

Dolomites delight (?)

Introduction

My first visit to the magical mountains was as a teenage schoolboy in 1953. My 2003 visit was in no way a visual disappointment; schoolboy memories had played no tricks over half-a-century.

My 2003 'tour card' was well and truly marked by a couple of generous readers: the much-travelled British duo, based in the US for many decades, Desmond and Janet Tivy.

By sheer coincidence, following my Norwegian adventure in 2002, similarly 50 years after my first trip to Norway in 1952 (see 'Noble Norway'), I told the Tivys that an urge to return to Northern Italy and the Dolomites was niggling away in me. Almost by return of post came their own 'mapaholics' version, a large hand-drawn map and pages of hand-written text of what I should see and do. All this based on their highly enjoyable trip a year or so earlier.

I built-up on their 'open-the-door' help, as I do for readers with my own work, did more detailed research and pushed the door further open – equipping myself with enough material to ensure I had an equally enjoyable visit.

(Why the title's question mark? My 'delight' was tempered by a touring 'shock'. I cannot say I was deeply disturbed by what I encountered - but I'm a hugely experienced driver and rally navigator. I've traversed probably more mountain roads than all but a handful of readers; for the faint-hearted my 'reservations', explained towards the end of what follows, in the final pages, could well be decisive in choosing whether you want to drive in the Dolomites.)

Dolomites: what are they?

'Dolomites' (*Dolomiti* in Italian; *Dolomiten* in German) is derived from the name of a Frenchman, Déodat de Dolomieu (1705-1801); the first geologist to closely examine the white calcareous rock. The 'dolomitic' rocks we admire today, a mix of limestone and coral, were formed 150-300 million years ago at the bottom of the then Tethys Sea.

Some 60-80 million years later the rocks were first compressed and then pushed upwards with stupendous force from the bottom of the sea. Evidence of this can be found in the myriad fossils, ammonites and shells found in the Sella group of mountains peaks. During the last two million years glaciers and weather continued the 'sculpturing'; what remains is the *Dolomiti* legacy.

Where are they?

The Dolomites lie within an oval-shaped area, roughly 50 miles from west to east and 40 miles from north to south, in north-eastern Italy. Locate three significantly-sized towns: Bolzano/Bozen (its German name); Cortina d'Ampezzo, some 40 miles away to the east; and, south of the latter, Belluno. The A22 *autostrada* forms the western boundary; the S49 and S52 roads the northern and eastern

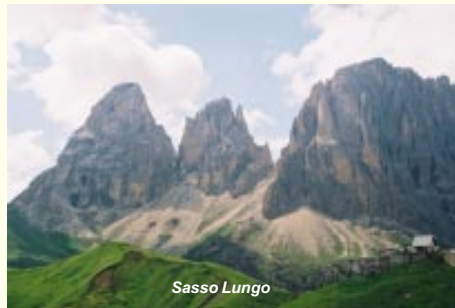
boundaries (south of Austria's Tyrol frontier); and the terrain between San Martino de Castrozza and Belluno is the southern extremity.

One further oddity is the much smaller, detached dolomitic Gruppo di Brenta, south-west of Bolzano and north-west of historically-famous Trento. This 'pendant', 15 miles long from north to south, is a group of 10,400ft limestone peaks as spectacular as any found in the main 'oval' to the north-east.

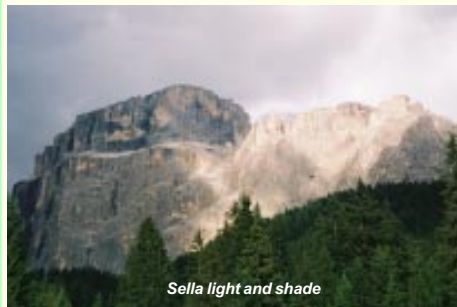
Much of the main 'oval' was part of Austria as recently as the late 19C. No wonder then, less than 150 years later, that German is a more dominant language than Italian in the Dolomites. There remains, in all sorts of ways, considerable evidence on the ground, of old allegiances. 'Dominate' will be a word I shall use again later on!

What do the Dolomites look like?

The Dolomites are scenically stunning. Their 'shapes' comprise every possible permutation of well-weathered domes, upturned moulds, pyramids, needles, vertical walls (one 4,000ft high), chimneys, towers, chisel heads, ramparts and other assorted shapes. What is especially captivating is that many of the peaks are isolated summits, akin to the smaller-scale Sutherland versions on Scotland's superb west coast (Suilven for example); others form groups of three, five or more equally high mountain tops. What is interesting is that dozens of the highest peaks are all around 3,150-3,350 metres high (say from 10,300 to just under 11,000ft).



Emerald pastures line valley floors; they then make way for vast drapes of conifers (both dark and, thankfully, the rejuvenating light greens of larches that shed their needles every autumn) which rise up the valley sides to a height of about 6,000ft. Above the tree-line further jade pastures are often seen; these rise to the bottom of the gigantic dolomitic walls which reach up some 3,000-4,000ft into the sky. They are proud, majestic mountains, with weather-beaten, heavily multi-lined faces; age has added to their allure and, for me, are among the most seductive in the European Alps.



Limestone and coral have combined to dazzle with differing colours: pink, pearl grey, peach, sunset reds and other hues. They are especially retina-pleasing when sunlight shines on the rock surfaces, illuminating the varying 'shades'; even better when clouds create contrasting pools of shadows. Sunrise and sunset are the best time to be up, literally, and about.

When is the best time to visit the Dolomites?

Surely in June? The meadows at high altitude are uncut and are a glorious kaleidoscope of wild flowers. Nowhere else in the Alps, perhaps nowhere else in any mountain range on the planet, are so many 'colours' so breathtakingly rampant. Use your imagination: blue crystal-clear skies; emerald pastures; all the earlier described dolomitic hues; greens galore; wild flowers of every shade possible; and spic-and-span colourful villages. Plus the bonus of really competitive *rapport qualité-prix* full-pension and half-pension hotel rates, often only 50% of August's high-season charges.