

COUNTRY LIFE[®]

TRAVEL

...and relax



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Don't forget the Dolomites

SUE LAWLEY is beguiled by a hidden corner of Europe that history seems to have forgotten

HAS our search for the sun, plus the growth of cheap travel, meant that we've lost touch with the real Europe? The question came to me as I spent June in the South Tyrol, Austria and Bavaria exploring a vast landscape, securely hidden behind the high protection of the Alps. It is the heart of Europe—familiar to most of us only as a winter playground. But summer returns the mountain villages to their people: a faceless blanket of snow lifts to reveal the glorious individuality of a world that, strangely, very few Britons choose to visit. Here, as the warmth of summer revived it, I felt in touch with the essence of the Continent. My journey began in the little village

of San Cassiano, a three-hour drive south of Munich. This is the Alto Adige, the Italian name for the South Tyrol, where Italy and Austria blend together in grateful acknowledgement of the best that each has to offer. The people here speak Ladin—not a dialect, but a completely separate tongue preserved and used by a population of no more than 30,000. San Cassiano sits under the majestic beauty of the Dolomites, where, in summer, the mountains are carpeted with meadows of wild flowers. One of these, the *Rosa Alpina* (Alpine Rose), gives its name to my hotel.

The Pizzinini family has been looking after the Rosa Alpina since the late 1930s. They were difficult times in the South Tyrol. The region was annexed to Italy after the

Summer in the spectacular Dolomites: a peaceful world far from skiing hordes

defeat of Austria-Hungary in the First World War, but it still retained strong Austrian connections. When Mussolini came to power, he introduced a programme of 'Italianisation'—and Mariangel Pizzinini, a man of small means but grand ambition, won the right to take over the Rosa Alpina after he produced a photograph of his 10 children. This, he argued, was evidence of his ability to maintain its Italian identity. Old Mariangel stuck to his bargain. Today, nearly 70 years later, the Rosa Alpina is run by his grandson, Hugo. The comforts of the Pizzininis' hospitality sit naturally beside the

sophistication of their restaurant with its two Michelin stars, where the chef, former Italian ski champion Norbert Niederkofler, conjures the flavours of the mountains to the table with astonishing skill.

Hugo is happy to help you plan your mountain hikes. He and his wife, Ursula, love the area—and I fell in love with it, too, walking for hours through splendid scenery, or playing golf on the local course where the balance of a mountain goat is as much a requirement as an eye for a ball. And there is plenty of good food and wine available. You can eat either in one of the many huts in the mountains always open to welcome hungry hikers (*goulash* soup or a generous plate of local ham and freshly grated horseradish) or, when a Michelin banquet (including delicious *foie gras* ice cream) is what you want, on the hotel's terrace (*ricotta gnocchi* with Gorgonzola and wild mushrooms—now my new 'desert-island dish').

I also indulged in the hotel spa where, in a candlelit room, I was handwashed in warm milk and gently buffed until my skin glowed with a new vitality. It all amounted to one thing—a sense of well-being. Whether I was breathing in the revivifying air of the

mountains or being patiently polished in the spa, I felt rejuvenated and at peace.

From San Cassiano, I turned north, driving into Austria through a motorail tunnel and on to the village of Filzmoos in the Dachstein mountains south of Salzburg. This is a towering wall of rock, one of whose principal peaks is called the *Bischofsmütze* (Bishop's Hat), because it looks remarkably like a mitre. At my next hotel, the Hubertus, the cooking was exceptional (there was even a hint of truffle oil in the breakfast jam). Johanna Maier, the owner, with her husband, Dietmar, produces food as good as anything you'll find in London or Paris and has also earned two Michelin stars. The little village where it's prepared is full of tradition—on the longest day of the year, young climbers take enormous risks to light bonfires on the mountain peaks, setting the twilight aglow for miles around, and the local band, drilled to perfection, marches into the square. Here, too, the world is in the open—walking, cycling or simply sitting and soaking up the warmth—with that unique mixture of refinement and informality that makes Austria one of my favourite places to visit. 🐐

Travel titbits



Summer days in the mountains

Few of us visit the slopes after the last snow, but summer in the Dolomites has plenty on offer for all ages. Look out

for the ibex, the rare mountain goat with long curling horns that used to be seen all over Europe, until it was hunted to near extinction. Emulate their mountain skill by following the *vie ferrate* (iron ways) paths that date from the First World War. And practise your swing at Kitzbühel, the home of one of the winter's most frightening ski races, which transforms itself into the alpine capital of golf in summer.

Travel Information

- *The Hotel Rosa Alpina, San Cassiano* (www.rosalpina.it); *the Hotel Hubertus in Filzmoos* (www.hotelhubertus.at)
- *Flights organised by Seasons in Style* (www.seasonsinstyle.com)