

THE DRAMATIC DOLOMITES

THE ITALIAN *DOLOMITI* COMPRISE JUST A FRACTION OF THE ALPINE CRESCENT, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO RIDING, GEOGRAPHY, CUISINE, CULTURE AND WOW-FACTOR, YOU CAN'T DO MUCH BETTER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MITCH BOEHM

It was one of those *of course!* moments you have on occasion, a head-slapper obvious enough that you wonder if you're losing your grip.

There I was, peering through the Boeing jet's window at the just-visible coast of Britain off to my left as the orange morning sun was just beginning to glow on the horizon on my way to Munich, Germany, and the launch of our 2024 Alps Challenge Tour with a large handful of AMA

members...and trying to gin up an angle for this year's tour coverage in the magazine.

A flight attendant appeared with coffee and asked about breakfast, and instead of thinking of the offered croissant and omelet I flashed on the surprisingly good pasta I'd had hours earlier on the plane...and from there I imagined the spaghetti carbonara and rigatoni-con-marinara that awaited our group once into the Italian Alps — and, more specifically, the

spectacular Dolomites.

And poof, there it was: Alpine *Italia* and the Dolomites... *Of course!*

At that point I'd visited and ridden in the Alps more than a dozen times. And while that 750-mile-wide and 125-mile-tall crescent of mountains touching eight countries and running from southeastern France to northeastern Austria — and from southern Germany to northern Italy — has

been a motorcyclist's paradise since the beginning of two-wheeled time, the Dolomite region directly south of Munich and just northeast of Milan is absolutely extra special, and for a whole lot of cultural, historical, geographical, culinary and road-design reasons.

“FATIGUE MAKES COWARDS OF US ALL”

Still, this year's Alps Challenge tour with the Edelweiss



Motorcycles, good folks, great culture and cuisine, and some of the most amazing geography anywhere. The Alps are pretty hard to beat.





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folks and about 18 AMA members didn't start off all that well, at least for me. Normally I give myself a full day to acclimate once I've arrived on European soil to deal with the jet lag and the (sometimes) lack of sleep that accompanies an 11-hour overseas flight. But this year, for work- and deadline-related reasons, I didn't do that.

I left Salt Lake City for our base hotel near Munich on Wednesday afternoon, arriving at about 9 a.m. Thursday, and didn't sleep much on the plane, just an hour or two. And thanks to jet lag I didn't sleep all that well at the hotel Thursday night, either...which meant that by the time I was suiting up to begin the tour on Friday morning (nearly two days after I'd left Utah) I'd only had maybe six hours of sleep. Definitely not ideal.

Good coffee and adrenaline kept me going all morning as we rode south toward the Alps, and like every other year, the excitement of seeing the peaks rise up on the horizon is palpable, and never gets old. But after a cappuccino stop at legendary Lake Chiemsee (King Ludwig II built a replica of the Palace of Versailles on an island there in the late 1800s) and a truly awesome pork schnitzel lunch (our guide Michael's recommendation, and a good one), I started to fade in a major way as we climbed into the Alps proper and headed toward the famous Grossglockner High Alpine Road — the highest paved pass in Austria.

Feeling woozy and nodding off is bad anytime you're on a motorcycle (or in any motor vehicle, really), but it's extra ugly



Left: Hitting the first line of the Dolomite chain is pretty awesome; you've just got to pull over and snap a photo. And then there's the pasta...



despite the puddles, painted lines and slick conditions — right along with some of the more skilled riders, brothers Greg and Jimmy, especially, who were in a similar mood. Riding with those two injected adrenaline into my system all the way to the top, and for most of the way to our hotel in Lienz, Austria, a couple hours later.

I say "most of the way" because, for the last 40 or so miles, and as I parked the Tiger 900 in the garage and checked into our hotel in Lienz, I was a blubbering and nearly incoherent mess. Despite thought

in the mountains, where the briefest of concentration lapses can have you playing parachutist without the necessary gear...and as I struggled to maintain focus, the idea of a few more hours on my Triumph Tiger 900 was stressing me out. And with a big group in tow, pulling off and laying down for a 30-minute in-yer-gear catnap — as I'd have done if I'd been on my own — wasn't gonna happen.

Luckily, as we started up the pass toward Grossglockner, it began to rain, which changed the game completely, at least for a while. Suddenly there was a challenge ahead, a twisty and mostly slick road to negotiate and conquer, and a desire to get to the top reasonably quickly, but also in one piece



processes mired in axle grease, I distinctly remember understanding why sleep deprivation was used as a torture tool to break people.

I'd planned to attend dinner with the group that evening after a short nap, but I ended up sleeping right through the alarm I'd set and waking up wide-eyed and bushy-tailed at midnight. Even worse, I was starving, and with the hotel lobby dark and not a vending machine in sight, I was out of luck.

But once again fortune smiled on me, because when I wandered outside for some fresh air I found a summer-fest celebration going on, with food vendors, live music and plenty of beer, which I ended up sharing — along with some tasty sausages and mustard — with the aforementioned Jimmy and his brother Scott, who were also dealing with a bit of jet lag and wide awake. We had some laughs, and eventually got some more sleep in anticipation of the following day's ride.

INTO ITALIA

Lienz is just a stone's throw from the Austrian/Italian border and the northern edge of the Dolomites, and I love how things begin to change the instant you ride from Austria into northern Italy. You notice this right away on signage, but it's much deeper than that, the manicured orderliness of the German-Austrian Alps giving way to a

more casual and rougher-around-the-edges environment, all of which meshes pretty well with Italy's more casual personality. It's definitely not a bad thing.

The verdant pastures and tiny communities located high above the picturesque Austrian valleys on the sides of mountains remain (I always wonder how folks get up there in winter...and how sheep and cattle deal with the steep hillsides), but the Swiss- and chalet-style architecture so common in Austria and much of the rest of the Alps changes a little once in Italy; the structures are a little more random, a little less orderly, and the grounds around them a little messier. The roads are a little rougher, too, but in a good way, and you get the feeling that Italians might spend a little more time cooking, drinking wine, conversing and laughing than the Austrians. Just a hunch.

As you push farther south and west along the top edge of the Dolomite region — our destination at the end of day two was Bolzano, or *Bozen* in Eurospeak, the "gateway to the Dolomites" — it's impossible to miss the change in

geography. Where the Austrian Alps have that typical Alpine look — quaint, gingerbread-esque villages and amazingly verdant valleys surrounded by towering peaks with green pastureland and foliage on the bottom half, and rockier (and often snow-specked) terrain above the tree line — the Dolomites, which constitute maybe 5 percent of the entire Alps chain, are much more jagged and abrupt, with pale-colored spires jutting dramatically what seems like miles into the air.

This impressive geography makes more sense when you consider how the two mountain types were created. The vast majority of the Alps chain was created the old-fashioned way...by the violent pushing, shoving and



If you thought that maybe the Dolomite region was a bit like a racetrack situated at the foot of the most amazing mountain peaks anywhere, you wouldn't be wrong.



churning of tectonic plates some 60 or 70 million years ago.

Geologic movement helped build the Dolomite region, too, but much of what constitutes them was formed by an ancient sea and the coral reefs and marine life that accumulated on the seabed over the millennia. These layered effluvia solidified into limestone, which morphed and were pushed/eroded skyward over time into the pale rock formations we see today. The Dolomites, by the way, are named after French naturalist Deodat de Dolomieu, whose 18th century discoveries shed light on the unique composition of the physical Dolomites.

BOZEN, AKA BOLZANO

As the “gateway” to the Dolomites, Bolzano sits at the northwest corner of the region, and is an

approximately 100-mile ride to the west and south from Lienz — though our route there on Day 2 was a crazy zig-zag of high-alpine passes that skirted the top edge of the Dolomites and offered up some of the most spectacular riding and geography on earth.

It’s always fun to hear what the tour guests have to say at coffee stops or during lunch on Day 2 of this tour, as most of them have never seen anything like it. I rode quite a bit on Day 2 with two-up husband and wife Curtis and Gail from northern Nevada, and on

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a few occasions they’d give me one of those eyebrows-raised, head-slowly-shaking, *we don’t really believe what we’re seeing!* looks. It was fun to watch.

As we neared Bolzano after a pizza lunch and a handful of really challenging passes, we ran into the downside related to the timing of this particular tour...late August, which can not only be very warm (especially at lower altitudes, which applies to Bolzano) but thick with summer-vacation traffic — cars and motorcycles for sure, but also bicycles. We encountered this last year and, with 20-20 hindsight, should have scheduled this tour in September when it’s cooler and less congested.



One of the prime elements of our Alps Challenge tours are the (usually) two “rest days,” where you stay in a particular town and hotel for two nights instead of just one. This gives guests an option to take either a short or longer ride the following day (most do), be a tourist and check out the local culture and attractions, or do a little of both.

Bolzano is the first of these rest days, and it’s ideally suited, with lots to do in town (Otzi, the incredibly interesting 5,000-year-old frozen mountain man who lies

in a museum there, is a prime example), great eateries seemingly on every corner, and an amazing selection of routes and passes to experience if you choose to ride. Our excellent guides Daniel, Michael and Ralph had a choice of routes (short or long, take your pick) ready to go, and while I caught up on work in the hotel, our group members had a fantastic day — and a great group dinner that night.

In all, the route to Bolzano and the following day in the Dolomite-dotted area netted a large handful of amazing passes, including *Passo Tre Croci* (1,809 meters), *Passo Di Giau* (2,236 meters), *Passo Di Falzarego* (2,015 meters), *Passo Valparola* (2,197 meters), the Campolongo Pass (1,875 meters), *Passo Pordoi* (2,239 meters), *Passo Sella* (2,218 meters) and *Passo Gardena* (2,121 meters).



LIVIGNO! LIVIGNO!

As always, leaving Bolzano and heading to the wonderfully Tyrolean ski valley of Livigno — which is the second stay-two-nights destination — is a highlight of the tour. First, you’ve got the Mendel Pass, with its wood-rasp pavement and perfectly smooth



Top: Italy’s *Passo di Gavia*; super-narrow in places, mostly barrier-free and filled with blind corners. Not so fun for some.



asphalt, all of which leads to the stunning Panoramahotel Penegal, which overlooks the entire Bolzano valley. It may be the coolest cappuccino stop in all of Europe, and reaching it via the bumpy, pine needle-dusted road — which is one-lane in sections — is always a hoot, especially if you're riding with folks who *always* want to go as fast as possible. Once again, Greg and Jimmy didn't disappoint.

Later in the day came *Passo del Tonale* and *Passo di Gavia*, the latter very much a love-hate thing with participants. It starts out mellow enough in warm and lovely *Ponte di Legno*, but quickly becomes challenging and scary as it threads north and skyward above the tree line, in places narrowing to barely a car width, with cliffside sections lacking any sort of guardrail that might save your bacon if you



Edelweiss' tour guides are notoriously capable and friendly, and ours — from left, Ralph, Daniel and Michael, seen here post-ride — didn't disappoint.

screwed up and needed to be punted — however roughly — back onto the tarmac.

Historically, Livigno was remote, agriculturally based and very poor, and to keep things percolating economically, the Powers allowed it to be a duty-/tax-free zone. These days it's a tourist favorite for both summer and winter activities, and while quite upscale (our hotel there, the Lac Salin, is a four-star, and parts of the 2026 Winter Olympics will be staged in the valley), the duty-free element remains.

The best part, though, might be the pizza joint we first experienced three years ago — and visited again this time — just a couple blocks from the Lac Salin. (Oh, Domenico, we have pineapple for your pizza! Where are you?)

STELVIO, OH STELVIO

While Livigno isn't technically part of the Dolomites, the two days spent in and near there are always a favorite part of this tour, and the riding heading to and from this Alpine wonderland is pretty epic. On riding Day 6 (of seven) we punched into Switzerland for a bit, with the Bernina, Fluela, Fuorn and Umbrail passes on our menu before turning east and northward into Italy again and our final hotel in Sölden, Austria.

But not before one of the tour's definite highlights — *Passo dello Stelvio*, the second-highest paved pass in all of Europe and one of the most popular rides/drives in the entire Alps. Built in 1820–1825 by the Austrian Empire, the pass — which saw some violent battles during WWI — features 75 hairpins in total, 48 on the northern side alone, and is a serious motoring challenge, with the popular TV show *Top Gear* calling it the “greatest driving road in the world.” The *Giro d'Italia* bicycle race often runs over Stelvio, which is only open from May to November due to heavy snow.

THE LAST RIDE

At the end of Day 6 we summited the last major pass of the trip, the *Passo del Rombo*, or Timmelsjoch, which sits smack dab on the Italian/Austrian border just south of Sölden in Austria. It's yet another amazingly twisty and challenging pass, and at the border crossing is a motorcycle museum called Top Mountain that has to be seen to be believed. It burned to the ground some years back but has returned bigger and better than ever. There's a great restaurant with equally good cappuccino on site, so a stop there is a necessity.

Sölden, like Livigno, is one of those picture-perfect Tyrolean ski towns that's busy year around, and it's always a fine spot to spend our final night, with a nice hotel and a quite good restaurant within. Since we'd be heading back to Munich the following day, the storytelling, beers, laughs and lies were pretty thick that evening, and we all had a great time, the group having bonded nicely over the last week — which always seems to be the case on tours like this.

For dinner I ordered the pasta special, and when it arrived along with a bowl of *Parmigiano Reggiano* on the side, I sat back and flashed on the little pasta epiphany I had on the flight eight days earlier.

We weren't in Italy anymore, but with Italy's to-die-for culinary skills very definitely alive and well in Austria, it didn't matter.

There it was. Pasta. Alpine *Italia*. And the Dolomites. *Of course!* **AMA**