

Dolomite Walking

by Brian Davey

The Dolomites of the Italian Alps must be among the most beautiful mountain ranges in the world. Their soaring peaks rise very steeply if not vertically from a landscape of well groomed alpine meadows and verdant pine forests.

When they first hit your eyes, they really are an awesome sight. Their lofty peaks rise from vivid green lower slopes. In every direction you look, there before you are the ingredients of a picture postcard.



The magnificent vistas at every turn illustrate the stark contrast between their greyish-white, bare, limestone rock faces and the clear-clean high altitude air of a blue sky, often mixed in summer with patchy fair weather cumuli-form clouds.

The Dolomites are said to get their name from the French geologist Deodat de Dolomieu who was able to differentiate between dolomite, (calcium magnesium carbonate) and calcite, (calcium carbonate), the two types of limestone which are the main constituents of these mountains. For a non-geologist it is difficult to accept the fact that these high mountains are the remains of marine sediments and coral that were deposited below shallow open seas some 230 million years ago. They were then uplifted to become spectacular mountains by tectonic plate movements along with the rest of the Alps some 65 million years ago. The evidence for this can still be observed in the fossilised shells and marine creature remains in pieces of rock to be found among the Dolomite paths. In more recent geological time, the elements of wind, rain, snow and ice

have carved out today's landscapes of deep U-shaped glaciated valleys and lake beds.

The beauty and attraction of these mountains is widely acknowledged certainly within Europe. The number of visitors to this part of Northeast Italy is a testament to this beauty. In winter when the mountains are snow covered, hundreds of thousands of tourists arrive to enjoy the benefits of the region's highly developed ski industry. In summer a multitude of ski lifts remain in operation to take a great multitude of walkers effortlessly into the higher reaches of the mountains.

Yes, this can be a lazy-person walking territory if that is your preference. And why not? After all, you must remind yourself that you are on holiday. You will need to conserve all your energy for the numerous high-level traverses of the Alta Via, also for the downhill walks back to the apres-sport life of your valley resort. But if you are the type of person with unlimited time and perfect fitness who must get up to the top under their own steam, there is no need to feel inhibited by the lure of cheap transport. For the summer months, the ski lift companies only charge a fraction of the price of winter lift passes. It is even possible to buy a much cheaper weekly card, which gives you access to a wide range of gondolas, chairlifts and a certain type of lift they call the coffin lift. This card also includes free travel with the local bus company that has the unfortunate acronym of S.A.D. Don't ask me what that stands for, but I'm sure it has nothing to do with lazy walkers.

The coffin lift is a frightening, perpetually moving, two person coffin-shaped cage that hoists you for about 15 minutes in claustrophobic standing mode to a high-level col in the impressive Sassolungo Group of mountains.



From this point some high altitude panoramic walking is possible, descending down a small glacier, passing two Alpine Huts on the way while enjoying some classical Dolomite mountain views.

From this col there is also the opportunity to climb the intimidating 3181 meter Sassolungo peak. However, I would highly recommend taking along a qualified local Alpine Guide booked through the nearest Tourist Office if this is your ambition. Although I was not in the least tempted to tackle this particular peak myself, I was assured by a Guide that it was not as difficult as the almost vertical 3000 feet north face suggests.

The Alta Via routes, as the name suggests, are high-level, long distance walks through some stunning mountain scenery. They follow well maintained tracks, usually old shepherd's paths or former military mule tracks. Many of these tracks are said to have been supply routes that date back to the First World War when this area was a war zone. At that time Italy and Austria fought bitterly over national boundaries, frequently running along ridges or mountain watersheds. Some of these boundaries are still not well defined as witnessed by the 1991 dispute between Italy and Austria over their ownership of Otzi the iceman whose 5300 year old frozen body was found by a couple of German hikers just 93 metres inside the Italian line of the border. Otzi is named after the Austrian valley of Otztal near where he was found, and can now be seen in a climate controlled casket at the Archaeological Museum of Balzano. A one-day visit to this interesting old Italian town can make a relaxing rest from the rigours of hill walking.

Today the Dolomite Area is well within the borders of Italy, established under the settlement of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. A surviving echo of this conflict is the confusion posed by the places and mountains, which are named in both Italian and German and sometimes in Ladin, another local language of this region.

Apart from the differing place names and sign posts, one of the nice things to be found along the tracks is the good number of mountain huts or refuges, most with walker or climber only access. They are situated in the most unlikely of locations where all supplies have to be carried in by aerial cableway, helicopter or mule. Here for a fairly reasonable cost you can stay overnight and enjoy restaurant style meals and drinks. Can you envisage or would you even want to imagine these facilities at the top of any of our Scottish Munros? But this is the Dolomites where mass tourism coupled to easy access accessibility is the order of the day. In contrast to the wilds of Scotland where I have sometimes walked alone for 10 hours

and never met another human being, here solitude is not an option for long, at least not in summer time. But there again don't let that put you off. Somewhere along the way you're bound to meet some very friendly Italian, German, Austrian or American people and perhaps even walkers from somewhere nearer to home.

The Alpine Huts or refuges are sometimes run by local councils, clubs or private families but are mostly run by the C.A.I. No nothing to do with the Central Intelligence Agency of the USA but the Italian Alpine Club. Along with the local valley authorities, they have assumed the responsibility of not only running and looking after the refuges, but of maintaining and numbering the tracks. For someone accustomed to navigating in Scotland across vast areas, often without paths over open mountain terrain, the frequent marking of routes with stripes of red and white paint on rocks or trees at very close intervals will seem a bit over the top. I'm sure the same amount of marking in Scotland would bring howls of horror from many environmentalists and would have people like Cameron McNeish running around our beloved hills with great pots of paint stripper. There is obviously a great surfeit of red and white paint in Italy!

Looking at the plus points, you are unlikely to get lost even if you don't have a map and compass. However, I would strongly recommend carrying these, as route finding must change dramatically in winter when the paint markings are quickly obliterated by ice and snow, and sometimes at higher levels even in summer. However, given the popularity of the Alta Via in summer, the number of ant-like walkers can mark a distant path miles away from your current position. Apart from myself, the only other person I noticed during my Dolomite travels with anything that looked like a compass turned out to be some poor myopic bloke with a magnifying glass!

'Tabacco', 'Kompass' and 'Geographical' publish some good walking maps on various scales. Other locally produced walker's maps must be treated with caution because they are not always orientated with North at the top of the sheet and some rarely show any grid at all. Also when latitude and longitude grid reference is given, the grid points are so far apart as to render them almost useless even with the added assistance of a GPS (Global Positioning System). However local maps are often printed on the back with a panoramic 3-dimensional picture. This is helpful in the

visualisation of the poor contour representation shown on the other side. Local map symbols can also be misleading and off-putting with difficult paths designated with different symbols. And don't be too surprised if you anticipate a difficult section ahead and find in place a well-constructed wooden staircase over what would have been a moderate scramble. These aids were obviously designed for the vast Italian/German/Austrian tourist market or perhaps intended to lessen the casualty rate at the local hospital Accident and Emergency Unit.

Some difficult stretches that are definitely not for the vertigo prone person are marked as 'via ferrate'. They are usually exposed parts of a route where steel cables have been bolted into the rock face to facilitate a safe passage. Again it is worthwhile consulting an Alpine Guide beforehand about the degree of difficulty and exposure



that you are likely to encounter. Some of the via ferrate sections I encountered actually turned out to be nothing worse than a steel cable handrail that you could comfortably take your granny along. Other routes such as the famous Tridentina Route of the Sella Groupe Range can be a real climbing experience. Here you'll meet some of the most exposed pitches imaginable with cast-iron memorials to climbers who died at that point, set into the cliff face to needlessly remind you of your perilous position. To negotiate this type of via ferrate, essential equipment is a helmet, harness, rope and karabiner, not to mention a good head for heights!

If I have captured your imagination, how about a future Cairngorm Club International Meet in the Dolomites?!