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View From the Top

With a slow, truly local cuisine and green credentials that go beyond its Alpine forests, South Tyrol is Italy at its most progressive

By Stanley Stewart **Photographs by Crookes & Jackson**

The rocky peaks and pine forests of Alta Badia, a region in the Dolomites

In Rome I caught a train north. I was going to another Italy. I left behind all the familiar bits of the country one by one—Rome's old Justinian walls, an Umbrian campanile above tiled roofs, Tuscan farmhouses adrift in olive groves, Brunelleschi's dome in Florence. Somewhere near Bologna a man waited at a crossing with boxes of grapes piled atop his tiny van.

Perhaps I dozed as we crossed the flatlands of the Po, with that hot slab of sun at the window. Because when I looked again, somewhere beyond Trentino, there were mountains, sheer precipices the color of ash, a strange, vertiginous new world. I sat up.

Half-timbered houses clustered around needle-thin church spires. Men with scythes cut hay in high meadows. Castles with conical roofs sat astride spurs and paths led into dark forests. The mountains, rearing now on all sides, were not the round, shouldered colossi of the Alps, leaning together like tipsy companions, but the peaks a child might draw: jagged, sharp-toothed, sheer-sided, individual, the great summits and massifs standing apart from one another.

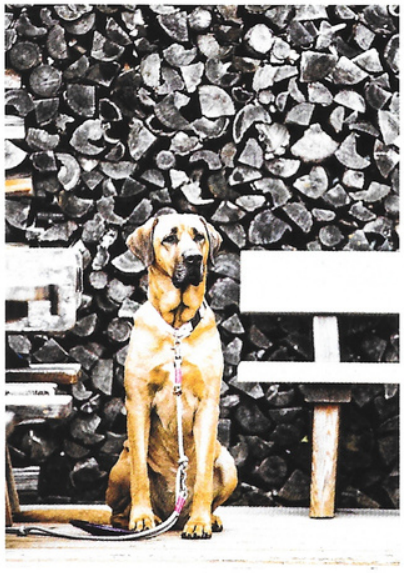
The whole thing was strangely familiar. I wondered where I had seen this before. And then I realized. These were the mountains of a storybook. This was a landscape where tales unfold.

In South Tyrol, unlike the rest of Italy, there are no crumbling ruins or must-see masterpieces, no cathedrals the size of counties or guides steering groups from the Renaissance to the Baroque in whispered tones. Italy is a nation composed of city-states, but here there are hardly any proper cities. In much of the region, you won't even hear people speak Italian. In a wood-lined bar in the small town of Lana, a burly chap greeted me with *guten Tag* and ordered a strudel with his coffee.

Carved out of the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, South Tyrol was awarded to Italy for supporting the Allies. Known to Italians as the province of Alto Adige, it is autonomous, like Sicily and Sardinia. The languages include not only German and Italian but also Ladin, the mother tongue for more than 20,000 people and said to be a mash-up of Latin and mountain Celtic.

Compared with the elegant symmetries of the Italian peninsula, or even the grown-up predictability of Austria, South Tyrol feels as if it's a rebellious youth, fresh-faced and eager, turning its back on all that dreary musing about duomos and statues of David. It is steeped in its own Alpine traditions, but the province also manages to feel edgily contemporary, more progressive and more forward-thinking than the rest of Italy.

A big reason is the region's long-established green credentials. Renewable sources—hydropower, wood, biogas, solar, wind, and geothermal—make a major contribution to energy. More than 85 percent of Italian houses that have been certified as energy efficient are in South Tyrol.



From far left: *On the veranda at Villa Arnica; hay soup at the restaurant Gostner Schwaige; the Alpine village of Lana; at Gostner Schwaige, pets are welcome*

Hotels have always been at the forefront of this change, opting for local produce, local materials, even local architects. Vegan and vegetarian menus are common. The numerous spas emphasize traditional treatments; the products you use are more likely to be harvested from a Tyrolean forest than manufactured in a Parisian lab. Even the wines are conscientious, with leading vineyards such as Alois Lageder, Manincor, and Loacker following biodynamic principles.

It helps that life in the Dolomites is so connected to nature. Winter is all about skiing, of course—the Dolomites have some of the longest continuous runs in Europe—but it is the warm summers that I love, when the high meadows blossom and the region becomes a magnet for hikers, climbers, cyclists, swimmers, hang gliders, and a dozen other kinds of fitness enthusiasts. In addition to the many opportunities South Tyrol offers to adrenaline seekers, it has a slower, more meditative side. This is a place of the senses—the unexpected flavors of food and wine, air so clear it seems to fizz, the scent of forests and wildflowers.

The first sense that is engaged in South Tyrol is sight. I could not take my eyes off those towering, cloud-shredding summits. The famous massifs of the Dolomites—the Tre Cime di Lavaredo and the rest of the Sexten Dolomites, the Cristallo group, Sassolungo, and many others—are monumental but they convey a sense of movement. Perhaps it is the shifting light, the drifting clouds' shadows, the way summits come and go, reorienting themselves with each curve in the road. They are the dancers of the mountain world, performing a ballet of dark granite and stratified limestone.

In summer the cable cars still run, like huge beanstalks, lifting people into the lap of the mountains, to high Alpine pastures dotted with sweet-faced cows. You can hike for miles or days, staying at *rifugi,* the plain, no-frills refuges that range in size from large dormitories to small huts. Often run by dedicated guides, they provide food and a bar as well as a place to sleep. More intrepid hikers can follow the famous *via ferratas*—literally, "iron

ways"—a series of dizzying metal ladders and bridges built by mountaineers and soldiers during World War I to connect some of the high ridgelines.

In the town of Ortisei I boarded a cable car and rose 3,000 feet to the pastures of Alpe di Siusi. In winter this is a skier's paradise, with bright figures whistling down slopes, but in summer it feels as if it's a lost world. There are no cars and barely any villages.

Ramshackle barns and log cabins are marooned in seas of velvety grass, wood piles leaning against their weathered walls. The only people I saw were other walkers, distant figures silhouetted on skylines. Wildflowers grew in profusion along the tracks. Dark pinewoods flooded across the slopes. On all sides spectacular summits rose among clouds: the sheer-faced Denti di Terrarossa; the anvil-headed plateau of the Sciliar, where Bronze Age people performed ceremonies; the impossibly tall Sassolungo; and Mount Bullaccia, whose lower flanks contain pagan worship sites.

A half-hour walk across the Alpe di Siusi brought me to Franz Mulser, a farmer, cheesemaker, gardener, storyteller, and chef. Standing outside his hut in his apron and little felt hat, he looked like a cobbler from a fairy tale. "May I introduce you to my cows?" he said shyly.

There were eight of them, grazing in the meadows below the cabin. "Rita, Bebe, Pia, Anna..." said Mulser, his voice trailing off. Each wore a bell with a different note, and as they drifted across the pasture they created strange melodies. The muffled tinkling was the only sound in the colossal silence of the place. Inside Mulser's small restaurant, known simply as Gostner Schwaige, eight small tables were laid for lunch. "I used to spend summers here with my grandfather," he said. "He showed me all the edible things around here—wild spinach, bear's garlic, forest onions, chamomile—so many. And I have my cows and sheep. That is what I cook. The food of these mountains."

What followed was as astonishing as a conjuring trick. First a platter of cheeses and meats with a basket of schüttelbrot, made fresh that morning, served with butter and flavored with pine emulsion. Then a gorgeous bowl of edible flowers to be dipped in infusions with chopsticks, followed by an earthen crock of heublümensuppe, a delicious soup made of hay, blooms, and herbs. The main course was slivers of beef drizzled with a grape sauce and the sweetest carrot purée. Finally, there was saffron ice cream and dumplings with plums hidden inside. Almost every ingredient had come from the pastures around us. At Gostner Schwaige, the distance ingredients travel is measured not in miles but in yards.

The mountains attract people who are looking for something. They are restorative. There is an idea that they can cure the problems caused by the lowlands. There is the hope that an uncluttered life away from the rush of lesser altitudes will offer peace, serenity, wisdom. The mountains offer a kind of Tyrolean *hygge*. At Hotel & Spa Rosa Alpina in San Cassiano, it is in the coziness of the *stube*, the wood-paneled drawing room with its crackling fire.

At huts in the high meadows, it is in the comfort of a steaming bowl of soup after a morning's hike. At Miramonti Boutique Hotel, far above Merano, it is in the stillness of the forest where you can pause and listen to wind and silence.

The Empress Elisabeth of Austria traveled to South Tyrol from Vienna

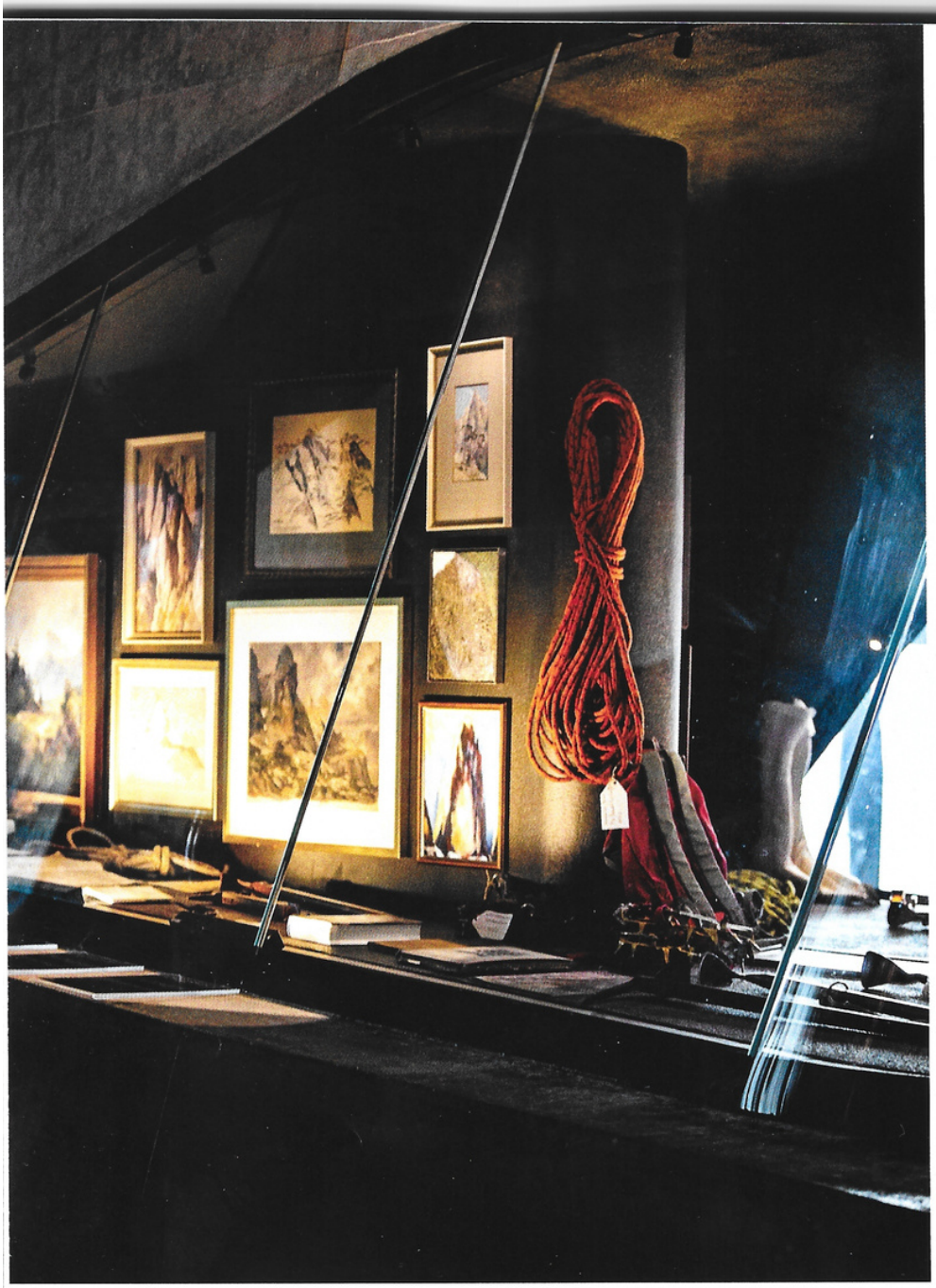
There is an idea that the mountains can cure the problems caused by the lowlands

in the 1800s for her health, taking the mineral waters of the famous spa town of Merano. She would be astonished by the state-of-the-art, 21st-century Terme Merano, which now stands in the middle of the town, with thermal pools, a snow room, and treatments using everything from organic whey to sand from Venosta marble. Meanwhile, at Adler Spa Resort Dolomiti you can opt to be covered in meadow hay.

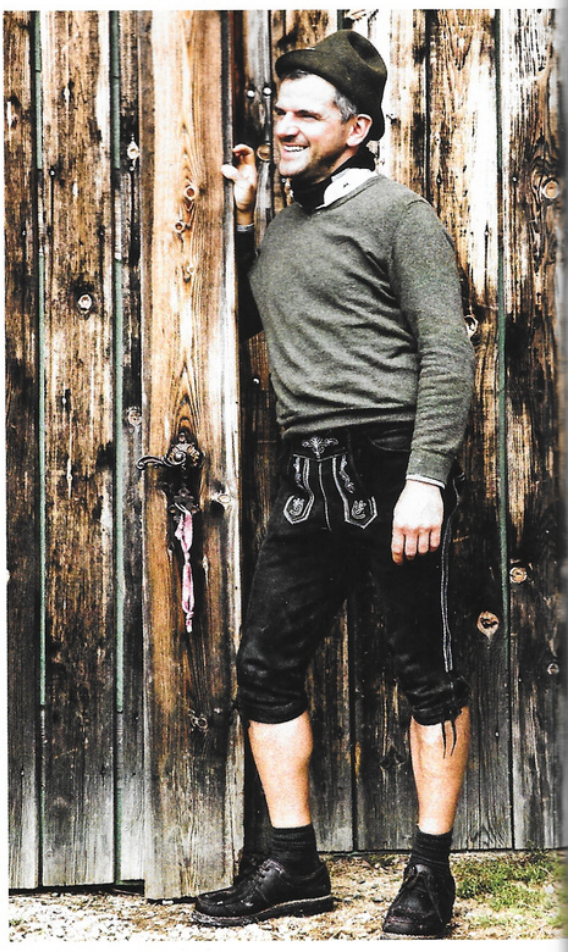
For a century or more, the Dolomites have been a connoisseur's retreat, drawing legions of writers and artists as well as those ardent hikers and skiers. The great 19th-century traveler Amelia Edwards visited in 1872, when the mountains were still nearly as difficult to reach as Easter Island, describing them as mystical before offering tips about side saddles and difficult innkeepers. Mahler composed his *Eighth Symphony* here, the soaring summits momentarily pulling him out of his usual ill-tempered funk. Kafka enthused about Merano and the simple clarity of its light. In his final years, Ezra Pound was brought to the region in hopes that its beauty might cure his madness. When Le Corbusier arrived in 1907, he declared the Dolomites "the most beautiful construction in the world."

In the past 30 years, a new generation of local designers—Gerhard Mahlknecht, Matteo Thun, Peter Pichler, Martino Gamper, and the award-winning Armin Pedevilla—have helped South Tyrol escape its chocolate-box reputation with stunning buildings that would make Le

On the road between the villages of San Cassiano and Riscone



From left: *Inside the Messner Mountain Museum; Franz Mulser, owner-chef of Gostner Schwaige; the pool at Villa Arnica*



Corbusier proud. The structural sophistication of their work lies partly in the region's DNA, that marriage of Italian style and German technical proficiency, and partly in their respect for the remarkable landscapes with which they are blessed.

These architects know their roots. There may be echoes of rustic huts in their use of traditional materials—stone and blond woods—but the influences are international. For a thrilling example, take the cable car from Obereggen for brunch in the remarkable Oberholz Mountain Hut. Created by Pilcher and Pavol Mikolajcak, the restaurant has three "branches"—astonishingly complex constructions of wood as grand as a cathedral—that shoot up toward a trio of colossal windows that bring the mountains to your table along with the coffee and baskets of fresh pastries.

On top of Kronplatz, at almost 7,500 feet, I went in search of three more architectural delights. The first was the Lumen Museum of Mountain Photography. Inside, spaces flow vertically into one another. A giant lens shutter opens and closes on a beautiful panorama, and a lighted mirrored chamber bewilders visitors with countless reflections of themselves. Ostensibly, the museum charts the history of mountain photography. But leave aside the early plate cameras and heavy tripods that porters carried up to the summits and you realize its story is really about how we view these peaks, of all their different incarnations: as a borderland, a war zone, an arena of scientific inquiry, a romantic escape, an adventure playground, a spiritual retreat.

I had lunch next door at Alpinn restaurant, a glass box spectacularly cantilevered over the edge of the crest, with wraparound views over the Puster Valley to the heights of the Zillertal Alps. The design was breathtaking and as local as the ingredients, the risotto was divine, and room gave the sensation of being airborne, like the paragliders sailing past the window. Alpinn is overseen by Tyrolean chef Norbert Niederkofler, whose kitchen at St. Hubertus in Hotel & Spa Rosa Alpina has earned three Michelin stars. There is no shortage of great chefs in South Tyrol, but Niederkofler is the godfather of them all. Drawing on Austrian and Italian traditions, his mantra is "Cook the mountain," something Franz Mulser would recognize, a commitment to the produce of these valleys.

After lunch, a five-minute stroll across the plateau brought me to another building, one of six Messner Mountain Museums. Born in South Tyrol, Reinhold Messner is a leading modern climber with an astonishing list of achievements, from the original solo ascent of Everest to being the first man to scale the world's 14 peaks higher than 26,250 feet. He's an emblematic figure in these parts.

Messner's MMM Corones museum on Kronplatz is dedicated to the history of mountaineering. Designed by the late Zaha Hadid, it is sunken into the edge of the plateau, with three great viewing windows emerging from the rock. Among the prosaic picks and climbing boots, the antique crampons and ropes of the exhibits, I found a quote from Friedrich Hölderlin, the German poet, etched on a wall: "When [the mountain] carries me on its powerful shoulders, when the rarefied air enchants all my senses... then I become into an eagle...liberated from the ground." Messner wants us to think about our relationship to the mountains, the way they both humble and inspire us. He sees them not just as a physical pursuit but as a spiritual quest. For everyone here, they are a glimpse of the sublime, a place of enchantment and magic. T

STAYING IN THE DOLOMITES

Schgaguler The 42 bedrooms of this family-run Tyrolean hotel are stylish and modern, with walls of honey-hued chestnut and deep tubs steps from the beds. *Doubles from $300; schgaguler.com*

Adler Spa Resort Dolomiti A place where most people never seem to change out of their bathrobes and the treatments are transportive. *Doubles from $400; adler-resorts.com*

1477 Reichhalter This half-century-old property has been reimagined as a traditional Tyrolean stay, with sturdy doors, wall stencils, and wonky floors. The bar is the heart of the village of Lana. *Doubles from $300; 1477reichhalter.com*

Miramonti Boutique Hotel Sweeping glass walls open this minimalist hotel above Merano to the panorama below. The outdoor swimming pool seems to hang over the valley. *Doubles from $200; hotel-miramonti.com*

Villa Arnica In the delightful village of Lana, where streams bubble through the streets, this 95-year-old, 10-bedroom mansion has been restored to re-create the feeling of a gracious home. Head to the salon-style bar where guests can hear jazz. *From $180 per person; villaarnica.it*

Lefay Resort & Spa Dolomiti Opened last summer as the sequel to the original Lefay spa hotel at Lake Garda, this hotel on a hillside in the Rendena Valley above the ski village of Pinzolo takes a relaxed approach to wellness. The masterful spa complex has a maze of steam and sauna spaces and a salt cave. *Doubles from $350; dolomiti.lefayresorts.com*