

Before they were the Dolomites, they were known as the Monti Pallidi — the Pale Mountains. Formed from ancient coral reefs thrust upwards 60m years ago, the peaks are sheer sided — so they shed the snow and stand above the northern Italian valleys like vast palisades. And while they might be pale in themselves (mostly the rock is a light silvery grey) that means they act as a giant canvas for the elements, constantly changing colour, forever pulling at your gaze.

Down in the town of Cortina d’Ampezzo — the self-styled “Queen of the Dolomites” — we stood in the dark of a cold January morning. To the east, the rock spires of Monte Cristallo were a deep blue in the early shadows but above us the cliffs of the Tofana ridge were already glowing gold in the sunlight. It was 8.50am and we had a long day ahead.

Our plan was to ski beyond the golden ridge, across the Pralongià plateau behind it, beyond the next great group of peaks, the Sella massif, and beyond the one after that, the Sassolungo. The journey would take us between Italian regions, from Veneto into Trentino/Sudtiro, through eight villages, across four different piste maps, the frontline of a former war zone and through three different dialects. We clattered into the Col Druscie cable car and set off.

Ski touring — exploring the mountains by hiking up on skis fitted with sticky skins — is booming, the latest obsession for those who want to bring an element of cardiovascular challenge to their holiday. In the US they even have a new name for it, “uphilling”, and devotees talk with a certain puritanism about “earning their turns”. But there is an easier way.





A viewpoint at the summit of Mount Lagazuoi, scene of fierce combat in the first world war © Robin Gautier

In many spots in the Alps, and a few beyond, the webs of lifts and pistes spreading out from neighbouring villages have expanded until they've become linked at the edges, making it possible to travel across the mountains while only ever skiing downhill. France was first, notably linking Courchevel, Méribel and Val Thorens to create Les Trois Vallées in 1972. Austria has been making the running in recent years but on Christmas Day, Italy unveiled a new trump card: a €19m, 4.5km-long gondola that makes it possible to ski all the way from Cortina to Alpe di Siusi, a distance of more than 40km as the crow flies, far further on the ground. That is — I think — the longest downhill-only, car or bus-free, journey possible on ski pistes anywhere in the world.





I say think, because the authorities here seem reluctant to promote this new possibility, and certainly don't tout it as a record. So far the new gondola isn't even marked on the online map of the Dolomiti Superski, the umbrella body that oversees the region's lifts and pistes. The night before setting out to try it, I asked Nicole Dorigo, the PR for Alta Badia (a central valley within the ski area), whether she had heard of anyone yet completing the full route. She hadn't. It was possible though? "No. I think it isn't." She was smilingly unequivocal. "But I am really curious to see how far you get."



The new Cortina Skyline lift, which opened on Christmas Day © Robin Gautier

And so it was with an anxious eye on the clock that photographer Robin Gautier and I started out on the first runs above Cortina. We bombed down empty pistes, still with perfect corduroy stripes from the night's grooming, then zigzagged south on a couple of chairlifts, before turning into the trees to catch the new Cortina Skyline lift. A long-held idea, finally completed as part of Cortina's preparations to host the 2026 Winter Olympics, the lift takes about 12 minutes to silently transport skiers through forests of spruce and larch towards the Cinque Torri's distinctive rock towers and the Falzarego Pass.

From 1915 to 1917 this was a war zone, where Italian troops coming from the Cortina side battled Austrian and German forces from Alta Badia on what was known as "*il fronte verticale*". It was a form of trench warfare, except here the trenches and tunnels were blasted from the rock faces and the front line snaked over the summits. Machine guns looked out from windows cut in the cliffs and at night floodlights combed the mountainside looking for enemy activity.





The cable car to the summit of Mount Lagazuoi © Robin Gautier

Today, a vertigo-inducing, pylon-free cable car whisks skiers up 630 vertical metres to the summit of Mount Lagazuoi. Some of the tunnels and gun emplacements are open to tourists — in summer the whole mountain is an open-air museum but in winter most come here to access a run known as “the hidden valley”. It isn’t particularly tough — graded as a red — but it is almost 5km long and must be one of Europe’s most beautiful pistes. From the frozen summit, a stark world of rock and snow and echoes of conflict, we dropped down below the tree line and into a gentler realm, passing frozen waterfalls then, tucked beside a little pasture, the Rifugio Scotoni, a pretty stone inn whose owner presides over a flaming barbecue in the middle of the restaurant.

At the end of the valley, the run flattened and we arrived on a snow-covered riverbed where a handwritten wooden sign announced the world’s most sustainable ski lift. A couple of local farmers were hitching horses to a sleigh, then trailing a knotted rope behind for skiers to hold on to. For €3 per head they dragged us for a few minutes towards Armentarola, then we pushed and poled beside a sparkling stream to arrive at the next lift.



The world’s most environmentally friendly ski lift © Robin Gautier

**Our base for the trip** was Corvara, the central Alta Badia village where the evolution of this huge

ski area first began. In 1938, a sleigh pulled by a motorised winch was installed to carry skiers, to be replaced in 1946 with Italy's first chairlift, the Col Alto. Today there are about 450 lifts and 1,200km of pistes covered by the Dolomiti Superski pass, though only about 500km of those are linked without the need to take a bus or taxi transfer.

Increasingly though, Alta Badia has become almost as known for its food as its skiing. In 1994 a young Italian chef called Norbert Niederkofler got a job in a pizzeria at the Rosa Alpina hotel. Before long the back of the restaurant was given over to his more gastronomic offerings and by 2000 it had won a Michelin star. Today the restaurant, the St Hubertus, has three stars, plus another for sustainability, and has also inspired a culinary revolution throughout the valley.



A table with a view at the Rifugio Chertz, between Corvara and Arabba © Robin Gautier

One St Hubertus trainee, Matteo Metullio, went on to win two stars at the gorgeous Ciasa Salares hotel in Armentarola, while Corvara's Hotel La Perla also bagged a star. The mountain restaurants that sprinkle the hillsides around here (known as *rifugios*, *hutte* or *utia* — there are 48 in Alta Badia alone) have also upped their game. Where those in other parts of the Alps are content to knock out goulash, schnitzels and lots of chips, the “taste for skiing” scheme sees chefs from Michelin-starred restaurants in other parts of Italy partner with a specific mountain hut and train its team to make a signature dishes. Meanwhile, on certain days of the season, a “sommelier on the slopes” leads skiers between huts to try the local wines (though strict new drink-skiing rules introduced this month might necessitate more spitting than sipping).

The previous day we had stopped for lunch at Club Moritzino, an Alta Badia institution at the summit of the Piz La Ila (start point of the celebrated Gran Risa World Cup course). There we ate tagliatelle made from cuttlefish and served with a warm amatriciana sauce, a delicate dish created by Marco Martini, whose eponymous restaurant is a few minutes from the Colosseum in Rome. With it came a green and flinty Sylvaner from the Köfererhof vineyard, less than 30km from where we sat, then lobster spaghetti — Moritzino specialises in fish and seafood, with a daily delivery arriving, via road and cable car, from Chioggia in the Venice lagoon.





The Ice Bar at Club Moritzino © Robin Gautier





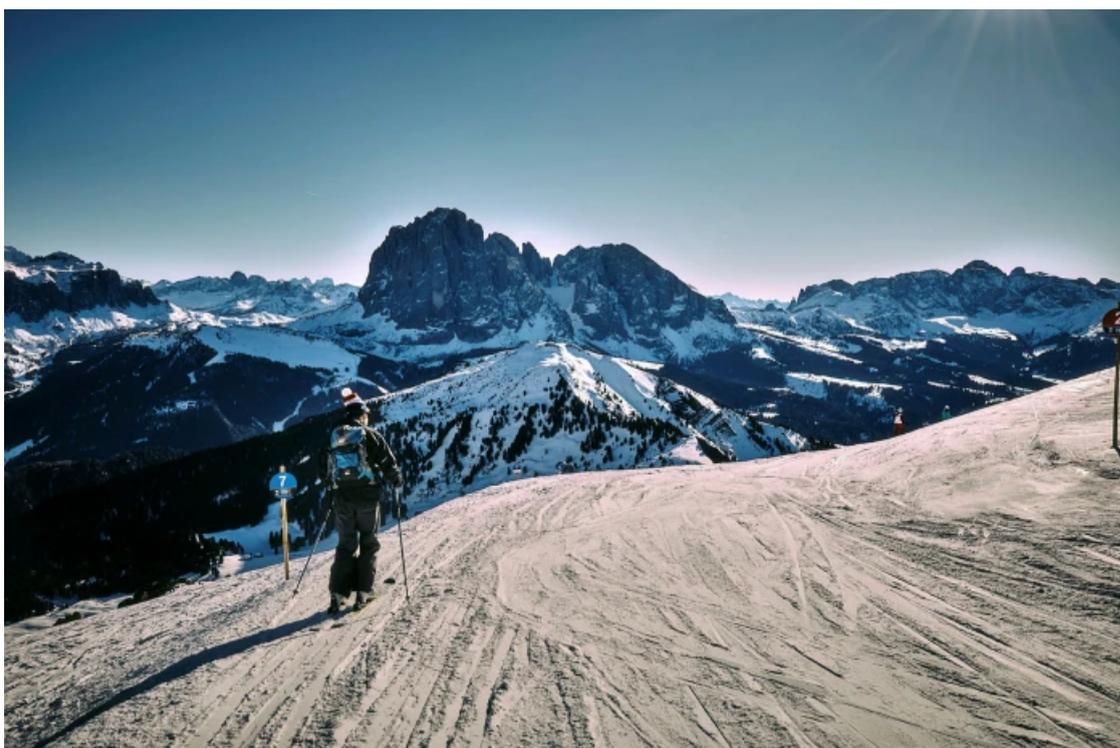
Marco Martini's cuttlefish tagliatelle at Club Moritzino © Robin Gautier



Homemade fig grappa to end the meal © Robin Gautier

We skied straight past the Ciasa Salares on our marathon ski day, didn't give Club Moritzino a second glance. Instead lunch was a couple of ham rolls liberated from breakfast by a kind waitress at our hotel, the Marmolada, and eaten on the Borest gondola, heading out of Corvara towards the Passo Gardena, the gateway to the Gardena valley. To the south was the bulk of the Sella Massif, itself ringed with lifts and pistes — the central wheel of the Dolomiti Superski whose circumnavigation, the “Sella Ronda”, is a popular objective for many skiers.

After this the skiing becomes a bit of a blur. There was a glorious long red run from the peak of Seceda down to the village of Ortisei — dropping 1,250 vertical metres in a couple of minutes — and a section above San Cristina where the piste was wider than several football pitches. There was a stop for a slice of cream, honey and almond *Bienenstich* (“bee sting cake”) at Selva's Costa bakery, and a wrong turn on the nursery slopes that left us queueing among a group of kids returning from school on their sledges.



Skiing off the top of Seceda, looking towards Sassolungo © Robin Gautier

Wrong turns are easy to make, navigation around here not helped by the profusion of languages. After the first world war, the Sudtiroal passed from Austro-Hungary to Italy, but both German and Italian were eventually adopted as official languages. In these high valleys, though, the majority speak their own local language, Ladin. The village at the foot of the Gran Risa slope, for example, is La Villa in Italian, La Ila in Ladin, and Stern in German. Ortisei is also Urtijëi and St Ulrich in Gröden. Official road signs usually list all three, elsewhere people pick and choose. What's more, the Ladin spoken in Alta Badia is different to that spoken in Val Gardena and Cortina. As you ski over the passes, “thank you” changes from *granmarzé* to *giulan* to *de gra* and *detelpai*.

Of course, Ladin is more than a source of linguistic complication — Ladin culture, based on mountain farming traditions, continues to be a strong part of the local identity. Ladin is taught in schools and there is even a Ladin newspaper, [La Usc Di Ladins](#) (readable online, though don't expect Google Translate to work). That sense of community could be why, after going away to study, many young people return to work in their home valley, in a way starkly at odds with other parts of the Alps. Almost all the hotels here are family-run.



Maso Runch, a Ladin restaurant in an 18th century farmhouse above Badia © Robin Gautier



Enrico and Christian Nagler at their farm/restaurant Maso Runch © Robin Gautier



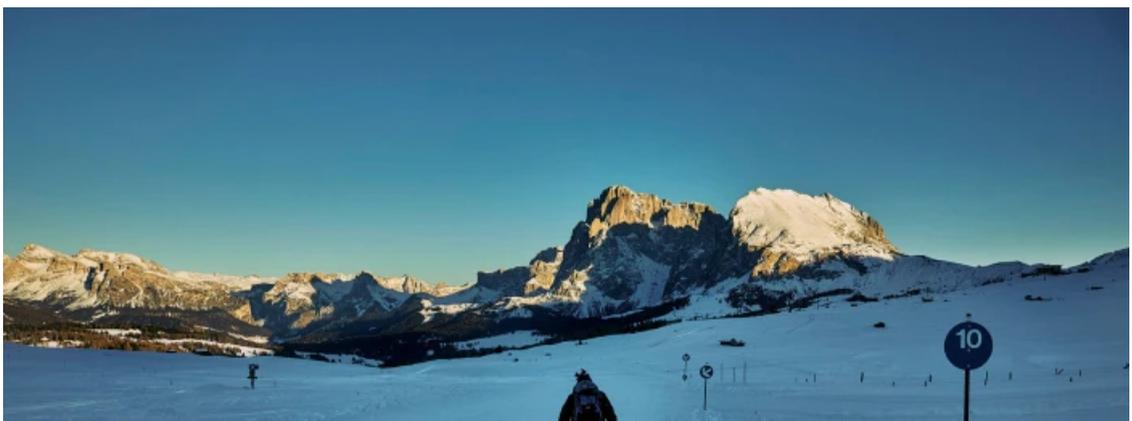


The Ladin speciality *canci arstis* being cooked at Maso Runch © Robin Gautier

Later in our trip, we ate dinner at Maso Runch, a restaurant in an old farmhouse above the village of Badia, where three generations of the Nagler family serve classic Ladin cuisine. The €36, seven-course menu included *panicia*, a barley soup, then *tutres*, *canci arstis* and *canci t'ega* — varieties of fried or boiled ravioli and dumplings stuffed with spinach, ricotta, sauerkraut and, in one case, marmalade. Each course was served at the same time to all the guests tucked away in the various wood-panelled rooms, then we emerged to wait for our taxis beside the cows in the neighbouring shed.

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**At 3pm, we wandered** through the centre of Ortisei, past families swimming in the steaming pools of the village's smart spa hotels, then took the gondola up to our final destination, the Alpe di Siusi. A vast alpine plateau — the largest in Europe — this is a beginner's heaven, with miles of quiet, gently sloping runs, dotted with inns and mountain hotels. It couldn't be more different from the jagged drama of the Cinque Torri and Lagazuoi where we had started the day.





Pushing across Alpe di Siusi to reach the last lift before it closes © Robin Gautier

It may have been all downhill but my knees groaned and my stomach rumbled as we slowly tacked across Alpe di Siusi. Finally, at the top of the Spitzbühl lift on the western side of the Alpe, we reached our goal, the furthest point from Cortina. It was just before 4pm: we'd been skiing nonstop for seven hours. We'd covered 40km as the crow flies but 93km as we zigzagged up and down on lifts and pistes. According to the Dolomiti Superski tracking app, we'd descended 8,832 metres — almost exactly from the top of Everest to sea level — skied 55km and ridden 30 lifts, never the same one twice.

Other than the odd Strava obsessive, will many skiers hurry to follow in our tracks? Possibly not — why wouldn't you split it into more days to remove the need to rush? — but it does underline the staggering extent and variety of this unique ski area.





The chapel at Berghaus Zallinger, built in 1858 © Robin Gautier





Tom Robbins approaches Berghaus Zallinger at the end of a long ski day © Robin Gautier

The only problem was that we weren't quite done. To reach our bed for the night, we had another 12km to go, curling back to the south east. As the slopes began to clear for the evening and the "enrosadira" turned the summits of the Sassolungo pink then violet, we hurried over the Alpe, tucking like ski racers on slopes that were almost flat.

We made the last lift nine minutes before it closed, then coasted down to the Berghaus Zallinger, a farmhouse-turned-hotel, alone in a fold of the mountainside except for its own little chapel. The moon was out as we trudged up to the door, the crunch of our boots breaking the utter stillness of a freezing dusk. Inside, the receptionist didn't seem that impressed when I said we'd come all the way from Cortina but she indulged us nonetheless, pouring out glasses of homemade hay schnapps to warm us up and to toast a grand day out.

## Details

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Tom Robbins was a guest of Powder Byrne ([powderbyrne.com](http://powderbyrne.com)), Alta Badia ([altabadia.org](http://altabadia.org)), Hotel Marmolada ([marmolada.org](http://marmolada.org)) and Berghaus Zallinger ([zallinger.com](http://zallinger.com)). Powder Byrne offers a week at Ciasa Salares, half-board with private transfers from Bolzano, from £3,373 per person. The Hotel Marmolada in Corvara has doubles from €323 per night, half-board. Berghaus Zallinger has doubles, half-board, from €1,848 per week.

Practicalities: The [Dolomiti Superski](http://dolomiti-superski.com) lift pass currently costs €60 per day and covers all 1200 lifts in the area (you can also buy tickets for individual valleys but the savings are usually limited). This season those over 12 must be fully vaccinated or recovered to ride the lifts (check details on the website). A taxi from Corvara to Cortina to begin the route described will cost about €100. It is possible to ski the same route in reverse but you would need to take a taxi from Armentarola to the Falzarego Pass. We carried a toothbrush and change of clothes in a rucksack but hotels and tour operators can often arrange luggage transfers if needed.

Getting there: Alta Badia is two hours' drive from Innsbruck airport, three from Venice. On February 13 a new airline, Sky Alps ([skyalps.com](http://skyalps.com)) is due to start flying from London Gatwick to Bolzano, from where it is 90 minutes to Corvara and only 35 to Alpe di Siusi.