddle* (skedaddle.com) has a seven-night guided Sardinia Coast to Coast trip, from £1,495pp, with most meals; flights and bike hire extra.

Walking

Hewn out of the rock, the town of Matera (pictured below) has an awesome location above the Gravina Gorge in Basilicata. It's famed for its ancient *sassi*: linked caves with cisterns and channels from prehistoric times, making it one of the world's oldest cities. As late as the '50s, 20,000 people were still living in the troglodyte quarter. Hotels have since opened in the *sassi*, among them the Sant'Angelo luxury resort (santangeloresort.it). *Explore's* Walking in Puglia and Basilicata trip includes Matera. Seven nights' B&B costs from £1,229pp, with flights (explore.co.uk). Three nights in Matera with Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk) costs from £675pp, B&B, with flights.

Wine-tasting

Fresh, perfumed, gamey: the wines of Etna have created a buzz over the past decade, made from indigenous grape varieties such as nerello. They stem from some of Sicily's coolest vineyards — literally: the highest vines are at 1,300m on the lava-strewn slopes. Sensing the potential, young Sicilians have been returning to old family vineyards, making top quality wine from often tiny estates. *Go-Etna* (go-etna.com) has a 4WD Jeep tour, with a wine-tasting and lunch at a vineyard, from £111pp, including pick-up from a hotel in Catania or Taormina.

