

FINANCIAL TIMES

Little wonders: three small cities for an autumn escape

With culture, cuisine and scenery — and none of the crowds — these destinations are ideal for an end-of-year city break

Bolzano, Italy

His clothes were like something you'd see on a Friday night in London. Leather leggings. A tufty hat. A hipster, two-tone coat with extra cape. We didn't need the life-size reconstruction — looking at the clothes, I could picture him in them instantly. After that, it was a jolt to meet him: Ötzi the iceman, curled up in death, wizened to a nutmeg brown by 5,300 years in the ice.

Bolzano is known for many things — apples, wine, the toothy peaks of the Dolomites rearing up behind the town — but I found none as captivating as Ötzi. He died in the Copper Age, and yet his dedicated, three-storey museum breathes him back to life.

We know a lot about Ötzi. We know what he wore, his blood type (O), his hiking history. We know what he ate for his last meal (wheat and venison), and how he died (shot in the back with an arrow). What we don't know is who he was.

That's appropriate for Bolzano — an eternal border city that you can't quite place. Long part of the Austrian Tyrol, then annexed to Italy after the first world war, it underwent forced assimilation under Mussolini. Today, 70 per cent of Bolzano residents speak Italian as their first language — but they live in a city whose architecture, food and vibe are profoundly Teutonic.



The pool at Castel Hohenberg



Part of the reception area at Castel Hohenberg

I had gone to Bolzano because autumn is the time to go — it's still bathed in sun, the mountains behind the city are still walkable, and the hills are heavy with apples and vines. I had also gone because this sleepy no man's land has had two major hotel openings during the pandemic. Castel Hörtenberg, a bijoux renaissance castle in a residential area east of the centre, has been transformed into an exclusive retreat, with rooms in the eaves of its fairytale towers and an incongruously lovely pool slotted amid trees in the garden.

Meanwhile, its sister property, Stadt Hotel Città, which reopened in July, is a slick renovation of a Bolzano landmark. A retro, Wes Anderson kind of place, it swaggers, bright pink, on the main square, Piazza Walther, and its café buzzes with Bolzanési at *aperitivo* hour.

Right now, as people linger outdoors before temperatures plummet, Bolzano feels very much alive. At Hopfen, a cosy microbrewery on Obstmarkt, they're downing beer like it's Oktoberfest, and at Vögele, a classic restaurant on via Goethe, they are guzzling *canederli* (dumplings) as if they're laying down fat to go into hibernation.



In summer, Bolzano is still bathed in sun and the mountains behind the city are still walkable. © Gerry Images

Ötzi may be Bolzano's only world-class exhibit, but there's much more to see than you might think, not least the architecture: porticos, Tyrolean frescoes, Jugendstil facades to rival Helsinki and grand Renaissance palaces. At the fashion store Cos, I climbed to the top floor, where the new season's belts and baseball caps were displayed in an 18th-century ballroom, wildly frescoed with scenes of seduction.

I crossed the Talfer river (over a bridge with inbuilt benches — only in Italy) to gawp at the Monumento alla Vittoria, a fascist-style Arc de Triomphe claiming Bolzano for Mussolini. Crossing back, I walked through one of Europe's loveliest city parks — weeping willows sprouting from boulder crops, the ice-blue Talfer thundering alongside, views of city-centre vineyards and those classic Dolomite spikes in the distance.



It's a magnetic landscape, drawing you outwards. One day, I got a taxi to the Messner Mountain Museum — a syncretic mix of Himalayan gods and Tyrolean history, laid out by alpinist Reinhold Messner in an ancient castle, perched on a bluff overlooking the valley. Further south, past orchards pendulous with fat apples, the hills were threaded with vines below and whisked into forbidding plateaux higher up, pinning Lake Caldaro, a

sparkling mini Garda, into place. People were eking out 2021's last rays lakeside as I got tipsy on sunshine at Panholzer, a chichi, almost Californian farm-to-table restaurant nearby.

Wherever I was, those fang-like Dolomites were calling me — so on my last day, heart in mouth, I took the triple cable car (one mountainside, two abysses) to Soprabolzano, 1,200 metres up on the Renon plateau. It's an instantly bucolic place of jade pastures, clunking cowbells and fragrant pine forests, and has been a Dolomite staple since the earliest days of tourism.



The newly restored Stadt Hotel Città



A room with a view of the Stadt Hotel Città

My cable-car nerves steadied by an Instagram-perfect brunch at Gloriette Guesthouse, cantilevered over the green, I took the 19th-century railway to Collalbo, a dinky village squaring off against a classic Dolomite backdrop. Sigmund Freud came here twice — he wrote *Totem and Taboo* in Collalbo — and today a footpath between the two towns has been named the Freud Promenade, with benches en route sporting quotes from the great man.

Among the quotes was this one, from *Totem and Taboo*: “In a certain sense, prehistoric man is still our contemporary.” I remembered Ötzi’s Hoxton clothes, down in the valley. I thought how he must have known these views, unchanged in 5,300 years. And suddenly Bolzano didn’t seem like no man’s land any more.

Julia Buckley

Details

Julia Buckley was a guest of Castel Hörtenberg (castel-hoertenberg.com; doubles from €200, B&B) and Stadt Hotel Città (hotel-citta.com; doubles from €138, B&B). See also Ötzi Museum, iceman.it; Hopfen, boznerbier.it; Vögele, voegele.it; Messner Mountain Museum, messner-mountain-museum.it; Panholzer, panholzer.it; Gloriette Guesthouse, gloriette-guesthouse.com