

Walking on sunshine

There's a certain time of day in the mountains of northern Italy, just before the sun dips, when the jagged, pale peaks glow orange. Come September, the colours deepen as autumnal larches catch the late rays and the mountains burn intense red.

These are the rugged peaks that flank the valley and pastures of Dolomites Val Gardena and Alta Badia, two valleys in South Tyrol. More intimate and secluded than the Alps to the north, this corner of South Tyrol is Italy's northernmost province. On the border with Austria, it is a fairy-tale mix of alpine and Mediterranean.

Crisp early mornings, cowbells and mountain pines place you firmly in the mountains. Average summer temperatures range between 18-20C (64-68F) in the mountains and up to 35C (95F) in the valleys. In total, South Tyrol boasts a glorious 300 days of sunshine a year.

Hilltop hotels offer wraparound views of snowy peaks as well as tempting spa treatments – think hay baths and wine masks – or simply a peaceful moment on a rustic terrace. For a cosy province, it also boasts an extraordinary concentration of Michelin- starred restaurants, making it the most acclaimed and foodie region in Italy. Local chefs work wonders with the farmers' produce, from smoked hams and sausages to goat's cheese and local apples. Romantic wineries are tucked between the region's vineyards, so you can sample local vintages and chat with the winemakers.

Known as the pale mountains, the Dolomites of Val Gardena and Alta Badia are dramatic to behold. Summertime it transforms into a vast outdoor playground for hikers, cyclists and thrill seekers.

If it's a gentle stroll you are after, you might not stray far from the villages of Dolomites Val Gardena and Alta Badia, perched high above the valley floor. Climb higher and you'll be rewarded with lush pastures at a giddy 8,200ft, where spring brings a host of alpine flowers. For the more bold, these 10,000ft-plus peaks offer some challenging hikes from one shepherd's hut to another and an extensive trail network.

For wildlife lovers, sunrise tours of Dolomites Val Gardena's Puez-Geisler

The Dolomites in summer offer some of the best hiking in Europe, combining Mediterranean sun with alpine freshness. **Helena Pozniak** enjoys the atmosphere



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nature park give you the chance to spot animals and birds within a pastoral wilderness. Families will enjoy the region's lively 'Active' programme, which includes stargazing trips, free from light pollution.

Cyclists love the variety of trails – there are 35 transalpine routes, among them the famous Sella Ronda with its spectacular glimpses of the Sella and Marmolada peaks. Wild and romantic Langental has gentle routes perfect for families and some frisky trails higher up. There's a busy summer calendar – on Saturday 16 June, 5,000 cyclists will flock to the HERO Südtirol Dolomites – a vast international celebration. Bikes take over on 23 June when cars are banned across four Dolomite passes for the annual Sellaronda bike day.

Road cycling is also a feature in Alta Badia, a ski resort at the top of Val Badia, which turns into a summer haven for hikers, cyclists, golfers and climbers. Visitors will find fine dining in this small valley, too, where three restaurants – St Hubertus, La Siriola and La Stüa de Michil – share no fewer than six Michelin stars.

Mid-September is best for the 'burning Dolomites' that are brought on by the late sun. And Dolomites Val Gardena offers sunset hikes until the end of October, a treat for photographers and walkers alike.

Imagine your holiday.
Live it South Tyrol

Alpine splendour meets Mediterranean soul in South Tyrol, Italy's northernmost region. Find out more about the Dolomites at valgardena.it and altabadia.org

