

Climbing Italy's alps 'via ferrata'

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Our day began with an easy hike on a well-worn trail. Marcello Cominetti, our 50-year-old mountain guide, led the way, setting a slow but steady pace intended to reserve as much of our energy as possible for what lay ahead.

Michelle, an Australian young enough to be my daughter followed, wearing a tank top, short shorts and oversized sunglasses. Marcello had taken one look at her when we met at our hotel that morning and said bluntly, "Tomorrow, wear pants."

Even though mountain climbing doesn't have to be a hardcore, man-versus-nature experience -- especially the way we would be doing it -- you can still get pretty scraped up when bare skin meets jagged rock.

We were in Italy's Dolomite Mountains for five days of climbing "via ferrata," or climbing the "iron way," using cables, ladders and the occasional bridge.

The Dolomites are better known for skiing than climbing. But when the snow melts each spring, via ferratas are exposed on the bare mountain sides. Many were built during the First World War, when Italian and Austrian troops fought to control the region.

Both sides wanted to be on the mountain tops, so they built bridges and ladders to allow soldiers to ascend the steep mountain faces carrying food, water, munition -- even firewood.

After the war, the Italian Alpine Club replaced the original ropes and wood with steel and iron and built many new via ferratas. Today there are more than 80 routes of varying length and difficulty.

I booked an excursion with Dolomite Mountains, a company specializing in hiking, climbing and biking. First I flew to Venice, then took a train and bus for another three hours before reaching Cortina d'Ampezzo, the site of the 1956 Winter Olympics and now a resort town.

The next morning I was snapping on a helmet, stepping into a climbing

harness and looking up at the sheer rock wall soaring into the blue sky overhead.

I was prepared for a challenge, but I wasn't prepared for the beauty of the Dolomites. This range of the European Alps is so visually stunning that last year UNESCO added parts of it to its World Heritage list.

Pale coloured peaks erupt from gentle green foothills as pinnacles, spires and towers. Cliffs rise more than 1,500 metres. Valleys plunge deeply and dramatically.

"If you fall from there to your death," says Marcello, pointing at a towering rock face on the other side of the valley with no via ferrata, "you are a hero, but if you fall from here and you die, you are just stupid."

Marcello's point was that almost anyone can climb via ferrata. Double-clip your harness onto the cable or to both the cable and your guide, as we're doing, and this is as safe as mountain climbing gets.

Still, safe is not the same as easy. Within minutes of starting our second day's climb on Col dei Bos, Michelle stalls.

"I don't know where to put my feet," she calls to Marcello, a couple metres above us. The rock face was unusually smooth, revealing few toe holds. Although young, fit and long-legged -- and still wearing shorts -- Michelle was stymied.

"Don't talk, just concentrate," Marcello replied in his brusque but not unfriendly way. "If you're talking, you're not climbing."

"But I can't see where to put my feet," she insisted, while I wondered how we would get through the week. "Every day we will do longer and harder climbs," Marcello had told us.

After Michelle struggled for a few more minutes, Marcello suggested she remove her sunglasses to better see small chinks in the rock.

Soon we were moving again and when I looked down an hour later, I was surprised how high we had climbed. Birds were now flying below us.

I also discovered that climbing isn't the chore that hiking sometimes is. Marcello nodded.

"Hiking is boring," he said, practically stifling a yawn.

Well, perhaps in some places, but not here. After climbing the wall and reaching a grassy knoll, we shoved our helmets and harnesses into our backpacks and hiked for another couple hours. Clumps of purple saxifrage sprouted from iron-red soil. Patches of snow stubbornly resisted the sun's warmth.

Marcello bent down and picked up what looked like a piece of rock, but wasn't.

"Shrapnel," he said, handing it to Michelle. "From the war."

Lagazuoi, the mountain peak we were approaching, saw some of the fiercest battles in the Dolomites. Barbed wire, sandbags, bunkers, lookouts and tunnels still attest to the battles waged here, 2,752 metres above the sea.

That night, tucked under my duvet at the Rifugio Lagazuoi, I read that more soldiers died from avalanches and the cold than from combat.

On our final day we climb Tridentia al Pisciadu, one of the most popular via ferratas in the Dolomites. High above us, a dozen or so climbers move in a line like colourful ants. A waterfall tumbles down one side. The sun burns into our backs. For a few minutes I feel light headed and think I might faint.

Then I hear Marcello chiding Michelle for holding herself too close to the cable, preventing her from seeing her feet. She vigorously denies it.

"Then I'm blind!" he retorts. I laugh at their verbal sparring

and keep climbing, knowing I'll get to the top in one piece sooner or later and either will be just fine.

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If you go

- Dolomite Mountains customizes tours based on individual interests and fitness levels. Owner Agustina Lagos Marmol speaks fluent English and discovered the Dolomites while working with Canadian tour company Butterfield & Robinson. Her mountain guides are certified by the International Federation of Mountain Guide Associations.

www.dolomitemountains.com

Accommodation

- Royal Hotel, Cortina d'Ampezzo: No longer regal, but comfortable and clean with a substantial breakfast buffet.

www.hotelroyalcortina

- Posta Zirm Hotel, Corvara: Originally built in 1808 and owned by the same family since 1908. Its exquisite, modern spa includes a Finnish sauna, a caldarium and a steam room. Traditional treatments include a hay bath.

www.postazirm.com/

- Rifugio Lagazuoi: A privately owned "rifugio," or mountain hut on Mount Lagazuoi, next to the Open Air Museum. The dining room offers meals; private rooms or dorm rooms with bunkbeds.

www.dolomiti.org/dengl/Cortina/laga5torri/ospitalita/RifLagazuoi/index.html

- Rifugio Franz Kostner: A rifugio built and owned by the Italian Alpine Club. Managers Cristina and Manuel Agreiter run the hut like a home, welcoming guests with satisfying meals and immaculate rooms.

www.rifugiokostner.it