Haute cuisine: fine dining in South Tyrol

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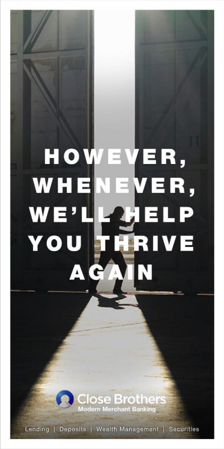
TRAVEL

Most come for the Alpine skiing but the burgeoning culinary scene continues to expand and delight

Altissima isn't quite like any brunch I've ever been to: rustled up by a quartet of chefs with six Michelin stars between them, in a mountain hut 2,100 metres above sea level. Sous-chefs in immaculate whites wrestle with portable stoves, while waiters in natty wool suits and knee-length socks swoop in with champagne refills. Our fellow guests stamp in from the slopes shrugging off ski jackets, and exchanging snowy boots for soft, fur-lined slippers.

The kitchen, meanwhile, turns out a succession of exquisite dishes, from extravagantly truffled eggs to Wagyu carpaccio, via caviar-heaped potatoes, Kamchatka king crab and the best chicken risotto I've ever tasted, laced with buffalo butter, mantis shrimp and a hint of tangerine. Alarmingly, there are still several courses to come, plus dessert and stilton, before we attempt to squeeze into a snowmobile back down the mountain. Luckily, my old-school salopettes have plenty of give; tailor-made for high-altitude gluttony, which comes in handy in this part of the world.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I'm discovering why ski insiders – and gourmands – love the South Tyrol, a scenic sliver of mountainous terrain in the far north of Italy. Unesco-listed since 2009, the Dolomites dominate the landscape, with their jagged spires, pale limestone peaks and densely-forested slopes. It's hard to find a lovelier place to ski, or one with more impressive foodie credentials. This region has a higher density of Michelin stars than any other province in Italy – 23, at the last count – along with an intriguing cultural and culinary heritage. (Part of the Habsburg Empire for centuries, it was annexed to Italy after the First World War, and still has three native languages: German, Italian and the local dialect Ladin.)

You can drive from Innsbruck, Verona or – as we did – Venice, leaving the flat, straight motorway for the hairpin roads that hug the Dolomites, past tiny village churches and snowy pines and through tunnels hewn into the rock. Painted poles line every twist of the narrow road – a reminder of just how heavy winter's snowdrifts can be. Our destination is the tiny village of San Cassiano and the hotel Rosa Alpina, whose fine-dining restaurant holds a coveted three stars.

ROSA
ALPINA

Frankly, it's a charmer from arrival: set in a building that dates back to 1850, and owned by the same family for three generations. (The affable current scion, Hugo Pizzinini, lives upstairs with his wife and three small children). Every room is different, but each has a subtle Alpine touch: a fireplace with a reading nook, a rustic antique chest, or – in the enormous penthouse – a sauna looking out over the mountains. My suite, tucked under the eaves, is pine-panelled and cosy, with its thick wool rugs, enormous bed and green granite bathroom, with a handsome tub and high-tech shower that moonlights as a steam room.

Downstairs, there are roaring fires, capacious sofas and all manner of inviting hideaways; my favourite's the library, with its shaggy Berber rugs, sleek, glass-cube fireplace and enticingly trashy thrillers. There's a dapper, 1930s-style bar manned by staff in white bow-ties, plus a billiard room and tiny private cinema, with blankets and slouchy sofas. There's also a gym (which I don't set foot inside) and a low-lit spa (far more enticing), with saunas, steam baths, a tranquil pool and excellent Alpine-herb massages, which make short work of my après-office, pre-ski knots.

Staying here could seriously sap your resolve to hit the slopes, but conditions are perfect, with cloudless blue skies and pristine snow. Mountain ranges to the north buffer storms and bad weather, so the Dolomites claim 300 days of sunshine a year. In total, there are 1,200km of pistes in the Dolomiti Superski area, running from vertiginous, ice-walled couloirs to exhilarating runs for intermediates, including the famous Sellaronda circuit. Our instructor points it out with a wave of his ski pole: a scenic, 40km loop around the craggy Sella massif, which decent skiers tackle in a day.

Alas, as wobbly beginners we spend the morning on gentler gradients, obediently following in Alex-the-instructor's wake. It feels as if we're flying along, until convoys of small children start to overtake us, flapping their arms like chickens, holding hands, or executing crisp parallel turns. "It's Saturday, so the local kids are having lessons," Alex cheerily explains, waving as his six-year-old nephew speeds by. Still, the setting's beautiful, backdropped by the snowy forest, and before lunch we manage a long, curving blue run that drops all the way to San Cassiano.

Lunch is taken seriously here, in true Italian fashion; an unhurried, sociable affair that generally kicks off with a round of Hugos (prosecco, elderflower syrup, mint and a splash of soda water). At the packed Las Vegas Lodge, we score a table by the window and choose from the typically South Tyrolean Alpine-meets-Mediterranean menu, which runs from sturdy knödel (dumplings) and würstel to risotto and homemade gnocchi. (If in doubt, order the traditional Tyrolean ravioli, stuffed with spinach and cheese, and covered in drifts of parmesan). Another, more jet-set option is the Rifugio Comici hut, known for its impeccable seafood: think spaghetti lobster or grilled monkfish, sourced that morning in Venice's seafood market.

As terrific as the skiing is, all roads – and slopes – here lead to food. As the season kicks in, so do the special events in the Alta Badia valley, including gloriously surreal 'sommelier on the slopes' wine tastings. That extraordinary Altissima brunch, meanwhile, was the launch of the annual Sciare con Gusto ('A Taste for Skiing') initiative, which sees ten star chefs creating an affordable dish for a different mountain hut. (Then available for the whole season). This year's standouts? Beef cheek with polenta by Giorgio Locatelli, moonlighting from his lauded London eaterie, and slow-braised lamb shoulder by Norbert Niederkofler, head chef at the Rosa Alpina.

On the final night of the trip, we're booked into his restaurant, the St Hubertus, awarded three Michelin stars in 2018. The unconventional table centrepiece sets the tone for what's to come: a circular loaf of sourdough bread, gently proving in an elegant glass dome. (Whisked away to be baked as we finish our aperitifs, it emerges from the ovens piping hot, to be slathered with creamy Alpine butter). This is a kitchen with its own take on fine dining, built around seasonal produce sourced solely from the mountains. "We're the only three-star that doesn't work with any French ingredients," Niederkofler explains. "Just the same 49 local farmers."

What could be a limitation instead becomes a challenge – and one that the team rises to, even in the depths of winter. The playful, palette-teasing bruschetta is a taster of their creativity, topped with basil oil-spiked fermented plums that mimic the taste of tomatoes. The rest of the evening's menu is equally full of surprises, from lake fish tartar with grass-green dill oil to mini-waffles with homemade lamb prosciutto, and cloud-light beetroot gnocchi with daikon cream and a sprinkling of beer 'soil'. Dinner ends with buttery tarte tatin and a baroque display of sweets: jewel-like jellies, salted caramels and puffs of cotton candy, served on an enormous antique antler – a final, evocative reminder of the moonlit mountains outside.

Rooms at Rosa Alpina start at €440 per night based on two adults sharing a Double Deluxe Room on a B&B basis, excluding tourist tax. For further information and reservations call Rosa Alpina on + 39 0471 849 500 or visit www.rosalpina.it

For more information on the South Tyrol, visit www.suedtirol.info

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