

The Dolomites may feel remote, but the next apple strudel or cappuccino is never far away

BY ANNE GEORG, POSTMEDIA NEWS AUGUST 26, 2011



Rifugio Passo Principe clings to a rocky ledge in the Dolomites, an eastern range of the Alps renowned for its soaring spires and jagged peaks. The area, part of Italy, once belonged to Austria.

Photograph by: Anne Georg, Postmedia News

Beckoning at the top of a steep rocky climb was a stone house – an Alpine Club of Italy mountain hut called a rifugio. There I'd get a hearty meal, complemented by good Italian wine, after which I'd sleep in a comfortable bed. Exactly what I needed.

Although it was late June, the evening air at 2,550 metres was chilly. Summer comes late to northern Italy's Dolomite Mountains.

It was Day 4 of my hike in this eastern range of the Alps, renowned for soaring spires and jagged saw-blade peaks, sculpted by glaciers and erosion. The Dolomites were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2009.

A variety of hiking opportunities exists for all ages, fitness levels and hiking experience.

Some routes have the option of taking a gondola, chairlift or cable car up or down various stretches, making for easier hiking.

I was with my guide, Agustina Lagos Marmol of Dolomite Mountains, an outdoor outfitter in the area. We'd had a long day of wending our way down well-worn footpaths, across pastoral countryside and up a gondola, ending with a steep ascent.

Stunning vistas surrounded us the whole time.

The Dolomites offer breathtaking views and endless outdoor activities for adventurers. But I soon discovered that beyond the beautiful trails and valleys, a rich culture exists, laden with tradition and history.

Manuel Agrieter and his wife, Cristina, our hosts at the cozy 28-bed Rifugio Franz Kostner al Vellon, are part of the vibrant mountaineering culture of the Dolomites. Manuel is a volunteer mountain rescuer and mountain guide and both are avid backcountry skiers.

They come from the area and have run the rifugio for 23 years, opening it around summer solstice and closing it in early October. Like many of the more than 600 rifugios in the Dolomites, theirs is open only for the short summer season.

Like other locals, Manuel and Cristina slip easily from speaking Italian to German to Ladin, a language in its own right. Before the First World War, the Dolomites were part of Austria, and were the front line of fierce battles. But after the war, the region was ceded to Italy.

Ladin is an ancient culture that is unique to the Dolomites. With roots dating as far back as the second century, the culture is steeped in history. The Ladin people have their own language, traditions and cuisine, which are still prevalent. Each village and town has an Italian, German and Ladin name.

Wine and spirits are specialties in the Dolomites, with many of the valleys and villages boasting their own wineries and distilleries. Rifugio Franz Kostner has its own wine label: a tasty 2009 Cabernet from the South Tyrolean Cortaccia-Kurtatsch winery.

Our dinner consisted of hearty breads, green salad and spinach and cheese ravioli, followed by a bowlful of fresh fruit. We drank local red wine, and after dinner we had a grappa, a uniquely Italian liquor, which Cristina had infused with herbs and coffee beans to give it a personal touch.

Agustina and I had started out three days earlier from Corvara, one of many upscale tourist resorts in the picturesque valleys of the Dolomites. We hopped a gondola to quickly reach lush alpine meadows populated by milk cows, dotted with rustic wooden cottages and sprinkled with an array of colourful wildflowers.

We climbed a rocky path to put us over the tree line. In some places when the path got exceptionally steep, a metal cable anchored into the rock provided support. Every few hours we stopped at a rifugio, eating a typical Dolomite lunch, like dumpling soup or eggs and bacon, or we'd have coffee and apple strudel.

Heavy skies hung above us and about four hours later, when we arrived at Rifugio Bolzano al Monte

Pez at approximately 2,450 metres altitude, cloud had already begun to envelope it.

The imposing stone edifice loomed from the mountain edge. But upon entering the dining room, we were embraced by the warm glow of honey-coloured wood, full of German hikers enjoying dinner, drinking wine and playing cards and other board games. The rifugio is one of the larger ones, sleeping 120 hikers in dorms and private rooms.

Our double room was cold, as was the water, but the beds were comfortable and we were provided with warm quilts and woollen blankets. On waking, the cloud had lifted and a stunning vista had unfolded below us, lighting the pale hue of the rock for which the Dolomites are famous.

The colour of the mountains is explained by a legend. A local prince travelled to the moon and fell in love with the princess of the moon. After marrying they returned to the Dolomites, but the princess pined for pale mountains of her home. In a quandary, the prince offered a group of homeless gnomes a home in his kingdom. In exchange they wove rays of pale moonlight to cover the mountains. The prince and princess lived happily ever after.

We left the rifugio after a typically European breakfast of bread, cheese, jam and coffee. From there we ascended a steep incline to 2,600 metres to reach a pass, then began the steep descent of approximately 300 metres through lingering snow and along narrow and precipitous foot paths. Then we climbed up an equal distance to another pass.

There, built in the sheer mountain ledge with dizzying vistas, was our lunch haven, Rifugio Passo Principe. It was packed, even though Agustina and I had been alone on the trail.

After the challenging terrain we'd just traversed and that which I could see lay before us, I was surprised at the festive atmosphere. The room was animated with grappa-sipping, beer-swilling locals.

Agustina explained that they were out for a Sunday stroll to celebrate the opening of the rifugio. A town was only about one hour away along a relatively easy trail. In the Dolomites, remote is a state of mind. A road or town is never far away; neither is apple strudel and cappuccino.

After a hearty minestrone soup, we headed down the steep rocky slope and up to yet another pass, then down again, sliding through wet snow to ease the strain on our knees. Walking along an old riverbed, we rounded a corner to see our next stop, Rifugio Antemoia, which sleeps 44 hikers.

Under the spell of the towering peaks and the aura of the evening light, I could understand how the prince and princess lived happily ever after in this extraordinary world of rock, history, culture and hospitality.

Calgary Herald

IF YOU GO

Getting there:

Fly to Venice. It's approximately three hours to Cortina d'Impezza

By train: trenitalia.com

By bus: atvo.it

Stay:

In Cortina s'Impezza: Hotel da Beppe Sello, beppesello.it

In Corvara: Posta Zirm Hotel: postazirm.com

More information:

Local outfitters, Dolomite Mountains, dolomitemountains.com

Rifugio Franz Kostner al Vellon, rifugiokostner.it

Information on rifugios in Italy. cai.it

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