

S t o r y l i n e s

Twenty-Five Things You Didn't Know About Trentino

***Alpine tourism**

The development of tourism in Trentino owes much to the British and Austrian mountaineering spirit, and to the fondness of the Austrian elite for spas and lakeside scenery. The Alpine club of Great Britain, founded in 1857, inspired a similar association in Trentino in 1872, not just aimed at mountaineering and the training of alpine guides but also devoted to the study of flora and fauna, geology and mountain lore. Five generations later, many of the current 150 alpine guides follow in their father's footsteps, with some from the same families of alpine guides who accompanied the first British mountaineers. Although trained in such disciplines as endurance skiing and climbing, the locals are equally adept at maintaining paths or pointing out the presence of flowers or fossils. On top of general mountaineering skills, many guides are expert climbers, with free climbing particularly popular in Arco, by Lake Garda. In fact, so deeply engrained is the alpine tradition in the Dolomites that one out of twenty citizens is a member of the Trentino Alpinist Society (SAT), which also involves voluntary and conservation work. One consequence of such commitment to the mountains is that levels of fitness are high: even hardy foreign hikers can expect to be overtaken by nimble Trentino pensioners out on a Sunday stroll!

***Austrian heritage**

Whilst Trentino is undoubtedly Italian, its strategic location has made it an historical pawn, not that the region has ever readily ceded to its changing masters. As Alcide De Gasperi, a legendary Italian prime minister from Trentino, once said: "Either you make history or you succumb to it". In 1803 Austria annexed Trentino and, until the First World War, the Marmolada peaks marked the border between Austria and Italy, with the region of Trentino-Alto Adige finally created in 1948. However, Trentino has been a borderland since the times of the Roman empire and later, as part of *Mittleuropa*, cannot deny its Austro-Hungarian legacy. Certain Trentino families can trace their roots back to the Austro-Hungarian empire: De Tarczal, a prominent winemaker near Rovereto, has both the bearing and the distinguished lineage of a noble cavalry officer. Local foods and festivals also evoke the Austrian spirit, from costumes and dumplings to strudel and waltzes. Madonna di Campiglio, one of Italy's smartest ski resorts since Austrian times, celebrates the link in its Hapsburg Carnival in February, a pretext for cavalcades of gay hussars and dressage horses, followed by waltzing and lashings of sweet *sachertorte*. Likewise, the Hapsburg Carnival in Arco evokes the carriages and costumes of the Grand Dukes and the pomp and ceremony of the Imperial court.
► *See: Province with the Mentality of a Region (below).*

***British mountaineers**

The first guidebook to the Dolomites appeared in 1837, published by John Murray of London, and contained the clear message of mountains representing freedom. The intrepid Victorian adventurers needed little prompting to create milestones in mountaineering history, conquering some of the greatest Trentino peaks, despite primitive equipment and arduous journeys made by mule and on foot. Foremost amongst the British pioneers were John Ball, Douglas Freshfield, Francis Fox Tuckett and Leslie Stephen, the father of Virginia Woolf. Tuckett opened up a tough route to Cima Brenta from Molveno, and Rifugio Tuckett, an appealing alpine lodge, honours his contribution, as well as providing filling alpine fare for hikers and skiers. In 1873, John Ball, founding president of the club later known as the Alpine

Club of Great Britain, led mountaineering expeditions to the Trentino Dolomites. In San Martino di Castrozza, now one of the region's smartest ski resorts, Ball was even behind the creation of the first hotel there.

***Bear facts**

The elusive brown bear still lurks in the Adamello-Brenta Park, the last northern Italian refuge of this rapidly disappearing creature. Adamello, Europe's largest glacier, provides the wilderness that the bears require, a setting that embraces woodland, lakes and alpine meadows. Recently, the plight of this endangered species has been recognised and the bears' Slovenian cousins have been introduced in a seemingly successful, if small-scale, breeding programme. The lynx has already been successfully reintroduced and the region has hopes that, in time, the bears will also become a success story. In the meantime, the best chance of bear-spotting is in the Val di Tovel area.

***Castle country**

Playboy caused a stir a few years ago by publishing an issue dedicated to the "Trentino Chatelaines", which featured nude girls in bondage posing in the most spectacular castles. Even without bondage, the castles are impressive enough, with several of the most romantic converted into atmospheric hotels and restaurants.

***Celebrities**

In keeping with the discreet tone of the region, Trentino does not make a show of its celebrity appeal, particularly since most come for peace and quiet in the mountains or a spot of skiing. That said, Trentino attracts such celebrities as Michael Schumacher, a fan of the Madonna di Campiglio ski slopes, and Maria Grazia Cucinotta (of *Il Postino* and James Bond fame), who prefers Trentino to other alpine parts. Trentino has also had more than its fair share of films made in the Dolomites, including Stallone's action movie, *Cliffhanger*, and Gerard Depardieu's *Mirka*, which also starred Vanessa Redgrave.

***Christmas Markets**

These cosy and often kitsch affairs are a chance to sample salami, alpine cheeses and mulled wine while buying curious handcrafts and cribs. The Trento Christmas market fulfils most Christmassy fantasies.

***Dinosaur footprints**

In prehistoric times, dinosaurs were present throughout the Dolomites, and numerous traces remain. In the Rovereto area, in particular, there are dinosaur footprints and a dinosaur trail, best followed with a guide. Two hundred million years ago dinosaurs left their tracks in these sandy causeways, which became fossilised in hard grey limestone. Dinosaurs can also be seen in the Natural History Museum in Trento.

***Environmental awareness**

Trentino is arguably Italy's most environmentally aware region, with a barrage of locally passed laws designed to protect this unspoilt pocket in perpetuity. In particular, motor boats are banned on the Trentino side of Lake Garda, showing a respect for the environment not emulated by the other regions that border the lake. There are equally strict laws governing forestry management. In the Val di Fiemme area and the Lagorai chain, a law holds that for every tree felled, foresters must plant at least six saplings. The thinking behind this is that despite the risks of storms, fire and avalanches, the statistical probability is that at least one of the saplings will survive beyond its hundredth birthday.

***Emigration and enthusiastic stay-at-homes**

Statistics claim that nearly 100,000 inhabitants from Trentino live abroad, a significant number given that the home population is only 400,000. The people once emigrated to places as diverse as the Americas and the former lands of the Austro-Hungarian empire, such as

Bosnia. In practical terms, it means that one can discover a Trentino society in a surprisingly wide range of foreign cities. However, the current relative wealth of the region means that economic emigration has been stemmed. Most locals are only too happy to live and work in such lovely natural surroundings. Indeed, the catchphrase of a recent promotional campaign was: “Don’t go on holiday – come and live in Trentino.”

***Freudian playground**

Under the Austro-Hungarian empire, particularly from the 1850s until the First World War, pockets of Trentino became a playground for the Viennese upper classes. Lake Levico, in particular, was a sought-after watering hole, favoured by such luminaries as Sigmund Freud. The great psychoanalyst saw the lakeshore as a peaceful retreat, and as a calming backdrop for contemplating his complex case studies. In such spas, the grandest hotels are often designed in Hapsburg style, with Biedermeyer furnishings.

***German enclave**

The Mocheni are people of German origin, descendants of those who came to work in the mines in the 16th century. This German-speaking group settled near Lavarone, in the charmingly rural Valle dei Mocheni, and maintain their traditions and cultural distinctiveness, as well as priding themselves on their well-kept farmhouses. Along with the Ladin (*see below*), the Mocheni represent the most significant linguistic minority in Trentino. ► *Request the Festivals brochure.*

***Herbal cures and hay baths**

Trentino is a herbalist’s paradise, with medicinal herbs to fight everything from asthma to the “evil eye”. These herbal remedies include: blackcurrant leaves, used as a cure for spring allergies and as an asthma remedy; willows, once used as aspirins, and now used in numerous cures; and arsenic, grown on alpine pastures, which was once used against malaria, but now has countless other beneficial uses. Hay baths are a bizarre but soothing catch-all cure involving copious sweating under mounds of freshly gathered hay.

***Little Finland**

Trentino is often dubbed “Little Finland”, thanks to its myriad alpine lakes and large stretches of wilderness – only the reindeer are absent. The region boasts almost 300 lakes, which generally lie at high altitudes. Apart from the sea-like expanse of Lake Garda, which enjoys a balmy Mediterranean micro-climate, there are another 296 ice-blue lakes, including Levico, Molveno and Caldonazzo. As for wilderness, over half the Trentino territory is given over to forests, with 20 per cent of the total land protected.

***Mushroom police**

Despite combining food and fun, mushroom-gathering is a serious business in Trentino, policed by specially appointed mushroom patrols. Visitors are forbidden from collecting more than two kilos per person, and need to be armed with a mushroom permit, available from the forestry commission. Those without a licence or caught gathering mushrooms after hours (7am-7pm) will be heavily fined. The region claims the widest range of mushrooms in Italy, including the prized *funghi porcini*, tiny *finferli* and the top-heavy *tamburi*, many of which find their way into local risotto, pasta, polenta or game dishes.

***Music in the mountains.**

The people are deeply musical, with over 150 choirs in Trentino, one for every second village. A local saying runs: “One person from Trentino resembles an unsociable bear; two people from Trentino mean an argument; and three people form a choir”. The choirs’ repertoire ranges from alpine folk music and oompah bands to operetta and ethnic songs close to the heart of Trentino’s linguistic minorities. In addition, more poignant melodies evoke wartime memories, when soldiers fought on this bleak alpine front during World War One, or were sent to refugee camps in Bohemia. On a happier note, music accompanies the best

festivals, including the *Sounds of the Dolomites*, when well-known performers from around the world give inspirational open-air concerts in the mountains. These free concerts, held from June to September, are an increasingly popular summer attraction. ► *Request the Sounds of the Dolomites programme.*

***Parapenting**

This breathtaking new sport, carried out over the mountain peaks, is a cross between parachuting and flying. Locations include the Canazei and Val di Fiemme area where Jimmy Pacher, the world parapenting champion, holds sway, and runs courses for enthusiasts. ► *Request the Sports brochure.*

***Polenta-eaters**

The locals' fondness for this alpine peasant fare has caused them to be dubbed "polenta-eaters" by Italians from other regions. But those in Trentino know how delicious polenta can be, made in a copper cauldron, and served with cheese, mushrooms, venison, sausage or sauerkraut. This preference for polenta also distinguishes the people from the German-speakers in neighbouring Alto Adige, the South Tyrol, who use wheat to bake bread, not make polenta. Fortunately, like much peasant fare, polenta has come back into fashion again in the smartest foreign restaurants.

***Province with the mentality of a region**

Trentino-Alto Adige is an Italian anomaly: an autonomous region containing two autonomous provinces, a product of the region's chequered ethnic divide. Trentino is resolutely Italian, with a Latin soul, while Alto Adige, also known as the South Tyrol, is Teutonic and German-speaking. During the First World War, a third of the Trentino population was either interned or evacuated to refugee camps in Bohemia or Moravia, and the economic crisis continued into the 1930s, since the Fascists favoured investing in the Bolzano area. The creation of the Trentino-Alto Adige region in 1948 was followed by full autonomy for Trentino, which brought economic and political stability. Moreover, the revival of agriculture, particularly in the form of wine and apples, undoubtedly helped Trentino, as did the growth of the winter tourist industry.

***Quality of life**

Trento regularly comes within the top ten Italian cities for quality of life. As a city on a human scale, with an historic city centre, it fits the bill. Its appeal also extends to an unspoilt environment, with the great outdoors on the doorstep, and equally fine food and wine produced locally. The sound economy is supported by excellent schools, social services and sports facilities, and endless leisure opportunities.

***Real Romans or simply Ladins?**

Trentino's Ladin-speaking minority has settled in Val di Fassa, close to the resort of Canazei. Ladin is a Romance language, close to Latin, once spoken over much of central Europe, and as far south as Emilia Romagna, but now restricted to pockets of Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli and Switzerland. Ladins claim to have been settled in the Trentino area for 2,000 years, suggesting links with the first Roman settlers. Ladin-speakers, who live mainly in the valleys, are noted for their entrepreneurial flair, folklore and homely recipes (tasted in such alpine inns as Rifugio Fuchiade). The lively Campitello carnival celebrates the clowns, lackeys and masked dancers who feature in Ladin legends and satanic rites. Local newspapers contain sections in Ladin, and certain words have gained currency amongst the general Italian-speaking population: *enrosadira* is a Ladin dialect word for the fiery red colour the Dolomites turn at sunset.

***Sense of spirituality and charity**

Most British students of European history cannot fail to know about the Council of Trent, with its impact felt throughout Christendom. The Council, held in Trentino's capital city,

marked the start of the Counter-Reformation, the response of the Catholic Church to the spread of Protestantism. At the time, Trento's role was even more marked, given its geographical location as the last Italian-speaking city before the German world. The people in Trentino still tend to be devout Catholics, particularly in the provinces. However, few know that the province is arguably the most charitable in Italy. In proportion to its population, the diocese of Trento, for instance, donates more aid to undeveloped countries than any other in Italy. This includes overseas missionary and charity work, and the supply of priests, as well as aid.

***Violins**

The Paneveggio forest, set in the San Martino area, is often dubbed "the forest of violins" since it owes its fame to Antonio Stradivari (1643-1737). Better known as Stradivarius, this master lute-maker from Cremona came here to choose the perfect wood for his instruments. If the Stradivarius is still a byword for sublime sound and beauty of tone, it is partly thanks to the spruce from these forests. Although the instruments are masterpieces of intricate design, Stradivarius' distinctive sound was achieved by an artful blending of wood. The secret was to select only the type of spruce noted for its rich resonance, trees formed in a bitterly cold period between 1600 and 1850, and characterised by subtle and closely-packed rings. Stradivarius knew how to "read" the rings and choose the most resonant examples. Although global warming means that this scenario is unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future, there is hope that the trees, which grow to heights over 450 metres, will produce the occasional specimen worthy of the great master.

***War sites**

Given its strategic location on the border between Austria and Italy, the Trentino Dolomites became a theatre of war between 1915-17, with thousands of soldiers struggling in icy conditions at altitudes of 3000 metres. Known as the "white war," this campaign of attrition caused almost 500,000 casualties on the Italian side alone and left a million soldiers wounded. Today, the peaks are dotted with the remains of military fortifications pitted with bullet-holes, as well as trenches, gun emplacements, secret tunnels, commemorative crosses, roads and forts. The greatest concentration of sights lie along the so-called "path of peace" which runs along the former front line, leading to the Adamello and Marmolada glaciers. There are also several engrossing war museums, including Forte Belvedere, above Lavarone.

***Wine lake**

Trentino-Aldo Adige produces the highest number of Doc (*appellation controlle*) wines, and Trentino itself is a major wine region, producing over 30 per cent of all Italian sparkling wines, including the best Spumante, the only serious rival to French Champagne. Major wines include ruby-red Marzemino, Mozart's favourite wine, purplish Teroldego, as well as aromatic white Muller-Thurgau and elegant Pinot Grigio. In Val di Cembra, Trentino also claims to have the highest vineyards in Europe. As for festivals, the long summer *Vinum Bonum* festival combines concerts and wine-tasting in historic cellars. ► *Request the Vinum Bonum brochure*. And then there's *grappa*, the local firewater, but that's another story.