



The Alta Via No. 1

Introduction

The Dolomites are spectacular limestone massif situated in northern Italy at the eastern end of the Alpine chain. The name of the range derives from the French geologist the Marquis de Dolomieu who first documented the region on a visit in 1789. During the First World War the mountains were the scene of bitter fighting, and troops dug fortifications into the most inaccessible parts of the mountains. Incredible paths were cut into sheer cliff faces and tunnels were constructed through the mountains, linking gun placements. Even today many of the remnants of these fortifications can still be seen. Indeed it was the construction of these aerial walkways that led to the development of Via Ferratas – the artificial scrambling routes equipped with steel ladders and cables which venture into steep terrain normally the preserve of the rock climber.

Although the Dolomites do not reach the same lofty heights as the peaks of the Central and Western Alps, their summits do rise to over 3,300 metres. Above the green forested valleys, there is an enormous amount of bare rock and some of the faces of the Dolomite giants are among the most impressive and important in Europe. The Tre Cima di Lavaredo, the Tofana de Rozes, Monte Pelmo and the Civetta are just some of the long list of instantly recognisable peaks whose tremendous faces offer rock climbs of the most exceptional difficulty. Indeed so technical are many of these routes that it was in the Dolomites where aid climbing was first developed.

To fully appreciate the wild and rugged beauty of the Dolomites we spend 7 days hiking beneath its fairytale spires and dramatic rock walls, with an occasional foray into the pretty valleys below. Our path follows the high route the locals call the *alta via* and winds through the most spectacular peaks high above the famed resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Trip Profile

The Alta Via 1 is a waymarked long distance footpath which runs from north to south for approximately 93 miles, beginning at Lago di Braies in Val Pusteria and finishing at Belluno. The southernmost section of the route involves some tricky Via Ferratas which are unsuitable for a walk of this type and our Great Walks version will follow the northern two thirds of the route as far as Passo Duran, thus avoiding these more difficult sections. We have designed this walk to be a high level traverse, and consequently we will be staying in mountain refuges for most nights of the trip. This means that we will be carrying all necessary clothing and equipment ourselves and will not generally have access to vehicle support.

To enjoy this walk to the full you ideally need to be familiar and comfortable with backpacking and enjoy staying in high mountain refuges. The paths are generally very good, well-maintained, and clearly waymarked throughout. Many of the days have a reasonable degree of ascent and descent, often as much as 1000 metres, but each night we can look forward to hearty alpine meals in the welcoming and lively Italian refuges.

Itinerary

Day 1 Arrival in Venice

We are met on arrival at Venice Airport by our ground transport and walking leader and from there make the three hour journey to our hotel in the town of Cortina. Nestling among some of the highest mountains in the Dolomites, Cortina is a fashionable resort with many shops and restaurants. After our evening meal the trek guide will do a gear check with every trip member and assist with the ruthless task of paring down the weight of our rucksacks. Any items not to be taken on the walk will then be packed into our Great Walks trek bags.

Day 2 Lago di Braies to Refuge Biella

After breakfast we transfer by road to the blue waters of Lago di Braies in Val Pusteria. This stunning lake nestles between the mountains of the Seekofel and Croda Del Becco. From Lago di Braies we set out on the first leg of the Alta Via 1. The path follows the lake shore on its western side through beautiful pine forest until we emerge at the far end of the lake at 1500m. It then begins a steady climb following the course of the river Giavo through woodland which becomes increasingly sparse as we climb higher. There is a steeper section of switch backs before a small lake is reached at about 1900m. We can look back from here towards Lago di Braies, beautifully framed between steep valley walls. The path then continues to climb up towards the foot of a prominent ridge before turning west along the Forno valley. Our high point of the day is the Forcella Sora Forno ('Forcella' means pass in Italian) at 2388m. Emerging finally at the crest of this, the first of many passes on our route, we can gaze southwards across a tremendous swathe of the Dolomites stretching across towards the resort town of Cortina D'Ampezzo. We can linger at the col, admiring the view, and congratulate ourselves on successfully tucking under our belt what is a relatively tough first day. There is a very short descent on the south side of the pass to the Italian Alpine Club's Refuge Biella (2327m) where we stay for the night.

Day 3 Refuge Biella to Refuge Fanes

The Alta Via 1 continues across open rocky ground which bears the scars of glaciation. In the distance we can see the mighty Pelmo (3168m) a peak we will be getting to know much better in the days ahead. We descend slightly to the Refuge Sennes at 2116m and then trek across the delightful meadows of Fodara Vedla (1966m). There is a newly built private refuge here and a possible site for our lunch stops. We then descend steeply down to the Hosteria Pederu (1543m) in the Valun de Fanes. Continuing south the trail picks up the course of the River Al Plan to reach the Refuge Fanes.

Day 4 Refuge Fanes to Refuge Lagazuoi

We climb up the gentle hillside to the south-east of the refuge to the small col of Passo di Limo (2172m) which lies at the head of the Val de Fanes. We pass the clear waters of Lago di Limo and descend easily down into the head of the wooded valley. We can pause for a rest at the small refuge Malga Fanes Grande (2102m) where drinks and snacks may sometimes be available, before heading south and following a broad path which ascends very gradually to the low saddle of Passo Tadega (2153m). From here we can see in the distance our route up to the prominent notch of Forcella del Lago (2486m). The path climbs in a long rising traverse to this col and on the far side it drops down steep scree to the Lago di Lagazuoi (2182m). We cross the small green pastures surrounding the lake and traverse the featureless expanse of Monte de Lagazuoi before a final steep climb delivers us to the large Refuge Lagazuoi (2752m). The views from here are absolutely outstanding. We have a far reaching panorama southwards across endless mountains whilst directly to the east the massive Tofana de Rozes (3225m) towers above us, its sheer pink granite walls rising for 1000 metres above the valley floor. Lagazuoi is a large refuge and during the day there is cable car access for day trippers who come up from Cortina to admire the views. But in the evening when the last of these tourists has departed we have the place to ourselves and can anticipate a marvellous sunset with the lights of Cortina twinkling in the distant valley beneath us.

Day 5 Refuge Lagazuoi to Passo Giau

We depart from the refuge early in the morning and descend to the Forcella Lagazuoi. This region was heavily fortified during the First World War and the area is littered with trenches, rusting barbed wire, shell cases and other military artefacts. The Alta Via contours beneath the towering walls of the Tofana di Rozes and we have to crane our necks to take it all in. Climbers can sometimes be seen on the face but such is the scale of the place you need good eyesight to pick them out. We continue traversing on an elevated path and then descend slightly to reach Refuge Dibona. The trail now drops down to the main road which comes up from Cortina. We cross this and climb on the south side towards the Cinque Torri, five fantastic towers of rock which are the playground of climbers. Beyond these we gain the crest of the delightful Nuvolau ridge which offers some of the finest views on the entire trek including a sweeping view across to the Croda da Lago (2701m) and Monte Pelmo. The fine views will encourage us to linger on this section, but eventually it is time to leave and we descend down towards the comfortable Refuge Passo Giau (2236m) with its excellent restaurant. This refuge is located on the road and we will be re-united with our baggage here, allowing for a change of clothes at this half way point in the trek.

Day 6 Passo Giau to Refuge Citta di Fiume

Fully refreshed and wearing a clean change of clothes we set out again, climbing easily to the Forcella Giau (2360m). The path maintains its height as we traverse across the Alpi Mondeval towards the Forcella Ambrizzola. This area is extremely scenic with the huge north face of Monte Pelmo beckoning us towards it. This is one of the major peaks of the Dolomites and its first recorded ascent was made by the British alpinist John Ball in 1857. We cross the Col Roan (2014m) and traverse across to the Refuge Citta di Fiume (1918m), located in a tremendous position beneath Monte Pelmo's huge north face.

Day 7 Refuge Citta di Fiume to Refuge Tissi

We follow the Alta Via around the northern flanks of Monte Pelmo until we are forced to descend towards the road at Pala Favera (1550m). We use a cable car on the next section up to the Col di Dof. This gains us 400 metres of altitude in five minutes and avoids a rather uninteresting hike up a dirt road. The path continues to ascend up to the Refuge Coldai (2132m). This is located in a tremendous position and with its fine views back across the valley to the Pelmo it makes a great place to stop for lunch. We then cross the small col of Forcella Coldai and drop down to a beautiful blue lake which is a popular excursion for day trippers. Above this we ascend to the notch of Col Negro di Coldai (2203m) from where there are fantastic views of the west face of the Civetta (3220m). We hike easily down through the pastures of Val Civetta amid a profusion of wild flowers, and finally reach the Refuge Tissi situated in a fantastic location opposite the Civetta.

Day 8 Refuge Tissi to Passo Duran and return to Cortina

The path follows a wide track which contours around a wooded hillside, before beginning a long and zig zagging descent to the Val Corpasa. Before we reach the valley floor we branch off the main trail and traverse on a high level route through mixed woodland towards the Forcella Col Dell'Orso (1823m). We skirt around the crenellated ridge of the Campanile del Zoldani (2398m) and cross two minor passes to reach the Refuge Carestiato (1834m). There are fine views of the Moiazza (2601m) which rises directly above us, and across to the peaks of the San Sebastiano group. We can pause here and soak up the scenery before embarking on the final section of the route down to the road at Passo Duran (1601m). Our private transport will meet us here and we drive back to Cortina and our hotel.

Day 9 Travel home

After breakfast we travel by private vehicle to Venice and our homeward flight. For those who wish to extend their holiday in Venice, we will be able to book hotel rooms.