

Storylines

Walking & Hiking in the Dolomites

The region boasts some of the country's best-kept mountain paths and cycling trails. Cycle paths range from gentle river-bank trails to altitude climbs and endurance tests, with summer signalling the start of mountain bike races over rough terrain. By contrast, hikers can travel at a slower pace, one more in keeping with the mood of contemplation engendered by the awe-inspiring peaks. Keen walkers can enjoy 6000 kilometres of marked paths, ranging from soft to strenuous itineraries, from a leisurely stroll around the shore of Lake Garda (from Torbole to Riva del Garda) to a major expedition to explore the chain of alpine forts dotted around the Dolomites (*see War Trails below*).

In the Trentino Dolomites, the scenery can be domesticated or wild, spanning views of apple orchards or flower-studded meadows, with beds of orange lilies fading into alpine pastures. The varied landscape embraces low-slung fortified castles, silvery-grey lakes, and forests of beech, larch and firs. To commune with a musical genius, you can walk the forests where Stradivarius came to select the choicest spruce for his violins, noted for their resonance. Stretches of landscape are dotted with shepherds' bothies, quaint sawmills, stone barns with larch-tiled roofs, and cowsheds turned into cosy rural inns. Trails are adapted to different levels of skill, from Sunday softies to serious hikers equipped with safety harnesses, ropes and protective helmets. Many hiking trails are connected to the vast network of alpine lodges in Trentino, known as "refuges", which provide shelter, bed and board, as well as hearty meals for visitors just passing through.

► *For booklets and brochures on walking and mountain-biking trails all over Trentino, contact the London Trentino office to let us know which areas you are most interested in. Also request the brochures on **Lakes** (covering the region's 297 lakes and opportunities to explore them) and **Parks** (covering the protected areas in Trentino, from nature reserves and botanical gardens to regional and national parks, as well as expanses of wilderness which provide perfect habitats for wildlife ranging from deer to chamois and even brown bears. For more information on how to plan a trip, including staying or eating in "rifugi" (refuges), request the **Refuges** booklet and the **Alpine Inns and Lodges ("Refuges") Storyline**. For a run-down on summer outdoor activities, including hiking and mountain-biking, request the **Summer Sports** brochure.*

Gradations of difficulty in hiking trails:

In summer, the "refuges" make ideal starting points for hiking trails, which are clearly marked to indicate their level of difficulty. The range covers:

***Tourist Trail (marked T):** the easiest level; a straightforward route, whether alpine path or forest trail. Do remember, however, that the trails have been designed by an alpine region where general fitness levels are far higher than in the UK, for instance. In

other words, it's sensible to try out the trail yourself before recommending it to readers: Trentino's idea of "easy" does not necessarily seem so to a housewife from Surrey or to a retired office-worker from Croydon!

***Hiking Trail (marked E):** a route without any particular difficulties or obstacles, although it could be rough, bumpy or steep.

***Expert Hikers Trail (marked EE):** a clearly-plotted trail at variable and often high altitudes, along routes which call for sure footing and a good head for heights. Certain stretches, such as along the *Vie Ferrate* (the so-called "Iron paths" (*see below*)) call for particular equipment, including harnesses and ropes.

***Equipped Expert Hikers (marked EEA):** a route only to be tackled by the most competent hikers, ideally accompanied by an alpine guide. Hikers should be suitably equipped with helmets, harnesses and so on.

Cycling and mountain-biking trails: Trentino is a paradise for cyclists and mountain-bikers. ► *Request the **Summer Storyline** from the Trentino London office, as well as the **Summer Sports** brochure. For more booklets and brochures on mountain-biking trails in specific areas of Trentino, contact the London Trentino office.*

Nature trails: Botanical trails in the Dolomites unfurl carpets of campanula and primula, edelweiss and orchids. The meadows above Madonna di Campiglio, one of the country's most prestigious winter sports resorts, are often carpeted in orange lilies. Trentino's varied climate, which encompasses the balmy shores of Lake Garda and the austere landscape of mountain glaciers, produces an exceptional range of vegetation: Mediterranean orchids, olive groves and vineyards give way to impenetrable forests of fir trees or rocky ledges dotted with the unfortunately named devil's claw. Elsewhere, there are pockets of wetlands, dotted with peat bogs and reed beds.

Wildlife trails: These are best experienced in the company of an alpine guide, an expert on the animals' habits and habitat. Since the national passion for hunting is curbed in Trentino, marmots, chamois, red deer and roe deer are plentiful, and the ibex has been successfully introduced. Even the elusive native brown bear is making discreet contact with his Slovenian cousins in the region's attempt to boost the bear colonies significantly by 2008.

Heritage trails: Apart from botanical trails and classic long-distance Dolomites paths tracing dark ravines and pink peaks, walkers can select from a series of rewarding heritage trails. Inspired by archaeological, geological, spiritual or military themes, these trails satisfy mind, body and spirit alike. ► *Since each area of Trentino has its own particular trails, contact the Trentino London office for more information.*

Religious trails: Holy Jubilee was celebrated with the promotion of pilgrimage routes linking tiny Romanesque chapels with onion-domed alpine churches before sweeping down into the valley to majestic Trento cathedral, rendered famous by the Counter-

Reformation and the seminal Council of Trent. ► *Request the Trento Factfile Storyline. Most of these routes are still feasible, despite the passing of Holy Year. *Request the Jubilee brochure.*

War trails & military routes: the most illustrious trail is the Path of Peace, tracing 400 kilometres of military installations from the First World War. Considered feats of military engineering, these Austrian-built forts, casemates and trenches are still visible along the former Austrian-Italian front, which stretched up towards the lofty Marmolada glacier. This front witnessed the battle dubbed 'the white war' as thousands of troops fought blindly amidst the impenetrable snow and ice. Today's demanding trail weaves its way through an almost Tibetan landscape of stark glaciers and shadowy canyons, interspersed with dense woods, high waterfalls, tumbling streams and shimmering alpine lakes. Gentler sections can be tackled on horseback but riders will miss out on the chance to stumble across spent cartridges and war memorabilia on, or just off, the walking trail.

Vie Ferrate, the "iron trails": The toughest high Dolomite trails are named after the spaghetti lines of iron cables that are implanted in the steeper rock, with sections covering sheer cliff faces. Runged ladders are used in a sport that, in rugged Trentino, is still considered walking rather than mountain-climbing. ► *Request a copy of a long action report covering the Vie Ferrate written by Alun Davies, the editor of Adventure Travel.*

Alpine guides: Since 1872, the Trentino alpine guides have been involved in exploration, research, forestry, and, of course, guiding. Trentino's alpine guides are still renowned for their expertise and include world-class mountaineers in their own right. Franco Nicolini, to name but one example, is a guide based by Lake Molveno who is not only the current Italian ski-mountaineering champion but has also scaled the highest peaks in Tibet and Patagonia. Hiring an alpine guide is one of the best ways to get under the skin of the region. ► *For a list of the alpine guiding associations, request the Refuges booklet.*

Environmental benefits of exploring Trentino:

This is Italy's most environmentally aware region, with myriad clean lakes, the constant monitoring of Lake Garda, and motor boats banned from Trentino waters. As well as expanses of sheer wilderness, Trentino also has the largest national park in the country, part of almost 20 percent of territory given over to protected reserves. A green consensus ensures that a balance is struck between safeguarding select habitats and preserving virgin forests, while providing a livelihood for the locals. For many, life is linked to the land, with alpine pastures tended by shepherds; mountain guides trained in the skills of free climbing or mountaineering; and ski instructors doubling up as summer forestry officials or rafting instructors. Protection of the environment and sustainable tourism also goes hand in hand with a sound legal framework. Compared with most Italian regions, Trentino has a healthy respect for both natural and man-made laws: deep in the woods, even mushroom-picking is regulated by the feared *funghi* police. ► *See the Storyline entitled Twenty-Five Strange Things You Didn't Know about Trentino.*

The Year of the Mountains:

The international “Year of the Mountains” is upon us, a United Nations-inspired venture that seeks to combine celebration of the world’s natural wonders with promotion of specific mountain ranges, alpine sports and scientific research into sustainable development. In Italy, the “Year of the Mountains” will be a high-profile affair, with mountainous regions vying with one another in staging spectacular events. The Italian committee has already decided to floodlight five significant mountains in honour of the occasion. The event has also been heralded by the introduction of an Italian “mountains credit card”, with 50 per cent of all profits going to support struggling alpine communities. While far from struggling, Trentino is fully behind any initiatives that favour alpine culture, sustainable development and tourism. Moreover, as the self-declared home of the Dolomites, Trentino is well-placed to promote its greatest assets – so expect to see the peaks celebrated in words, music, wine and sporting events.

► *For more details of the events connected with this international jamboree, see www.mountains2002.org. For details of how Trentino plans to celebrate the year, check with the London Trentino office – and **keep your diary free for 16th May and 13th June!***