

AUGUST

## DOLOMITES

BY MARK WILSON

In winter San Cassiano is an impossibly chichi Italian ski retreat. The summer, by contrast, is traditionally a lean period and that's a pity because you can avoid those Alpine perennials – broken bones, lukewarm Glühwein and panda eyes – while still enjoying the spectacular scenery. The village is in the heart of the Dolomites, hemmed in by startling teethlike crags that erupt from the forests below. As the sun crosses the sky the peaks put on a light show: from the burning red of dawn through the gentle violet of the afternoon to breathtaking red-gold sunsets (the "enrosadira").

The local area is criss-crossed with a network of footpaths, chairlifts and buses. If you're so inclined you can call on the services of a mountain guide but that sounded like way too much exertion: we took a pair of chairlifts from the nearby village of Pedraces to the church of Santa Croce, hard against the Monte Cavallo, which rises vertiginously nearly 1,000m above it. After stopping for lunch we ambled (hiking is too strong a word) past the stations of the cross that line the path, and down, on the gentlest of descents, on a winding track through the forest and back to the hotel. Perfect, but for only one thing: the four o'clock thunderstorm was early. Each day, with Alpine efficiency, the clouds massed on the forests by 3.30pm and the rain fell

half an hour later. Not this time. Just after two the weather broke and we were soaked. Luckily, a quick dash across a field brought us to a hillside hamlet and a helpfully positioned garage with awning. A couple of other families were already sheltering there and had phoned for taxis, so we cadged a lift for the five-minute drive back to the hotel. Oh, the rigours of mountaineering.

We were staying in the Rosa Alpina, a traditionally styled but luxurious boutique hotel on the main drag of San Cassiano, run by the Pizzinini family for three generations. The service is impeccable without being over-formal and the rooms go for rustic charm rather than pandering to the vogue for giant plasma screens and absurd plumbing: here there's pine panelling with local paintings on the walls and ceilings, and breathtaking views over the forest.

You're nobody in the hotel trade without a spa these days and Rosa Alpina's is one of the best. After all that exhausting strolling there are clay treatments, ultrasound facials and the chance to indulge your Cleopatra complex with the "special skin care for two with milk bath". If you're brave, a serene white-coated massage technician will pummel you to within an inch of your dignity with a full-body workout. By this time you'll have worked up

an appetite. How many villages of 750 souls can boast three Michelin-starred restaurants within five minutes' drive? Sadly, we had time to try only two of them, the first of which, St Hubertus, was in the hotel itself. Its chef, the splendidly named Norbert Niederkofler, serves up regional dishes with a "gourmet twist". If you're in a large party or an exhibitionist you can book the chef's table (actually a private dining room with picture window to the kitchen) for the full theatrical experience. Just up the road La Siriola offers a more modish gastronomical experience, with creations such as a medley of tomato dishes from jelly, through soup to sorbet; plus local specialities including mountain hay soup, which tastes like, well, hay. But in a good way.

San Cassiano is a three-hour drive from Venice, and as an extra treat on the way home we stayed at the Bauer Il Palladio hotel on the island of Giudecca. It's just across the water from St Mark's Square and next door to Sir Elton's humble palazzo but it's a world away from the miasma of a Venetian summer. Thick stone walls keep the interior cool and tranquil, and the front rooms give a spectacular panorama of the city. Rosa Alpina: [www.rosalpina.it](http://www.rosalpina.it), 00 39 047 184 9500. Bauer Il Palladio: [www.palladiohotelspa.it](http://www.palladiohotelspa.it), 00 39 041 520 7022 →



SAN CASSIANO IS HEMMED IN BY STARTLING TEETHLIKE CRAGS THAT ERUPT FROM THE FORESTS BELOW



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