

out of this world

Natural *High*

This winter, if you're longing to be far from the madding crowd and chairlift chaos of another jam-packed ski resort, a 'slow ski' safari is the perfect way to experience the transcendent beauty of Italy's DOLOMITES. Enjoy enchanting overnight stays in remote mountain huts and immerse yourself in nature on an exhilarating Alpine adventure – where you'll never ski the same piste twice, and where every view is more breathtaking than the last...

Words by Andrea di Robilant



SNOWSCAPES
The sweeping drama of the Dolomites can be truly appreciated from one of the mountain rifugi, which offer a welcome retreat after a long day on the slopes

In 1994, *Agustina Lagos Marmol*, a young and adventurous Argentinian with a passion for skiing traveled from a remote town in the Andes to Southern Tyrol. “I fell in love with these mountains,” the now fortysomething Agustina tells me over a glass of wine at the Rosa Alpina, a venerable family-run hotel in San Cassiano, in the heart of the Dolomites. “They reminded me of my Patagonia.”

She stayed, married, separated and raised a daughter while working as a guide. In the process, she has become a major force behind the ‘slow skiing’ boom in this area. Not to be confused with cross-country skiing, which takes place on relatively flat terrain in a limited area, slow skiing has become synonymous with traveling over great distances (as opposed to going up and down the same mountain like a caged hamster). It is changing the way we think about the sport. And the Dolomites, arguably the most beautiful range in Europe, are especially suited for it: one can ski for as long as a week, swishing from valley to valley, sleeping in simple but comfortable high-altitude *rifugi* (mountain huts), never once going down the same piste.

I have been skiing the Dolomites since I was a child, but never solo before. My three-day skiing trip would be with Dolomite Mountains, Agustina’s outfit. And so, I start out early one morning from San Cassiano with Max, my cool Slovenian guide, me wearing my throwback Nordica anorak and woollen bonnet. We go down the Gran Risa, the legendary racecourse where Tomba ‘La Bomba’ won spectacular World Cup victories in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fortunately, the pace becomes more leisurely as we move on to less traveled slopes across Val Badia and into Val Gardena in a changing landscape of staggering beauty.

This part of the world was once (250 million years ago) a tropical sea filled with exotic fish and aquatic predators. The Dolomites, which pre-date the formation of the Alps, were actually sea cliffs and the light, gray-white limestone takes on a rosy hue as the sun begins to set. These mountains were named after Déodat de Dolomieu, the French geologist who first studied their formation at the end of the 18th century, but locally they have always been known as the Pale Mountains (Monti Pallidi).

Slow skiing is as much about eating well as it is about skiing. Years ago, when I used to bring my children to the Dolomites during their winter break, lunch on the slopes was usually polenta and sausage. Today, step into a rifugio and you have a choice of gourmet dishes by a Michelin-starred chef. Max and I stop at the *Ūtia de Bioch* (bioch.it), at the center of a high plateau in Alta Badia and within easy reach of all the major runs. The view is spectacular: to the right the ship-like Sassolungo, to the left the great Sella range and, in the distance, the melting glacier on Marmolada, the highest mountain in the region. I am about to ask

for the usual fare when Max orders for me – a delicious plate of spinach ravioli sprinkled with chives and an excellent Tyrolean weissburgunder wine. Gottfried Valentin, the proprietor, sold mostly grappa when he turned the family hayloft into a rifugio in the 1990s; now his wine cellar has over 400 labels.

After lunch we ski down to the hamlet of Armentarola, our heads still light from the wine, and make our way up to Passo di Falzarego, moving into the haunted landscape where the Italian and Austrian armies fought in World War One (over a million lives were lost in the ‘White War’). We pass silently by old trenches and grottoes carved in limestone. We leave the Cinque Torri, an iconic group of five tower-like shafts, behind us, and skirt the peak of Nuvolao, which is bathed in a golden light. It’s late in the day and there are no other skiers in sight. At sunset we arrive at a rifugio at Passo Giau, 2,236 meters up, the pass that separates the Tyrolean Dolomites from the Veneto Dolomites.

Diego Valleferro, a retired ski teacher, bought the rifugio 30 years ago when it was no more than a shack. It now has nice clean rooms with wooden floors and hot showers. Diego, who does all the cooking, serves a crunchy salad with apples and speck, delicious dumplings with a beetroot stuffing and veal medallions with blackberry sauce, which is pretty remarkable given the lodge’s remoteness. More remarkable still is the sudden appearance of Agustina who had driven her car here by the back roads to take over from Max.

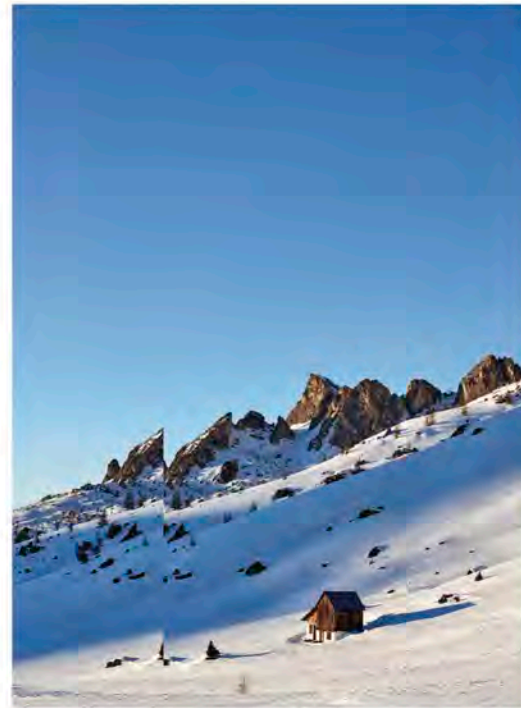
The next morning, Agustina and I leave early and ski in the shadow of Monte Pelmo, a perfectly shaped mountain that seems to float above the clouds. The more massive Monte Civetta rises on the other side of the valley. We are now a world away from the crowded and cosmopolitan South Tyrol. The few skiers we encounter are from Treviso, Padua, Belluno; they speak with a Veneto accent. The chairlifts have a boxy, 1970s design. The rifugio serves only sausage and polenta. Suddenly I feel less conspicuous in my vintage skiing attire.

I follow Agustina’s lead, as she zips neatly down the slopes in her Patagonia Snowbelle pants, catching lifts and pressing on to reach the base of Marmolada for the last gondola ride up to its 3,300m summit. It is cold and windy when we get to the top, and getting dark. I have to stop several times on the way down to catch my breath and massage my calves. We reach Capanna Bill, a rifugio at the base of the mountain, not a moment too soon. The wind howls all night and I dream that an avalanche sweeps us away.

Early the next morning, I put on my skis, bid farewell to Agustina and head back to Val Badia. I have a long journey ahead of me but the slopes are empty and now, I know the way. ■

Agustina can organize a ski and gourmet safari from \$5,065 per person (minimum two people); dolomitmountains.com

“We moved on to less traveled slopes... in a changing landscape of staggering beauty”



Photographs Paola + Murray; Bobby Fisher; Slim Aarons/Getty Images

Clockwise from above: Passo Giau, at 2,236m, separates the Tyrolean from the Veneto Dolomites; skiers walk up a mountain in Cortina, shot by Slim Aarons in 1962; a luxury loft suite at the Rosa Alpina chalet; the charming village of San Cassiano



NEED TO KNOW: THE DOLOMITES

STAY The nicest place to stay in Val Badia – some say the only one – is the Relais & Châteaux Rosa Alpina (rosalpina.it), owned by three generations of the Pizzinini family for the past 70 years. It has the intimacy and charm of an old-style establishment with all the luxuries and the service of a five-star hotel. Another big plus is the fabulous St Hubertus restaurant and its Michelin-star chef, Norbert Niederkoller – try his signature tortellini with braised veal cheek. Take an après-ski stroll in San Cassiano and visit the town museum for an insight into the history and morphology of the Dolomites. *Scott Dunn* (scottdunn.com) offers a seven-night *Ski Safari* from \$4,045 per person, including three nights at Rosa Alpina, B&B; four nights in a rifugio, half-board; return flights; transfers; and guides. For ski hire and passes, visit skirental.it; dolomitisuperski.com/en

