

# Eat... Alta Badia

Forget schnapps: in this civilised valley in Italy's South Tyrol, the après-ski (not to mention pre- and mid-ski) is all about the fine dining

Words by William Sitwell

Photographs by Sebastian Pearson

**A**s time edges by and my age creeps ever upwards, I have come to discover one incontrovertible truth: skiing holidays get more comfortable. Having formed this view after a trip to the Italian Dolomites, I present the following pieces of evidence. Ski boots are not only more comfortable these days, but in the morning are even dry and warm. Drag and button lifts have been abolished and replaced by comfy chairs that slow down to allow you to get on, rather than attacking you at ferocious speed from behind. Ski passes placed inside your pocket radiate beams to machines that let you through to the lifts, removing the need to wrestle off your gloves to show your pass to a mute, hairy, angry man carrying a shovel. And you can order lobster for lunch in a mountain restaurant, choose Michelin-starred restaurants in the evening, and drop in afterwards at a bar that serves fragrant and aromatic white wines.

And so it was, on my first night in Alta Badia – a valley of six towns – that I found myself having dinner at Stüa di Michil in Corvara. This intimate little restaurant in the charming La Perla hotel boasts a star of the Michelin variety, which is presumably why it serves the likes of delicately flavoured char in a mountain-flower crust with spelt salad and a roasted tomato cream, and a balmy vanilla risotto bolstered by the inclusion of meaty artichokes, blood sausage and fresh lobster.

After dinner I toured the restaurant's wine cellar, possibly the world's most kitsch, a sort of ghost-train ride – albeit on foot – through drinky-drinky heaven. It has piped music, wobbly floors and rooms with every great wine you can imagine. There's even a temple to the 1968 Il Tempio del Sassicaia vintage, where, rather creepily, my guide knelt at an altar to worship a wine that admiring locals have elevated to iconic status.

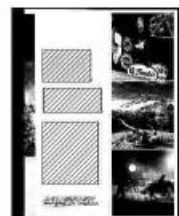
I'd flown in to Venice earlier in the day: I'm more used

to skiing the French slopes of Val d'Isère and Méribel, so it seemed strange to be starting out in the city of canals. In fact, Alta Badia is only 200 kilometres from Marco Polo airport, along the motorway past broad river plains full of vineyards – the kind that, you might think, produce wine with a hint of car exhaust on the nose.

As the mountains crept closer, the road steepened, snow began to fall and we came to Cortina d'Ampezzo. Now a ski resort of faded glory, its glamorous heyday was during the 1950s – it hosted the Winter Olympics in 1956 – and 60s, when the likes of Peter Sellers, David Niven and Claudia Cardinale sipped Campari and soda on its stylish café terraces while filming *The Pink Panther*.

Twenty-five kilometres on from Cortina, Alta Badia is very nearly Austrian, being in the most northern part of the Dolomites. The locals speak more German than Italian (it was under Austrian rule until the First World War) along with a smattering of Ladin. This language, derived from Latin, is a relic of the days when the valley was a northern outpost of the Roman Empire, and is still spoken by 30,000 people in the region.

I slept well after my Stüa di Michil dinner and awoke on my first morning to a scene I always pray for when skiing: a fresh layer of snow and a clear blue sky. From my hotel balcony in the village of Pedraces, I could see down the valley to a few dark wooden houses among the pine trees. Although near to busy Val Gardena, Alta Badia is peaceful. It has smart hotels in Colfosco; chic shops in Corvara; the restaurants of Pedraces and pretty San Cassiano; Christmas markets; and 15th-century churches. The pace of life is gentle; it is a place for families, and the



skiing is punctuated by incredible eating.

Thus, a day on the slopes can kick off with a quick visit to Rifugio Col Alt, at the top of the Col Alt cable car, which leaves from the village of Corvara. Here, the genial Fernando dishes out glasses of champagne to help the passage of oysters down one's throat.

Then, after a gentle morning's skiing, you can lunch at the Las Vegas mountain hut, 2,000 metres above San Cassiano. You can spot the place by the blasted tree stumps that stand outside it, petrified tridents that look like huge cacti from a snowbound *Roadrunner* cartoon. Also outside are deck chairs for sunbathing as you wait for your enormous pizza. The menu comes with stretching exercises, and waiters can bring you blankets to make the benches comfier or your knees warmer.

There is more traditional food at Jimmy's Hütte, above Colfosco. A typically South Tyrolean restaurant, it serves the Austrian pudding, *Kaiserschmarrn* – a kind of shredded pancake with blueberry jam. Jimmy's attracts a wide range of people but, Jimmy says, they don't all pile in at the same time. For some inexplicable reason, the English dine at 1pm, the Germans at 1.30 and the Italians at 2.

For a more luxurious experience, there is Moritzino, at Piz La Ila above La Villa, a short walk or slide from the cable car. The speciality is fish; the menu has a wonderful range of soups – clam and mussel, or turbot, for example – and plenty of red mullet, lobster and sea bass.

And after a day's skiing and guzzling, why not try a spot of skjoring? This strange activity is a speciality of

Alta Badia – think of it as waterskiing behind a horse.

You put on your skis, tie a long rope round a nag and yell, "Gee up, horsey!" Participants race round a circuit at the foot of the Gran Risa slope. This is followed by races between traditional farming sleighs, and the inevitable torchlight procession that winds its way down the hill.

At the end of my trip, leaving Alta Badia early in the morning enabled me to do something at which, living in England, one can only wonder. We drove down from the snow-covered mountains for three hours, toward Marco Polo airport, stopping on the way for lunch in Venice. Breakfast in the snowy mountains, followed by a light lunch of pasta overlooking the Rialto Bridge: could life ever feel more civilised and decadent?

**Eat Alta Badia** page 104

- Bmi flies daily to Venice from London Heathrow. Tel 0870 607 0555; flybmi.com.
- EasyJet flies from Gatwick to Venice (Marco Polo). Tel 0905 821 0905; easyjet.com.
- Ryanair flies from Stansted to Verona. Tel 08712 460000; ryanair.com.
- British Airways flies to Milan Linate from Heathrow; Milan Malpensa from London City and Heathrow; and Venice and Verona from Gatwick. Tel 0870 850 9850; ba.com.

# **Alta Badia**

## Address book

### Restaurants

#### **Jimmy's Hütte**

*Passo Gardena, Colfosco.*

*Tel +39 333 433 2262*

See main feature.

#### **La Siriola Armentarola in**

*Pre De Vi 31, San Cassiano.*

*Tel +39 0471 840092;*

*siriolagroup.it*

Michelin-starred restaurant offering 'creative cuisine', as well as more than 1,300 wines.

#### **Las Vegas Lodge**

*Piz Sorega 15, San Cassiano.*

*Tel +39 0471 840138;*

*lasvegasonline.it*

See main feature.

#### **Rifugio Club Moritzino**

*Piz La Ila, La Villa. Tel +39*

*0471 847403; moritzino.it*

See main feature.

#### **Rifugio Col Alt**

*Top of Col Alt cable car,*

*Corvara. Tel +39 0471 836324*

See main feature.

#### **Rifugio Santa Croce**

*La Crusc 1, Pedrares.*

*Tel +39 0471 839632*

Bar and restaurant beneath the Santa Croce church. It serves an extremely good *Kaiserschmarrn*.

#### **Runch Farm Strada**

*Runch 11, Pedrares.*

*Tel +39 0471 839796*

This 19th-century farm is the perfect place to taste a traditional Ladin meal.

#### **Stüa di Michil**

*Hotel La Perla, Strada Col*

*Alt 105, Corvara. Tel +39*

*0471 831000; hotel-laperla.it*

See main feature.

### Shopping

#### **Caprize Strada Col Alt 96,**

*Corvara. Tel +39 0471 836162*

The place to pick up typical local food products such as mountain cheeses.

#### **Arte del Tessuto Alice**

*Strada Col Alt 45, Corvara.*

*Tel +39 0471 838318*

Great for traditional weavings and textiles.

### Sights and activities

#### **Santa Croce Church**

*La Crusc 1, Pedrares.*

For an insight into the Ladin culture, visit this pretty 15th-century church.

#### **Skijoring**

*La Villa*

Watch local skiers competing in this bizarre local tradition. See [altabadia.org/winter](http://altabadia.org/winter) for the full schedule.

#### **Museum Ladin Tor 72,**

*San Martino in Badia. Tel +39*

*0474 524020; museumladin.it*

Learn about the Ladin heritage here in Tor Castle.

#### **Sotciastel Sotciastel 5,**

*Pedrares. Tel +39 338 485 9425;*

*sotciastel.it*

Ring to arrange a visit to this Ladin farm where, in summer, owner Erika Pitscheider offers weekly Ladin cookery classes.

## Hotels

### **Hotel Melodia del Bosco**

*Strada Runcac 8, Pedraces.*

*Tel +39 0471 839620;*

*melodiadelbosco.it*

Friendly, well-kept, family-run three-star hotel with big bedrooms, a short bus-ride from the slopes.

### **Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa**

*Strada Micura de Rü 20,*

*San Cassiano. Tel +39 0471*

*849500; rosalpina.it*

Historic, luxurious hotel with minimalist spa and the Michelin-starred St Hubertus restaurant.

### **Sporthotel Teresa**

*Strada Damez 64, Pedraces.*

*Tel +39 0471 839623;*

*sporthotel-teresa.com*

Four-star traditional alpine hotel at the foot of Sasso Santa Croce Mountain. Also serves good food.

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*For further information on South Tyrol, see [suedtirol.info](http://suedtirol.info). For details of how to get there, see page 121.*



***Clockwise from below left: At the Las Vegas mountain hut, the enormous pizzas and deck-chairs-with-a-view encourage skiers to linger; the breathtaking scenery can offer a religious experience; wintry knick-knacks abound at Jimmy's Hütte***





***Clockwise from left: Skiers revel in the comfort of a chair lift; badges and labels give Jimmy's Hütte character; slip down an oyster before you slide down the mountain; a skier relies on horsepower for speed***



**Slip down half a dozen oysters, *right*, before sliding downhill; *below*, the pretty Santa Croce church sits at the foot of Monte Cavallo**



