

# Dolomite triumph

It's a place where no-one bats an eyelid when Hollywood's George Clooney shows up unannounced. Understated wealth is what **Sophie Hazan** found in San Cassiano.

**S**LEEPING above the reception at Rosa Alpina is the spa hotel's secret weapon - newlyweds Hugo and Ursula Pizzinini.

No job is too big or small for this on-stop publicity machine, who are an essential ingredient to the family-run business. While beautiful Ursula might hike up the nearest mountain to pick *Antica Flowers* for one of the hotel's healing beauty treatments, bespectacled Hugo is likely to be zipping about entertaining guests. So on our crumpled and crossed arrival, after a two-hour airport transfer by road up the steep sided Dolomite Mountains, our hosts emerged like late night heroes to help with luggage.

Not that they would have ever let on, but it is likely that that very morning they had both been up at the first glint of dawn to see off departing guests.

Ushered inside with a smile and a hug, our room keys were passed out and we were neatly packed off to bed before we could say "Nightcap?" No matter, I found instant comfort reclining in a complimentary bathrobe, guzzling apricots from the welcome basket and sipping chilled champagne from the well stocked mini-bar.

The pick-me-up and walk in wardrobe even inspired a rapid unpack. That and Hugo's keen reassurance that there would be no rushing or early starts for the next couple of days.

Looking around, I'd been hooked into a spacious junior suite, decorated in traditional Alpine-style pine furniture and whitewashed walls.

Beyond the bed was a cute breakfast area with fridge and cushioned window seat - presumably a welcome rest area for throbbing limbs after a physical day out in the mountains.

Naturally Rosa Alpina has differentiated rooms of varying luxury, but what radiated when we later took "the tour" was the individual personality of each.

Curtains divided one, another had a snug log stove, while others boasted private balconies or nook.



**LUXURIOUS:** The Rosa Alpina hotel boasts excellent spa facilities

Renaissance painted walls.

In fact, from the tiled Turkish steam room of the spa to the welcoming wall-sworn faces of the mountain guides, the hotel oozed a friendly warmth.

## Athlete

Robe-wearing guests were just as likely to pass you en route to the pool as the wiry athlete clattering into the lobby with hike balancing over one

shoulder, or family gaggle with pet pooch in tow. Such a casual door policy is exactly why you could be forgiven for forgetting that this is a place that draws the rich - and famous.

Well, with Pizzinini family boss Paolo firmly at the helm backed by wife Daniela Steiner, the namesake of the hotel's exclusive spa, who else would check in at Rosa Alpina? A motorbiking George Clooney, of course.

Local legend has it that the Hollywood Alister booked in unannounced to take full advantage of the spa and double Michelin starred St Hubertus restaurant.

No prized photo of Paolo embracing the handsome actor can be found framed and hanging anywhere, so naturally I later took the opportunity to closely quizz the beauticians, rationalising that they would be the first to spill if this was some publicity stunt.

But all three recalled the visit: "Oh, yes, Mr Clooney was here."

And that that is. No excitable glugge or feminine blab, and certainly no gossiping. Which sums up the understated, unflappable professional approach at Rosa Alpina.

Waking from a dreamy night's sleep next morning, it appeared to be the middle of the night. Dourfully I switched off the alarm and winched open the window shutters.

Lush green rolling hills and a tree-lined vista burst in technicolor high above the village road, which was surprisingly busy. The twitter of bird song and sooty smoking chimneys left me scanning the horizon for Julie Andrews' billowing skirts.

The transition from the overcast Leeds skyline to the dramatic Dolomite mountain range was exhilarating. This was the high altitude village of San Cassiano, famously steeped in legend and history, and at the heart of the Alta Badia district.

At 5,000ft the Italian hamlet has today become best known for stylish skiing.

But many of the locals are not quick to forgive its past, and still proudly remember the locality's strategic importance for World War One allies between 1915 and 1917. And as Algen Rosen (father to become Rosa Alpina) was the village's only doctor, he played a significant role housing soldiers and important officials.

Outdoor enthusiasts - hikers, climbers, cyclists and ramblers - love and dominate the area during the warmer months.

Tourism is essential to the Alps, and the emphasis is undoubtedly on physical activity. Tourists in the sunny Limonaia breakfast room were wrapped up and headed out.

Usually summertime is a scorcher in the Dolomites, but it seemed even the southern hemisphere was suffering from an unseasonal blip, with light showers and cool temperatures expected.

That meant hiking was out the question as far as our over-protective guides were concerned, and activation of Plan B.

For the next two days we browsed the stunning scenery, dropped in on sites of interest including a war museum and took advantage of transport and cable cars when out "walking".

Hugo and Ursula had prescribed fresh air, food and relaxing spa treatments.

Wonderful, but perversely I was a shade disappointed to not even get near to earning my rewards and each day took my constitutional - a half-hour march up the nearest hill.



INDIVIDUAL THE HOTEL SUITES OFFER A PERSONALITY



**STUNNING:** Stroll in the Dolomite mountains or relax in the Daniela Steiner spa

That aside, the location was a dream retreat. The culinary highlight was always going to be the 13-course taster menu we were promised at the elegant St Hubertus.

Even after the horror of realising that my personal request to not eat dairy products had somehow been translated into a meat and fish-free menu, I could not find fault.

How so much flavour was infused into what was essentially a bowl of cold tomato soup, or how the chef had kept his fingers while shaving the truffles and porchini within an inch of existence I will never know.

And that was despite being seated at the chef's table inches from a window which was wound back to reveal the kitchen's nerve centre.

## Quality

All produce – food and drink – is sourced locally, making this an expensive business, pointed out Hugo. While the restaurant owed its medals to the home-grown talents of Norbert Niederkofler, the culinary whiz would never survive without the financial backing of the hotel due to the cost of buying top class produce.

Good quality is what Rosa Alpina delivers, but there are no unnecessary airs and graces. The Wine Bar & Grill serves excellent freshly made traditional pizza and pasta dishes. A three-

## Travelfacts



- Rosa Alpina room prices start from £131 per night between June and October.
- For information and reservations please contact Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa on 00 39 0471 849 500 or email info@rosalpina.it
- Wine Bar & Grill at Rosa Alpina – three-course lunch £23
- St Hubertus at Rosa Alpina – five-course tasting menu plus amuse-bouche and pre-dessert £83
- Fondue at Rosa Alpina – cheese fondue £29 and meat fondue £32
- Daniela Steiner beauty

course lunch sets you back little more than £20 per head. The key message the family want to deliver is far from being stuffy, they are cutting edge. "People hear about us through word of mouth, but we can always do better," the charming Ursula told me. "Times are changing, after all. We have many more young couples and families

- spa at Rosa Alpina – various treatments and prices listed at [www.rosalpina.it](http://www.rosalpina.it)
- British Airways fly from London Gatwick to Venice Marco Polo three times a day, seven days a week – [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)
- KLM Royal Dutch airlines fly from Leeds Bradford to Venice Marco Polo three times a day, seven days a week – [www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)
- Rosa Alpina offer transfers by road (200km) and by air (private jet or helicopter).

staying with us. And more people are interested in health – they don't want to just bake in the sun, they want an active break. "Summer holidays spent in the mountains have in the past been associated with older people wearing unfashionable walking gear. It wasn't seen as fun and interesting, like it is now."