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# I went on Italy's most indulgent ski holiday

On a 'ski safari' in the Dolomites, **Sidonie Wilson** enjoys three fabulous places to stay, with fine wines and feasting

**T**he ski holidays I am used to typically involve arriving at busy Geneva airport to pay £15 for a bottle of water, bundling into a three-hour minibus transfer, getting caught in the queues going up the mountain and arriving at a 20-person chalet hosted by an English gap-year student. I'm used to bumping into half

of London at après (unsurprisingly my last break to Val d'Isère sent me home with Covid). But this trip — my first foray into Italian skiing — promises to be different. I've come to the Dolomites for my first "ski safari". The premise is simple (and does, in fact, involve getting the binoculars out for some marmot spotting): instead of staying in one chalet, you ski between different accommodation, in different



villages, via different resorts. The cynic in me is thinking what a faff it will be to lug my overpacked luggage and ski kit around. But Merriam Charles, my luxury tour operator, and her Italian sidekick, the ski guide impresario Mario Delmonego, promise no finger-lifting will be required. Within a couple of hours' drive from Innsbruck in Austria our small group is crossing the Italian border at sunset,

gazing at the tips of the Dolomites, highlighted in soft salmon hues above contrasting craggy cliffs. Gabriele, our driver, is an early indication of how charming this trip will be. With his golden curls and strange techno music, he takes us up the windy farm roads in his Tesla and delivers us to the first of three unique stays where we will spend our nights. We are welcomed with a warm hug by Stefano

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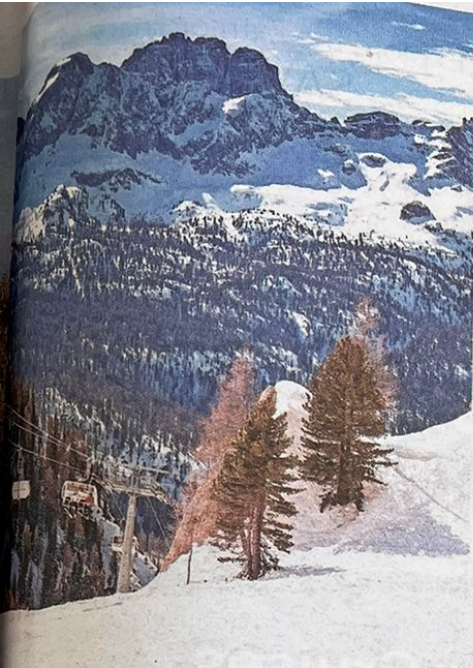
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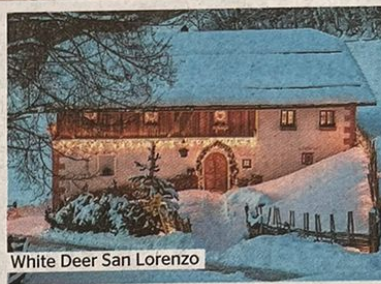




Locanda degli Artisti



Dinner at Rifugio Fuciade



White Deer San Lorenzo



Sidonie next to her ride

**Need to know**

Seven nights' half-board from £3,300pp based on six sharing, including guiding, ski hire and six-day ski pass (merriioncharles.com). Helicopter transfers from £655 for six people. Fly to Innsbruck



Barbini, host of the White Deer San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge near San Lorenzo di Sebato in the Alta Badia valley. He's waving and shouting "ciao, ciao", brandishing slippers to make us feel instantly at home. Chalets are rare in the Italian Alps, where most accommodation is in hotels, so this retreat, a former 16th-century hunting lodge built for Italian aristocracy and sleeping ten (you have to book the whole chalet), is something special. With rustic chic interiors it exudes as much character as its lively owner.

We're ushered into the wine cellar for our official welcome, which involves many aperitivos, and Jenga stacks of 15-year-aged parmesan and homemade fennel breadsticks. Stefano proudly shows off his wine collection — Italian only — and his beloved "Ferrari". Not a car, but the brand's snazzy red speck-slicing machine. We toast "salute" with a bottle of Cuvée Marianna, which he describes as "drinkable" — his new favourite English word. We laugh as we clink glasses — it's so "drinkable" I plan to sneak some back in my suitcase.

Dinner both nights, to quote another of our host's unique phrases, is "mamma mia luxury". By which he means utterly delicious. While many features of the lodge are sustainable (the hot water and whirlpools are heated by the original wood-burning stove), when it comes to food Stefano will travel across Italy to pick up the best ingredients, and scoffs at my suggestion of buying mozzarella from the local shop rather than in Naples. Those delicious crispy Taralli crackers? Puglia. But they do rear their cattle on local farmland. Course after course (ten of them) of high-end home-cooked food arrives, with different wine pairing for every dish,

each delivered with its own tale. The level of detail is almost exhausting and, after a final digestivo of Stefano's deadly homemade limoncello, I start to panic that my salopettes won't do up the next day.

Still, I can't refuse another hearty meal at breakfast to gear up for day one of our safari. The idea is to ski in many of the 15 resorts that make up the Dolomiti Superski, now the biggest ski area in the world with more than 1,200km of pistes. The best deal is to buy the Flexipass lift pass, which covers the whole area (from £266 per adult for six days). It's April — the end of the season — so my expectations for fresh powder had been low, but a big dump earlier in the week kept conditions

**3 more Dolomites ski trips**

- Wine ski safari in Alta Badia**  
In the famously foodie valley Alta Badia, a "wine ski safari" sees skiers zip between four huts to taste 60 South Tyrolean wines (£26pp, altabadia.org). **Details** Seven nights' half-board at the Hotel Dolomiti in La Villa from £1,355pp based on four sharing a room, with flights and transfers (skiworld.co.uk)
- New family hotel in Corvara**  
With a soft play zone and "aqua fun" pool with slide, the Movi Family Aparthotel has much to

- impress small people. A rooftop terrace bar will win over oldies. **Details** Seven nights' B&B from £886pp (movifamily.it). Fly or take the train to Venice
- Classy in Cortina d'Ampezzo**  
All-new Ambra Cortina Luxury & Fashion Hotel features antler chandeliers, rustic woodpanelling and decoratively hung antler raquettes (snow shoes). **Details** Seven nights' B&B from £1,265pp including flights from London and transfers, departing January 7 (heidi.com)

impressively good for this time of year. At Kronplatz, a 15-minute drive in Mario's ski bus, there's no queue for the main gondola, which sets the precedent for the rest of the trip. The Dolomites have fast, state-of-the-art lifts and the Italians tend not to ski past the Easter weekend (they start focusing on beach trips, even if there's snow), so often the slopes are empty at this time of year.

We ski all morning, stopping only for an elevenses bombardino — a drink like egg-nog, with five spirits and velvety cream on top — at Le Table (letable.it), which does wonders to help me find my ski legs.

One of the many draws of the Dolomiti Superski is that — alongside the larger well-known ski areas such as the 40km Sellaronda circuit and the resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo — smaller, crowd-free villages provide an authentic slice of Italian mountain life. The highest peak is the Marmolada (3,343m), where there's fantastic off-piste skiing, and the food everywhere is a cut above that of the French Alps — far cheaper and with more choice. As a pescatarian, in France I brace myself for long self-service queues ending in a bowl of watery onion soup. But in Italy my first slopeside lunch, at Lorenzihütte (mains from €10, dolomitisuperski.com), is a luxurious sit-down affair featuring a local shepherd's cheese, then wild mushroom gnocchi, while the proximity to Austria means there is also canederli, traditional dumplings served in a broth.

Blue-skiing is promised for the next day, so we take things easy at après hour and head back to the chalet to enjoy the outdoor hot tub, indoor Finnish spa and Turkish steam room. Dinner is another endless feast of pasta and cheese — orzotto ai formaggio, ricotta and asparagus salad — followed by salmerino (a local river fish) with polenta, and for the carnivores venison shoulder from deer shot on Stefano's farm, then a simple rhubarb panna cotta and grappa.

After breakfast the next day the safari really sets in, with a lift by helicopter from the chalet's private helipad. Helicopters are available as an add-on for guests (who are charged extra), but as heli-skiing is banned in Italy (you can fly across the border to Austria for that), flights can only transfer skiers to the pistes. There's an added benefit, though, of arriving before the lifts open. Our helicopter sets down on soft snow at the top of the pistes of the Cinque Torri ski area. It's incredibly quiet,

and we rush with excitement to be the first skiers to whizz down the runs. Mario guides us down wide, empty blacks, helping me with my technique so I can carve perfect "S" bends in the sunshine.

Lunch is a trio of pastas in another mountaintop eatery with panoramic views, Rifugio Averau (mains from €11, rifugioverau.it), then the helicopter returns to whisk us over the Dolomites. The charismatic pilot, Gabriel Kostner, makes an impromptu stop at his favourite slopeside bar, Sofie Hütte (seceda.com) in the Val Gardena/Santa Cristina ski area, where his chums the owners impress their homemade tiramisù on us, and a delicious min digestivo, then continue the tour by skiing down through Val Gardena and the aptly named "Rock City", traversing around the imposing cliffs of the Passo Sella.

Normally guests can ski all the way down from the Sella Ronda area to the next accommodation stop on the safe, but as some lifts are already closed for the season we take a taxi from Lupo Bianco to the village of Canazei and our hotel, Locanda degli Artisti. This is another family affair, opened in 2021 by the husband and wife Sergio and Emanuela Rossi, but it's a modern, incredibly chic aesthetic. It bills itself as an art hotel, with each room dedicated to a different artist, and there is no wall without an original piece. Food is a creative highlight too, with their son, Mattino, as head chef whipping up potato tellone filled with salted codfish, crepes with beetroot, and Moena cheese, black garlic and apple.

Good job, then, that another solid day of skiing is to follow. We spend the morning in the Falcade-Tre Valli ski area, on crowd-free slopes of quaint Arabba, where Mario grew up, and a mountain-top lodge at Rifugio Fodom (mains from €11, rifugiofodom.it), owned by his cousin. Mario has been a ski instructor here for 40 years, having such a well-versed local lea means we discover hidden trails with tracks, empty lifts and the best snow.

Our final night is spent at Rifugio Fode, nestled away at 2,000m in Trens and usually only accessible by snowmobile or on foot — but due to the lack of snow, Mario's van can make the journey. Also owned by the Rossi family, Fuciade is a completely different experience, though with the same familiar welcome, and Emanuela treats us to a before her son cooks up a Ladin and the terranean menu. Ladin, you ask? The refers to a minority ethnic group of northern Italy's Tyrol, whose pre-Roman culture — including their simple cuisine — continue in the Dolomites.

Most rifugios have old-timey Austrian style decor — home-stitched curtains, pillows and rooms warmed by a traditional wood burning stove (stove). Visitors to Fuciade for this Ladin experience eat food alone: melt-in-the-mouth Swiss Alpine char with creamy milk, mushroom cream and bitter salad; cjaioncjes, ravioli-like pasta — filled with wild mushrooms, poppy seeds and cinnamon — potato spaghetti with truffle fondue.

Guests usually come on a ski safari for seven days, but even though mine here involved three, the many different miles of pistes we covered made it like many more. On our last night I feel my aching muscles in my room's hot tub, thinking what a surprise Italian it has been. While I expected chichi accommodation and House of Gucci-type decor, what I got was genuine Italian hospitality, impeccable ski knowledge, a huge amount of fabulous pasta, cheese, wine, and surprisingly great spirit — we even found fresh powder. It turns out the dolce vita, with a large dollop of "mamma mia luxury".