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Peak Performance

A Dolomite ski experience is a sure-fire
route to a special holiday.

by Lisa Young

The helicopter's rotors created a deep thumping sound that echoed around my bedroom at the White Deer San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge in the Italian Dolomite mountains. Trees bowed and snow flew as the machine hovered over the landing pad in preparation for touchdown. I was here to meet Merrion Charles, a British woman living in Italy, where she is a travel consultant specialising in luxury Italian holidays.

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Our late-season Dolomite ski experience would include the four valleys of Val Badia, Val Gardena, Val di Fassa and Arabba, which surround the Sella massif and, collectively, create the legendary 26km Sella Ronda circuit. Sportier skiers can complete the circuit in three hours (no stops), or you can take it easy, with lengthy coffee and lunch breaks as you pass through four different Ladin valleys and ski resorts, and three Italian provinces.

The helicopter was a typical Merrion Charles surprise treat for her clients, to make them feel that their holiday experience is special.

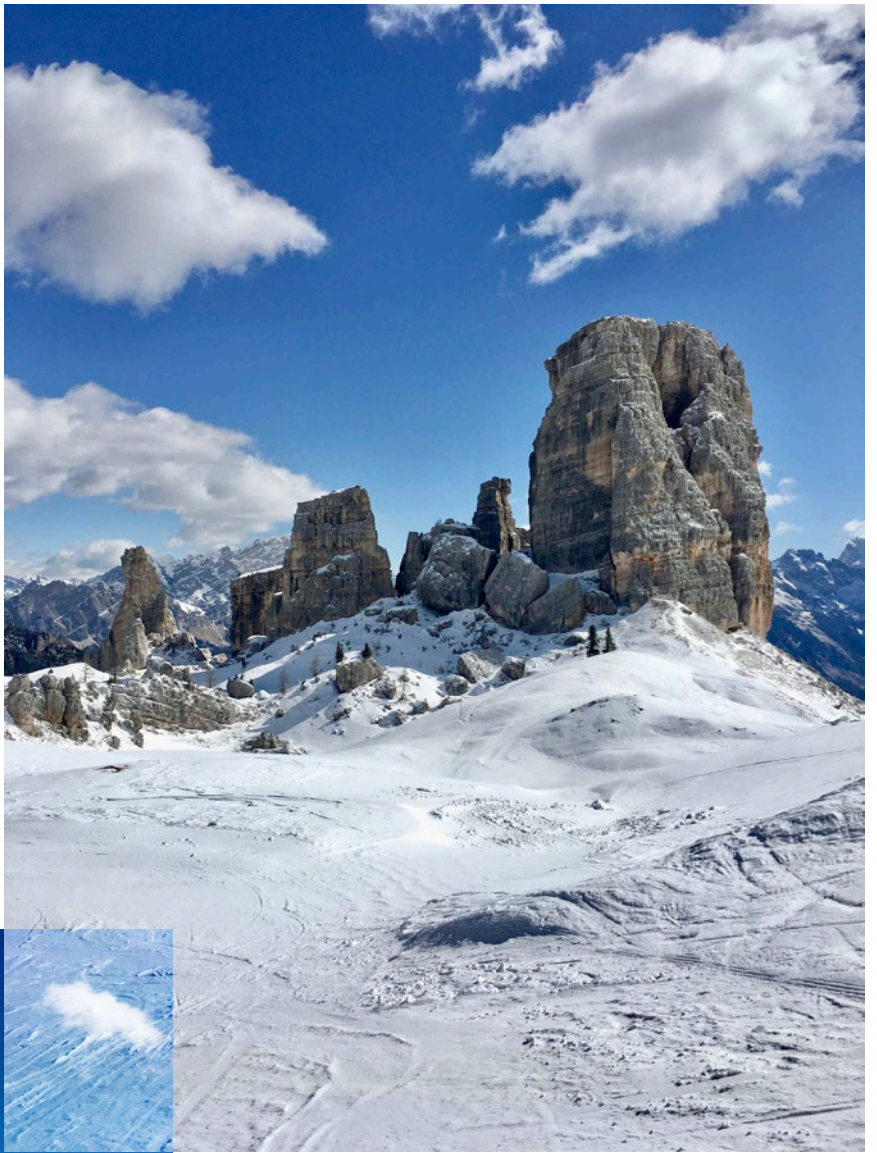
Outside the lodge, renowned local guide Mario Delmonego scooped up our skis, loaded them onto the helicopter and we were off, flying high over craggy peaks to the top of Cinque Torri to experience 'first tracks': skiing on freshly groomed runs, before the lifts opened.

On the snow there was not a soul in sight. The mountains were silent and windless under a cloudless blue sky. The runs

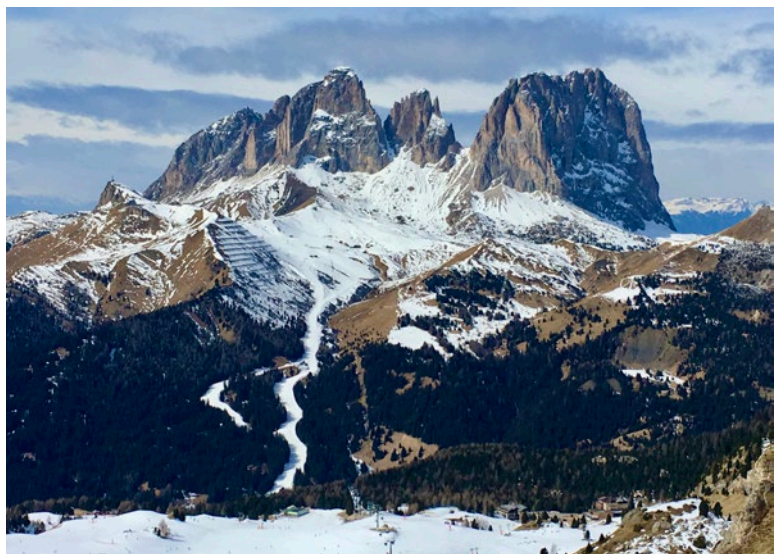
remained quiet even after the lifts opened; you don't get the usual bustling crowds here, and the snow, although mostly man-made, is exceptional.

Later, piste-side in Val Gardena while indulging in a luxuriously decadent hot chocolate, I asked Charles: "Why the Dolomites?" She said: "I don't think anywhere matches them. This is the largest ski domain in the world and phenomenally well organised, with a state-of-the-art lift system and snow-making technology. The scenery, I think, goes way beyond that of the Alps, with the pink hue of the rocks and the stunning mountains, each with its own name."

An accomplished skier herself, Charles's welcoming smile and naturally warm and friendly manner make those around her feel at ease. She is confident every trip will run smoothly because she's done her homework, strategically planning every detail. This is why her clients (an impressive international list she refuses to divulge) come back time after time.



A sun-drenched morning after fresh snow on the Dolomites © Lisa Young



We sat in the outdoor hot tub with the dome-shaped Marmolada mountain in the distance, nicknamed 'Queen of the Dolomites.'

Later still, we sat in the outdoor hot tub looking at the stunning Dolomites and the dome-shaped Marmolada mountain in the distance. Nicknamed 'Queen of the Dolomites', it is the highest peak in the range.

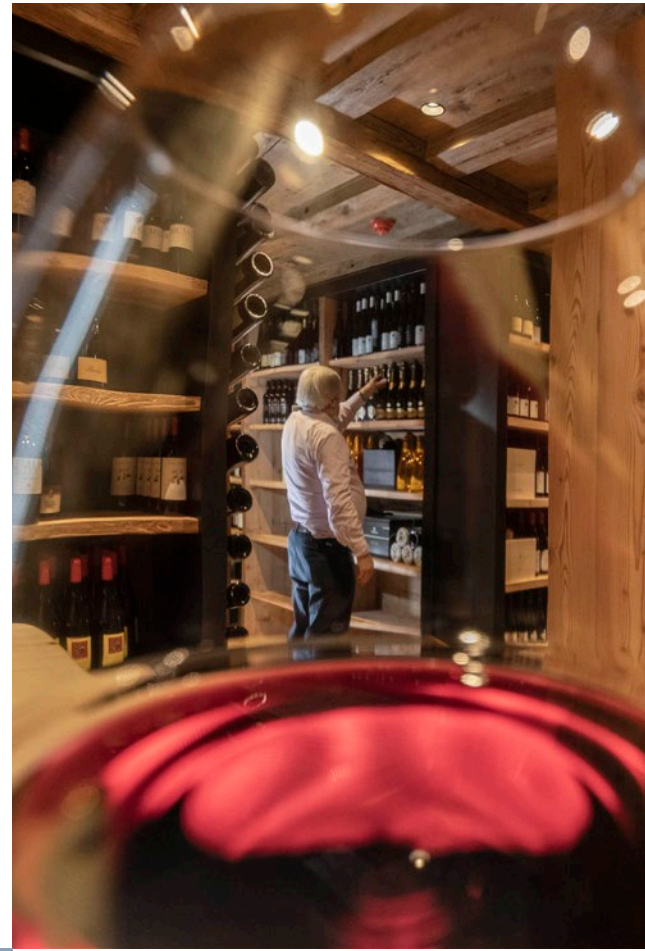
I asked Charles how she chooses accommodation for her clients. "I like to find properties that make clients feel like they have really escaped to somewhere special and unique and, while being luxurious, provide a true and fully embodied experience," she said.

"I chose the White Deer San Lorenzo, like many I promote, because it is privately owned and managed. The owners are passionate about what they have created and are actively involved, which ensures a continuity of high-level service. Each property has its own specific characteristics so that one feels at home and looked after."

Our stay at the White Deer San Lorenzo was already memorable, as lodge owner Stefano Barbini had spent an hour entertaining us in his beautiful wine cellar, enthusiastically pouring delicious Italian wines and carving wafer-thin slices of specialised locally made speck, a type of cured, lightly smoked ham.

Over a lengthy dinner, I asked Charles what makes her different to other private consultants. "I live in Italy and speak the language. I'm a one-woman, plus dog, band, creating a tailor-made service, and available around the clock every day of the year. I personally know and have visited and stayed in all the places I promote; I have in-depth knowledge and the ability to match clients to the right property," she said.

The following day we skied the Kronplatz — Plan de Corones area. Meanwhile, in the town of Canazei, our luggage had conveniently arrived in our rooms at the contemporary Locanda degli Artisti hotel, owned by Emanuela Rossi and her family. Each of its 20 suites is dedicated to an Italian artist (I stayed in the Adolf Vallazza room), with at least one original piece by the artist adorning the walls.



Clockwise from top left: Venison pan fried with apple puree and fruits of the forest served at The Rifugio in Fuciade. White Deer San Lorenzo owner, Stefano Barbini choosing bottles in his wine cellar. A room in the art hotel with original artwork by Ricardo Schweizer. Tomino cheese encrusted with pistachio and radish and sweet tomatoes served at The Rifugio in Fuciade.



A former priests' retreat, the cellar doors come from a castle built in 1600. A massive hay barn door made from pine larch, dates from 1475.

Our last day on the snow was in the Arabba area, our guide's home village. The pace was slow at first because everyone stopped to greet him. We spent another spectacular day on empty slopes; at their busiest I counted 10 other people, but otherwise there was nobody else. Although it was late season, I was told the slopes are never busy.

Our last night was spent under the shadow of Marmolada at the exquisite Rifugio Fuciade, also owned by Rossi. The rustic refugio is in complete contrast to the town-based art hotel. The setting is rural, remote and rugged, and the accommodation is warm, cosy and cottage-like, only accessible by snowcat during the winter.

Rifugio Fuciade is a former priests' retreat. It serves some of the finest food in the region, and a tour of its vast wine cellar is a lesson in history. The cellar doors come from a castle built in 1600, and another, a massive hay barn door made from pine larch, dates from 1475. That evening, we dined on smoked alpine char, potato spaghetti with truffle fondue and browned venison, to name just a few of the exquisite dishes created at the rifugio.

On an early-morning walk in the shadow of Marmolada, I asked Charles to define the key to her approach. "In this age of terrifying climate change and other environmental problems, there should be more focus on 'good tourism' instead of mass tourism, which is counterproductive and damaging on many levels," she said.

"Working with high-end clients gives me great pleasure, and I am fortunate to attract clients who tend to be philanthropic, socially and culturally aware, and who value the personal touch. The key is communication and awareness of people's needs, and once that is understood, the rest is easy. Many of my clients have become dear friends and I think that says everything." ◇



Bedrooms and sauna at San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge. One of the ancient doors at Rifugio Fuciade.

