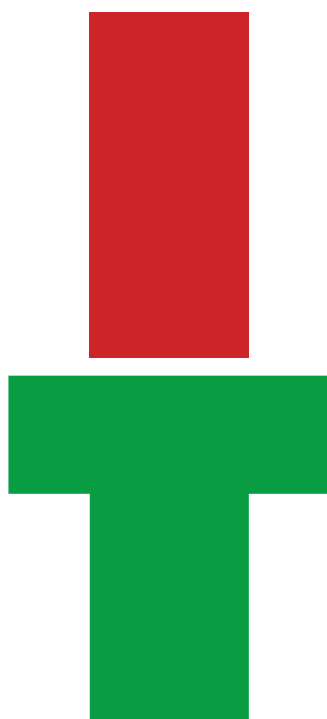


ROCK

UNESCO-famed cliffs, delicious mountain cuisine, and more miles of groomed slopes than Park City, Whistler Blackcomb, and Les Trois Vallées combined. Where to start with skiing **Italy's Dolomites**? Hold my spritz.

BY JUSTIN PAUL

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY
CLARA TUMA**





Halfway down the Tofana Schuss, a highlight of the women's World Cup ski tour, with Cortina d'Ampezzo in the distance.

Cortina classics (clockwise from top left): Tofana ski area's popular rifugio Col Drusciè, pre-après-ski on the Corso Italia, roasted venison with Brussels sprouts at Cristallo Resort's La Stube 1872, and Pizzeria Porto Rotondo, a Corso Italia staple with a menu of Neapolitan pizzas that's nearly a dozen pages deep.



CATCHING MY BREATH

near a lift, I scan the horizon in a slow 360-degree turn. It's a bit of a head trip, like standing in the center of an impossibly large porcelain bowl. White swaths

curl their way down in all directions, while a network of chairlifts ferries skiers and snowboarders this way and that toward a dizzying array of opportunities. And out of sight beyond the lip of each ridgeline, another network of cables stretches out, and yet another beyond that.

The Dolomites ski map I dutifully studied this morning folds out comically large, roughly the same size as the gas-station state maps no one buys anymore – and it's about as much use. Lift upon lift upon lift link villages and resorts threaded through the mountains, each of which warrants its own fold-out map. Over the years, I've zipped down countless “Racetracks,” “Autobahns,” and other runs named for the local interstate or highway, but this is the first time I've thought commuting by ski could actually be a quicker option than by car.

Roughly two hours north of Venice near the Austrian border, the Dolomites jut from the earth to form Italy's ultimate adventure-sports playground. This eastern stretch of the Italian Alps teems with rock climbers, kayakers, cyclists, and trekkers in summer. Once the temperatures drop, the UNESCO World Heritage cliffs and valleys play host to the world's largest ski network: Dolomiti Superski, a 12-area expanse totaling more than 450 lifts and 750 miles of marked



trails. You could spend a whole season zigzagging among the mostly interconnected network without skiing the same run twice. Or, this being Italy, without eating the same plate of handmade tortellini from one of the 400 independent *rifugi* – former farmhouse huts renovated as restaurants – that stop skiers in their tracks.

For an introduction to the region, I decided to dig into two destinations popular with both international and Italian skiers: Alta Badia and Cortina d'Ampezzo, which sit on opposite sides of Falzarego Pass from each other. “The skiing in Alta Badia is terrific for intermediates,” says Los Angeles-based Virtuoso travel advisor Lucy Butler, who carved up its slopes recently. “I expected mainly super-duper expert terrain, but that certainly wasn’t the case.” The same can be said for Cortina.

Though you can find the odd chute or bump run, the vast majority of the Dolomites’ slopes are immaculately groomed for Italians to ski like they drive: fast and stylishly, over rollers and through sweeping g-force-inducing corners. Their daily goal seems to be a connect-the-dots lift game that involves swishing down as much terrain as possible. Turnstile pass-readers even log your progress for a “performance check,” so you can track vertical feet, kilometers skied, and “lift repetitiveness” to compete against yourself, ski buddies, and faceless diehards over the course of the day or season.

I’ve come around to the value of mountain guides when skiing a new resort, and Alta Badia is a prime example of why Virtuoso advisors often arrange them for clients’ ski vacations. “That’s Lavarela, where we started in San Cassiano,” my guide, Diego, says, pointing to a towering face two valleys and a small mountain away. We’re on just our fourth or fifth of the 16 different lifts we’ll ride today. In the Dolomites, it’s not finding the best terrain that you need guides for – it’s to ensure you end up in the right town when the chairs stop, or at least one a manageable taxi ride away.

WHILE THE DOLOMITES ARE PART OF THE ALPS,

the list of attributes they share with the mountains of Switzerland’s Saint Moritz or Courchevel in France ends somewhere shortly after “people who like sliding on snow.” Formed from fossilized coral reefs and atolls, the imposing cliffs and massifs that define the region glow with soft oranges, pinks, and reds in the warm morning and evening light, like chunky embers cast across the landscape. Witnessing their transformation as weather and time progress can be as much a sport as cruising their slopes.

“Compared to skiing in other areas, those dramatic, jagged peaks surrounding you stand out the most, but the food is actually my favorite part of skiing here,” says Rick Reichsfeld, president of ski and adventure-travel tour company Alpine Adventures. “From the delicious beet ravioli to the dried meats and farmstead cheeses, you’ll know you’re not in Switzerland or France.”

Although gourmet dining is as much of the ski-town experience as Gore-Tex these days, it’s true that the Dolomites’ – and especially Alta Badia’s – blend of northern Italian, Austrian, and Ladin mountain cuisine rivals its skiing both in impressiveness and importance. Not long after I arrived in San Cassiano, Hugo Pizzinini, owner and



Clockwise from top left: Ûtia de Bioch owner Markus Valentini, an Aperol spritz and tortellini stuffed with speck cream (a dish created for his *rifugio* by chef Norbert Niederkofler of three-Michelin-starred St. Hubertus), the gondola up Mount Lagazuoi, and a room at Rosa Alpina.



general manager of Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa, set me straight: “Here, we ski two hours, then lunch two hours.”

The third generation of Pizzinini to run the hotel, he personifies the Alta Badia experience – sophisticated and proud, yet unassuming. It’s a feeling you pick up on when you first set foot in the hotel, where Pizzinini worked every staff position while growing up and where he and his wife now live and raise their three children. Fires crackle in the votive-framed fireplace in the lobby, which serves more as a cozy chalet living room where guests nurse negronis on couches and shaggy sheepskin-covered pillows. Local wood carvings, artwork, and vintage photos line hallways and guest rooms paneled in knotty white pine – so much pine, in fact, that I assumed it was the source of the hotel’s warm, foresty scent until an older man walked past burning incense. “My father,” Pizzinini later explained. “He swears that if he goes around with church incense, there are less people with flu.”

BACK UP ON THE MOUNTAIN, ROUGHLY TWO

hours into our day, Diego suggests we stop for an *aperitivo* at Ütia de Bioch, a typical *rifugio*. As platters of speck, sausages, pickles, two cheeses, breads, and empanada-like pastries arrive, he explains how, a few years ago, a group of these huts banded together to distinguish themselves by inviting Michelin-starred chefs to create a special dish for their menus. What started as a bit of a PR stunt has evolved into the Gourmet Ski Safari, something visitors now plan ski days – and in fact entire vacations – around. Although you can order the dishes throughout the season, on one day each year, the chefs descend on the huts to cook their respective dishes in what becomes an extended progressive lunch on skis. The annual event’s popularity spawned wine spin-offs – numerous days each season when skiers pair up with a sommelier and a guide for hut-to-hut tastings of South Tyrolean wines. “This year, there are more than 150 wines you can taste in a day,” Diego says as we finish a glass of prosecco, adding with a smile, “though, as instructors, we don’t recommend that.”

While our midday snack could pass for lunch in most places, soon we’re linking more slopes en route to a special run Diego wants to ski before our main meal. After a few lifts, a “ski taxi” shuttle over the pass, and a cable car that seems to defy physics with its near vertical ascent, we step off atop Mount Lagazuoi. On one side, Cortina’s ski resorts fan out; on the other, a treeless white highway leads back to Alta Badia. At more than five miles long, the Hidden Valley’s Armentarola run is one of the standouts in all of the Dolomites, if not all of Europe. Steeply pitched in parts, the intermediate run begins with panoramic views of the peaks, then banks its way through a remote cliff-lined gorge and canyon. Ice waterfalls and a massive rock face – the back side of Cortina’s Tofana ski resort – loom closer and higher as you descend, making you feel infinitesimally small. In a fitting flourish, the run ends with another Dolomites original: a horse-drawn sleigh trailing ropes – literally a two-horsepower lift that tows skiers along a snowed-in creek bed to Armentarola resort’s lifts.



From top: *Rifugio Scotoni's* Christian Agreiter at the grill and its patio on the Hidden Valley's Armentarola run.





MOUNTAIN MAN

Chef **Norbert Niederkofler** introduced his Cook the Mountain menu to Rosa Alpina's St. Hubertus to let guests see, smell, and taste the Dolomites on a plate. The kitchen grows more than 100 herbs, works with a professor of fungi, and won't serve anything you can't find on the mountain – which means no fine-dining staples such as foie gras, citrus, tomatoes, or vanilla. "In the mountains, for four to five months nature doesn't give you anything," Niederkofler says. "Starting this concept takes a full year: In summer, you have to fill up the storage room – drying, fermenting, preserving in oil – otherwise, you run out of food in the winter." The restaurant sources ingredients from some 40 farmers – no middlemen – to supply its seasonal menu. "Spring is light and fresh – what you're looking for after a harsh winter," he says. "Summer is powerful and rich, autumn becomes more earthy, and winter is dark and very earthy." As for the dish that embodies his three principles of place, season, and zero waste? "Whitefish tartare," he says, locally caught, with the scales fried for texture and a sauce made from the bones.

Roughly halfway down the valley, we pull over at *rifugio* Scotoni. The sundeck is packed, wine and warm eggnog-like *bombardinos* are flowing, and even though it's nearly 2 PM, owner Christian Agreiter is still a nonstop flurry of flames, flipping, and chopping at the grill. Scotoni is known for its family-style mixed platter of ribs, steaks, sausages, vegetables, and polenta, and a quick glance around the room confirms the feast lands on most tables, along with multiple bottles from the 400-strong wine list. People, think of the horses! What did they possibly do to deserve this?

Things are more composed back at Rosa Alpina, where the day wraps up at the hotel's three-Michelin-starred St. Hubertus, Alta Badia's top restaurant. Chef Norbert Niederkofler follows a sustainable, strictly locavore "Cook the Mountain" ethos with exquisite results: Delicate trout with black garlic and foraged berries, ravioli with mountain cheese in a light chicken broth, lamb with koji sauce, and a "Tomato?" course that turns out to be a preserved plum (tomatoes don't grow well in the Dolomites) are just a few highlights. It's a strong finish to a big day, both by ski and by fork. Cortina has a lot to live up to.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF FALZAREGO PASS FROM

Rosa Alpina, Cortina d'Ampezzo presents itself as the glamorous, cosmopolitan counterpart to Alta Badia's quiet village life. The town splashed onto the international scene in 1956, when it hosted the first televised Winter Olympics, and has been refining its reputation ever since. Spread across a valley with the Tofana and Faloria ski resorts dominating either side, the town of roughly 6,000 swells to nearly 50,000 during the season's peak – you'll find a good chunk of them living it up at the pedestrian-only Corso Italia's bars, restaurants, and shops when they're not on the slopes.

"If you want nightlife, you're better off in Cortina," says Lucy Butler, when asked who she'd recommend it to over Alta Badia. And as their base: the historic Cristallo Resort & Spa, recently

From top: San Cassiano's parish church and the "horse lift" at the end of Armentarola ski run.





Clockwise from above: Trout with wild berries and black garlic from St. Hubertus, Cristallo's Lounge Bar, and Rosa Alpina owner Hugo Pizzinini and his wife, Ursula, in the hotel's library.

restored to its 1956 Olympics glory with parquet floors, sparkling chandeliers, and stenciled wood panels. Perched just out of earshot of the main drag's commotion, guests wake to valleywide views of Tofana resort and Mount Faloria, returning after a day on the mountain to toast the alpenglow with the house cocktail: rosé Champagne and lychee liqueur.

Shortly after doing the former, I step off the gondola at Tofana. This largest of Cortina's ski resorts is noticeably more crowded than those on the other side of the pass, but it's also easier for first-timers to navigate. After a couple of warm-up runs, I find my way to the mountain's famed downhill slope, an annual highlight of the women's World Cup ski tour since 1992. The run starts with a majestic view of the valley, then quickly accelerates to one of pro skiing's most iconic shots, the Tofana Schuss, a 65-degree pitch that dives to the right between two sharp spires. Lindsey Vonn and her peers blast through it airborne at a white-knuckle 80 mph, but even seen through my goggles at a quarter of the speed, it's still a cheer-worthy sight.

A light snow begins falling at lunch, and clouds crawl down the peaks, nudging all but the foolhardy to more gentle terrain below the tree line and eventually back to town, where the Corso Italia's wine bars will be kicking off early. Tomorrow brings the promise of Faloria's advanced slopes, or possibly those of Cinque Torri, with a run back down Lagazuoi – plus that two-hour lunch, espresso breaks, and a midday *aperitivo*. The local take on a ski day brings *a lot* to the table. "Performance check," please.



"Consider twinning a Dolomites vacation with time in Venice. It's an easy drive through very pretty scenery, and on the way, you pass the glassware outlet stores!"

– Lucy Butler, Virtuoso travel advisor, Los Angeles



MAKE TRACKS

Set up for great days in
the Dolomites.

GO Alpine Adventures tailors complete ski vacations at resorts around the world for groups ranging from 2 to 200. A recommendation for the Dolomites: seven days that include three nights each at the Cristallo and Rosa Alpina hotels, a five-day Dolomiti Super-ski pass, ski or snowboard rentals, and round-trip transfers between the resorts and Venice. *Departures: Any day through the 2019 ski season; from \$2,698, including breakfast daily and a \$100 credit at each hotel.*

STAY Off-slope diversions at 55-room **Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa** include a family pool and an adults-only pool in the spa, a game room and cinema, and the lobby bar, where you'll often find owner Hugo Pizzinini chatting with guests. Dinner at St. Hubertus is a must, and the hotel's casual Restaurant Wine Bar & Grill is San Cassiano's best spot for handmade pastas, grilled meats, and wood-fired pizzas. *Doubles from \$645, including breakfast daily and a \$100 hotel credit.*

Cortina d'Ampezzo's 74-room **Cristallo, a Luxury Collection Resort & Spa** greets guests with sweeping views, a large spa, parlor games in the lounge, and a mini ice rink on the terrace. Among its three restaurants, intimate La Stube 1872 serves mountain dishes, such as French rack of venison with potato galette, while fine-dining Il Gazebo is the go-to for 360-degree Ampezzo Valley views and the likes of blue-potato dumplings with squid, candied cherry tomatoes, and burrata. *Doubles from \$415, including breakfast daily and a \$100 spa credit.*

Northern Italy's popular wellness retreat, Lefay Resort & Spa Lago di Garda, is set to open a sister property in Madonna di Campiglio this summer: **Lefay Resort & Spa Dolomiti** will feature 111 suites and residences (all with fireplaces), two restaurants, and an expansive 54,000-square-foot spa – an inviting retreat for post-mountain recovery. *Rates to be announced, including breakfast daily, two complimentary massages, and one dinner for two. VI.*

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