

A SOLO JOURNEY THROUGH THE ITALIAN ALPS



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Travel continues to drive my creative aspirations as a photographer and my academic endeavors as a college student. This passage details one of the most fulfilling solo experiences of my lifetime. Writing it almost one year after stepping off the trail reminds me of the value of time outdoors. It has powerful abilities to simultaneously heal and help us grow as individuals. I will never forget these mountains.



I spent the last six months of 2023 in Italy, staying with a host family during the summer months to learn Italian, and later taking courses at the longest-running university in the world. Living in Siena and Bologna offered diverse cultural immersion, from watching the Palio di Siena in July to standing in Piazza Maggiore during Bologna's November Christmas tree lighting. My time in Italy was full of constant transitions woven throughout the slow travel. Sweltering August heat waves turned into light December snow. Linen sundresses were soon layered with thick leather jackets and scarves. The leaves turned from bright green to yellow, floating in the wind on my daily walk to class. I met the more stagnant periods, however, with deep self-reflection, sometimes struggling to find a familiar version of myself in a foreign urban environment. Oftentimes individuals are led to believe that the moments of stillness provide the greatest opportunities to reconnect with their values. However, I discovered that my most transformative personal journey unfolded during a different experience: spending time in between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna embarking on a solo trek through the Italian Alps.



The Alta Via 1 Route is a 75-mile hut-to-hut trail in the Dolomites, weaving through the mountains from north to south. Rivers and lakes line the footpaths, and cows and goats stare as you walk past, the bells around their necks chiming throughout the silent valleys.





The mountainside has unmatched beauty and culture, blending alpine traditions from three neighboring countries at their boundaries. Each small town in the Dolomites, such as Dobbiaco/Toblach, where I began the trip, had a German and Italian name. Each rifugio that I stayed in presented a blended cuisine, from local apple strudels to mushroom risotto. Dishes became more Italian-influenced the further south I walked.

I took this journey solo, but very quickly formed a nomadic community over the 10-day trek. Miles of solitude were balanced with smiles exchanged as I passed by family destinations. Lively parts of the trail accessible by road cleared out after sunset, leaving only the thru-hikers for dinner. I played cards with a couple from Rotterdam, saw videos of the Marmolada ice slide from my South Korean bunkmates, and practiced Italian with a mother and son on their fifth consecutive Alta Via 1 walk. Each day extended opportunities to calm my mind on the uphill climbs while celebrating newfound connections to not only the land, but also those undertaking a similar journey through the mountains.



The route had steep inclines that shot down into valleys. Staring down from the highest point, Lagazuoi, and later staring back up at the forcella from below, invited moments to embrace the constant flow that comes with backpacking. There was always something new to see, always another way to reconnect with the ground beneath me, one step at a time.

Mornings were my favorite. The sun captured and held the hope of the new day as it appeared, granting the opportunity to rest and rejuvenate when it disappeared for the evenings. Every alpenglow offered variants of pink, orange, and yellow on the peaks that stood in front of the rifugios' windowsills. The trails were pristine, having had a break during the night from the foot traffic during the crowded August months. My favorite morning was at Rifugio Averau, where just a five-minute stroll down the walkway sat the Cinque Torri. The soft morning sun cast the grass in a golden light, highlighting every detail in the magnificent rock formation. It was as though I had the park all to myself.



Stepping off of a trail at the end of a hike sometimes feels as though you're re-entering the real world from a fantasy. Deep moments of solitude and connection with nature are rare in everyday lives, unless prioritized. My last morning in the Dolomites, after finishing the Alta Via 1, was spent at Seceda. I sat on the hill, gazing up in awe at the edges of the ridge reaching straight up into the sky. Children ran through the path to get a closer look, their parents watching from behind. Hang gliders soared to the tips of the peak, while local farmers mowed the lawns at a steep incline. Cottages perched on perfectly-manicured grass. I have never taken in more fresh alpine air. I let time pass, taking in the human-nature relationship pervasive all around me. It was time to begin my next adventure.

Spero di tornare sempre a te, Italia





