

DEPARTURES



THE HOTELS ISSUE

Breakfast
at the
Rosa Alpina
hotel in the
Dolomites.
Opposite: The
pool at the
clubhouse at
San Luis
resort.




A large, rustic wooden spa building with a central fireplace and a swimming pool in the foreground. The building features a high ceiling with exposed wooden beams and a balcony with a metal railing. A large stone fireplace with a fire burning inside is the central focus, flanked by stacks of firewood. The foreground shows a person swimming in a pool, with their back to the camera.

AN ENDLESS SPA DAY

ONE WRITER, UNACCUSTOMED TO SELF-INDULGENCE, FINALLY LEARNS HOW TO
LET GO IN THE OLD-WORLD RESORTS OF ITALY'S DOLOMITES.

BY ANDREW SEAN GREER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANILO SCARPATI



If you're coming from Venice, the famous resort town of Cortina d'Ampezzo is a mere two hours away. Coming from Innsbruck, Austria, takes a little bit longer, though you can have the added pleasures of an espresso at Bar Al Pacino (just for the name), a bratwurst at a roadside cabin, and the opportunity to exit the freeway exactly where "Otzi the Iceman" once roamed 5,000 years ago (his mummy is on display nearby). You'll get to experience the thrill of climbing into the mountains where, for millennia, people have fled empires and armies to live in relative peace. Even from listening to the radio, you can get a sense of the place—German-language country music spliced with Italian pop—and, indeed, the area is both Germanic and Italian, and also neither. A mix of strudel and cannoli. As you marvel at the breathtaking vision of the Dolomites rising like the three Weird Sisters in the mist, you could consider that you are crossing the ever-changing border of the Hapsburg and Roman Empires.

It was the Romans who brought ritual bathing into these mountains, centuries ago, which transformed into spas in the late 19th century and then, in the 21st, into wellness centers that provide everything from bespoke nutrition, beauty treatments, and boot-camp pop-ups to good old-fashioned detoxing with a hike and a sauna. Traveling across the Dolomites, to several of the region's best spas, I imagined celery juice and steam baths; I imagined sandpaper mud scrubs; I imagined being beaten to a pulp by strong Tyrolean women. I was seeking a modern escape. And didn't it seem possible? Here in the clean mountain air, your phone locked away, and nothing between you and the Alps but a meadow full of flowers?

We started out, my traveling companion and I, at "the diamond of the Dolomites": the Cristallo Hotel in Cortina d'Ampezzo. As we climbed up from the chic little town onto a hillside, the sight of a grand hotel's old-fashioned vintage-style columns and balconies recalled the slice of marzipan cake I'd had in Innsbruck. I'd seen this place before, but where? And then it came to me: *The Pink Panther*. The original film from 1963 with David Niven, Claudia Cardinale, and, of course, Peter Sellers, in which a glamorous international crowd holds swinging parties as guests sneak from room to room to steal a diamond. I recollected how the thief was thwarted by particularly attentive hotel service, and that service was still on display at the Cristallo: Gianluca, the sales director, greeted me warmly.





Clockwise from lower left: The Restaurant St. Hubertus at Rosa Alpina; Cristallo Resort & Spa's Romanesque pool; the view from the relaxation area at the Adler Mountain Lodge.



Dolomites Directory

The wellness retreats to know.

For a glamorous old-world experience, head to **Cristallo Resort & Spa** (rooms from \$400; cristallo.it), a Luxury Collection hotel, for its sprawling wellness center complete with pools, thermal facilities, and treatments from Ayurveda to cosmetic.

The family-owned **Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa** (rooms from \$561; rosaalpina.it) offers everything from facials and massage to yoga classes. This summer it will host a Ranch Malibu pop-up retreat. The **Adler**

Mountain Lodge (rooms from \$480; adler-lodge.com), has a modern rustic vibe with lots of light woods, stone, and hay. Treatments are based on local ingredients like edelweiss and arnica. **San Luis** (rooms from \$334; sanluis-hotel.com), takes advantage of its spectacular setting with hydro-focused therapies—there's a Jacuzzi in the middle of a lake and hot tubs in every chalet, as well as an indoor pool in the clubhouse.

He corroborated my *Pink Panther* memory by noting that, in the 1960s and '70s, the Cristallo was host to a jet-set crowd, and its patrons would dance until all hours at its nightclub, the Monkey. Later, the hotel's interiors were completely remodeled to tempt a fashionable new horde.

Gianluca escorted me down to the spa area, which was once a wartime hospital and rehab center. The technicians wore white and the sparkling elegance gave it the air of a luxury clinic. Giulia Roccatello, the in-residence health coach, explained the regime of tests, treatments, and services (like the gym's virtual trainer and the Cloud, where you float in a balloon of warm water), and suggested I stick to the Health Coach Corner at breakfast, where I could forgo the temptations of cheeses and meats for fruits, vegetables, and grains. "Last week, we had a crowd of Frenchmen who wanted nothing but carrot juice," she said, laughing. "We don't know why!" I swore to her that my intention was to follow all her advice, and that I would

The San Luis resort offers sweeping views of the Dolomites.

not overdose on carrots. I was preparing myself for the tough Tyrolean woman and her impending pummeling. Perhaps I felt that, by indulging in such luxuries, in some way I deserved it. But reality was kinder: My specialist covered me in thick black clay and set me out to dry. After a shower, I was massaged for a length of time I cannot measure because I promptly fell asleep.

The next morning, the clouds parted, and the view of the mountains was exquisite. At the breakfast buffet, my companion served himself cake while I made myself a celery, turmeric, and apple concoction. Clay treatment, massage, proteins, and turmeric. My journey to health had begun!

Westward we went: over a mountain pass and down toward the Rosa Alpina. Unlike the Cristallo, there was no grand entrance or lobby, but a cozy room with fireplaces and an enormous couch in the shape of a sleeping bear. After being shown my room—a loft suite decorated with faux furs, a fireplace lounge, and a view of the pine forest—I was taken down to the spa.

There: blond wood heaven. An upper level comes with a pool and relaxation room, and a lower level has two kinds of sauna—the cooler Eco sauna and the much hotter Finnish sauna (which a Russian guest informed me was “not hot enough”). In addition to its spa services, the property offers other retreats, such as a mind-and-body experience with an Ayurvedic master and a summer pop-up of the cultish celebrity health boot camp, the Ranch Malibu.

I opted for something more relaxing: a hot Tibetan stone treatment. There were stones on all of my chakras and even more stones in my masseuse’s hands, which she used to work my muscles. But no strong Tyrolean; no beating me to a pulp. Perhaps they do that in the Swiss Alps, but not here in Italy. So I fell promptly asleep.

Afterward I managed, in my bathrobe and slippers, to waylay the friendly concierge into arranging to have a fondue in the traditional stube. Later, I sat by the fire and called down for the Wi-Fi code; my plan was to rent *The Pink Panther*.

“Life is a mountain, not a beach,” the concierge informed me.

I’m sorry?

“That’s the code. The Wi-Fi code. ‘Lifeisamountain notabeach.’”

How true.

I would like to say that rushing to have two massage treatments in one day is harder than it sounds, but it isn’t.





Of course, you do have to get up at 6 A.M. and then navigate the mountain passes—only to quickly discover that a spring thaw has closed all of the them because of avalanche concerns. Let's just say we took the long way. By noon, we were approaching Adler Mountain Lodge.

When they told me the resort was atop the Alpe de Siusi, I assumed in the way Connecticut is "atop" New York. Not at all. It is atop an Alp in the way figurines are atop a wedding cake. And it is magnificent.

There are a number of Adler properties in Italy, including in the nearby town of Ortisei, but the Sanoner family, who have operated inns in the area since 1810, were inspired to build this new hotel after a visit to a lodge in Namibia. The strong wooden beams, the open layout, and the panoramic windows capture the pared-down elegance of a tented luxury camp. From anywhere, you can look out on Sassolungo and Sciliar (the Witch's Mountain). Every room in the main building has a vista, as do the rooftop sauna and heated infinity pool, which has built-in underwater benches for enjoying the view. Here, atop an Alp, there is nothing but earth and sky.

Of course, I had another spa appointment later that afternoon, so I headed straight to the saunas. A sign explained that mountain hay purifies the body and strengthens the immune system, so I trotted off to the sauna *di fiemo*: the hay sauna. I assumed it would smell like a summer stock production of *Okla-homa!*, but instead it felt earthy, natural, and relaxing. All the treatments featured local flora and fauna such as edelweiss and rose hips. I chose a massage with silver quartzite—an Alpine mineral known for its energizing properties. Somehow it made me doze off again.

We then made our way back across the Alp toward Bolzano-Bozen and north again to the forest around Merano, to arrive at San Luis. I knew I was going to

like it from the entrance—piles of cut wood and a simple metal gate. Alex, the co-owner and manager, told us our bags would be brought to our tree house and that we should have a glass of Franciacorta with him before the sun set. We were ushered into a large room of wood and leather and sheepskin, lit by a fireplace and candles in lanterns, where we could enjoy the last light of day. Alex told us about his family, who also own an old grande dame hotel in Merano called the Irma. One evening after quite a few bottles of local wine, they came up with this idea for a new resort: tree houses in an Alpine park and modernist chalets perched over a lake, where everyone would stay in separate quarters but would gather at the clubhouse, the barnlike structure for meals, spa treatments, and reading by roaring fireplace or massive indoor pool. "It's all about the silence," Alex said, and explained that usually, the first day, people freak out. They try to do too much. By my second day I had my routine of not doing much of anything and headed to the spa.

Who is the last person in history to have two massages in four hours? Liz Taylor? How often had I greeted a new masseuse, these last three days, only to have my hopes dashed? How many times had I donned the paper sumo-wrestler panties, slid under the crisp towel, smelled sandalwood incense, and fallen asleep? I had given up on being beaten to a pulp; I was taking my spa regimen, at this point, with perhaps

too much ennui. And then in walked Stefano, a large Sicilian with a serious demeanor. He pointed to where I was to lie. He spread oil on my back. And then he beat me to a pulp.

How I managed to make it to dinner I don't know.

I am told the antipasto course, in the bar and restaurant of San Luis, is a thing of beauty: burrata with truffles, an octopus salume, marinated vegetables. I am told there was a little boy in lederhosen. I am told that my Italian was terrible. I remember none of it; it had been beaten out of me. I had gotten what I wanted and—best of all, for someone rushing so quickly from one luxury to the next, becoming blasé about such indulgences—what I deserved.

Alas, I had to leave San Luis at six in the morning. Even so, a man was waiting for me in the bar with a table set up for me to watch the dawn, and there he had set out a warm croissant, a cappuccino, and something red-and-white in a package. I was in such a rush to exit that I did not ask what it was; I merely put it in a bag in the back seat and promptly forgot about it. I drove out of the darkened forest and into Merano. I felt pampered, relaxed, inspired. I was sure my dreams would be haunted, for weeks, by visions of the craggy Dolomites.

It was only later that day that I received a call from the rental company: "Mr. Greer, we checked your car, and you have left behind a strudel, and, it seems," she said, pausing, "a pizza." ☺

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