



Clare and Alice; above right, their holiday base, the Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa



OUR TREK to the top!

Clare Balding walks miles for Radio 4's *Ramblings*, but she and Alice Arnold had never been on a walking holiday before their visit to the Dolomites...

“So you want to hike?” Hugo Pizzinini greeted us at the reception area of the Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa.

Alice and I nodded. We'd just arrived in San Cassiano, a village high in the Dolomites that has been inhabited by the Pizzinini family for generations. Hugo's grandfather started the hotel in 1939. San Cassiano is just over the Austrian border (we flew into Innsbruck) into north Italy, but the

locals are not Austrian or Italian – they are from South Tyrol and speak their own language, Ladino, as well as Italian, German, French and very good English.

Hugo smiled. “Okay. Tomorrow we hike but tonight, you eat.”

That first evening we not only ate, we also drank. Hugo wanted us to enjoy the full variety of the local wines. He asked Paulo, the maître d'hôtel, who looked so like Robert Downey Jr that I am still

convinced it actually was Robert Downey Jr on a break from filming, to make sure we sampled a few Tyrolean delicacies. I would love to tell you more about what we ate and how delicious it was but by the time we got to the third white wine, before moving on to two reds and a dessert wine, I'd lost track of pretty much everything.

We slept for ten hours and woke up without hangovers. I don't know what it is about South Tyrolean wine but I can highly recommend it.

Hugo's father drove us east into the mountains. We both blamed the altitude for making us out of breath after five minutes but soon we had fallen into the steady rhythm of walking uphill, the silence broken only when Hugo pointed out wild flowers.

“Edelweiss!” he said with a child's enthusiasm. He showed us arnica flowers, electric blue trumpet gentian, tiny orchids and purple bell flowers capable of growing without soil. It was a glorious morning, with the sun bouncing off the pink rocks of the peaks around us and, as we climbed, the villages and the people disappeared.

“It's like meditation,” said Hugo, echoing

the thoughts in my head. There is a point on any long walk where your mind is totally clear because all you can focus on is where you're putting your feet.

After an hour and a half Hugo sliced up an apple with his penknife. He shared it with us and also made us eat chocolate.

"You need sugar for the climb ahead." He pointed to the grassy bank to his left. It was steep but mercifully short. We both took a swig of water and smiled. A holiday should be an escape and we couldn't have felt further from "real life" if we'd tried.

"Isn't this just a piece of paradise?" said Hugo. He just loves being in the mountains, and to share that joy with his guests brings him inordinate pleasure.

We climbed on and up and over, the ski runs of the Alta Badia area sweeping verdantly down to the valley. I fell over on a relatively flat path

and Hugo advised us to invest in proper walking shoes rather than the trainers we had thought would suffice. After nearly three and a half hours,

we came over a ridge and spied a hut.

Like the Von Trapp children but without the musicality, we ran through the wild flower meadow towards it. Tending a barbecue was a man in a chef's outfit, and a woman was arranging flowers for the table. We washed our hands and faces in the fresh water trough and sat on the bench to admire the view. Hugo gave us local sparkling wine.

The man in the chef's outfit was, in fact, a chef – and not just any old chef. He was Norbert Niederkofler, the chef from the hotel's two-Michelin-starred restaurant. He came up the mountain to cook us risotto, made with local pine butter and cooked al dente. We had walked across the mountains admiring the flora and fauna, and now we could eat them. Bright, edible flowers decorated our dishes and a refreshing white wine found its way into our glasses. Then there was pudding. A local type of bread and butter affair but made with eggs and sultanas. Any calories we had burnt off walking went straight back on again, but it seemed worth the trade.

Over the next five days, Hugo suggested various "hikes". They were all so well signposted that he insisted they were "eye-dee-ot proof". He was right. Even idiots like us couldn't get lost. We climbed up to the Santa Croce Church and were thrilled that it took us under two hours when the sign said two and a quarter. We hiked up to Fanes (pronounced Farn-ase), where the climb takes you onto a plateau of meadowland with cows' bells banging out the beat of their munching. Local horses are taken

up there for cooler air and newborn foals were sunbathing in the summer rays. In the middle of nowhere was a restaurant for lunch and a cold drink. We climbed up to a lake

where locals swim in their underpants.

We did our best to savour as many different food options as we could. The hotel has either the relaxed and casual Wine Bar & Grill, or the two-Michelin-starred St Hubertus restaurant, which offers a night of what I can only describe as food theatre. Our new friend Norbert designed a 12-course tasting menu for our delectation, following his philosophy that the cuisine should reflect the local area.

Some dishes were based on old Ladin recipes, others invented by Norbert to reflect the mountain terrain. We had fresh herb salad with clear tomato water, risotto with local cheese, and suckling pig with crackling. After course five, Alice said she was full. By course seven she was begging for mercy and when the final "cake of the day" arrived she was nearly on the floor. We drank wines specially paired for each course and I congratulated myself on wearing trousers with an elasticated waist.

As well as outdoor activities, the beauty of the mountains, fabulous food and local wines, another highlight is the hotel's spa. I had two deep tissue massages to ease my aching muscles, a pedicure, which was like a combination of surgery and carpentry, filing away dead skin and leaving me walking on

pleasures of walking



Chef Norbert Niederkofler cooks up a treat



air, and a facial that gave me a glowing radiance more lasting and healthier than the one usually associated with drinking wine. Alice was wrapped in bandages, lay in a tube sweating (I didn't fancy this one at all but she liked it!), and was rubbed with mountain herbs.

Just when we were starting to take for granted the delights of the hotel and its free sweetie table (pretty high on my list of desired extras), it was our final day. That evening, as we ate our last dinner in the Wine Bar & Grill, I asked the waiter for something or other.

"That is without problem," he replied.

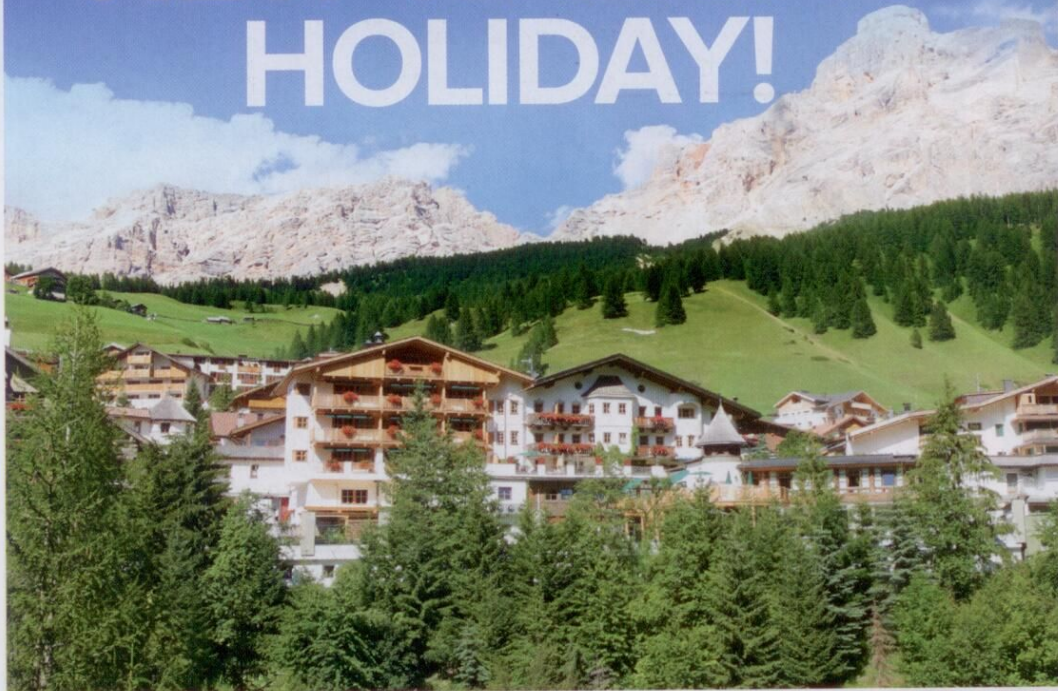
That phrase rather sums up the attitude of those who work at Rosa Alpina. Nothing is a problem, everything is possible and if you go there you will never want to leave. As we checked out, a well-known singer was arriving for a three-week break after her worldwide tour. I couldn't think of anywhere better to escape, recover, repair and go home with a pocketful of sweeties.

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We've joined forces with spa and wellness specialist Healing Holidays (who Clare Balding travelled with), to offer w&h readers an exclusive four-day break at the five-star Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa in San Cassiano, Alta Badia.

A luxury Relais & Châteaux hotel, elegant Rosa Alpina makes the perfect base for your holiday, with mouth-watering Michelin-starred dining plus an indoor swimming pool, spa and gym.

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W&H READERS EXCLUSIVE OFFER

PRICE
woman&home is offering a four-night stay at Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa from **£1,175pp.**

DATES You can book a last-minute trip and travel any time between **21 August and 25 September 2016** or between **2 and 28 June 2017**. These are ideal times to go as the weather is still sunny, but cooler for walking.

INCLUDES

- + Return flights from London to Innsbruck with private transfers.
- + A five-course tasting dinner for two at the two-Michelin-starred Restaurant St Hubertus.
- + Four nights accommodation with breakfast plus **FREE room upgrade***.
- + A **FREE** three-course dinner for two at the Wine Bar & Grill.
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