

The Italian Redemption

Venice, the Dolomites, and the Mountain Men - But No Flip-Flops!



Left to Right: Venice (ah, Venice), Becco di Mezzodi near Forcella d'Ambrizolla, Tres Cime de Lavaredo

Introduction

After Allison and I hiked the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB) in 2005, returning to Europe seemed doubtful given horrific weather and a negative impression of trails, facilities, and hygiene. But somewhere in the back of my mind, I had the sense that Italy's Dolomites might be worth exploring. Even so, it was a gamble: of the countries we hiked during the TMB, Italy had the most frightening weather. On the other hand, it had the cleanest huts and the best food. I don't know when I first heard about the Dolomites - but I have had them on my back-burner list for at least 12 years. Ellen has also visited Italy several times, including hiking the Dolomites in 2006. Shortly after her trip, I received a big flyer from Wilderness Travel (WT), a company I'd never been fully tempted to patronize (despite good reviews from several John Muir Trail teammates). The draw was as immediate and irresistible for several reasons: (1) they had assembled a full-scale Alps Symposium in Bolzano featuring Reinhold Messner, a hero of mine; (2) the symposium would bring together trip members from all WT Alps trips - with smaller groups of 6-14 departing variously thereafter (including to the Dolomites). Unlike the usual company I go trekking with (MTS, which runs only 1 trip in the Dolomites), WT runs 2 regionally-defined trips: Western (in/around Bolzano), and Cortina (more to the east). After researching a variety of sources, the Cortina trip appealed to me more; the peaks seemed bigger and more historically relevant (particularly to Messner), the landscape more austere. It should be strongly noted, however, that Italy is REALLY expensive and the per-day price for this trip (including a trip to Venice on my own) remains the most expensive I've done. I probably wouldn't have dropped my wad if it weren't for the fact that I was confident I was going to make full professor (which I did, in March 2007) and if the big 40th birthday wasn't around the corner. Even so, I definitely ate next year's raise.



Left to Right: vaporettos/Grand Canal, speeding across lagoon (Murano in background), gondolas in side canals, hospital

June 18-21, 2007 - To and Around Venice

Although I would rate my time in Italy as among my top 10 guided trips, my airline experiences were among the worst. After much debate (Lufthansa operates a direct flight between Portland and Frankfurt), I chose American because I have a frequent flyer program with them. But that meant a number of connections (Dallas, London, Venice) - always risky given the luggage situation. Having had luggage lost on my last trip, I figured: what are the odds of that happening twice? Apparently - good. Given an early departure, I spent the night in Portland where, almost on a whim, I called to confirm my flights - at which point I discovered that my first leg was delayed 2 hours, meaning I would not make the connection to London. After an HOUR on the phone, I was given an even earlier flight on San Francisco (via Alaska Airlines) - followed by an American flight to Dallas (with a 40 minute connection). My exact words to the operator (given that that's where luggage was lost last time): you're going to lose my luggage. Her response: no, it's not rocket science. Needless to say, they failed to make the transfer and lost my bag for about 10 days. Consequently, I did stuff a few more things into my daypack - to the point I had 1 full set of hiking clothes, including my fleece and raingear. But, given my extensive history with Chacos, I left my clunky emergency boots in the luggage - along with my walking sticks, guidebooks, duplicate hiking clothes, and 3 girly outfits (i.e. skirts and dresses) purchased for the symposium. Indeed, I can only fathom that this is a sign from god that I am not to wear dresses or skirts (something I haven't done for 7 years). After a 3:30 a.m. wake-up, things went smoothly in Portland - although ALL flights were 100% full. En route to San Francisco (i.e. 90 minutes), I was seated next to a morbidly obese woman. San Francisco was a complete mess and I ran the length of the airport to make the connection because we'd landed at the international terminal (the plane bound for Mexico). Being that my Dallas-bound flight was actively boarding when we landed, I demanded

priority in all security lines and was moved near the front. Fortunately, I was NOT seated next to anyone requiring 2 chairs and we had an amazing view over Yosemite Valley and the Sierras. In contrast with all my other experiences in this notoriously annoying airport, Dallas was pleasant and on time. After an easy terminal change, I found myself - disturbingly - next to the same gate Allison and I were delayed 5 hours en route to Santiago last December. Today, though, things were on time. I enjoyed my window seat, my quiet neighbor (a Texan on his way to Dubai), the plane food, 4-5 hours of sleep, and the fascinating light outside (we were somewhat near the Arctic Circle and solstice). We landed at London/Gatwick around 9:30 a.m. and, like San Francisco, it was a complete mess for the same reasons. Although I could not talk my way through any lines (either for boarding passes or security), most were a little shorter and I had a full hour to work with. My British Airways flight to Venice left promptly and was scenic - with most of the Alps visible. Even so, the final 5 minutes over marshes, lagoons, and Venice proper remain the most memorable to me. Indeed, Venice looked and felt small - not nearly as daunting as I was expecting. Despite being virtually devoid of greenery, its rough terra cotta appearance was intriguing; it looked like a ceramic tile roof surrounded by the unearthly blue-green of the shallow lagoon. Also in contrast with expectations, the Venice Airport (Marco Polo) seemed small and unthreatening - even after my luggage failed to show up and I had to deal with the baggage office. In my experience, more Italians understood and/or spoke more English than any other non-English-speaking country I've visited to date. According to computer information at the time, the bag was lost in San Francisco (as predicted and mentioned) and was on its way; the desk attendant was extremely confident (as was I, at the time) that it would be here when I came back to the airport in 2 days (as this was WT's meeting/pick-up point for the symposium).



Left to Right: San Marco - arriving, basilica/square, Bridge of Sighs

Although I LOVED my brief visit to Venice, there were a couple of frustrating elements. First, after much debate, I decided to stay at a reasonably cheap Holiday Inn in Mestre/Marghera (7 miles outside of Venice). Although the idea of staying in Venice was attractive, I was put off by the extreme price (200-300 Euro's a night) of anything decent with direct boat access and could not conceive of complex water travel and luggage hauling after more than 22 hours of plane travel. After finding what I thought was a Holiday Inn with BOTH continental breakfasts AND a free airport shuttle, I decided to devote more money to a really good daytrip into Venice. Upon arriving, though, I quickly discovered that the Holiday Inn offered NEITHER amenity. Cab fare to/from the airfare ran about 30 Euro's, the breakfast buffet 12 Euro's, making for HUGE additional expenditures (had I been more prepared and/or patient, I could have employed local trains/buses). On the bright side, the hotel did offer a cheap shuttle to/from Venice and their food was excellent, convenient, and plentiful. Although cabs were easy to retrieve at the airport, they were difficult to summon and/or find anywhere else. The hotel staff was generally good with most assistance requests, although the staff could seem short and indifferent. Upon checking in at 2:30, I promptly enjoyed a long shower, a 3-hour nap, dinner, and a solid night of sleep. While I was dazedly eating my plate of gnocchi, this couple from Tennessee felt sorry for me and insisted I join them. She was a nursing school professor (psychology) and he was an industrial chemist originally from Istanbul. After years of trips to this area, they LOVED this hotel and said staying in Venice was overrated and annoying. He then tried to scare me about my personal safety in Venice, insisting thieves were prevalent. Indeed, many people I talked to before leaving were not kind when it came to Venice: insanely and embarrassingly crowded (particularly now that the city had sold its soul to the cruise industry), filthy, stinky, dirty (someone said Katherine Hepburn acquired a lifelong recurring eye infection after diving into the water while filming there), possibly dangerous. These statements, in combination with my single female traveler status, made me seek out a guide. After researching many services on-line, I settled with a moderately expensive private service that included both boating and walking, including a trip across the lagoon to Murano (famous for its glass making facilities). My only retrospective error was planning the tour to begin at 9 (had I waited until 10, I could have used the cheap hotel shuttle). Indeed, after an expensive but satisfying and quiet breakfast buffet (during which I stole a few bread rolls for lunch), I was riding into Venice/Piazzale Roma at 8:30. My morning guide (Barbara, originally from Venice but now living on the mainland) was to meet me at a designated area near the Grand Canal; visions of some dauntingly large plaza were not founded - although there were a lot of people and buses. We found each other within 5 minutes and were quickly boarding the company boat (basically, the same kind of vessel used for "water taxi's" - not to be confused with larger bus-like vaporetto's). Despite soaring temperatures (it eventually reached 92°F with 85% humidity), the Grand Canal was overwhelmingly beautiful and spectacular. I was actually unable to fathom it enough to take a picture for some time. Things seemed relatively quiet, the water calm (save the occasional noise and wake from a vaporetto), the market near Rialto Bridge just beginning to stir. There was a nice cool breeze - no funky smells whatsoever. Barbara, a spectacular guide, identified all major buildings and described their history and architecture - most historic palaces now upscale hotels, art museums, or high-end business offices. After perhaps 30 minutes, we disembarked at San Marco Square. Here, we spent until noon touring the Doge's Palace (including the Bridge of Sighs and prison), and Saint Mark's Basilica - Barbara's terrific tour continuing throughout. Probably the coolest thing about going with a private guide was not having to wait in what were already LONG lines at all major destinations. Barbara just flashed her badge and we entered via a completely separate and typically empty access point. Unfortunately, photographs were not allowed in either the palace or basilica. Although I learned

a TON about Venetian history during the tour of the Doge's Palace, I can't say I was, like, blown away by its architecture or artwork (none of which I recognized). The Bridge of Sighs and prison area were of more interest, albeit for different reasons. Meanwhile, the basilica completely blew my mind - perhaps because I was not expecting it and it didn't strike me as that large or ornate from the outside (indeed, most domes were shrouded in scaffolding). I would readily proclaim Saint Mark's as the most beautiful christian church I've ever visited. Something about the all-encompassing byzantine gold mosaics and amazingly complex (both geometrically and geologically) floor patterns was so unique and distinctive. We paid a couple Euro's extra to view the gold altarpiece (Pala d'Oro, worth it because of its medieval images and fascinating precious stones) and to go upstairs to view the bronze horses (which some scholars actually date back to BC Greece or Rome) as well as go outside on the balcony behind the front façade (which provided good views over the square and Grand Canal).

After Barbara's tour, Flavia (same heritage as Barbara) took over, leading a fantastic walking tour back to just beyond the Rialto Bridge, mostly via obscure back-alley thoroughfares. Every perspective could have been photographed as art - it was THAT beautiful. Like Yellowstone/Old Faithful, Venice became silent the moment you left the major tourist spots. There were times we had whole campi (little squares) to ourselves. I also especially enjoyed seeing Venice's hospital and aquatic ambulances. Despite crowds, Rialto Bridge was gorgeous, the views over the gondola-choked Grand Canal dreamy. Prior to actually being in Venice, I had entertained the notion of taking a gondola ride - although my specific aim was to hire the only woman gondolier (a first last year). Months before, I even emailed her and, remarkably, got a response: she was visiting family on vacation the week I was there. After seeing SO many gondolas with hokey tourists, my desire for a ride vanished - although walking so many gorgeous, narrow waterways and the private company boat were equally important factors. Indeed, I would liken the back streets of Venice to hiking spectacular slot canyons in Utah. Just past the market near Rialto (where the morning fish stands were now empty, save lots of blood and the only stink encountered), Flavia called the company boat back for our final tour destination: through narrow canals and across the lagoon to Murano. Although the latter was interesting, the heat did not make standing near the furnaces appealing... particularly as compared with the awesome ride across the lagoon. Indeed, it felt like we were in a James Bond movie - zooming across the aquamarine water, the waves and spray flying over the front of the boat. Definitely a high point. Prior to the trip, my mother - when she heard I was visiting Murano - remarked that she might be interested in some glass (mostly because my folks were patrons and fans of Tacoma's many glass artists). Given that - and the gallery air conditioning - I think it is safe to say that I bought the most expensive gift I've ever bought another person. At the time, I looked at it, asked myself if my dad would have bought it for her, and the answer was yes. Of course, the gallery also engraved it, gave me a major discount, and covered all shipping costs (which, miraculously, happened without incident). After this expensive stop, I was cordially returned to the Piazzale Roma where it took 15 minutes of active hailing to stop a cab. Back at the hotel, I enjoyed a shower, a nap, some BBC, and dinner (grilled chicken and potatoes). At some point, the front desk helped me check up on the luggage: nothing and not even remotely promising.



Left to Right: Bolzano, vineyard/winery-covered hillsides, medieval castles (seemingly everywhere)

June 22-24, 2007 - Bolzano and the Symposium

The next morning, I enjoyed another satisfying breakfast at the hotel before an even more exciting ride back to the airport (completely different route through industrial/waterfront Mestre). I arrived 3 hours early (relative to WT's noon meeting time) - my aim to find my luggage, which I was confident would be there (at least as I entered the airport). To make a long story short: I managed to occupy the entire 3 hours with fruitless searching, beginning with an hour-long line just to be taken back to the 5 HUGE areas of unclaimed/lost bags. Indeed, there were people in my search party who had been suffering with no bags for a week or more. One sad couple found their bags (after 10 days without) but everything was damaged, likely left outside and in water/rain for some time. Before seeing the insane bag rooms, most people were angry and belligerent with the staff; after being escorted through the maze, everyone fell silent because I think we all could not escape acknowledging the magnitude of the problem was beyond anyone's control. Later, WT staff reported that 15,000 pieces of luggage had been lost at Frankfurt during the period I was in Venice. Inexcusable, simply inexcusable. At around quarter to noon, I gave up and sat down at the meeting spot (a busy café). A couple other WT clients soon approached me, asking if I was with WT (indeed, we must all have that hiking look about us)... and, eventually, 2 guides. No one in this first round, however, was on my Dolomites trip (all were doing or leading this insane "via ferrata" trip - basically, exposed climbing while clipped into war-placed cables along the spines of peaks and ridges). Owing to some late arrivals, I opted to stay back, eventually meeting Claire, the first of my Cortina-bound team. Alas, though, the traffic - once we FINALLY hit the road (around 1:30) was truly crazy. What should have been a 2-hour trip to Bolzano took nearly 3, albeit with a couple bathroom or snack stops. I was surprised by a couple things about the drive: the extensive farmlands (half growing wine grapes and the other half corn - food, feed, or fuel, I cannot be sure) and that we never saw any large mountains. I was also glad we passed through Trento, as this is the home of Ellen's pseudo-boyfriend. She will hate me for printing that.

Before this trip, I had been intimidated by what I'd heard about stylishly upscale Bolzano. Indeed, that was why I'd gone out of my way to buy some new outfits (now lost). Likewise, I didn't know what to expect from WT clientele - given that we were in a

4-star hotel and there was a lot of wining and dining during the symposium. I can honestly say, though, that neither Bolzano nor WT's clientele were stuffy, arrogant, or socially threatening (in appearance or manner), despite a lot of over-the-top events (e.g. meals enjoyed at full-on castles and wineries). And my sparring, casual outfits (which showed up again and again) never felt out of place. Nonetheless, people quickly became familiar with me as the girl with no luggage (notably, 1/10 among the 70-member symposium group were likewise). Anyway, we arrived at the beautiful hotel just after 4, leaving me time to clean up before the poolside welcome reception. My room was many cuts above anything we stayed in while hiking the TMB: down quilts, lavish pillows, and luxury bathroom/tub facilities. Even so, I didn't photograph the rooms... probably because, sadly, I was constantly having to keep up with the clothing issues (i.e. doing laundry in the sink). Being a wallflower and WT virgin, I consciously avoided the reception until the last 15 minutes. Indeed, MANY clients in the group knew each other and were long-term WT devotees. Even so, people were genuinely outgoing and friendly with us newbies. There were also about 30 guides and staff in attendance, each with a vested interest in integrating social freaks like me (but not offensively so). I quickly clicked with several women (including an industrial biochemist working in Switzerland) and found my social companions for the duration of the symposium. Shortly thereafter, David Breashears gave the hour-long opening talk (mostly about Everest), a preface to his film preview (shown after dinner). Although I'd seen his IMAX film and first learned about him during the 1996 disaster (the topic of Krakauer's Into Thin Air), I really didn't know what to expect from him. Most other people I talked with said that meeting and hearing Breashears was their primary draw to this event. Indeed, Breashears attended nearly all symposium activities before heading out with the via ferrata group (which probably explains why that trip was the only sell out). David, though, seemed like a nice guy - which was a pleasant surprise (I say this because many of the few celebrities I have met have been assholes). I loved his talk, enjoyed his film, and found him to be genuinely interested in all the activities - not to mention readily capable of socializing with the group. Nonetheless, I did find it slightly disconcerting to show up at the breakfast buffet and there's Breashears... not to mention the fact that my only minor conversation with him regarded - you guessed it - losing luggage. In retrospect, I sort of wish I'd gotten a picture of and/or autograph from him. Oh well. After his talk, we enjoyed a lavish buffet dinner. Already feeling like I'd gained a few pounds in Venice, I skipped all the meat (which included a roast suckling pig) and indulged 2 salads and some incredible salad/fruit/cheese courses. As stated, we proceeded - after dinner - to watch Breashears' film, a 10-year study of the Into Thin Air disaster. I was nearly asleep by 10:30, not looking forward to tomorrow's 8 a.m. departure (i.e. 7 a.m. wake-up).



Left to Right: Bolzano hotel, town center statue and church, shopping district/open air market

The early morning symposium departures were designed for a reason: it enabled our group access to museums before the general public. For the next 2 days, our group was split into 2 subgroups who did the same things but on opposite days. Today, I was in the mummy group - bound for the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology, 20 minutes away by foot. And thus we walked through the main square and shopping region, the open-air market stands were being set up as we passed. En route, I happened into a conversation with WT's CEO (Bill), who smiled memorably when I explained I was a WT virgin with years of MTS experience. Over the course of this trip, I had several chances to interact (and even hike) with Bill, a Scandinavian and former chemistry major who reminded me of Garrison Keillor. As a result, I have to say that it is hard NOT to want to be loyal to him and his company - which he founded and has been running for decades (in contrast with other companies and their high turnover managers). Also, the guides seemed to love Bill and he genuinely loved his work, particularly dreaming up these symposia. Anyway - even though Ellen RAVED about Otzi (the mummy's contemporary name), I have to say that the whole experience was even MORE interesting than even she could convey. At the museum, we were split into 3 groups with private guides after an overview by the female curator. For anyone who doesn't know about Otzi, he is a 5000-year old specimen that was discovered along the Italy/Austria border in 1991 by some hikers (interestingly, Messner was in the second party to see him). Otzi was recently featured in National Geographic because forensic evidence just revealed - among other things - that he was fatally shot in the back. After mishandling and international arguing, Otzi was given to the Italians where he is being properly stored - along with a large number of well-preserved personal affects (e.g. his axe, clothing, backpack, weapons, bag of medicines and survival gear...). Our museum guide and the first floor (all devoted to Otzi) were REALLY fantastic. The displays of his things were as interesting as the viewing window (maybe 18 inches square) where you peer into the freezer at Otzi's glistening and tattooed body. After our hour-long tour of the Otzi area, we were turned loose on our own. Although the next floor up (devoted to bronze and iron age history and artifacts - particularly smelting) was interesting and informative, I was a little bored with the top floor (Dark Ages and Roman Times). The gift shop could have also used a few more books in English, although the general brochure and a few basic Otzi books were available. Being that I wrapped up early, I decided to run down the block to buy a few essentials at the hiking shop (given that I had pretty much decided my bags were not going to show up any time soon): another shirt, sunscreen, more socks, and hiking poles. I purposely did not buy boots because, during dinner the night before, my main WT contact said that if I was comfortable hiking in sandals, I should/could proceed.

After regrouping outside the museum, we were picked up by what was the most efficient fleet of vans/drivers I've ever worked with (whether in terms of a guided vacation or a professional conference). We proceeded 20 minutes up into the hills above town, along a silty river that reminded me of L'Avre in Chamonix, to the Runklestein Castle. We walked the last section, up this steep rocky path that took a few people's footwear expectations by surprise. At the castle gate, we were greeted with drinks and a light snack (unfortunately, I cannot recall the crazy local drink made of regional flowers). We were then split into smaller groups and taken on what was, for me, a too-long tour of the castle with an emphasis on its endless frescoes. Had most of us not started to get REALLY hungry, or had the castle guides been less longwinded, I would have enjoyed the tour more. Eventually, we made it down to the courtyard for a half-buffet, half-formal lunch. As with all Italian meals, there were at least 4 courses - which took some of us by surprise given that buffet line 1 featured a HUGE salad bar and plenty of hors d'oeuvres (indeed, my prosciutto intake was sky high most of this trip). When they announced the second course (several pasta dishes) AND then tried to pass out dessert (apple strudel being the most regularly featured option throughout this trip), many of us were stuffed, realizing we'd better adjust our pace and/or portion sizes. In the middle of the meal, 3 musicians in period costumes played and sung - which, at the time, seemed over the top. Like I will continue to say: had everyone not been casual, friendly, and down-to-earth, I would have assumed the group was a bunch of snobs. After lunch, most of our group walked back to the hotel, a 45-minute stroll mostly along the river... albeit in soaring heat. Fortunately, I had about an hour to shower and nap before the afternoon lectures began. Indeed, my only mild complaint about the symposium was that it was more busy than a science conference; a little more downtime to relax would have been appreciated. The first afternoon speaker was magnificent: 1 of the primary forensic pathologists who was involved in high-level research on Otzi. His hour-long talk was organized, fascinating, and technical - no pandering to the lowest intellectual denominator. After a brief coffee break, we proceeded to the second presentation - this long-winded and fairly arrogant British climber I'd never heard of before. Unfortunately, he drove me (and a few others) nuts by running 30 minutes over (despite a polite request to wrap things up as people were hungry and we had a dinner schedule to maintain). His talk, a history of climbing in the Alps, was 50% interesting - the rest overemphasizing the minutia of names and advanced route variations that went over many heads and interest levels. Although clearly a leader in his field and a fine public speaker, brevity could have been more effectively employed.



Left to Right: lunch castle and musicians, red carpet dinner castle, vineyard grapes

By this point, many of us were exhausted. That there was now some major surprise dinner event requiring bus transport was not that appealing given that some of us had hoped to do a quick buffet line, skip dessert, and sneak off to bed. Instead, we rode 30 minutes to the outskirts of Bolzano to this mystery castle (the name of which I never recorded). Given all the secrecy the guides were trying to imbue on this occasion, I actually wondered if we weren't heading to Messner's (as he also lives in a castle near Bolzano). Although my theory was not correct, the level of pomp at our destination was, again, over the top: a full-on red carpet with trumpeters (seriously). After a tasty cocktail and appetizer social on the lawn (that included a harpist), we made our way up the red carpet to the dining hall. Although the meal was exquisite, the sound quality in the dining area was insane: the thick, cave-like walls were an echo chamber, with chatter escalating to the point that many of us were rattled and/or annoyed. This fact prevented our appreciation of the covert entertainment operation: hired actors/musicians who attempted mild jokes during dinner (e.g. the mean waiter who collected dishes by coming up from behind, encircling you on either side as he stacked piles of plates down over yours and walked angrily away before having an audible, feigned fight in the kitchen). After downing a substantial and delicious pasta course (a plate of nettle dumplings with chanterelles), I was already full - not to mention crazy with the noise and ready for bed. Thankfully, we were back on the bus by just after 10:00 - escorted down the red carpet by the actors blowing fire - and I was in bed by just before 11.

The next morning, I was in the Messner group, driving 20 minutes to the recently-opened Messner Mountain Museum Firmian (which, ironically, had also been featured in the National Geographic issue with Otzi). I believe it was Patagonia Sara who introduced me to Messner, encouraging me to attend his Seattle Mountaineers talk in the mid-1990's. At the time, I had no clue what I was in for and - honestly - I can't say I completely understood some of his thick, Tyrolean-accented talk. But I was instantly blown away by the guy. Messner remains, in the opinions of many (including myself), the greatest climber of all time. In addition to a substantial history of vertical rock ascents in the Dolomites, he was the first to climb Everest without oxygen, to solo Everest, to climb all fourteen 8000 meter peaks, and to implement small alpine style ascents on Himalayan peaks. I can't exactly say what is so inspiring about Messner to me; he is, simply, an amazing man with a fascinating life. In the past several years, he has established several museums throughout the Dolomites - all devoted to various aspects of mountains and mountaineering. Firmian, perhaps the centerpiece of this project, was installed in an historic castle near and above Bolzano. As with yesterday, our group had been given pre-public access to the museum (as well as Messner himself). Messner spoke for about 30 minutes to our awestruck group in a natural amphitheatre within the castle walls. While most others seemed too comfortable shooting pictures of him and - later - asking for autographs and/or photographs, I could barely take a single profile image and - much later - timidly ask for a signature. Indeed, I often felt sorry for him having to deal with so

much attention, particularly when he was giving a presentation or trying to have a conversation. I wished there had been a clearly-defined time for autographs because, honestly, I found a lot of peoples' responses distracting, rude, and/or embarrassing. After Messner's introduction, we were turned loose. I can't exactly put Firmian into words - as it was more about artistic and spiritual responses to mountains than a traditional portrait of mountains and mountaineering history. I would estimate that 75% displays represented Messner's personally collected items (art, mountaineering artifacts, or historical books/photographs) and 25% were commissioned pieces developed specifically for this space and theme. Although I had the sense that a few people in our group did not get it (i.e. why he chose this format), I loved it. My only funky moment was stumbling into this room that contained tons of really old climbing gear, some taken off Everest during a clean-up trip; something about the old crampons reminded me of my dad's (which hang alongside his ice axe near my front door) and, sufficed to say, I had a little moment. Thankfully, however, it was just me at the time. Our group wrapped up pretty much as the museum was opening to the public. Ironically, I found out later that Michael and Chris (climbing friends from the web who moved to Germany a couple years ago) were among the people visiting THAT morning. We missed each other by a matter of minutes, imagine that. Our group drove another 20 minutes to a winery and inn called Schloss Korb, the former impressively built into war bunkers. After touring the vineyards, we enjoyed some wine tasting followed by an excellent 5-course lunch.



Left to Right: Messner Mountain Museum, including the man himself

Returning to the hotel around 2:30, I enjoyed a cool shower (being that it was blazing hot yet again) before a short pre-trip meeting with just our Cortina-bound group. Unfortunately, the latter almost ruined my day because - upon hearing about my luggage and footwear situation - the trip leader firmly said: no boots, no hiking. Needless to say, I was upset and angry, not only because this guy thoroughly dismissed all my experience but also because - like I said to him at the time - I would have gladly bought boots yesterday had WT given me the go-ahead to wear Chacos. Although the trip leader and I eventually made peace (more or less), the jury remains out on whether I will do future hiking trips with WT. Having been involved in SO many other trips (with so many other companies) where sandals were allowed (if not encouraged or fully donned by guides), the Chaco issue might be a serious deal-breaker. Anyway, my state was not helped by the first speaker, a professor who was supposed to talk about people/culture and the Alps. He seemed unorganized, repetitive (with respect to history we'd already heard), simplistic, and overwhelmed by the larger figures he was surrounded by. Had the guy focused purely on war and the Alps (a sub-topic of his talk, illustrated by many fascinating pictures), I would have been more interested. After a coffee break (during which time, my trip leader had already located a female guide with extra boots that should fit me), Messner took the stage again - speaking 2 full hours about pretty much his entire life. Seated 6 feet from him the entire time, I decided to lose my angst - vowing that, among other things, I had paid too much money and spent too much effort to come here and NOT enjoy the rest of the Dolomites. I'd put up with plenty of foot problems on many other trips; if wearing ill-fitting boots was the only way I was going to be allowed to hike, then I was up for taping my toes and bunions every day, not to mention suffering through and/or treating monster blisters. Nevertheless, I left the final dinner after the second course - partly because I was exhausted, partly because I was tired of all the socializing, and partly because I needed to clear my mind some more.

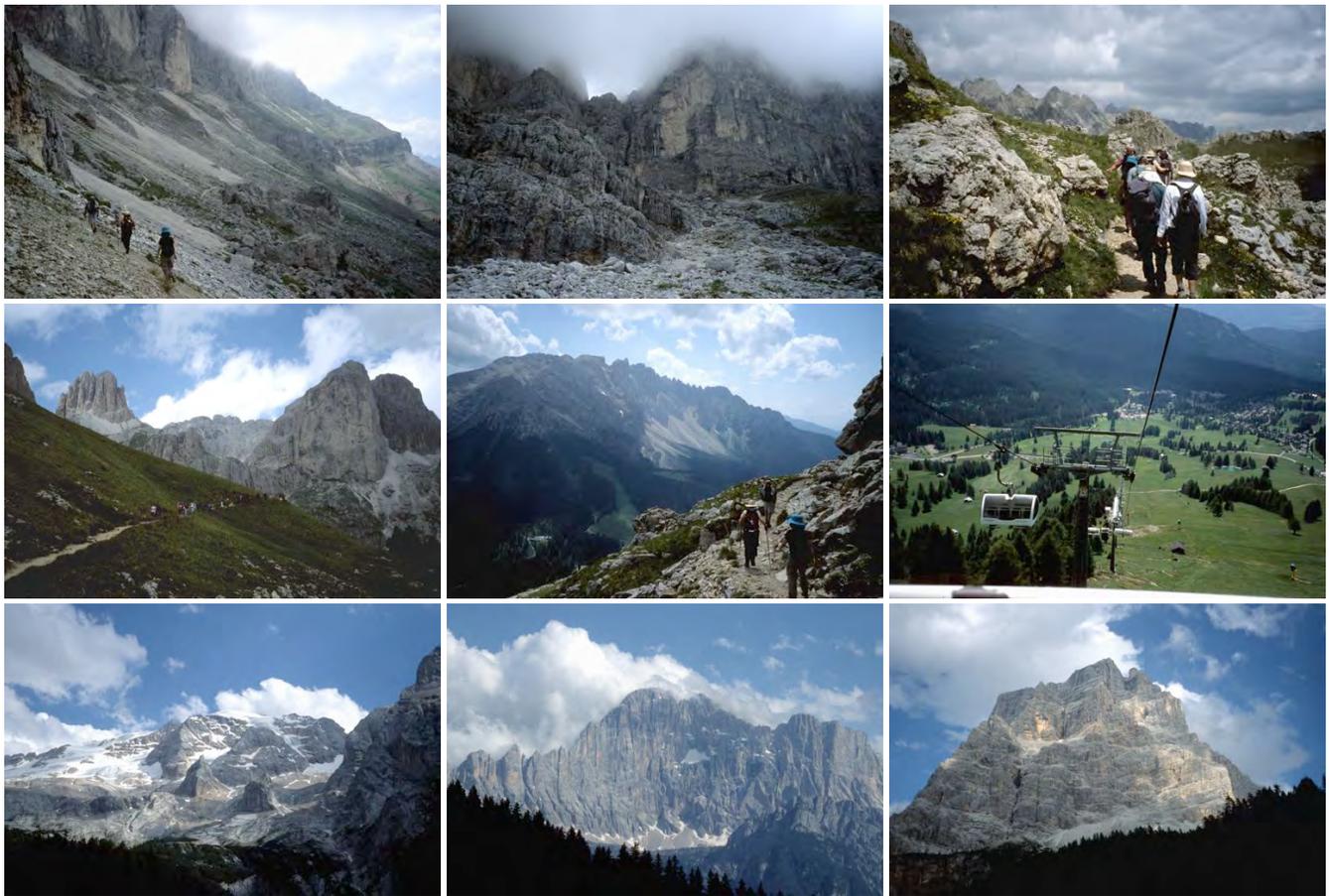


Left to Right: pink tower near hut, view across from hut, massif under which we hiked from bottom of lift

June 25, 2007 - Western Dolomites/Rosengarten to Passo Staulanza

Despite the theoretical boot source (i.e. we were to pick up the female guide's boots en route to the Rosengarten), I hoped to dash down to the sports store first thing and try to buy new boots (given that a few guides thought said store would open at 9 and we were leaving at 9:30). Well - the store didn't open until 10, meaning the best I could do was visit the pharmacy and buy every conceivable tape product... plus scissors (grand total = 28 Euro's, NOT cheap). We then piled into our van (we actually had 2; the other was picking up a couple from England who did not attend the symposium) and proceeded west, stopping at a small, pretty lodge where my loaner boots were procured. A GREAT surprise on this trip was the fact that our

group uniquely got to visit/hike the Rosengarten, a feature of the Western Dolomites that was normally not part of the Cortina itinerary. Because we'd been in Bolzano, this side-trip was thrown in as a bonus. Last year, Ellen had sent an especially beautiful postcard of the Rosengarten and thus I was pleased to be able to see it. I'd say the Rosengarten was about an hour from Bolzano. Perhaps as a peace offering, our trip leader said I could wear my sandals today because the trail was mostly level and popular (i.e. lots of people with diverse footwear). I took this as a good sign and decided I'd do my best to behave on future hikes since his gesture seemed to indicate an open-mindedness I hadn't seen yesterday. To my slight horror (at the time), we utilized an open, bar-less ski-lift to ascend to the route - this rocky trail just under the towering gray to pink/orange rocks. Fortunately, teammate Claire managed to adequately distract me on the way up (and, thankfully, the lift down had a bar). Even though I harped and harped about ski-related stuff during the TMB, I honestly can't say it bothered me in Italy. I thought about why every time we passed/used said features and the only reason I can fathom was that Italy kept ski-related things far more clean and presentable (i.e. little/no run-down pieces of equipment strewn everywhere, few poorly-cut roads between facilities in the meadows). Over time, I actually appreciated WT's willingness to use the lifts, most of which were highly popular for hiking. As we set out on the trail, the rocky heights were mostly in dynamic clouds. At times, even we were enveloped by a cold mist. Thus, it was a surprise when - by the time we reached the hut - the skies were shaping up into a sunny and scenic day. I'd say we hiked 2-3 miles to the hut, the volume of hikers passed comparable to that above Chamonix. We received an equal number of hello's in German and Italian. The other unexpectedly nice thing WT did was fully utilize the huts for food (vs. MTS, who had us pack and carry lunches every day - with prevalent huts only used for drinks and snacks). At first glance, I was concerned that getting timely service and/or meals was going to be an issue (as this and many huts were terrifically busy). Although this was hardly the case, I wondered how much having guides (who seemed to know most hut employees) facilitated things. The other surprise about the hut meals was the menu diversity; in contrast with France (where I QUICKLY became cheese-overloaded), I was almost always excited about food on this trip. Menus consistently featured lighter pasta/red sauces, heavy cheese/potato/sausages, wiener schnitzel/veal Milanese, and many little surprises (e.g. beet-filled ravioli, chanterelle-stuffed crepes, cheese/fruit/chutney plates...). Not to mention great fruit juices, beer, and wine.



Left to Right: (top) setting out, looking up, nearing the hut; (middle) incoming mass, descending to... ski-lift; (bottom) driving views - glaciated Marmolada, Civetta (north face/wall), Pelmo (from Passo Staulanza)

Unfortunately, the lunch hut was grand central station - the most notable group being 30-50 teenagers we assumed were on a graduation-related outing. Watching the motley crew endlessly pass, we were surprised when they assembled a neighboring knoll and this white-robed priest rose to give mass. Although I can't say Italy seemed more conservative or religious than France, there were trends along these lines. Shortly after the singing began, we headed back, hiking a mile back and then descended to an intermediary lift. Although these chairs featured bars/covers, I still cursed audibly as we took the first, long plummet down the open/high slope. After 4 hours on the trail, I was surprised how much more driving awaited us. Although the distance was likely small (50-100 miles), the difficulty of the roads seemed stunning and substantial. Roads in the Dolomites, while good quality, were amazingly curvy and strewn with these incredible passes (many have signs that count the zigzags, which averaged 20-40/pass). Also surprising: the numbers of insane motorcyclists - many of whom readily cut into

oncoming traffic on blind corners. Between all the ascents/descents, we passed several small and scenic towns and, remarkably, saw most major peaks: Marmolada, Civetta, and Pelmo/Doge's Cap. Despite already steep topography, said mountains rose to even more impressive heights above the forested hillsides. Indeed, the forests - at least from a distance - looked pristine... far less impacted than our northwest clear-cuts. Remarkably, people have been selectively thinning the Dolomites for centuries - albeit with small-scale tools. Upon closer inspection, you could - of course - see cut trunks and more manicured floors... but, honestly, I was shocked to see how impressive a long-logged landscape could look. Our goal for the night was the remote lodge at the Passo Staulanza, located between Civetta/Pelmo and owned by a man who had recently climbed K2. Another extremely welcome feature about this trip (as compared with TMB), was the fact that daily hikes were independent entities (i.e. we were not on a regimented schedule that involved moving to a new hotel/inn every night). Thus, we would spend 3 nights at this lodge, doing various dayhikes from this pseudo-base camp. All I can say: SO relaxing! As with our Bolzano accommodations, our rooms were spectacular and clean... perhaps simpler, and slightly chillier (as we were higher and the weather did take a slight turn for the cooler). We enjoyed all breakfasts and 2 dinners in the lodge, the latter representing the only time I felt a little overloaded (as they seemed to enjoy their noodles especially buttery/oily).



Left to Right: broad overview of hike to pass from low, hiking under Pelmo on scree, Pelmo from just beyond scree in forest

June 26, 2007 - Under the Pelmo and Almost to Cortina via the Forcella d'Ambrizzola

Every day saw 2 hiking options: strenuous and less strenuous. Because we had 3 guides/2 vans, strenuous options involved a van/van thru-hike. There was also the no hiking option - and, in contrast with my impression of the TMB, relaxing was less frowned upon. While I LOVED all the options, it did complicate my decision-making process because I wanted to make the best choices every day. Prior to the trip, I downloaded/compared images from all hiking options. Based on these data, I knew that today's strenuous hike was my top priority for the week. It struck me as gorgeous and comprehensive (in the same way hiking Summerland/Indian Bar/Cowlitz Divide is on Rainier). And, indeed, today's hike was, easily, among the top 10 I've ever done, a combination of perfect weather (albeit, surprisingly, not clear), great company, shockingly beautiful scenery, and my first encounter with wild edelweiss. Conveniently, the trail proceeded directly from our lodge. It contoured moderately under the vast northwest face of the Pelmo, most sections dominated by impressive slopes of bone-like scree or thin alpine forest ablaze with colorful flowers. After an hour, we climbed through a short forest section, up emerald meadows, and through a brief pasture to the Rifugio Citta di Fiume. Here, we enjoyed a snack - Civetta, Pelmo, and Marmolada all in view. Incidentally, Civetta means owl - presumably because, from the south (i.e. this view, more or less), it resembles this bird.



Left to Right: (top) Rifugio Citta di Fiume, Civetta; (bottom) views from first pass (Sorapiss), to the Forcella, edelweiss

After, in my case, apple juice and the purchase of the Mt. Pelmo panorama postcard booklet (these were awesome; I bought 1 representing every major vantage we visited throughout the trip - except Rosengarten and Tofane), we continued. At first,

we seemed to be hiking a wide dirt road. This eventually pinched into a simple trail. Within the hour, we arrived at this amazing pass (Forcella de la Puina or Col Roan). Rising from across this miraculously green valley were a mess of HUGE peaks, including Antelao and Sorapiss (both, apparently, a treat to see). Among the endless sea of background peaks were Tres Cime di Lavaredo, famous towers I was particularly excited about hiking in a few days. Continuing, we began hiking what looked like a fairly daunting climb to the Forcella... or what we thought was the Forcella (i.e. this obvious green notch). In fact, this false gap was a brief and perpendicular distance from the actual target pass, eclipsed by the massive walls and towers of the Becco di Mezzodi. The ascent seemed relatively easy, through magnificent fields of green - flowers everywhere. Even so, our party definitely split at this point: 2 fast couples and the leader in front, me, Jean (a pharmacist from Stanford), and our tertiary guide in back. At some point, we regrouped for a chocolate break in a meadow strewn with fascinating, large boulders - thick mounds of diverse and colorful flowers everywhere. Here, our leader located edelweiss in bloom - very exciting as my dad loved the Sound of Music and my last gift for him had been dried edelweiss from Chamonix. Notably, prehistoric burial sites had been discovered among the stones. Eventually, we continued up to the false gap, the Pelmo looking completely different from this perspective, the profile of the Becco changing with every step. From the gap, we finally saw the actual Forcella (flanked by the pointy spires of the Becco and the Croda de Lago), an impressive trail through gray and white scree.



Left to Right: (top) Becco walls, Pelmo, first gap and Becco; (bottom) Forcella, Croda, views of Tofane/Cortina

Given few issues with the boots so far (albeit on fair uphill), I was concerned about the descent. Looking down the pass, I was surprised to find only a gentle trail heading down to the obvious lake (Federa) and Rifugio Palmieri; indeed, the descent felt reasonable, something that would NOT continue post-lunch. Unfortunately, the skies were more threatening - dark clouds gathering over the now-visible Tofane group and Cortina (which, for some reason, I thought was WAY farther away). Thus, we dropped quickly to the refuge (it was 2:30, 2 hours later than expected) and enjoyed another fabulous lunch (especially pleasant given that we were the only group there). Having coveted others' sausages, polenta, and potatoes at the Rosengarten, I heeded my stomach's desires. Nevertheless, we didn't dally... and were soon rounding the lake and proceeding through subalpine forest that, at first, seemed to contour the flanks of the Croda. Disturbingly, we could hear climbers drilling (yes, DRILLING) routes up the massive walls above the lake. And then the fun began: an insanely steep and rough trail that reckoned frustrating TMB sections (minus, thankfully, SHUD). My toes were toast: 2 serious blisters (on the tops of the hammertoes) and 4 purple toenails (1 eventually fell off). Although this sucked, 3 things did keep my spirits up: (1) having survived comparable problems during my boot-wearing days; (2) knowing I would be satisfied with a couple lighter days to recover; and (3) amazing views across the valley to these surreal high valleys within the Tofane (too small to photograph but we would be hiking there in a few days).



Left to Right: Rifugio Palmieri with Tofane, inside refuge, Lago Federa looking back on Becco/Forcella

After about 2 hours, we arrived at the remarkably woody and remote trailhead (which looked like something straight out of the Cascades). Although the trip itinerary stated we were "only a few miles from our hotel," the drive seemed substantial - taking us over the remarkably scenic Nuvolau region near Pasao Giau (which we'd hike in a few days) and then dropping via

something like 39 numbered zigzags to the valley floor and then climbing briefly back to Passo Staulanza (where we arrived around 6). Our 5-course dinner (which, for me, included a grilled steak) was enjoyed at a different inn just down the road (I actually don't know the exact town because I was so turned around by this point).



Left to Right: Pelmo in fog near trailhead, ascending to the refuge, Rifugio a Sonino al Coldai and Forcella Coldai

June 27, 2007 - Under the Civetta to Lago Coldai

Probably for better, today was overcast and drizzly. Sufficed to say, the poor weather - in combination with my feet - made choosing what I thought was a simpler hike (it was, but not by much) easy. Our mileage today would be 6-7 with 2000 feet up/down (vs. yesterday's 9 miles, 2000 feet up/3000 feet down). Not surprisingly, this was my least favorite hike (although, even then, we saw more than we did on any comparably bad TMB day) - not only because of the weather but also because I was not impressed with the trail. Something I failed to previously mention was that most of the Forcella hike represented the Dolomite's PCT-equivalent, a decent and well-graded route that traverses the entire range. Today's hike was NOT part of this trail. Not surprisingly, the easy crowd was bigger (Claire, Jean, and I - lead by our secondary guide). While everyone started at the same trailhead, the easy group went in/out (turning around at a small pass above Lago Coldai) and the harder group did a major van/van thru-hike that took them under the entire north face of the Civetta and then down this long ridge. I believe it is fair to say that we all were granted the same views, the harder group sustaining only a longer period in active rain. We all began hiking at a dirty little farm, initially climbing a truly rough and steep dirt road. After 20 minutes, we arrived at a ski-lift but continued hiking the road down to another dirty little farm. Here, a variably wide road-like trail made of unevenly inlaid stones zigzagged up this face and around the corner to this little valley and pass on the side of the Civetta. Several final sections just before the refuge (Rifugio a Sonino al Coldai) were edgy, offering extremely vertical views up the Civetta flanks and down to the town (Pecol, I believe - also where we likely had dinner the night before) below.



Left to Right: (top) Coldai, turnaround point view, returning in fog; (bottom) north side of pass, mystery flowers, musical cow

At the refuge, the weather showed some signs of promise (i.e. moments of blue) and so we decided to push over the small gap (Forcella Coldai) and on to the lake. Although my pictures make this pass look pretty tame, the multiple trail(s) up this thing were poor, rough, and made of loose rock and dirt. Once we arrived at the gap, massive clouds and fog pretty much moved back (almost for good) but we descended to the lake and then - given dynamic moments of clearing - decided to continue up and down and up and down toward the towering flanks of Civetta's north wall. During my flights home, I took to reading Messner's autobiography and was impressed to learn that he basically camped at this lake for many weeks as a young man, tackling route after route up Civetta's north face. Despite overall bad weather, though, I honestly felt satisfied and rewarded for the views we were granted. At our final stopping point, we enjoyed some snacks (tasty cocoa-embedded granola cookies which I've never seen in the US) and briefly looked down and across this huge bowl - the harder group's target lunch

refuge a tiny dot on this higher ridge far across the valley. Eventually, we returned to the hut via the other side of the lake. Descending the pass was annoying but not as bad as I thought it would be. Nonetheless, my toes were NOT being given any reprieve today. Back at the nearly empty refuge, we actively enjoyed its central heating. Being an all-women group, we ordered several items to share (salad, French fries, and a berry tart) in addition to individual main course (mine being veal Milanese and spoon-standing hot chocolate). After a leisurely lunch, we started down. Within 30 minutes, it was actively raining (which it hadn't done outright so far) - and this continued all the way down. But most of the walking was on stone paths or rocky dirt roads - fairly pleasant. During the final 30 minutes, the sounds of distant cowbells completely filled the air - sounding, to me, like something out of Nepal... the cacophonous but strangely beautiful music the monks played. We returned to the lodge around 4 p.m., which gave me time for a long hot shower and nap before our dinner (at the lodge). I believe tonight was also the night Claire introduced me to Limoncello, a Sicilian liquor made from something like everclear, dozens of lemons, and tons of sugar. Needless to say, I made a concerted and successful effort to find Italian-import Limoncello upon returning home. Only Bryan's wife (Emma), however, agrees with me about Limoncello's merits.



Left to Right: Passo Giau and part of crazy road, Nuvolau from Pass Giau, along trail to Averau

June 28, 2007 - Nuvolau/Averau to Lagazuoi

Today represented our last morning at Passo Staulanza. Thus, we all packed and loaded the vans for the impressive drive back up to Passo Giau. Packing, however, was somewhat unusual: tonight, we would be staying in a true mountain hut (Rifugio Lagazuoi, elevation 9100) and, from this point, hiking a remote trail down to Cortina tomorrow (passing no facilities en route). Individual packing consisted of a preparing a simple bag of bare overnight essentials, with the remainder of our gear being driven to our Cortina hotel. Group gear also consisted of grocery store food for lunch packing, which our secondary guide purchased today while we were on the trail. Given yesterday's toe-challenging hike, I took the absolute easiest option and was, in fact, granted a decent day. Based on my map interpretation, we only hiked about 3 miles total, with less than 1000 feet gained/lost. From Passo Giau, the easy group basically hiked under the Nuvolau (which looked completely different with every step) to this gap and refuge (Rifugio Averau) between the Nuvolau (a larger mountain) and Averau (a tower-like feature). I can't say I have any grand comments about the scenic quality of the hike; the day was more clear than yesterday - but still cloudy and cold. Thankfully, there was no rain. Knowing the harder group was taking a longer, rougher, and steeper route basically over most of the Nuvolau, the easy team took a LONG lunch - not only because the place was teeming with biker men (every age and body type, most wearing revealing spandex and many emitting great sweaty odors) but also because we decided to be especially indulgent - ordering individual dishes (mostly pasta and salad) plus beers and an incredible, shared cheese plate with all these fantastic little chutney-like spreads.



Left to Right: Averau from near refuge, looking back up trail at Nuvolau massif, Nuvolau trail from Rifugio Averau

The harder group arrived at the Rifugio Averau 2-3 hours after we did, having eaten at the higher Rifugio Nuvolau. Although the pre-trip itinerary said that everyone would hike 3 miles down together, we were given the option of hiking a super-short trail down to the Cinque Torri and then catching a ski-lift to the valley floor. I heartily accepted this option - mostly because I was into seeing the Cinque Torri, these MASSIVE towers that seem like a prominent feature from anywhere around Cortina. Unfortunately, the beer had finally broken up whatever badness had been camped out in my GI tract for several days and, as we dropped to the Torri, all I wanted to do was find a bathroom FAST and sit there for some time (which I did). Thankfully, that was the only incident of its kind during this trip. We promptly took another exciting ski-lift down the mountainside to near Passo Falzarego, my fear factor diminished by the prominent chair bars/covers. There, our secondary guide was waiting with the van and groceries. Within no time, we were at Passo Falzarego. Thinking we had some time, we all dispersed into this especially crazy gift shop that featured, to my utter surprise, cultivated edelweiss plants (unlike higher elevation counterparts, these grew long stems and leaves, the flowers almost a foot off the ground). But the harder group arrived within 10 minutes

(gee - was I on the toilet THAT long?), shortening our browsing as the guides were concerned we quickly make our way to the gondola and up to Lagazuoi. Had I not ridden so many intense gondolas in France, I probably would have freaked over Lagazuoi - particularly given its ultimate elevation and the fact that we pretty much shot right up what was all gnarly rock and, near the top, icy snow.



Left to Right: (top) Cinque Torri, Passo Falzarego buildings; (bottom) Lagazuoi - from near Nuvolau, refuge, view over Tofane

Indeed, over the past couple of days something like 6-12 inches of snow had fallen on the top of Lagazuoi - making me nervous about the initial phases of the hike down to Cortina. Sadly, the via ferrata group - who stayed at Lagazuoi the night before us - could not do any technical scrambling, and they were left to basically repeat our itinerary. Despite everything, though, we were extremely lucky - having all gotten "private" (i.e. non-dorm) rooms. Of course, private at this level meant 2 people sharing 1 room (in my case - me and Claire). In contrast with the oft-dirty mountain huts in France, Lagazuoi was like a luxury hotel: beautiful wood, down comforter, fluffy pillows, and fantastic heat (that rivaled our lodge at Passo Staulanza). Given the lightness of the day, I decided not to use the token-operated shower - but I heard nothing bad about them. Alas, though, we couldn't see a damn thing other than swirling fog and clouds - which was sad because Lagazuoi is said to offer 1 of the finest views in the Alps... particularly at sunset/rise. The best view shots I got were taken around 5 a.m. when there were some mild moments of clearing. About 45 minutes after arriving, everyone (I believe) but me went down for this tour of WWI features (as the Dolomites were a major front between Italy and Austria). I bowed out when I heard getting to most of them required navigating some extremely exposed bridges and walkways around Lagazuoi's main face. Although I initially felt bad about missing this tour, we passed several impressive tunnels, bunkers, and gun turret structures during the early part of the hike down to Cortina. That, and everyone returning from the tour said it was freezing. Even though the cleanliness and amenities of the hut were excellent, the food was my least favorite on the whole trip; the meat was sort of tough and the potato croquettes seemed like Italy's version of tater tots. But, as always, the Limoncello was awesome.



Left to Right: WWI bunker just down from Lagazuoi, Whitney-like summit flanks, looking back up to Lagazuoi

June 29, 2007 - Lagazuoi to Fiammes/Cortina via Tofane's Val d'Travenanz

I suspect, had this hike been first, that I might have said it was the best... but, in any event, it remains an extremely strong second both for its extreme beauty and the fact that it was so comprehensive. We set out around 9 in loosening fog. In contrast with other days, our tertiary guide (someone I'd enjoyed hiking with on day 1) was in charge of returning to Passo Falzarego, helping with things in Cortina, and - eventually - picking us up at the other end. Also, our leader basically said: everyone is going on this hike (in contrast with pre-trip literature suggesting there was an easier option). I don't know if this had to do with our leader's supreme confidence in our group or whether there were other needs in Cortina... but it was the right decision and everyone mostly stuck together throughout day (I had always planned to do this hike anyway). Even so, it was a whooper: 13 miles and about 5000 feet down, with no easy escapes and - as we discovered - LOTS of challenging river crossings. The other thing I have to say about this hike is that 2 historic hikes in my past came back a lot during the descent: first Whitney and then LeConte Valley, both in the Sierras. After all kinds of whoopla about crazy steep stuff and big snow on

the upper route, there was basically nothing to be concerned about. For the first time on this trip, I was among the front people - as, even in borrowed boots, I am (for better or worse) fast on descents. The reason the beginning reminded me of Whitney was because of the tilted summit, the rocky terrain, and the pie-shaped window sections - all classic features of the Whitney ascent. After dropping off the first summit area, we entered a high upper area that seemed dominated by red-orange rock and alpine meadow - interspersed with a few small banks of snow.



Left to Right: upper Val d'Travenanz - Zimes de Fanes, looking back toward Lagazuoi, dropping into LeConte-like valley

After a snack/break in the area between the high meadow and what I would call the middle of the valley (i.e. more subalpine meadows with trees), we continued dropping - the massive U-shaped valley looking almost identical to LeConte (south of Muir Pass). As we neared what was a long flat section at the bottom of the middle valley, we began crossing the Rio de Fanes MANY times (probably 6-8 by the time we were done) and walking open riverbed scree - as opposed to a defined trail. The combination of white rock and unearthly blue water looked like a classic thermal basin in Yellowstone. We met, like, 1 person in the Val d'Travenanz proper: a confused college-aged backpacker from somewhere in eastern Europe. As stated, the river crossings were interesting: ascending/descending several washed out ravines with 6-10 foot vertical sections, jumping or fording moderately wide bridgeless water, balancing on submerged rocks. Those of us with walking sticks seemed the most comfortable with the latter. And, all the while, the Tofane soared above - still visible beneath the ever-present clouds, white stripes of snow on their upper reaches.



Left to Right: (top) upper middle valley to river scree/lower valley; (bottom) lower valley sections - river, Tofane, waterfall

Eventually, the valley made an obvious turn and we began to significantly drop into a deepening canyon - the Tofane summits vanishing from view (or becoming eclipsed by lower gorge features). Along several sections, the trail was edgy and eroding - although I was never nervous. Believe it or not, we finally stopped for lunch around 1 - at this impressive waterfall where, just as we arrived, a chamois clamored audibly over the rock in its effort to run away. I was made fun of for carrying all the Pringles - the assumption being that I was going to hoard/not share them; given that few others actually wanted them, though, I did take my liberties with this bad weakness of mine. The main component of the packed lunches were sandwiches (bread, cheese, and sumptuously fatty sausage slices). There were also lots of snacks: granola cookies, candy bars, fruit, and little boxed juices. Given threatening rain (it had sprinkled slightly just before we stopped), we did not linger. I'd describe half the remaining hike down from lunch as tolerable (i.e. edgy trails above a river canyon), half annoying (i.e. gravel or paved roads). We did stop briefly at this large waterfall that required a mini-via ferrata to access; needless to say, I refrained... although mostly because my feet and toes were killing me. Indeed, I suspected I'd be taking tomorrow off just to heal several new and serious blisters. FINALLY, we arrived at the trailhead, amidst dozens of European families playing by the river. The drive to Cortina was brief (less than 20 minutes), our hotel nearly as high-end/luxurious as that in Bolzano. To all our surprises, it was only 3:30. Unfortunately, my luggage was nowhere in sight; just before leaving Passo Staulanza, we'd received word that it had finally been located in London (specifically, Heathrow) and would be delivered to Cortina shortly. For some reason,

though, I didn't believe them; thus, I decided it was time to buy a canvas duffle for extra gear during the flights home. That night, too, dinner was "on your own." And so Jean and I went shopping at the highly-recommended and fabulous La Cooperativa, an all-purpose, multi-level, reasonably-priced grocery and department store. In addition to a decent bag, I found edelweiss seeds (which were, of course, confiscated by American customs officials after I reported them) and we enjoyed a 10 Euro meal of sausage/roll sandwiches, apple juice, and fruity gelato cones. And so, contrary to popular belief, I believe it IS possible to eat cheaply in Cortina. Not sure about accommodations, however.



Left to Right: Cortina churches, hotel, Falaria views - Cristallo (left), Tres Cime (far right)

June 30, 2007 - R&R in Cortina and Falaria

Today began chaotically: a breakfast zoo of 35-50 Japanese tourists who usurped all hotel staff and did not understand the concept of a buffet line. Owing to a fully infected blister, I skipped all hiking and spent the day in and around Cortina. Jean decided to join me. All others went on planned hikes at Sorapiss, most doing some route that involved several mini-via ferrata's and a LOT of loose rock scrambling. Even though Sorapiss was of interest (long story involving Ellen), I was not disappointed - in part because the day was overcast. Jean and I began our day exploring the town center. We'd been recommended the museum, which housed both natural history as well as modern art. Although our leader said the latter contained enough viewing materials for a few hours, we spent barely an hour looking at the fossil collection, most marine shellfish. Nothing was in English and little attempt to explain biological context was made (more effort was placed on where the piece had been found). I'd say the whole exhibit occupied a 25X25 square foot room. We then went downstairs to the modern art section (perhaps 25X75 square feet). For someone who typically does not get into looking at art, I'd say the collection was decent and occasionally interesting (including a bona fide Picasso ceramic). The best art was a new exhibit by a young painter that we returned to see later that night. His (can't remember the name) paintings were impressionistic landscapes of the Dolomites painted in bold colors. After exhausting the museum, we walked a fair and convoluted distance to the Falaria gondola (which cost us each 15 Euro's). Here, among throngs of families/children, we rode over the forests and up a rocky face to this 6000-foot shelf beneath the Sorapiss massif. Disappointingly, this was the ONLY lift in/near town that was open; sexier gondola's (e.g. Cristallo or Tofane) were all closed for just another week. Evidently, the latter boasts some of the craziest high bridges, most traversing airy faces. After a long time staring at the extensive views (Cristallo, Tres Cime, Sorapiss, Tofane/Lagazuoi, Nuvolau, and Forcella), we enjoyed a long lunch for which we were reimbursed by WT (in my case, another veal Milanese; in Jean's, coveted chanterelle crepes). Eventually, we returned to town, did some shopping, and made our way back to the hotel - notably just 30 minutes before the rest of the team. That night for dinner, we (including WT CEO Bill, joining our hike tomorrow) drove to this strange little lakeside inn 15 minutes outside of town. It was pouring rain and everything felt clammy. The menu seemed focused on items like rabbit, deer, and fish - things you catch or hunt. After a venison-based pasta course, I enjoyed grilled rack of lamb with caramelized onions - always a treat. During dinner, I received a frustrating call from WT staff in the US; apparently, both my mother and Bryan had been receiving crazy phone calls from American Airlines about my luggage (i.e. nobody knew where was it supposed to go, despite extensive itineraries submitted to the Venice airport). Consequently, both were now contacting WT, adding to the long list of people trying to manage my luggage situation. Nonetheless, I think we all pretty much knew my luggage was not coming to Cortina any time soon. Thus, I requested EVERYONE deliver the following clear and consistent message to the airlines: SEND IT HOME!



Left to Right: the typically easy folks, me and Jean, Tres Cime - my favorite shot

July 1-3, 2007 - Tres Cime de Lavaredo and Coming Home

Our final day was greatly anticipated - both because I knew the Tres Cime region was gorgeous but also because the towers were key features in the Messner repertoire. As with the Lagazuoi/Tofane hike, we were all encouraged to do the harder hike, an 8 miler around the entire massif. Some of the fast folks, however, objected to there not being a super-hard option (as stated in the pre-trip literature); consequently (perhaps because they had Bill's ear), they were eventually taken on some gnarly-long variation after lunch. Although our team was a peaceful bunch, there were definite undertones among 2 people

who clearly thought WT needed to do more fitness screening (this was mostly voiced after the Sorapiss hike, during which our group briefly integrated with that of the via ferrata); had there not been several options each day, I think the bitching would have been more pronounced - not to mention earlier. My opinion of the situation was that the complainers (both marathon runners in their early 60's) represented a fitness level WELL beyond that of excellent hikers, including our leader; thus, it is my strong opinion that they would likely never be happy with any team.



Left to Right: (top) Sorapiss from parking lot, early trail views; (bottom) lunch - refuge, various views

Compared to other hikes, Tres Cime was the most crowded - although WT gets credit for picking a decent, less popular route for the start of the circumambulation. From the congested parking lot, we hiked clockwise (i.e. away from Rifugio Auronzo). To the south, Sorapiss soared - this HUGE half-circle of rock and ice that reminded me of the Picket Range. Frustratingly, the Tres Cime were so big that they defied photography; indeed, I worried we'd never see them like we had on the road coming in. Within 15 minutes, we were passing the western flanks of the Tres Cime, entering this high meadow plateau that offered increasingly encompassing views of the north tower faces - the most sheer and overhanging faces that Messner was the first to free-climb. In addition to the Tres Cime, there were gorgeous peaks everywhere, the most beautiful group of which was this rosy-tan massif (Rocca dei Baranci, I believe, based on my panorama postcard interpretations). After an extensive photo stop, we began to descend into this little, green valley - our target refuge (Locatelli) obvious WAY above on the other side. Needless to say, we didn't see some of the fast folks until dinner (as they had, by now, talked their way into a super-long route that went east from the hut, around the Paterno massif). At some point, though, we did cross paths with this HUGE group of Japanese tourists (possibly the same group at our hotel) and I utterly shocked this woman with some of the only Japanese I know: mushi mushi/hello. She was so stunned (in a good way) that she looked up, folded back the brim of her hat to meet my eyes, and reciprocated. After the trip, Ellen - of course - ridiculed me for using this greeting, as it is supposed to only be used on the phone. When we finally huffed our way up to Rifugio Locatelli, though, the place was - seriously - a MADHOUSE. In addition to hundreds of all-purpose Sunday visitors, there was another HUGE religious group AND a local mountaineering chapter. I would estimate there were 300 people just outside the refuge eating, either on the main patio or among the rocks and meadows just beyond. After 20 minutes (our guides hovering over emptying tables inside the building), we managed to get a table inside and receive our food in a timely manner (in my case, a simple bowl of penne/red sauce). Unfortunately, the women's bathroom line was truly insane (2 stalls for 30-40 women) and I eventually gave up.



Left to Right: along western flanks looking at Cadini, Tres Cime from road below parking lot, Sorapiss from van

The rest of us chose between 2 routes back: WT CEO Bill led the lower freeway hike and the secondary/tertiary guides led the upper, narrow hike. Jean and I chose the former, thoroughly enjoying Bill's company and conversation... not to mention the sane width of the freeway trail (which, thanks to the fact that we were hitting it later, was not as nuts as it looked 2 hours before). Probably the finest views of the Tres Cime were had from along this route - all 3 towers against a flat plateau of green meadow or white scree, fitting perfectly into my camera frame against a gorgeous sky of blue and white. Eventually, we crossed the eastern flanks of the Tres Cime - the Cadini massif reminding me, again, of the North Cascades. Given the

insanity during lunch, I had yet to find my precious panorama postcard; thus, when Rifugio Lavaredo appeared below the main trail, I made an unsuccessful run/detour. Fortunately, the bathrooms were free. We continued around the south side of the Tres Cime, the trail nearly flat and passing more structures (e.g. a little church) than other trails we'd hiked. Soon, we arrived at the Rifugio Auronza - where panorama postcards were available and several espresso's were downed. The drive back was pleasant and brief, and we arrived at the hotel around 3 - leaving plenty of time for shopping (there was some kind of insane open air market down every street in the town center), clean-up, and packing. Our final dinner was at an upscale mountain inn 15 minutes from town. It was my favorite meal on the trip because the food seemed lighter and each of the 5 courses was more reasonable in size (highlights included champagne starters, some kind of smoked duck salad, more grilled lamb, and this almond/vanilla ice cream thing with berries).

The next day involved a LONG drive back to the Venice airport, on roads we clearly hadn't drive before. Nonetheless, as with the drive to Bolzano, we stopped at a couple classic truck stop type places that felt just like the things we frequented while driving to Yellowstone. Arriving around noon, I decided my luggage was likely here waiting (despite everything) and so I waited in line at the lost luggage window for about an hour. When I handed the attendant my claim paperwork (which was barely holding together after so many days of handling and folding), she knew EXACTLY where my stuff was and, for the last time, I was sent back to the holding area where - indeed - my bag was located, this time by the staff (because they had received so many calls about it). I wasn't in the mood to ask any questions (like: what happened to the message to SEND IT HOME?). I just paid my ungodly cab fare and returned to my beloved Holiday Inn for the night. Although I'd contemplated returning to Venice for a couple hours (specifically, Rialto Bridge - to buy a framed, antique-style woodcut map of the city), I ended up cleaning, repacking, showering, napping, and then watching a bunch of bad TV until dinner. For my final meal, I greatly pleased the typically-chilly waiter by ordering a mini-bottle of wine with my meal - PLUS a run through the dessert and fruit bar buffet. Like I recently said to someone, the Italians reminded me a lot of East Coast people: a little cool and brusque at the first meeting but then totally and genuinely warm if you show up for a more extended time. Comparatively, I think the French were probably more Seattle-like in nature: generally polite all the time, but never really breaking out of that shell into something that felt more genuine and above baseline nice. In any event, I could definitely see myself living more easily in Italy for an extended period of time after this trip. Anyway, the next morning, I made my way home. Flights were interesting given that Britain had just dealt with the car-bombings/attempts in Scotland and London. But, honestly, Gatwick was fairly easy given all the whoopla. Dallas, as usual, was another story: 3 weeks of flooding and stormy weather had been delaying or canceling flights daily and mine was no exception (3 hours late), meaning another late arrival (1 a.m.) and another hotel in Portland before finally sleeping in my own bed.

Closing Thoughts

So - not going to lie: this was a terrifically expensive trip. In talking with colleagues about Italy, though, the price tag for any trip to Italy sounds high, regardless of travel venue. Having done a lot of trips, though, I firmly believe you get what you pay for. I paid a lot and I got a lot - definitely more than I was expecting. Indeed, WT seems to run 10% more than MTS - but they are complete detail freaks, not to mention more creative and organized when it comes to designing (or fundamentally wanting to design) theme-based symposia. Like I've said, I also couldn't help liking Bill - as a leader, company manager, and person. But, then again, how could *I* not respect a former chemistry major, Scandinavian, aging hippie (yes, Bill, you sort of are a hippie) who lives in Berkeley? My response to WT notwithstanding, I absolutely look forward to returning to Venice and the Dolomites again. Virtually everything about them was satisfying and spectacular, particularly in comparison to my experience on the TMB: the trails were maintained better, the flora was more vibrant and pristine-feeling, the food was more interesting, all facilities were cleaner, towns were smaller and more tractable... Indeed, Italy fully redeemed Europe and I loved it.



Left to Right: Venice waterways, Bill and Tres Cime freeway trail