



# Ultimate “Ultimate Dolomites” - This is Fucking Awesome!

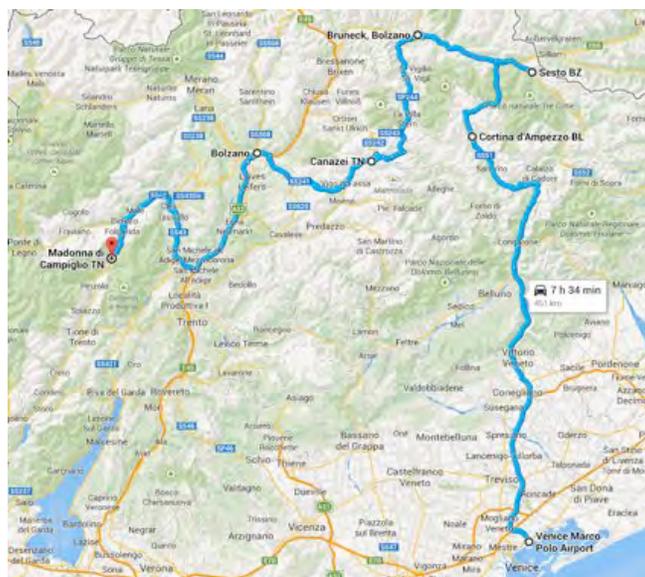
Three Sisters and Our New Brother-In-Law Choose Their Own Adventure



Left to Right: (top) Cinque Torri, upper Lagazuoi & Tofana; (middle) Croda da Lago, Tre Cime cows, towers, & me; Cima Dodici & Una; (bottom) Ladin folklore goddess Bregostina & marmot, Marmolada, Rosengarten, Ellen & Torri di Vajolet, me & Bocca del Tucket

## Introduction and DIY Preparation

First – I make no apologies for that title. Ellen used Macklemore’s “Thrift Shop” as our wake-up song most mornings; consequently, my in-my-head hiking beat was that song’s honky sax, and every time we came to some great view, all I could think was: This IS Fucking Awesome! Mostly as a result of rafting (the adventure travel gateway drug), I have done a lot of guided trips these last 15 years. After Ellen and my success self-leading a simple, short trip to Norway last summer (see 2013 report), we (Ellen, Allison, new brother-in-law Marshall, and I) decided to organize our own ultimate “Ultimate Dolomites” trip (an oft-used adventure travel name). Although Allison had never been to the Dolomites and Marshall had never been to Europe, I had been on a guided trip to the eastern Dolomites (see 2007 report) and Ellen had self-guided many shorter trips to different parts of the Dolomites. I did the big-picture region/timeline selection, making sure this trip was a full 2 weeks, that it emphasized several areas, and that it did not involve a ton of daily driving (i.e. we moved through several mountain village base-camps). As shown in the adjacent map: after meeting in Venice on July 13, we would spend 4 nights in Cortina, 3 nights in Sesto, 4 nights in Canazei, and 2 nights in Brenta (with Ellen and I staying there an additional 2 nights); accommodations for this trip roughly cost \$80 (all \$ will be reported in USD equivalents) per person per night, including breakfast.



For hike approximation, Ellen and I used a combination of favorite hikes from past trips and the Cicerone guidebooks – though Italy’s massive snow-pack this winter made for some challenges. But we knew this going in and packed appropriate gear: mini-crampons, poles, and river-fording sandals. As for getting to Venice, we arrived there via different paths. Ellen drove from the Hague, taking 2 days to get to Asiago (near Venice) – where she spent 4 days competing at an international orienteering. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, she met the rest of us at the Venice airport. Meanwhile, I flew from Seattle (leaving 3 days after returning from the Aisek – report pending) to Denmark on July 10 – where I rested up 2 nights (alas, my SD card from that leg was damaged and I lost all pictures from Copenhagen and Venice). I then took a 2-hour flight to Venice, arriving 1:35 on July 13. Meanwhile, Allison and Marshall endured a 2-part overnight

flight (Portland to Frankfurt to Venice), arriving 1:30 on July 13. Because Ellen's car and most economical vehicles in Europe are VERY small, we agreed in advance that Ellen/I (E/I from here on out) would be in one car, and Allison/Marshall (A/M from here on out) would rent their own. This decision also allowed us to plan a few one-way traverses. In contrast with our Prius rental experience in Norway last summer, there were NO automatics on this trip. This meant Ellen and Marshall were the sole drivers.



Left to Right: Cortina & Cristallo (from near Croda da Lago), our hotel (note Roman bridge and busy road), edelweiss, walking path

### July 13: Getting To Cortina Basecamp

Anyone who has been to Venice knows that that airport is small and unimposing. Today was also not as hot as it could have been. Although Ellen prepared a kit with maps and snacks for A/M (who also brought their own GPS), they mostly followed E/I (also using GPS) for the 3 hours it took to drive to Cortina. This drive was more straightforward than it seemed to me in 2007, with the majority of driving on 2-lane highways, plus 1 toll area. My bathroom needs were challenged because it was Sunday. After a string of closed gas stations, we found an open deli-market. Although Ellen insisted NO business would let you use their bathroom for free, this place said we could - but I still purchased a cone of melon/cantaloupe gelato... and they were out of toilet paper. From here, we started heading high into the mountains - with several big ones (e.g. Pelmo) appearing above the valley along which we climbed. Ellen's report about Asiago weather this last week was negative (severe rain, thunder, and lightning); she was thus pleased and a little surprised to see ANY mountains today. Coming into Cortina, we enjoyed major glimpses of nearly all the surrounding peaks: Cristallo, Sorapiss, Tofane, Croda da Lago, etc. Overall, Cortina was the most expensive town we stayed in, although the hotel I booked was not as high-end as many other places in this posh ski-focused destination. Our hotel was along the busy main one-way street entering and going around town (i.e. along the edge of the central pedestrian-only area). Given that hotel parking was limited (but easier than at most other places we stayed), E/I directed A/M into the one empty parking spot when we first arrived at the hotel. E/I then drove all around town (a ~7 minute circle) in hope that, by the time we came back, A/M would have gotten the hotel owner to open up another space for us... which he did. As everyone will report, I LOVED our hotel owner; he was the most friendly local we met. Although there was a good/small elevator in the hotel, the rooms here were among the smallest on the trip. Being along a busy street, it could also be noisy with the balcony doors open (fortunately, they were sound-proof when closed). While the bedding was great, the beds creaked a lot (adding to all our snoring) and the TV didn't work properly. A/M had a full bath, E/I a skinny shower only. We didn't have big mountain views - but we could see slivers of some peaks, and were below an impressive Roman bridge. Not surprisingly (but against the advice of Rick Steves and others), A/M decided to take a 2-hour nap before dinner; meanwhile, E/I set out on foot - first to explore the central part of town (noting grocery co-op hours), and then down this pleasant walking path that ultimately lead up the Fiemmes valley (Fiemmes being a trailhead for our Lagazuoi hike, later). Views along the way included beautiful meadows teeming with flowers (indeed, we hit the HEIGHT of flower season), the flanks of many surrounding peaks, lush forests, and - most amusing - Twin Peaks log-boy (shown above). Our turn-around time was 6:30, meaning we walked 4-5 miles total. E/I had made the decision that tonight's dinner would be at this neighboring pizzeria/bar. With VERY minor exception, dinner establishments did not open until 7 p.m. (with most facilities closed mid-day, between 3-7). Tonight's meal was good: a combination of soup, salad, and personal pizzas. The service was very fast in terms of getting food to the table, but we had to bug them for the bill - and then we had to correct the returned change (\$15 off). Our server seemed like a shy teenager - not someone maliciously trying to shortchange tourists. As is often the case when self-guiding trips, we struggled with restaurants on this trip, ultimately wasting a moderate amount of money especially in Cortina. Some lessons: (1) understand the seating charge and factor that into the bill (at most places, it was a few bucks per person... but it could be 10-15 PER PERSON); (2) if there is a seating or service charge, there is no need to tip (although I'm sure it is appreciated). We DID know that you pay for water (at all places) and you often have to pay for basic bread. Although tonight's pizzeria/bar experience was positive and fairly priced, it would have been more reasonable and very possible to do all dinners using grocery/co-op food.



Left to Right: Bai de Dones, Pian dei Menis, rocky scrambling, meadow meandering with Tofana glimpses, first view of Cinque Torri

### July 14: Cortina Basecamp - Cinqui Torri Loop, WWI Museum... and the BEST Entrée of the Trip

After a hearty hotel breakfast, we headed up the road towards war history-laden Passo Falzarego. Given less than stellar weather, we downgraded today's longer hiking plans in the vicinity of Cinque Torri to the shortest and most basic option: the 6.2 mile and 1800+ foot up/down loop (including WWI side-trip) described in Cicerone/Short Hikes #20. Although yesterday's drive seemed less crazy to

me than in 2007, all true mountain driving on this trip was just as memorably crazy as before – represented, this morning, by DOZENS of tight zigzagging turns through open meadow and lush forest. After 20 minutes, we arrived at the intended trailhead for this hike: roadside Bai de Dones (~5 minutes below the pass), which housed a small store and open-chair ski-lift. Although I had visited the Cinque Torri in 2007, I bypassed today’s hiking route by riding said ski-lift from the Cinque Torri down to this parking area. Bai de Dones provided free all-day parking provided that you paid to use their restroom – which we promptly did upon arrival. We then headed up a VERY rudimentary and muddy connecting trail, which did not inspire confidence about hiking in the Dolomites. Fortunately, we arrived at the floral Pian dei Menis, where a “real” trail proceeded earnestly up the steep hillside of rocky outcrops and larch. Although we never had far-reaching views over Cortina, we enjoyed glimpses of the Tofana across the valley; we’d be hiking there tomorrow, albeit not down the obvious zigzagging trail in view (Cicerone/Short Hikes #22-3), which passes multiple WWI ruins, including an old hospital foundation. Shedding lots of clothing, we ascended to glorious sub-alpine meadows, meandering through AMAZING flowers. Traversing more level ground, we hiked towards temporarily-visible Mt. Averau (where I did hike in 2007) and the Cinque Torri complex. Just before Averau vanished into the mist, we crossed a snowfield and entered a blocky and impressive boulder-field... at which point a brief bout of windy rain caused us to put on all our raingear (thankfully, one of the few times we had to do this during the whole trip!).



Left to Right: (top) anemone, Averau, boulderfield, classic views of Cinque Torri from near Scoiattoli; (bottom) WWI museum area

Right before the usually busy Rifugio Scoiattoli (which serves as the upper ski-lift station that descends to Bai de Dones), we paused for classic view pictures of the Cinque Torri, a bed of buttercup-like flowers blanketing the emerald landscape. We then bypassed Scoiattoli, in favor of doing the WWI museum and inner Cinque Torri side-trip before descending to lower Rifugio Cinque Torri for lunch. Although I had – in theory – hiked the Cinque Torri from Averau in 2007, I swear I don’t remember most of it... in part because it was SUCH a madhouse (where today, under cloudy skies, is was SOOOOOO quiet!), and in part because I never visited the WWI museum complex (no idea how I missed that!). Said museum constituted a mile of very up/down hiking, with representative WWI areas refurbished – e.g. rebuilt trenches, gun towers, cabin-like structures housing barracks, clinics, mule stockade etc. In the adjacent inner Cinque Torri, a large block of snow seemed to dangerously block the trail (which actually traverses the tower complex), and so we back-tracked and continued on a rocky trail around the Cinque Torri. Dropping through even more amazing flowers, we arrived at Rifugio Cinque Torri within 15 minutes – notably BEFORE a moderate crowd nearly filled the place.



Left to Right: inner Cinque Torri trail and climbers, looking back over WWI museum area, Rifugio Cinque Torri, descent in woods

Here, we enjoyed soup, beverages, and their pasta and dessert specials: the latter was FRESH gnocchi made from potatoes in their garden, in a FRESH mountain herb pesto; the former was a ricotta-filled almond strudel cake. Alas, there are no pictures of these items because we were so flabbergasted with their deliciousness. Our first 1.5 miles down from the rifugio was on a paved road used by both service and passenger vehicles; indeed, seeing the terrain caused Ellen to recall that one of her winter trips to the Dolomites involved snowshoeing UP this road to the rifugio – but then not being able to climb higher because of weather and avalanche danger. Using maps and hand-held GPS, we left the road to hike down a forest trail; unfortunately, we missed one important turn and wound up along the main highway, hiking up the edge-less road 0.5 mile back to Bai de Dones (not sure how that happened... but it caused us to be SUPER-careful on all future hikes and never get lost again!). Being that it was only 3:30 and tomorrow’s forecast looked great, we

decided to do some reconnaissance regarding the lower trailhead for our “most difficult” Val Travenanzes (Lagazuoi to Fiammes) hike. We were also hoping to have a face-to-face conversation with the Fiammes Visitor Center “ranger” equivalent about route conditions (given likely snow and river crossings) – and assumed that would be open until 5. Well – it closed at 4... we arrived there at 4:15. Although the obvious parking lot and trailhead instilled some confidence, there were very few cars, implying that not many people were doing the traverse. After returning to Cortina, we split up for dinner; A/M hit the co-op and did an in-hotel grocery meal; meanwhile, E/I met with some informative staff at the central alpine guide office and were assured the route was doable... just expect snow at the top (they did not have any comment about lower river crossings). We then went back to last night’s pizzeria/bar for soup and salad.



Left to Right: Passo Falzarego, gondola, A/M at Lagazuoi – view down/out... , Nuvolau, Averau, Pelmo, Cinqui Torri...

### July 15: Cortina Basecamp – Lagazuoi to Fiammes via Val Travenanzes... The Adventure Hike!

This hike was my favorite from 2007 – although that experience involved no snow, limited views up high (thanks to a high fogbank), and no shoe removal for river fords! Regardless, this traverse feels wild because it does not pass any rifugios for 12 high-commitment miles; it also starts super-high (at nearly 10K) and drops 5000 feet, with several river fords just over half-way down. This hike is not in the Cicerone/Short Hikes guidebook but can be found in their longer trekking guide; they and other sources rate the traverse as “most difficult.” When our hotel owner heard we intended to do this hike, he was concerned, giving me his personal cell number, as well as information about how to call for a helicopter rescue. We carried the most gear for this hike, and we used all of it. Ultimately, both the snow and the river crossings were more substantial than I hoped they’d be; even so, it only took us about 6.5 hours. Given its magnitude and sequential challenges, Ellen dubbed this “the adventure hike.” After putting Ellen’s car at Fiammes (FREE parking all day!), we headed up in the A/M Fiat to Passo Falzarego (FREE parking all day!) and easily caught the 9 a.m. gondola (no line!), which whisks you up 3000 feet in 5 minutes to Lagazuoi. We used gondolas or shuttle buses 5 times over the course of our whole trip, each costing us \$15-20 per person (i.e. total gondola/bus budget = \$400). From the top gondola platform, we enjoyed blue-sky mountain views all around. Of course, there was a SHITLOAD of snow, and the words “sunny and warm” did not come to mind. After a short bathroom run, we hit the trail. Our group stuck to what was a decent (but slushy-slick) boot-path through snow (following the real trail route). Allison and I wore mini-crampons and were embarrassingly slow. Ellen wore relatively new German climbing boots with good tread so she did not use traction devices. Marshall is a skier so he pretty much did standing glissades everywhere, all the while wearing the same basic Keens as Allison and I (no traction devices). During the upper half of this traverse, we hiked close to this MASSIVE party of Italians. As with many hikers we enjoyed in Italy, they were a rag-tag bunch: blue jeans, ghetto gear, beer-guts, few packs. The only things they didn’t have that we saw on all other hikes were cigarettes and dogs (on leashes, in strollers, or in chest baby carriers - seriously). While we made our way through the snow, the Italians scrambled this awkward band of rock above the snow. I’m not sure who thought whom was crazier – us/them, or them/us.



Left to Right: (top) uppermost sections showing most snow; (bottom) mostly dropping into boulders – Lagazuoi Grande, Tofana

After negotiating ~800 vertical feet of 60% snow, we arrived at this saddle (Forcella Lagazuoi). Above, the snowy section of trail we’d just negotiated rises like a ski-jump to the rifugio/gondola platform. At Forcella Lagazuoi, a right trail branch descended back to Passo Falzarego (via the aforementioned war/hospital Cicerone/Short Hikes #22-3... and a good escape or option if you cannot organize the

one-way traverse) and the left trail branch continued down the Val Travenanzes. After a short break to adjust clothing, we continued left – the way becoming a mix of amazing boulder-fields and emerald meadows. For the next several hours, we were almost always under the Tofana, the walls of which reminded A/M and I of hiking deep in the Grand Canyon.



Left to Right: rocky meadow sections between Forcella Lagazuoi and our lunch spot in the larch

Although there are no working rifugios along this route, there is an old stone foundation just before the trail first drops into larch forest... and, 20 minutes later, there is a ramshackle, locked cabin with a broken picnic table. We chose the latter as our lunch spot. Today's lunch items mostly came from the grocery co-op. I enjoyed bread with herby cheese and salami, fruit, and chocolate. As we ate, we acknowledged that we were barely half-way down... the unknown river crossings looming. The Italians also passed us while we were eating, but we caught up to them after continuing down through more open woods. Along this section, several side-creeks (which resembled Yellowstone thermal run-off) were much higher than they were in 2007. Thus, I was not surprised to arrive at the moonscape white flat river area and find a substantial, high, and swift river (mid-calf, with fast white-water)... and all the Italians scratching their heads. While they did all sorts of things (searching farther up- and down-river, moving rocks to try and engineer stepping stones...), we just changed into sandals and jumped right in. An excited older woman shouted "Bravissima!" as we forded, the first of 4 such crossings (well, Marshall did find one lower spot where he chose to rock-hop, the rest of us sandal-ing). Unfortunately, the terrain between the upper 2 crossings was NOT amenable to sandal hiking (this from a 14-year veteran of sandal hiking)... and so there was a lot of shoe-changing. BUT the route was more clearly-marked than I recall... although we never saw the Italians again.



Left to Right: (top) heading to the lunch cabin, Ellen at ghetto picnic table with Tofana waterfall, side-creek negotiating, into the moonscape, river ford-o-rama; (bottom) river-ford-o-rama, some sandal-hiking, final change of shoes

By the final more shallow but wide, braided crossing area, Allison and E/I were walking fully in the river... until an obvious meadow bank and trail was reached. There, we met a British couple hiking UP from Fiames, who confirmed there were no more river fords. BUT there was more snow – and so we changed back into boots for good. Of course, we did have to cross the river on a cool perpendicular log bridge (corresponding with a strong bend down the final valley) – after which we started down what I call the gorge segment of the

trail. Here, the river cuts deeper and deeper into a more traditional canyon; meanwhile, the trail stays higher up – often traversing narrow, unstable gullies. It was in one of these pockets that a HUGE swath of snow blocked our route; making matters worse, it CLEARLY went over a side-stream (you could see this shallow dip in its middle). Fortunately, it was stable and the path contoured it with only a slide descent. There were a few other small snow patches, including one under this beautiful spray-like waterfall.



Left to Right: (top) perpendicular wooden bridge and upper gorge, slide areas; (bottom) snowfield, middle gorge, larch again, Fiames

Our pace down the final gorge was fast as compared with our pace on the upper sections. Up until then, my team assumed I was making things up when I said we did this traverse in 6 hours back in 2007. Admittedly, we were also getting tired and wanted the hike to end. After a short snack and stretching break in this shady grotto, we began our final 3 miles. En route, we passed a lot of log piles – which we assumed were the product of trail repair crews dealing with winter debris. We crossed a cool rock bridge, and then some super-high wooden bridges over places where the river ran through a crack-like box canyon. We also passed more and more people coming up from Fiames. About 2 miles from the end, the path – still descending – became road-like... and we were passed by several dangerously fast and inconsiderate mountain-bikers. About 1 mile from the end, the path became flat, meandering along a MASSIVE, turquoise river that would have been impossible to ford. Across the river, there was a HUGE tent camp complex (30+ LARGE, canvas tents); we assumed this was some kind of commercial establishment for city slickers. The last half-mile was paved, which we knew was correct because we'd seen this during yesterday's reconnaissance trip. We are confident that we were the first to complete the traverse that day, arriving around 4 p.m. – 6.5 hours after we took off from the top. Despite high emotions, I am not sure my team loved this hike as much as I did back in 2007; indeed, while I loved it, it was not my favorite of this trip. Ellen said it was good because it required a full team effort at times, but she also all felt like we were always on edge – wondering what the next exciting challenge would be. But we drove back to Passo Falzarego excited to reward ourselves with a fancy meal. After a brief picture stop (the weather even more amazing, despite some earlier dark clouds), we stopped in at this restaurant that was poised on an obscenely scenic arm above the Cortina valley – MASSIVE views of Cristallo, Sorapiss, and Antelao. Unfortunately, the woman in charge rudely shooed us away because it was only 5 and she was in the middle of preparing for the 7 p.m. dinner start. And so we returned to Cortina, cleaning up and snacking a little before walking to what we THOUGHT was a reasonably priced hotel restaurant in the middle of town. In fact, their seating charge was the highest we encountered on the whole trip and, by the end, we had paid \$250 for a so-so meal... all in the presence of smokers (because they seated us on the veranda). Although the pasta appetizers were good and everyone else enjoyed their entrees, mine (Milanese osso bucco with saffron risotto) was terrible... and EVERYTHING was, like, teeny-tiny French portions. Indeed, we had to have an impromptu group self-intervention about shutting down our food spending habits and being more cognizant of seating fees... before turning down \$\$\$\$ desserts in favor of \$1.50 gelato cones down the street.



Left to Right: Croda da Lago from Lagazuoi, new trail and construction, look at that log pipe (!), annoying rock outcrops

### July 16: Cortina Basecamp – Frustration at the Croda da Lago

Today was, at times, frustrating. We were all tired. Allison had come into this trip with a cold and it was now worsening, on the move into her ears and lungs. I insisted we make a pact to be back to the hotel by 4 because we had to pack for tomorrow's move. Although we agreed we were going to the Croda da Lago area to the west of Cortina, we could not come to a consensus about which version to

do: the 7-mile lasso-loop described in Cicerone/Short Hikes #19 (this loop required crossing 2 passes), an in-out trip just to first pass (i.e. half of the Cicerone 19 loop), or a short car-to-car traverse from Passo Giau across the first Croda pass (recommended by our now-overly confident hotel owner). Our decision-making ability was complicated the fact that we had seen the second pass area from Lagazuoi – and it had LOTS of snow (see right side of first shot above). This was confirmed by a formidable-looking Swedish couple (staying at our hotel) who had done the lasso-loop yesterday; despite being only 7 miles, it took them 6.5 exhausting hours. Both the in-out and car-to-car trips would avoid the second pass – but no one knew what the snow situation was between Giau and the first pass, and A/M and Ellen did not understand that the car-to-car shuttle only required a 15-minute drive between trailheads (not 45 minutes, as per Lagazuoi-Fiames). Hence, this option was voted down. I also had very mixed feelings about Croda; in 2007, we did a very long traverse from Passo Staulanzo and Mt. Pelmo – crossing only the first pass, dropping by the lake, and then hiking to just below Passo Giau. Although I LOVED everything about the first 3/4 of that traverse, I HATED the trail below the lake; the idea of doing that twice (which is what the in-out entailed) honestly pissed me off... and I was not a happy-girl most of the day.



Left to Right: momentary flat spot during climb, Lagazuoi from viewpoint, Lago Federa – Becco di Mezzodi, Croda flanks, rifugio

For this trip, we all set out in the A/M Fiat and headed towards Passo Falzarego; mid-way up, we turned west towards Passo Giau. We then had to watch carefully for what was I knew (from 2007) was a small in-the-forest/roadside parking lot by Ponte di Rocurto. After about 10 minutes, we easily found the trailhead – mostly given away by shitloads of cars. Given horrible memories of the trail between the lake and the parking lot, I was initially SHOCKED at the amazingly manicured trail: new bridges, a fresh layer of white dolomite gravel, stunning hand-hewn log pipe aqueducts for diverting run-off (honestly – my favorite things of the day!). Within 15 minutes, though, we arrived at an active trail crew with heavy machinery – and the beautiful trail ended. Shortly thereafter, all my horrors returned: the scramble-worthy root and rock outcroppings, the schizophrenic trail grade, the obscenely braided social trails (sometimes 5 across, fanning in zigzags over steep gullies), and the mob of crowds abusing them. During the majority of the steep climb to the lake, I hiked with this party of older Italians who were slow and steady. After we reached the mile-long flattish bench before the lake, though, the Italians started stopping too much so I passed them – arriving at the lake 15 minutes before A/M and Ellen. At this point, I was raring to go to the first pass (Forcella Ambrizzola), and SOOOO annoyed with the trail that I was seriously in favor of hiking the loop just to avoid returning down that mess! After A/M and Ellen arrived, we snacked briefly and then headed up what is a shockingly civil trail to Ambrizzola – not to mention TOTALLY scenic (a slight surprise as we did not have as many distant views in 2007). Despite leading the pack up to this point, though, I totally bonked, dragging my sorry ass last over the pass.



Left to Right: (top) Becco di Mezzodi & Forcella Ambrizzola, A/M and I, Sorapiss, Antelao, Tre Cime (tomorrow's hike!) (bottom) 2 views of Croda da Lago, Becco di Mezzodi & Pelmo, trail towards pass two (Forcella di Formin) and Passo Giau

At the pass, we parked ourselves (and lunch) along the trail heading to pass two (Forcella di Formin) because a decently-gear party was coming up, and we wanted the skinny on the snow conditions. The woman we ultimately talked with said she was not great on snow but managed it OK – HOWEVER, their party had started their hike at 9 a.m. (i.e. they had taken 4 solid hours to do only half of the loop). We had already taken 3 hours just to get to pass one... and Forcella di Formin involved MORE climbing, followed by snow. Although I do not believe anyone in our group was totally OK with the decision, we played it safe and returned via the same path,

stopping only for drinks at the rifugio. Hoping to take a more direct antiseptic approach to her infection, Allison (who claims to LIKE bitter things) downed a famously bitter gentian grappa shot – declaring it unappetizing. Indeed, the rifugio featured a wall of grappa – dozens of medicine bottles filled with many colors and/or plants. The funniest was “Rambo” (complete with an old/faded picture of Sly); the owner claimed it was filled with a changing mixture of grappa leftovers. Given that we were on a mission to get back early, we avoided the mob (mostly on the rifugio deck consuming long lunches as we departed), thus enjoying a more palatable hike down.



Left to Right: Allison and gentian grappa, down the beautiful trail, Passo Giau – Averau, Nuvolau, Ra Gusela, Croda, snowfields...

I then asked for a very short driving trip up to Passo Giau, even though it meant arriving back at the hotel at 4:45. Although the scenery there was MAGNIFICENT (and made some of us regret not doing the car-to-car), there were some WICKED long snowfields between the pass and Croda – longer than anything we’d managed so far. As should be obvious, there were also happy cows. Although we had views of the glaciated Marmolada and lumpy wedding-cake-like Sella (both of which we’d see at closer range from Canazei), none photographed well given dark clouds and funky lighting. And so we returned to Cortina. E/I did a grocery dinner on our own while we packed. Unfortunately, Allison’s illness was now bad enough that I recommended looking into antibiotics; problematically, though, we spent too much time trying to Skype with her clinic back in Oregon - as opposed to just going directly to the local pharmacist.

**July 17: Transition to Sesto Basecamp – Tre Cime di Lavaredo, a Glorious Madhouse!**

Although it is recommended to leave early to avoid MAJOR crowds at Tre Cime (IMO, the MOST popular place in all of the Dolomites), we had to wait until the pharmacy opened – and didn’t hit the road until nearly 10. Tre Cime was less than an hour away, but involved a hefty (over \$30) entrance and parking fee. Madhouse is an understatement. Having endured a hard night, A/M did their own thing today – visiting only the front-face trail areas by the towers. Meanwhile, E/I did the full Cicerone/Short Hikes #9 – a 6.2 mile loop with about 1700 feet up/down. I had done this loop in 2007, but it had eluded Ellen a couple of times – mostly owing to problematic snow conditions. Today, it was SOOO good that Ellen declared it her favorite hike on this trip. Nevertheless, she initially questioned my choice to walk it in the opposite direction recommended by the guidebook (my choice was based on the fact that we were taken this direction in 2007 to avoid the crowds). In the end, Ellen agreed that what we did was more pleasant. Heading clockwise, we walked a more rudimentary path first through cow pastures, crossed over fenced Forcella Col di Mezzo, and then dropped to a rolling meadow of shrubs and tarns. Soon, we passed a map-labeled “shepherd’s hut” (looked like a real rifugio to us) and then continued another 15 minutes, at which point I needed some lunch. Unfortunately, after hiking off-trail and up a small knoll, I realized I had forgotten my food – and thus mooched off Ellen, who always packs a monster lunch. And thank god for that... after lunch, we descended this HORRIBLE slippery loose gravel trail into another cow pasture – only to climb relentlessly out of that hole up to Rifugio Locatelli. Exhausting!



Left to Right: (top) small part of MASSIVE parking lot system, Ellen at Forcella Col di Mezzo, trail from Forcella, close-up of cool peaks in distance, Tre Cime and tarn; (bottom) shepherd’s hut, beyond hut, ANNOYING DOWNHILL trail from hell, resting after big climb!

It’s funny because I SWORE we did not visit Locatelli from 2007 – and yet I just read my account from that trip, and there it was... not to mention: JUST as crazy. So crazy, in fact, that I took video of the massive, unending stream of hikers descending the trail as we arrived. Given that E/I had just shared a single lunch and it was now 2 (i.e. after the lunch rush), E/I easily purchased a slice of

chocolate cake – which we enjoyed on the scenic veranda: views of Tre Cime and adjacent, serrated Monte Paterno beyond in-your-face. It is worth pointing out that, in a couple days, E/I would hike to this point from Sesto, entering by way of the trail under Monte Paterno (but above the Laghi di Piani), and exiting along the complex of mountains behind Locatelli (e.g. Crodon di San Candido).



Left to Right: (top) all Locatelli – Tre Cime, Paterno, San Candido and Laghi di Piani; (bottom) hiking back to Rifugio Auronzo

We ate our cake quickly, having agreed to try and meet A/M by the cars at 3. In the end, this did not happen; after climbing the wide and gentle trail up to Forcella Lavaredo, we descended via a steeper, tricky gravel path that bypassed Rifugio Lavaredo, and then it was back to Rifugio Auronzo and the parking lot... arriving at 3:20. A/M's car was gone, although they did leave a note indicating they were heading to Sesto. We headed back down the steep road, briefly stopping in the lake- and resort-dominated town of Misurina because it offers amazing views of the castle-like wall of Sorapiss. We then continued north to Sesto via the Val de Landro, a place neither Ellen nor I had been before. This initial route was enjoyable – a northwest-like highway through mountains and forest, passing several lakes (one was so scenic that we had to stop and take pictures of Cristallo's impressive north face/towers). Where the highway T-intersected the town of Dobbiaco, the route became less pleasant: more congested with a combination of logging trucks, farm equipment, and more commuter-y traffic. Heading east, it was slow-going pretty much all the way to Sesto, sort of.



Left to Right: Misurina and Sorapiss, Cristallo from highway-side lake along Val de Landro, Sesto hotel – views, room

Indeed, we THOUGHT our hotel was in Sesto... but then we learned it was 10 minutes east of Sesto in the smaller town of Moos - up this hairpin turn hill, with less parking than the place in Cortina, and no elevator. But the hotel was spacious, offered magnificent mountain views, and mostly peaceful (minus A/M's night one yappy dog neighbors and balcony smokers). Of course, the staff (few of whom spoke English) seemed confused at times - although I'm sure they felt the same about us, not to mention that we were demanding. Indeed, they were unable to provide E/I with a room that had twin beds (so Ellen brought her inflatable mattress), and they could not understand why we were not on their "half-pension dinner plan." Although our Cortina hotel did not provide on-site dinner, this was available at a fair number of hotels – and proved to be a great bargain. But we did not comprehend this until our second night in Sesto. Where A/M had enjoyed a late, giant buffet at Tre Cime/Rifugio Auronzo (and stayed in for the night), E/I decided to venture out – initially trying to locate some web-recommended options. Unfortunately, the GPS car navigation system had MAJOR problems in most small towns... tonight taking us up a dirt road that seemed to terminate in a logging area. We then went into the first "hotel restaurant" we could find and were rejected, the staff saying they ONLY served hotel guests who had half-pension dinner plans. They did, however, recommend a nearby hotel restaurant that did accept non-guests. Thankfully, this place was EXCELLENT and we were seated and served just before the HUGE dinner crowd arrived. Being very close to the Austrian border, we enjoyed Weiner Schnitzel, pan-fried potatoes, a GREAT salad bar... in addition to a DELICIOUS thyme-gnocchi soup and a sweet ricotta gnocchi dessert with fresh berries. Upon our return to the hotel, I think Marshall regretted that he didn't join us for what was a truly Marshall-y meal.

### July 18: Sesto Basecamp – "Rest" and Sightseeing Day in Nearby Brunico... A Brief Summary

Given that we knew the weather would be HOT today and more pleasant tomorrow (and to rest Allison while her antibiotics kicked in), we decided to take a full break day from hiking (indeed, although I loved Sesto, there were not a ton of hiking options, at least if you

believe Cicerone). And nearby Brunico offered some great things to see, all in the context of a smaller town (as opposed to crazy Bolzano, later!). As with yesterday, our drive (back to Dobbiaco, and then 30 more minutes west), was sometimes slow and annoying. Our first stop was at the South Tyrol Museum of Folk Traditions, which was easy to find, made up of both outdoor sites (including over-time buildings and some live action demo's) and indoor museum displays. It reminded me of a smaller and more tractable version of Oslo's HUGE Folk Museum. Our next stops were muddled because, as stated previously, the GPS car navigation system had serious problems with small old towns – often directing us to places you could not drive (e.g. streets that have been converted to pedestrian-only zones). In the end, we parked near the old town and then hiked UP the hill to the Messner Mountain Museum (MMM) RIPA, housed in the town castle. Having visited MMM Firmian in 2007 (the first of Messner's now-many mountain museums), I thought RIPA was more logical and linear (vs. Firmian's more cerebral and conceptual feel). However, I thought the castle at Firmian was more interesting than boxy Brunico; nonetheless, the conversion of the space was great, the art in the main tower excellent (not to mention the tower views over the city and countryside), and the old movie footage of Tyrolean people fascinating. While A/M headed back down to the old town to shop, E/I ventured across this footbridge to my favorite spot of the day: the quiet, empty, and powerful sylvan WWI Cemetery. After 20 minutes of contemplation, we returned to the old town for gelato – before getting lost and frustrated trying to leave the city. Tonight, we enjoyed a multi-course dinner at our hotel (including a WELL-stocked salad bar) for \$15 per person. Although A/M and Ellen LOVED meals at the hotel, I thought most of the food was just OK... but worth the economical price.



Left to Right: (top) memorable things from the South Tyrol Museum of Folk Traditions; (bottom) Brunico, MMM, War Cemetery

**July 19: Sesto Basecamp – AMAZING Fiscalina Lasso-Loop, MY Favorite Hike!**

Today's hike was THE reason I included a stay Sesto – inspired by my 2007 trip to Tre Cime... because even then, I KNEW this area looked FASCINATING! Although this hike followed the Cicerone/Short Hikes #8 route, the guidebook contains inaccuracies: e.g. the trailhead parking fee is NOT hefty (the daily rate was only \$5), and not even the local signs say this hike takes only 6.5 hours (it took us nearly 9!). Although we did not carry Allison's hiking GPS, we map-estimated this hike to be a fucking hard 12.5 miles with 4000 feet up/down. But it was also fucking AWESOME! Knowing this, I suggested strongly that – as with yesterday – A/M and E/I operate as separate parties, including driving our own vehicles to the trailhead. In the end, E/I left early and managed the entire loop. A/M left a little later and did an 8.8 mile in/out version (with 2500 up/down, just to the first high rifugio... and that is based on GPS).



Left to Right: parking, setting out, first switchback view to other end of loop, contouring, easy snow, climbing towards Cima Dodici

E/I hit the road after downing breakfast at 7:30. With the highly developed trailhead 10 minutes away (at the end of this dead-end road 2 blocks from the hotel), we began hiking at 8:20. Our first task was to hike 1.5 miles up the flat lower valley to and then beyond Rifugio Fondo Valle. For part of this time, we walked in a white-gravel riverbed reminiscent of the Lagazuoi ford-o-rama. At Fondo, signs indicated we were 2 hours from the next rifugio (Zsigmondy-Comici, Z/C for short) but we knew – looking up at the instantly climbing switchbacks – that this was going to be hard. At the time, neither of us wholly thought we were going to complete this loop; as Ellen was quick to point out, we had not been very successful with hikes that were over 2000 feet up/down so far. But Ellen forgets how focused I become when I am highly motivated... not to mention how much easier climbing is in early morning shade – which, praise JEBUS, we were in most of the way to Z/C (alas, the same cannot be said for A/M's climbing experience). But the most inspiring and

different thing today, was the fact that most of this trail was SOOOOO civil: wide, perfectly graded switchbacks... a dream. Of course, there were some interesting but straightforward snow-patches in the clefts that hugged the soaring walls of Cima Una and Pulpito Alto. Although we climbed the entire way to Z/C, most was not via relentless or monotonous switchbacks; the long ramp along and around Pulpito was stunning, reminding me of hiking in the North Cascades during peak flower season... the Patagonia-like spires of Cima Dodici and La Spada soaring, alongside the massive Popera complex.



Left to Right: La Spada & Dodici, rock stairs & Pulpito, Rifugio Z/C & Monte Popera, climbing above Z/C, more Dodici, Popera

Although the final slog to Rifugio Z/C was just that, we actually made it IN the European time of 2 hours (a first for both of us!). Today, I intentionally reduced my pack-weight by carrying very little water because I knew there were 3 huts en route (i.e. I knew I would be relying on purchasing needed water along the way). After downing buying and downing some drinks at Z/C, and entertaining a short discussion about the feasibility of proceeding, we continued up – our next trail-indicated landmark 1 hour away at Rifugio Plan di Cengia (P/C for short), just down from incredible Passo Fiscalino. Prior to this trip, I had it in my head that this section was a hard crux of the trip (I'm not sure why... I thought it was going to be more scrubby); in fact, this section of trail was just as civil as what we'd been on, gaining another 1000 feet first through rolling meadows and then across a rocky altiplano-like plateau... all with 360° views and the occasional picnic table (seriously – although I did not include any pictures of these). There were supposed to be war-ruins all through this section – but the only ones we saw for sure were gun towers cut into the peak to the south of Passo Fiscalino (upper row, fourth shot below). Here, we also enjoyed our first panoramic view west – over the dramatic bowls and mountains near Tre Cime (I actually think we saw said towers and Cristallo here – but didn't realize what we were seeing until nearby Rifugio P/C, which had a labeled panorama). The hike between Passo Fiscalino and P/C was super-dramatic and out-there, overlapping partly with the beginning of several via ferrata: a ledge-like cut into this rolling white bulging rock ridgeline, mountains all around... the rifugio tucked into this little pocket at the end of the ridge. All the ridge and geological angles in this area seemed fascinatingly weird and jumbled – which is what initially drew me here based on impressions of nearing Tre Cime.



Left to Right: (top) altiplano with Popera and Dodici, Passo Fiscalino with close-up of side-peak (note gun tower and stairs); (bottom) view west from pass to Tre Cime/vicinity, crazy ledge trail, Rifugio P/C and crazy outhouse, more P/C & Popera

Once again, we purchased and enjoyed drinks at Rifugio P/C, which was hopping with visitors (including an American mother-daughter team being led by an Italian guide) – most in the middle of full-on salads and bowls of pasta (all looked DELICIOUS!). Following an exciting visit to P/C's free-standing outhouse (this time peeing into an airy hole 20 feet above a lingering snow-bank), we then moved ourselves up the ridgeline to Forcella Pian di Cengia so we could eat our basic, carried lunches. There, marked by an impressive Jesus-crucifix woodcarving, it was clear the hardship was going to begin. Indeed, I would later confess to Ellen that I felt physically sick with fear during lunch because the trail visibly dropped down this obscenely steep and gravelly gully, complete with several snowfields that – in retrospect – were just slightly easier than the ball-bearing gravel. Making matters worse, EVERYONE was faster and more fearless than me: we're talking – people with small infants in carriers on their backs, small children, old women dragging miniature poodles, and the aforementioned Americans... EVERYONE. I was, simply put, an embarrassment. But alas, I was probably thinking about watching my mother fall on snow last summer – and not realizing at the time that today was the anniversary of that terrible event.

In the end, all that mattered was: I made it down in one piece, and Ellen was not ashamed to be seen with me. At the gully bottom, the trail became civil again, cutting a near B-line across the white gravel flanks of serrated Paterno all the way to still-crazy Locatelli. Although we made a brief drink, snack, and pee stop here, I posted no pictures because we'd been here before.



Left to Right: (top) Jesus marks the beginning of uncivil trail section, descent and snow, civil trail section cuts B-line to Locatelli (bottom) San Candido, last view Tre Cime, Cima Una north face, view of labeled uncivil trail and Dodici from across valley, tired Ellen

Knowing we had a 3-hour descent to go, we continued around the lakes under San Candido, the trail dropping first through meadows – the whole while looking across at both the civil and uncivil trails we'd just descended. After 20 minutes, the trail dropped beyond the flattish upper meadow-lake area, offering head-on views into the north face towers of Cima Una (the other side of which we'd climbed along in the morning). Cima Una's north face towers remain one of my favorite images on this trip, an even Ellen had to finally do some jumping (picture not included) – before dramatizing how tired she felt (third shot below). Indeed, as the path descended more steeply and relentlessly, it was tiring and occasionally challenging with loose gravel and rocks. Adding insult to injury, this 10-year-old girl appeared – SKIPPING at full force down a section Ellen and I were both pussy-footing our tired toes along. Nevertheless, when we arrived at Rifugio Fondo Valle (1 mile from the end), we elected NOT to pay for/ride this horse-drawn buggy back to the parking lot... but, I won't lie, it was tempting. Ellen's camera time-stamp indicates she arrived at the trailhead at 5:06; I, for some reason, was all energetic at the end, arriving 15 minutes before that. Wasting no time, we headed back to the hotel for a swim and sauna in the welcome pool... before a filling hotel dinner. A/M were in good spirits, having greatly enjoyed their hike to Z/C.



Left to Right: (top) CLOSED Ladin Museum, Passo Gardena – Sella from north, hut & flowers under Cir peaks; Sella from south (bottom) hotel, room and deck, Canazei family adventure park... how many GPS's do you need for small towns in Italy?

**July 20-21: Transition to Canazei Basecamp and All-Rain Day – Val Gardena Picnic, Nearly Around the Sella, Ladin-Land**  
 Given that we knew the weather would be breaking down slowly today, we drove over Passo Gardena and then mostly around the Sella. South of Brunico, we hoped to stop at what I mistakenly thought was the only Ladin Museum (in San Martino). Unfortunately, it was Sunday and the museum didn't open until 2. Given that it was barely noon, we continued, arriving at Passo Gardena in no time.

After a minor altercation with a parking fee attendant, we carried our picnic lunches up to the porch of a locked cabin surrounded by wildflowers. From here, our views were south to the Sella's north face, and east to the distant Tofana and Passo Giau. From Gardena, it was a windy, up-and-down drive that eventually climbed to Passo Sella... and then DRAMATICALLY dropped to Canazei (arriving around 3). As with our last hotel, our Canazei hotel was in up-valley Alba, a 10-minute walk away. We all agreed that this hotel had the best and most spacious rooms and deck, the latter of which A/M and E/I shared. Other good features: slightly more parking, an elevator, and an OK hot tub and sauna. Unfortunately, we did get the run-around about breakfast times, there was no on-site dinner, and in-room internet not only cost \$5 but was also TERRIBLE. After checking in, we headed on foot into town on this pleasant valley path. Canazei, although usually bustling with traffic, was a very pleasant town – a cheaper and more family-friendly version of Cortina. At the town's information center, E/I learned that one of our target hikes (the Sella summit of Piz Boe) was too snowy (indeed, they had to cut snow-tunnels for today's "Sky-Race" running event that encompassed part of said climb). And, of course, tomorrow's correct forecast was BIG RAIN! Although we had worked hard to prepare "rain-out" options in advanced of this trip, we still struggled with priorities, driving, and individual responses to short-term cabin fever. Setting out, we thought the rain might hold back a little, allowing us to visit some open-air farm and do a little waterfall walk in down-valley Val di Fassa. After getting stuck in a traffic jam lasting all the way to Vigo di Fassa, though, the downpour began in earnest. And so we went to plan B: the Ladin Museum of Fassa... along with, like, every school-aged child in the valley. This was a great and modern museum with lots of fascinating information about the pre-Christian folklore of this unique group of mountain people... not to mention incredible masks and costumes. After doing a little co-op shopping, we found this so-named geology museum, a roadside collection run by this sweet little old lady who, despite speaking hardly any English, did know her geology. Alas – there are no pictures of her or the museum! Following a good pizza lunch back in Canazei, I cannot speak to what others did for the rest of the day; I did some reading and napping, and I know Ellen had to go running. Later, she and I walked into town for beet ravioli in truffle cheese sauce and green mountain herb in sage butter spatzle.



Left to Right: Ladin toy demonstration, masks, costumes, mythical fermentation god Salvan; the greatest take-home pizza box EVER

## July 22: Canazei Basecamp – Great Views of the Marmolada, But Only a So-So Hike (IMO)

Going into this trip, we had a list of 4 possible hikes for our 3 full days in Canazei... now reduced to 2 by yesterday's rain. Given that the Sella was too snowy, that today's weather was not promising enough to pursue a super-long drive/hike to the famously over-run Sciliar, and we were saving tomorrow's good-weather day for the Rosengarten, we defaulted to our shortest and easiest hiking option for today: the Viel del Pan (Cicerone /Short Hikes #41 – but done in reverse and car-to-car). Driving up to Passo Pordoi (15 minutes above Canazei), we parked Ellen's car there (FREE parking all day!) and then piled in to the A/M Fiat and headed DOWN to our lift in Arraba (FREE parking all day!). It should be noted that Pordoi is the massive pass below the Sella's south face; here, a daunting gondola can be seen shooting straight up this cliff-face (that's what we would have done had we attempted the Sella). But the gondola we rode from Arraba up to Porto Vescovo was massive too – rising 600 feet higher, in fact, than the one up the Sella.



Left to Right: from Pordoi - Sasslungo, Sella & gondola; OUR bottomless gondola cables (can't even see Arraba origin!)

In retrospect, we were lucky to have done this hike backwards because the best views of the Marmolada were at Porto Vescovo... and, as forecast, the clouds rolled in by 1 p.m. Although said views were the best I've had of the Marmolada, the actual hiking trail left something to be desired (especially at the start): it was poorly marked, there were WAY too many social trails, and the trails were both muddy and shitty (a combination Allison and I termed "shud" while hiking in France in 2005). Said shud originated from a giant herd of slightly aggressive and agitated sheep, some of which did seem to gang up on Ellen whenever she approached. And even though the glaciated Marmolada was magnificent, it rose above a very man-made reservoir/dam(n) (Lago di Fedaiia), which was less attractive. Anyway - after navigating the shuddy trail down a steep green bowl of sheep, we essentially contoured on VERY steep and green hillsides for the duration of the hike. Although our overall elevation gain/loss was not crazy, the trail was – by no means – flat; it had a regular up and down that I found rather exhausting. Meanwhile, the antibiotics were finally kicking in and Allison had her hiking groove back strong. After a few miles, we reached Rifugio Viel del Pan – which was HOPPING with hikers (most doing this route from the other end, in the way Cicerone recommends). Consequently, we found a meadow-y spot for our picnic lunch. One of the interesting things about this ridgeline is that it is volcanic – not sedimentary dolomitic; indeed, looking down the ridge from our lunch spot was like looking at a ridge in the Olympics – lots of bulging pillow lava formations. We continued, the trail getting easier and more civil, and

arrived at slightly ghetto Rifugio Fredarola – which was blasting Elvis tunes across its veranda and pine igloo (we were never sure what exactly that was... perhaps a sweat-lodge?). Ellen, who is never afraid to dance, did her thing... causing a small stir among the onlookers, a few of whom sort of joined her. The video is HILARIOUS – although I have been banned from posting it (not that I am clever enough to do so). From Fredarola, we descended back to Passo Pordoi – most of the Sella now shrouded in clouds.



Left to Right: (top) descending into bowl of sheep, Ellen's nemeses, typical trail, looking back on bowl of sheep, rare all-group shot (bottom) classic trail view, pillow lava, Ellen Elvis-gyrating, Fredarola sign, Lago di Fedaia and Viel del Pan ridgeline, old-school lifts

After driving back down to Arraba, we went on a so-so driving tour – making our way farther down the valley on what (for me – even as a passenger!) were terrifying roads, and then looping around/under the ridgeline we'd just hiked... ultimately winding up at the reservoir (Lago di Fedaia) under the Marmolada. Here, we became separated from A/M because, as usual, there wasn't enough parking (plus – they were on a mission to eat a more substantive meal). E/I drove across the dam(n) and contemplated taking this old-school lift (i.e. up to 2 people stood up in these waist-high open cages) up the terminus of the Marmolada glacier; although never far off the ground, we ultimately declined because (a) there was a high "freak-out" potential; and (b) the views higher up were definitely sucking. Driving back to the highway, we did find A/M walking across the dam(n), having apparently talked a slightly agitated rifugio cook into extending lunch service. And then we returned to Alba, less than 25 minutes down the valley... where it was dinner on the balcony BABY!



Left to Right: (top) shuttle-van from Pera, Rifugio Gardeccia and Rosengarten peaks, on trail to Rifugio Vajolet; (bottom) to Rifugio Vajolet – start, climbing, rifugio on cliff; looking up at scrambling route to Torri del Vajolet – close-up

**July 23: Canazei Basecamp – The Legendary Inner Catinaccio/Rosengarten... A Little Over-Hyped (IMO)**

Today's hike was one of the new routes I was super-excited about, having been exposed to a lot of pre-trip hype about the Inner Rosengarten: first Passo Principe and later the Torri del Vajolet (sort of pronounced "vaj-o-lay" – you can imagine where that went). Before Ellen committed to this trip, A/M and I had considered a guided venue that included Passo Principe – and so I was determined to prove that we could self-lead this hike. But I misread how they were doing it (i.e. via a less crowded route on the Sciliar side), and I also did not comprehend how "harsh" (a good blog descriptor) the scrambling path to Vajolet is. Because this is a popular area with

many potential entrance points, E/I planned this hike to death – ultimately cutting 6 hiking miles out of the classic itinerary by finding a shuttle-van that took us half-way up to Passo Principe from Pera (near Vigo di Fassa). While this was great for most members of our group (i.e. allowing A/M and Ellen to hike BOTH Principe AND Vajolet – something we had not considered possible) it lessened the impressiveness for me. Nevertheless, A/M declared today's hike their favorite, largely because of the challenge of the scramble. This hike is described in Cicerone/Short Hikes #36; we began at Rifugio Gardeccia – not the more classic approach from Vigo di Fassa. After a brief skirmish over breakfast times, we hit the road for Pera around 8 a.m., easily finding the extraordinarily efficient shuttle-van service area. Paying as much as we did for gondolas, we boarded a 20-seater mini-van and drove up a one-lane but paved road all the way to Rifugio Gardeccia, already situated at over 6000 feet in the middle of the soaring Rosengarten (note - the Torri del Vajolet are not visible – you MUST commit to the scramble to see them). With shuttle-vans arriving every few minutes, the trail quickly became a clusterfuck – and it was in this context that we proceeded up the valley to Rifugio Vajolet (as estimated, this took us less than an hour). At this point, however, decisions became challenging because we didn't comprehend that it was actually possible to do BOTH the Principe hike and the Vajolet scramble. While the path to Principe looked mellow and easy, the scramble to Rifugio Alberto (under the Torri del Vajolet) was visibly insane – proceeding straight up this rocky gully for 1500 sustained feet of climbing (much cable-assisted) in about half a mile. A/M were 100% committed to the latter; Ellen wanted to do the scramble but correctly predicted that I would be uncomfortable hiking by myself to Principe. And so, some more reluctant than others, A/M and E/I separated for the day.



Left to Right: trail to Principe, final ramp to pass/rifugio, rifugio, pass view (no big whoop!), is that an early-era Star Wars robot?

E/I easily hiked to Principe in the predicted time of 1 hour. Alas, there was no mystery to the open route, and I found the pass was a little boring. Indeed, the best thing I saw all day was this funny little transport tank used to move supplies to said hut; it looked like one of the ghetto robots the Jawas collected in the first Star Wars... even more against the desert-like white gravel-scape. One other good thing about the hike was that E/I realized early on that it was going to be super-fast – enabling Ellen to easily make her sola bid at the Vajolet scramble. Although I did hike up said route maybe 200 vertical feet (just before the cable section began), I could not get over my fear at the dizzying ascent – nor my frustration at what was the ULTIMATE clusterfuck (and we thought the lower trail was bad!). While Ellen scrambled, I attempted to procure lunch – joining a Dutch family for “minestrone with hot dog” (alas, there are no pictures), berries with yogurt, and the BEST freshly-squeezed OJ on the trip (sadly, NONE of our hotels served any real juice!). While I was waiting, A/M returned and decided to run up to Principe. And while they were away, Ellen returned and ordered yogurt-berries and OJ... before we headed down, meeting A/M on time at the shuttle-van pick-up point. Lastly, it should be noted that Ellen scrambled only to Rifugio Alberto; A/M continued all the way to Santner Pass, a gentle, 20-minute climb from Alberto. While both offer views of the Torri del Vajolet, Santner is considered quintessential. A/M's total GPS spec's were 10.5 miles and 3700 feet up/down.



Left to Right: (top) Ellen's scramble to Rifugio Alberto – plus treats after scramble; (bottom) A/M's scramble to Passo Santner

### July 24-5: Bolzano Day-Trip and Madonna Basecamp – The Horny Peak Hike That Inspired Me to Visit the Dolomites

We left Canazei around 10, making 2 shopping stops before departing the Val di Fassa: the first to buy the Rev-Dr. Dutton some grappa (for taking care of my yard), and the second to this hillbilly-looking Ladin Décor store (where a moderate amount of money was dropped on carved-wood items). Beyond, the drive turned into an unexpected rain-fest all the way to Bolzano, preventing otherwise

beautiful views (alas, I knew this because we'd driven this segment in 2007, under clearer skies). Bolzano (pop = 100K), however, was a pain in the ass after so many days in small mountain villages: challenging to navigate, obscenely crowded. After parking in underground lot near the central bus station, we ate at a bakery and then walked 10 minutes through the crowded old town, including through the food/produce-oriented open-air street market. Our only real goal in this city was to visit the Otzi/Glacier Mummy Museum, for which we'd bought on-line tickets in advance (thus avoiding the long line of ticket-less people waiting to enter at controlled time intervals). Before going into the museum, I famously said I was not going to buy anything because I was pretty such I bought all their merchandise in 2007 (when we enjoyed an early/private viewing... not to mention several special talks about what were then new medical/forensic findings). What was shocking to me was that 70% of the museum was, like, totally changed up; although the first floor with the actual mummy and all his gear was largely the same, the Dutch-improved figure reconstruction was VERY different, and the top 2 floors of the museum were devoted to flashy and/or hands-on displays about the aforementioned medical/forensic discoveries and other glacier-related mummy finds throughout the world. And so I had to buy a few more things. We didn't do much city-touring after Otzi because, by then, it was 2 and we still had a 2.5+ hour drive to our final destination: the Brenta Dolomites, our basecamp being Madonna di Campiglio (MDC). Although it didn't rain during what was – at times – an agonizingly SLOW drive, it still took us nearly 3 hours to make it to MDC. While it is likely A/M and Ellen would vote our time in the Brenta as unnecessary, there was a specific reason I needed to see it: because on Ellen's first trip to the Dolomites (circa 2004), she was guided by a friend who lives in nearby Trento... and their first hike was in the Brenta. When I first saw Ellen's pictures of this area's arguably most famous hike (described next), I vowed to visit to the Dolomites. However, the Brenta are not featured on typical adventure travel itineraries – although I would not exactly call them much less crowded or touristy. And so we never came near the Brenta in 2007. The Brenta Dolomites are small, separated from the main Dolomites by the wide Bolzano valley/highway, and seem geologically different (more shortly). Unfortunately, they also seem (at least the part I saw) to have more ski-related impact and deforestation. Although the main Dolomites are definitely a UNESCO site, I am unclear as to whether the Brenta have a similar designation given relative development/impact.



Left to Right: hillbilly Ladin wood-shop, open air markets in Bolzano, the new and crustier Otzi reconstruction, MDC hotel

Unfortunately, MDC – the drive, weather, development, steep hills, and hotel – did not impress me that first night... and it was definitely not my favorite area on this trip. Although the hotel looked reasonable from the outside, the smell of what seemed like recent smoking activity was great throughout the lobby... and lingered throughout the entire building. Although there was a small elevator, there were shoebox-sized ashtray bins outside each elevator opening. While we never saw anyone smoking (and I am sure there is a no smoking policy written somewhere), little/no effort to rid the hotel of its smoky past had been made, including doing obvious things like replacing old carpet and cleaning/re-painting walls. The parking was also terrible – to the point we never moved the cars during our short stay in MDC. Even though we generally liked the staff and thought the homemade baked goods at breakfast were divine, we limited our time inside the physical building – including rejecting what was probably a delicious and economical dinner plan. Instead, we made several frustrating attempts at well-rated restaurants UP the hill from our hotel, before ambling a few doors down and discovering our favorite overall restaurant on this trip, which we ate at EVERY night while in MDC: Le Roi Ristorante and Pizzeria. Great service, great food (in particular – soup, grilled meats, all vegetable sides we tried, anything with mushrooms, and desserts), and great beer.



Left to Right: gondola, looking across at Cinque Laghi area, upper lift station and Pietra Grande, main Brenta core above Tucket

After an exciting evening of thunder, lightning, and major rain, we were not too surprised that the skies had wrung themselves out come morning (at least for a spell!). This was good because A/M had only today to do hike to the Sarah-inspiring Rifugio Tucket; they were leaving for Venice tomorrow, and then home. Our aim was the entire traverse described in Cicerone/Short Hikes #49. Given that no one wanted to move any cars, we hauled our asses (some more frustrated than others) back up the hill to the highway, and then back along the highway up to the Groste gondola lift (taking twice the time the hotel staff said it would). There, we rode in 6-seater gondolas 2500 feet up this swath of deforested land (our second highest overall gondola ride). The Groste gondola cost \$5 per person MORE than any other gondolas we used, another surprise for me given Brenta's lower-key reputation. The upper lift station was at 7500 feet, in the middle of this austere plateau. After walking 5 minutes up to Passo del Groste and taking some pictures of so-so Pietra Grande (forming the northern flank of the pass), we headed back down to the trailhead – given away only by the stream of people heading in that direction (indeed, there were few/no signs in this area... just occasional paint splashes). Once we got away from

the lift area and related development, I actually thought the trail was sort of cool... and different from all our other hikes for the following reasons: portions of hike was ON this massive cracked sheet-like plateau of rock that had the look and feel of travertine; meanwhile, other portions of this hike snaked through these massive cities of rocks – and yet the trail remained shockingly civil and extraordinarily well-thought-out. In between the rocks, the way was a mellow jaunt through emerald meadows.



Left to Right: Tucket traverse – cracked plateau, rock cities with civil trails, meadows... rounding the corner to short Tucket climb

In general, we contoured through the rubble and meadows below the immediately adjacent peaks – hiking 90 minutes before heading up and into this scenic, boulder-strewn gap where Rifugio Tucket was built on this rocky block above a major scree gully and mini-valley. Above, the weirdly soaring Brenta peaks (e.g. inspirational Cima Sella, a.k.a. Horny Peak) defined the snowy Bocca del Tucket. Although I HAD to see this inspirational area and it was great, it was not the BEST view on this trip... and, as with other parts of the Brenta, it was a little cluttered with unkempt human development. After taking many obligatory pictures, we enjoyed a fleetingly scenic lunch and tried to come to a consensus about what we were doing for the rest of the day given that the weather appeared to be getting worse, and there were a few cabled scrambling sections en route to the next rifugio (Brenta) that yours truly was not keen on.



Left to Right: (top) near and at Tucket, lunch, squat toilet; (bottom) 30 minutes later – views GONE, into and out of the rocks

Indeed, by the end of lunch, this GIANT fog-like cloud poured over Cima Brenta, filling the pass and upper gully by/beneath Cima Sella. Now donning much more gear (because the temperatures also dropped at least 10 degrees), we decided we would go out to this obvious pass before the left trail option cut into the valley/gulley where Rifugio Brenta lay (i.e. right before one of the cabled sections). At this pass, we were hoping to see towering Cima Tosa (I believe, the highest in the range) before taking the right trail option, which headed back down to our shuttle-bus pick-up point (more about that shortly). Although I'm sure a couple of us were probably hoping (or half-hoping) to continue all the way to Rifugio Brenta (directly under Cima Tosa) if the weather looked better at the pass, most of us agreed that A/M would benefit from getting back earlier so they could properly pack and we could have a less stressful final dinner together. With that mindset, we headed into the fog and even BIGGER boulder cities (albeit, with even more civil trails!). After descending a civil meadow trail, we arrived at this section Cicerone describes as "slippery, sloping rock slabs." I had assumed that this

meant running water over rocks; in fact, it was this weird, massive, jagged travertine-like slab that jut out of the earth, forming the path... and, yes, some parts were physically slippery (even though there was little running water). Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention this one especially high toothy ledge that we had to carefully lower ourselves down; out in front, I may have yelled some warning back to the sisters about being careful not to injure their vajolets here. At the bottom of the crazy rock slabs was the pass – the upper mountains/valley still shrouded in clouds. And so we descended – first to DELIGHTFUL Rifugio Casinei. Here (notably in sun), we had our “final group” prelude meal: several decadent desserts and beer nearly all-around.



Left to Right: crazy rock-slabs, a new lily, Rifugio Casinei, are we in Oregon (?), Vallesinella area with shuttle-bus pick-up

And then (after a little sobering up) we made a very sylvan descent (causing us to ask – are we, like, in Oregon?) to COMPLETELY SUNNY and crowded Rifugio Vallesinella. Sadly (and unexpectedly), the entire mountain range cleared up between 2-5... meaning we probably could have made it to Rifugio Brenta and gotten that big view of Cima Tosa. Oh well. In the paraphrased words of Marshall: we did so many amazing hikes on this trip – not seeing Cima Tosa didn't matter at this point. To which I added: And we thoroughly enjoyed our time at Casinei - that was the right way to end this leg of the trip. After another dinner at Le Roi, the thunder and lightning and pouring rain began... and it was NOT gone come morning.



Left to Right: rain-out “dance of the dead” church in Pinzolo, B&B - Ellen and her Loony Tunes Pillow, me on MDC's “flying fox”

**July 26-7: E/I Only Madonna Basecamp – Another Rain-Out Day, Followed By the FRUSTRATING Cinque Laghi**

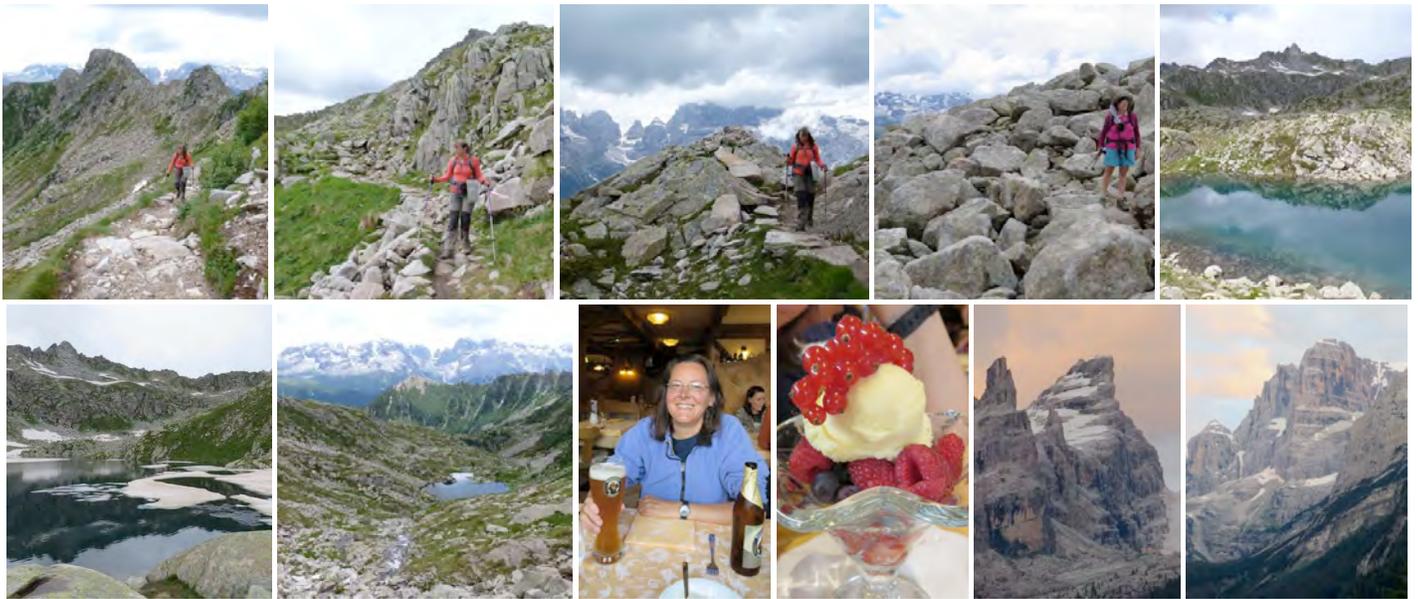
A/M departed for Venice in the rain, leaving E/I to deal with another rainout day - not to mention a 10 minute move down the valley to this quiet B&B with welcome fresh air, little English, and no internet. Knowing the latter, we usurped the free internet in the smoky hotel lobby until 11:30 (after several families checked out, partially clearing the crazy parking area). Accepting that there would be no hiking today, we did some sightseeing in down-the-valley Pinzolo (including 2 churches and a Brenta visitor center), enjoyed a GREAT roast chicken lunch at this roadside bar, and then checked in at our B&B. Given that it mostly stopped raining 4-8, E/I took a walk down this raging riverside path by the B&B – before heading back into MDC for more shopping and, yes, another dinner at Le Roi.



Left to Right: lily and Brenta, looking toward Ritorto with Mt. Nambrone - ex-current, from above; more flowers & metallic beetle

The next morning, we visited the other side of MDC, which we'd seen from Tucket traverse – and which we'd learned yesterday was part of the “Parco Naturale Adamello-Brenta” and the European “Geo-Park” network, the only official designations we found for the Brenta. Today's hike, Cinque Laghi (there were actually more than 5 lakes), was SO geologically different than ANYTHING we'd seen on this trip: bowl after bowl and ridge after ridge of granite, granite, and more granite. Although the weather was OK in the morning, it was never blue-sky clear or particularly warm... and it TOTALLY dumped on us during the final 20 minutes of our descent. Not surprisingly (IMO), this hike was not – I repeat NOT – featured in Cicerone. We knew about it via two sources: Ellen had found a description on-line using some MDC visitor site; and I had seen it done in the context of a Sierra Club outing. Our first task was to drive back to MDC and find the Cinque Laghi lift, which was challenging because the lower part MDC was in the midst of a triathlon – with many roads blocked. Eventually, we sucked it up and paid \$5 to park all day by a nearby lift (Pradalago) – and then walked ~4

blocks to our target lift. Today's 6-seater gondolas were almost as expensive as Groste, despite only going up 1800 feet... also over another deforested swath, this time ripe with MANY grazing cows. From the upper lift station, the trail was civil and mostly level to the first (and largest) of the lakes: Lago Ritorto. In addition to all kinds of interesting (and unique-seeming) flowers, there were immediate views of the dolomitic Brenta across the valley, but clouds enveloped the tops of the tallest peaks. Where the trail was cut into rock outcrops, cables had been installed – even though they did not seem necessary... particularly by comparison with the wild-west, cable-free condition of the mid-section of this so-called trail. Passing several large (and sometimes very noisy) parties, we quickly reached Ritorto. After taking a few pictures, we began the next obvious task at hand: climbing 600 feet along/above the lake to Passo Ritorti.



Left to Right: (top) just past Passo Ritorti, typical trail, mini-pass before lunch, IN the rocks, Serodoli; (bottom), Gelato, upper part of descent, I definitely need a beer after that trail... and dessert, alpenglow – Cima Sella and Tosa

Beyond Passo Ritorti, the trail meandered through a shitload of granite – sometimes flat, sometimes climbing or descending in 200-foot intervals. Midway across, we passed unimpressive Lago Lambin. About 10 minutes before reaching large Lago Serodoli, we stopped for a windy lunch – the views across the valley slightly better than they'd been earlier. And then it was a quick drop and a little scramble across a teetering boulder-field, at which point we arrived at a ghetto emergency hut (notably strung with a sheet/banner painted with "The Mountain is Sacred" in Italian). Below was Lago Serodoli, its namesake mountain distantly above. From this point, there were no more official trails leading higher, and even getting to the shore of Serodoli required another teetering scramble. Ellen was determined to make it to Lago Gelato (15 minutes beyond), and so I waited for her to do her thing – a large bank of clouds moving in dramatically. I did not regret not seeing Gelato, its apparent name derived from the regular ice therein. Given imminent rain, we began our descent to the final official Lake – Nambino – and then on to MDC. This trail was a complete mess, no-doubt exacerbated by many days of rain: a steep, muddy, unending mess. Ellen will tell you I did a LOT of swearing and complaining down this "pig-swill chute" of a trail. We thought it might improve as we entered the forest but – NO – it overlapped with a transient stream-bed, combining running water, mud, AND irregular slick wood stairs. And the messiness really did not end at Nambino, despite a large operational rifugio... there was another mile of too-steep crazy rock to negotiate before FINALLY meeting legitimate dirt and then paved roads. But of course, then the deluge (and I mean DELUGE) hit, soaking us for the final mile down to MDC. Should you prefer to avoid the trail between Serodoli and Nambino, it is possible to hike an alternative trail that contours over to Lago Predalago, and then pay handsomely to take said gondola back to where E/I parked. In need of major clean-up, we headed back to our B&B, showered/changed, and returned to Le Roi for OUR final meal in Italy: roast chicken for Ellen, and grilled deer with huckleberries for me. On our way back, we stopped at this roadside overlook where Italy bid us farewell with a glorious display of alpenglow AND the full summit of Cima Tosa.



Left to Right: driving up the Bolzano valley, Zugspitze gondola cable, Zugspitze cogwheel train, church window, summit complex

### July 28-31: Across Europe, Bonus Night in Iceland, Return Home

For some reason, I wanted to experience driving (or Ellen driving) across Europe on this trip. Day one of this drive was shorter, taking us from Italy, across some slivers of Austria, and winding up in Garmisch, Germany by 1 p.m. Although the weather was promising in the morning (bad valley fumes notwithstanding), the Alps were not kind come afternoon. One thing we under-planned was our trip up the Zugspitze, Germany's tallest mountain (at just under 10K). Not realizing there were many shorter options, we thus ended up on the

LONGEST and most expensive ticket – parking at the Zugspitze train station in Garmisch (the only part that was free), and then paying \$75 per person to – in theory - take a combination overland train, HUGE summit gondola, little gondola (summit to lower plateau), in-mountain cogwheel train, and then overland train back. The problem: I flipped OUT when we arrived at the HUGE gondola, which climbed 6500 feet over ~10 minutes, all via long, high cables (that's 2000 more than all the things we'd done in Italy). Realizing we could avoid said gondola by taking the cogwheel train up instead, we pursued this longer access route. During the hour it took us to do all this maneuvering, the clouds moved in and we never saw much of what the fuss is about; it mostly looked like a junky, ski-ravaged quarry with a few patches of dirty snow. Adding insult to injury, the cafeteria was out of pretty much everything – but we did have a decent salad, overcooked spaghetti (Ellen), and some over-heat-lamped Weiner Schnitzel & fries (me). For some reason (possibly rain on the tracks?), the trip back to Garmisch took even longer, putting us at our funky hotel after 6 – thunder and lightening hitting the surrounding mountains until 11 p.m. At first glance, I had serious concerns about tonight's hotel because it was above this loud-looking bar (featuring live music tonight!), in an old-looking building with very creaky stairs (no elevator). Fortunately, the barkeeper was this powerful older woman wearing a full-on dirndl and she ran a super-tight ship... plus the hotel rooms had been fortified to be soundproof against all the yodeling and whatnot. And this was good because I was feeling a little nauseous and head-achy after what had been a long day of driving, fumes, elevation changes, and late/bad lunches; thus, I procured food from the nearby grocery and ate in-room... while Ellen patronized the lively downstairs attractions. Our "Olympic Bobsled" room, one of several apparent theme rooms, had great beds/bedding, a useful table, a HUGE deck, and a well-appointed bathroom.



Left to Right: Garmisch hotel – exterior, deck, theme room, barkeep door carving, live music... including some yodeling!

The next morning, we were flabbergast by the AMAZING breakfast spread at the hotel: platters of fresh berries, cherries, melons; baskets of diverse rolls, bread and soft pretzels; and this table of mixed granola, condiments, and yogurt. Fifty times better and healthier than all the Italian breakfasts we'd eaten during this trip. After a little shopping, we hit the road for what would be an 11-hour drive (with very few stops). Plans to meet Bruno for a fancy Thai dinner were dashed by challenging weather en route (rain, thunder/lightening), and MANY slow construction zones; indeed, although we were driving on the famous autobahn (and Ellen did drive fast when she could), it never lasted very long. Instead, it was McDonalds just over the Germany-Netherlands border – being that the Dutch seem to be obsessed with McDonalds. Arriving at Ellen's place just after the sun went down, I cannot say I would do this kind of drive again (maybe a sexier route?) – but I was glad to have seen the lay of the land once. The next day, we went shopping, visited this free goat farm, had some gelato, and did the pleasant hike to the dunes that I loved from last year... oh – and we took Ellen's car to a car wash (one of the kinds where the machine washes the outside, and then you vacuum, clean the inside at work-stations). I would love to say that my flight home was non-monumental... but, alas, I got a bonus night in Reykjavik paid for by Icelandair; to this day, they have not explained the problem but, given that they paid for everything, I suspect it was unintentional piling up on their end.



Left to Right: Ellen and the goats, me and the goats, lunch in the dunes, going to the CAR-WASH, bonus night in Reykjavik

#### Closing Thoughts:

Italy was just as magical the second time, and I would readily do this kind of trip again. Given minimal fights, no divorces, no car accidents, and no serious injuries, I think we all did a fantastic job and it was a great trip. Ellen and Marshall deserve the most credit for being such good drivers; although I knew Ellen could handle it, I was a bit worried that driving the Dolomites would be intimidating for Marshall – especially because he'd never been to Europe before. I, for one, could NOT have driven many of these roads. The hiking difficulty was what I expected, although the snow did make things more challenging at the start. Also, I forgot how high most of the hiking is in the Dolomites; even though the range is not super-high, most of the hiking is between 6000-9000... which, coming from sea level, you definitely feel. As stated, Ellen's favorite hike was Tre Cime, A/M's was Rosengarten/Santner, and mine was Fiscalina. My hiking stat's on this trip are 75 miles, 15,000 up and 23,000 down. As the eldest member of the trip (by 16 years relative to Allison), I think that's pretty good – although my knees were not silent. Given how challenging the weather was in much of Europe this summer, I was grateful we only missed 2 full days to rain. The next time I go to Italy, I would like to focus on the Sciliar/Val Gardena area – which we largely skipped on this trip, partly because of weather but mostly because of the driving and effort required relative to chosen base-camps. Hopefully, I will learn more practical Italian by then... not because you need it, but because it would be nice to know. Ciao!