

Dolomites 09  
(Jim Sheehan)

In early July Noel and myself flew out to Bergamo and drove up to the Brenta Dolomites. We found a very comfortable campsite at San Antonio di Mavignola south of Madonna di Campiglio and settled in.

Next morning we drove into the National Park (€5 entry and €2 per night for parking) and parked in the ample carpark near the Rifugio di Vallesinella. Soon we were kitted out and started up the Sentiero 317, past the Rifugio Casinei (1826 m) and out of the forest to the Rifugio Tuckett at 2273 m. The rifugio was comfortable and welcoming and sparsely populated at this time.

Next morning we set out to go to the Rifugio Alimonta on the Sentiero SOSAT (S 305), a via ferrata graded d on a scale from a (easy) to f (v. hard). The guardian of the rifugio assured us that the route was passable, unlike some of the higher routes which were blocked with late snow. We walked up the valley and dropped down to cross the scree onto the sides of the Punta Massari. Here we ascended a short ladder and climbed along a gradually rising trail until we turned south and across a boulder field that lay under a blanket of snow. We came to a ravine which we entered by descending a ladder and continuing with cables for protection. A long ladder (51 rungs) brought us up to a narrow ledge which led us out of the ravine to reveal the Val di Brenta below and the majestic Sfulmini peaks ahead and left. A short section of the path involved crawling on all fours through a low tunnel that was open on the left hand side. After a short break we dropped down to the junction with S. 323 leading up from the Rif. Brentei. We stayed with S. 305 and climbed up over snow to the Rif. Alimonta at 2580 m. The valley floor was covered in a thick blanket of snow and the terrace of the rifugio lay well below the top of the surrounding snow.

After a comfortable night in the rifugio we set out with just our via ferrata harnesses to climb up to the Bocca. The snow was crisp after the night frost, but soon we were looking down into the Val Perse. We ascended a system of ladders that brought us into the Centrale route and followed the cables around to the east where the view extended out over the Val d'Adige which separates the Brenta from the main Dolomite range. Knowing the route ahead was not passable, we retraced our steps to the Alimonta and retrieved our packs and set off towards the Rif. Brentei below. It being Saturday, we met numerous people coming up against us. The S. 323 dropped into a valley that was covered in snow. People coming up on the snow were glad to see us on the track and made their way over to escape from the snow slope. One group of young people who were going to the Alimonta to busk stopped and serenaded us with a rendition of the "Bella Bionda", much to the bemusement of the other walkers. We got to the bottom of the snow field and resumed on the S 323 to its junction with the S 318 near the Rif Brentei.

After a brief lunch stop we continued along the S 318 with the spectacular Val di Brenta below to the left and the Punta di Campiglio towering above us to the right. The path led over an exposed snow chute and through a tunnel before turning north and dropping through the trees towards the Rif Casinei. Here we stopped for cappuccino and strudel before continuing back to the car at the Rif di Vallesinella.

We relaxed on the Sunday and took advantage of the fine facilities of the campsite to do our laundry. Then we went into Pinzolo for a browse around the town and the few gear shops we could find. Back near the campsite we stopped off at a Birraria for a meal. Thinking we were ordering a starter, main course and salad and chips, we ended up with a half roast chicken each and two 15" platters of sliced cold meats together with salads, chips and beers! We polished off the lot, knowing that we would need the energy on the morrow.

Monday morning saw us back at the Vallesinella. We retraced our steps up the scenic S. 318 as far as the Rif. Brentei, where we had our lunch. We then continued past the little chapel and along the gently rising path hanging over the valley on our right until we came to the snow field below the Bocca di Brenta (2552 m). Here we donned our crampons and made our way up the steep snow to the pass and then dropped down onto a rocky path that brought us to the Rif. Pedrotti. A blanket of cloud lay below us to the north and east, with the peaks of the Val Perse projecting like nunataks from a glacier. The Pedrotti was more crowded than the other rifugii, possibly because of its accessibility from Molveno. Nevertheless, it was very comfortable and offered a very good bill of fare, as did all the huts we used.

Next morning we dropped down past the Rif. Tosa and left across a snow field to pick up the S. Orsi (S. 303) that leads back to the Bocca di Tuckett, but keeping to the eastern flanks of the Centrale and Bocchette Alte. The route was straight forward, rising gently across scree slopes until we passed under the steep sides of the Cima Molveno. Here there was protection for a couple of hundred metres. At the end of the cables we had to make our way down over loose and steep ground and over soft snow to regain the path across the scree. This in turn was crossed by extensive snow chutes, icy in places. We stopped to put on our crampons and so came to the bottom of the Bocca di Tuckett. After a refreshment stop near a big rock, we continued up to the Bocca (2648 m) and down the other side on soft snow. We were now in sight of the Rif. Tuckett and soon we were on its welcoming terrace, beers in hand and discussing the relative difficulty of the SOSAT graded d and the Orsi graded b. We agreed that the Orsi presented more challenge in the prevailing conditions, but the SOSAT was well protected at all exposed positions.

To reinforce this conclusion, a party of Germans arrived at about 9 pm, having set out 10 hours earlier to traverse the S. Benini (graded d). This would normally take about four hours, but not only were the cables buried but also the way marks were also covered in snow. What was intended to be an easy first day turned out to be an epic. We assured them that they would have no such problems on the SOSAT, their next day's walk.

The following morning we set off down S. 317 as far as the Casinei, taking time to photograph some of the many beautiful alpine flowers that abounded in the various habitats. Rather than head straight back to the car, we took S. 317b which brought us down by the Cascade or waterfalls that emerge from the cliff walls high above the valley floor. The path zigzags down, crossing the two branches of the river between the cascading waters. Back at Vallesinella, we collected the car and after a quick visit to the supermarket, we were on our way back to the camp site at Fae for lunch and preparations for the move east on the morrow.

Thursday 16th July saw us packing up our tent and loading the car for the journey east where we intended climbing the Marmolada, which at 3343 m is the highest peak of the Dolomites and is

equipped with a via ferrata that leads to within 100 m of the summit.

We drove to Mezzolombardo on the Noce before turning north along the SS 12 to Ora where we turned right for the Val di Fassa. Our road rose up to Pozza di Fassa where we found the Catinaccio Rosengarten camp site close to the town. This campsite was more crowded than that at Fae and the pitches were smaller and less grassy. However, the facilities were excellent. These were housed in a state of the art block that was not quite finished. In addition, residents in the site could avail of a 10% discount at several restaurants in the locality.

The town of Pozza and the adjacent village of Meida largely consisted of modern hotels, apartments and restaurants in the classic alpine style, but interspersed with older buildings that predated the modern tourist-driven development. The local language and culture was Ladin which survived the changes resulting the redrawing of the international boundaries over the centuries. We were delighted by a street festival of traditional music and dancing in the streets on our second night there.

Next day we set off to explore the environs of the Marmolada. We drove to Alba and parked the car near the telerifuge station and set off up the narrow road towards the Rif Contrin. The track rose steeply over a series of switchbacks through a forest. After 30 minutes the track levelled off and passed through a pleasant valley alongside the Contrin river where horses and cattle grazed. We continued over the river and soon another sharp rise brought us to the Rifugio Contrin at 2016 m. Here the huge bulk of the Gran Vernel and the Marmolada dominated the skyline to the north and northeast.

After cappuccinos and cakes, we continued up the Val Rosalia, past the Capella di San Maurizio, patron saint of the Alpini. After an hour we arrived at the junction of the S 606 which continued to the Forcella di Marmolada and the S 610. This latter we followed as it rose steadily to the east over the rocks and scree towards the Pas de Ombretta. We stopped for lunch in the lee of some rocks to escape the cool breeze blowing down the valley. We resumed only to cross some snow chutes that spilled over the track and before long came to a crumbling mass of black basalt-like rock. The track led up around this onto a slope strewn with old wooden posts and rusted barbed wire that probably dated from the Great War. At the top of this slope a rough cross of two interlocked pieces of iron marked the Pas de Ombretta (2702 m). The vertical cliffs of the Marmolada rose to our left and the slopes of the Cima di Ombretta rose to our right. Ahead the view stretched across the Val di Cordevole to the other Dolomite giants, the Pelmo (3168 m) and the Civetta (3220 m).

We retraced our steps back to the Rif. Contrin with the distant rumble of thunder adding urgency to our progress. We had a quick beer at the rifugio before returning to the car and we just made it back to the camp site as the thunder and rain set in. The storm lasted through the night and it was midday before the weather cleared to reveal fresh snow down to 2000 m on the surrounding hills.

With a good forecast for the next few days we set out on Sunday afternoon by bus to Alba. From here we set out for the rifugio, pacing ourselves better on the steep ascent to the valley. While we met many walkers descending the trail, we and just one other were the only guests in the rifugio that night. After an excellent meal, we retired to our comfortable quarters and set our

clocks for a 6.30 am alarm call. Breakfast at 7.00 and we were on our way at 7.45 now weighed down by heavier packs than previously.

Back we went up the Val Rosalia on S 606, but stayed with trail after its junction with S 610 that we had followed previously. The landscape was almost lunar as we trudged over extensive scree slopes practically devoid of vegetation. The path crossed under the Forcella di Marmolada and rose over less stable scree at the foot of the Picol Vernel. We donned our helmets and harnesses and scrambled towards the foot of the forcella where we could make out the first of the ladders. A snow chute lay between us and the foot of the first ladder and it proved soft and unstable where it overlay the loose scree. Noel made his way up to the foot of the ladder and belayed me as I climbed without my ice axe which was snagged in my pack. From here I climbed up the first section of ladders to the forcella proper where we sorted the ropes and ice axes on a good stance beside two dugouts dating from the Great War. The Contrin hut was visible 850 vertical metres below, and 2 km distant.

At this stage we were joined by a number of climbers who had reached the forcella from the north side. We were now in a line of people clipping on to the cable and moving up the via ferrata. The climbing varied from moving over smooth rocks with just the cable for protection to climbing on stemples (U-shaped iron steps cemented into the rock face) or simply iron bars. The latter presented quite a hazard to anybody loosing their footing as they could hit quite a few of them before the harness leashes met an arresting peg.

We took advantage of two iron pegs just off route to rest a while and allow the people behind us – including an eleven year old girl - to go past. The views were stunning, but being slightly to the north side of the ridge we did not get the full sense of exposure that we might have experienced on the lip of the south face. We resumed our progress and it seemed no time before the route levelled off somewhat. The via ferrata ended where the rocky ridge met a snowfield stretching ahead towards the summit. Here we donned crampons and deployed ice-axes and walking poles and made our way up the last 100 m in the soft fresh snow that was the legacy of the recent thunderstorm. Then the iron cross and the summit trig point came into view. We made our way over and took the customary photographs before retreating to the small bivouac shelter (Capanna Punta Penia) where we had a welcome hot cup of tea. The guardian told us he stayed there for 100 days, mostly alone.

We started down the snow slope to the north towards the descent gully. We were delighted to find that it was rigged with a via ferrata cable. Our guide book gave this as an unprotected scramble, with another book mentioning the possibility of abseiling. We made our way quickly down to where the cable disappeared into the fresh snow covering the glacier below and filling the bergshrund that was listed as a potential difficulty. On went the crampons again and we set off on a wide down over the upper glacier, confident that if we stayed on the well-trodden track we would be safe from hidden crevasses. It was interesting to recall that this very glacier once housed a network of ice tunnels that was home to up to 300 Austrian troops between 1915 and 1917. Some of this City of Ice still remains under the lower reaches of the glacier, but the fresh covering of snow meant that there was little chance of our coming upon any evidence of it.

We were now in sight of the Pian dei Fiacconi with its two rifugios and more importantly a cable

lift down to the Diga di Fedaia. We hurried down, fearing we would miss the last lift, but we made it with time to spare. The lift was of the continually moving type with individual cages which were entered at a run from behind. The attendant closed the gate behind. 600 m below, the gate was opened by the bottom attendants who also steadied the passenger as they stepped backwards off the moving cage. We made our way to a nearby bar and ordered two beers to toast our achievement and to slake our thirst. A German couple offered us a lift across the Diga to the bus stop that brought us back to Pozza.

On the Tuesday we went up to Canazei by bus to meet Bill, Ann and Cathal who were holidaying in nearby Arraba. We were in wind down mode and enjoyed the afternoon with them. They were faced with the drive back to Arraba while Noel and I could relax on our bus ride back to Pozza for our last Ladin-style meal.

Next day we were packed and on the road by noon. We joined the Autostrada at Ora and were in Bergamo by 5 pm. We checked into the relative luxury of a 3 star hotel and enjoyed a traditional Italian meal in a cellar restaurant nearby. We were well placed for the airport and next morning we checked in our car and completed our formalities for the flight back to Dublin, arriving tired but satisfied with our Dolomite adventures.

#### Travel:

- RyanAir to Bergamo. Sports bag (up to 32 kg) @ €30 eachway.
- Car: Fiat Punto from Avis through Auto Europe

#### Guide Books:

- Via Ferrata Scrambles in the Dolomites by Hofler/Werner and Translated by Cecil Davies (Cicerone).(Comprehensive but dated, lacking maps and stilted language)
- Walking in the Dolomites by Gillian Price (Cicerone) (Useful information, more maps than above, readable.)
- Via Ferratas of the Italian Dolomites: Vol 1 by Smith and Fletcher (Cicerone) (Similar to above, more maps but covers North, Central and East)
- Via ferratas of the Italian Dolomites: Vol 2 by same authors (Covers the West - including the Brenta - and South)

#### Maps:

- Dolomiti di Brenta, Adamello-Presanella, Val di Sole 1:50 000 Sheet 10
- Tabacco Series Marmolada-Pelmo-Civetta-Moiazza 1:25 000 Sheet 015
- Tabacco Series Val di Fassa- Marmolada 1:25 000 Sheet 06 and Sella 1:25 000 Sheet 07 also cover the Marmolada and the areas to the west and north, respectively.
- Kompass maps of the area are also available in 1: 25 000, 1:30 000 and 1:50 000.

Maps available from Stanfords of London ([www.stanfords.co.uk](http://www.stanfords.co.uk)).