

HIGH SOCIETY!

MATT WARREN discovers perfect pistes, heavenly retreats and pizza to die for in Italy's stylish Shangri-La

WHEN I first learned to ski, skidding down nursery slopes while the instructor barked orders, no one mentioned horses. Why should they? Three years on, however, and I wish they had.

After an idyllic day's skiing in the Italian Dolomites, we are now being towed back to the resort by a pair of braying mares. There are 20 of us in all, hanging onto a long rope behind the horses as they trot across the ice towards the little village of Armentarola.

It is harder than it looks. Skiing in a straight line under horse power is easy on the flat, but the rope slackens on the downhill stretches and we concertina like toppling dominoes, skidding and weaving as we go. Some giggle, some shriek. Others go pale, sweaty and silent.

By the time we reach our destination, we feel as though we have narrowly survived the accident-strewn opening sequence of an episode of *Holby City*. But then the Dolomites, in Italy's German and Ladin-speaking north-east, offers drama in spades.

Just three hours away, we had taken the cable car to the summit of Lagazuoi. Pressed against the window of the gondola, we watched breathless as the ground fell away and the peak's sheer rock buttresses loomed above.

Flights of crows greeted us at the top, as though we had just landed on the shores of some eerie, otherworldly kingdom. I half expected St Peter to appear and escort us through the Pearly Gates.

The views were certainly pure magic: on the one side, wooded slopes and scattered villages. On the other, a hidden canyon of washing powder snow and dramatic rock walls. It was *The Lost World* on ice.

BETTER still, they serve pasta and pizza in this Shangri-La. Taking the long, winding red run down from the summit, we arrived at Utia Scotoni, a busy mountain restaurant set in a winter wonderland, film-set landscape.

Inside, under timber beams, we lunched on tagliatelle with venison ragout and warming cups of *Glühwein*.

There was just one catch: just 200m beyond the restaurant, the piste topped down a short, but incredibly steep, icy slope. A couple of grinning walkers were lurking at the top of it, like vultures waiting for the comedy carillon provided by the tumbling, over-lubricated skiers.

Full and flushed with wine, I



skied to the script and scudded headlong into a snowdrift. Only the *Glühwein* tempered the shame. My girlfriend, Genevieve, and I were staying in the nearby village of San Cassiano, a chocolate-box community of 800 souls at the foot of the vast Sella massif. It's not a destination for those after hubbub and raucous apres-ski, but it's so romantic I'm surprised they don't go all the way and dye the snow candyfloss pink.

Our hotel, Rosa Alpina, was the ideal peak retreat, combining Austrian homeliness with oodles of Italian style and sophistication.

Here, we dined in the famed two Michelin-starred restaurant, St Hubertus, where the wonderfully-named chef, Norbert Niederkofler, cooks up a real Alpine storm.

The menu here is an Odyssey through the finest mountain ingredients — with one or two surprises thrown into the mix. I wolfed down my 'calf's head', for example, before realising I'd enjoyed an exquisitely prepared plate of brains.

One evening, we postponed the culinary surprises and indulged in the hotel spa's ultra-romantic treatment for two.

After being coated in mud and steamed in the sauna, we basked in the Cleopatra Bath — a Jacuzzi laced with milk, honey and essential oils. Only the asp, thankfully, was absent.

Three years ago, the picture postcard pistes above the village were the setting for my first ever ski lessons — and crashes. This time, I was determined to take to them with a little more aplomb.

Easy blue and intermediate red

runs predominate in the Alta Badia lift system, which occupies the peaks between the villages of San Cassiano, Corvara and La Villa. But skiing is a serious business here, and among the wealthy Italians who flock to the region, style is all. To ensure that we looked the part, we began with a few lessons with Markus, an instructor from the Scuola de Schi Dolomites, and we couldn't have been in better hands.

When an incognito king passed through the region just last week, he picked Markus as his guide.

ARMED with his tips, we made it down the hardest local slope, the infamous giant slalom run at Piz La Ila, with a degree of dignity and decorum, and then started exploring further afield.

The Alta Badia lift system has a relatively modest 90 miles of pistes but it is linked into a network that runs for nearly 800. Stretching out beneath the lofty summit of 3,342m Marmolada, the region offers staggering diversity and views to die for.

You can even ski the whole way around the picturesque Sella massif in a day on the celebrated Sella Ronda circuit.

After lunch at Utia Bioch, the best rustic mountaintop restaurant in Alta Badia, we skied the scenic slopes to Chertz and then down into the little village of Arabba. Here, the lifts ascend Marmolada herself.

Apparently, Marmolada is one of the only female mountains in



Pictures: GETTY

the area. But she's no soft touch.

The slopes here are some of the most challenging in the region and are lickered by the low-lying clouds which roll up her flanks. At Luigi Gorza, 2,495m up, we took the red and black runs back down to village level, where we warmed up on ham, egg and asparagus pizza, and plump ravioli parcels soaked in melted butter.

The next day, we skied in the opposite direction, through Colfosco and along a dazzlingly beautiful valley to Utia Jimmy.

Here, needle-sharp peaks stabbed the sky and red runs dribbled back down the slopes through some of the most extraordinarily beautiful mountain vistas. We rarely waited more than five minutes for a lift and covered miles of pistes before we'd even digested breakfast.

Fresh powder isn't always the region's strong suit but pistes remain groomed thanks to an extensive battery of snow canons. And we were particularly lucky.

After driving into the village on our first day in 15c sunshine, the following evening unleashed one of the biggest snowfalls of the winter. And conditions remained superb.

On our last evening, we took the last lift up to Utia Bioch and drank sweet prune liqueur as the sun slipped behind the mountains. Fully fortified, we then skied the long, gliding blue run back down to San Cassiano.

The piste was completely empty, the peaks were washed rose pink by the sunset and we had only Mrs Marmolada, looming on the horizon, for company. After a week in her shadow, she had proved a most excellent hostess.

TRAVEL FACTS

easyJet (easyjet.com) flies to Innsbruck, a two-hour drive from San Cassiano, from four UK airports. Fares from £19.99 one-way. Car hire through Alamo (alamo.co.uk).
Doubles at Rosa Alpina (00 39 0471 849 500; rosaalpina.it) in San Cassiano from £155 per night. For lift pass details, visit dolomitisuperski.com.
Ski and Snowboard School Dolomites (00 39 0471 844 018; skidolomites.it). For more info, visit altabadia.org.

For news, views and the latest snow reports, visit travelmail.co.uk