



A chairlift provides easy access to the base of the Dolomites' highest peak, 3342-metre Marmolada. PHOTO: MARTIN TAYLOR

Dolomites offer delightful via ferratas

BY MARTIN TAYLOR

I first met Helmut Microys when I arrived in Toronto from England in 1965 at Bon Echo, Ontario, the climbing cliff operated by The Alpine Club of Canada's Toronto Section. An Austrian native, Helmut and his partner were the leading climbers of the day. Both of us long-time ACC members, over the years Helmut

and I have been together at various ACC camps in the Rockies. He has also served as the North American representative on the Safety Committee of the UIAA.

Two years ago, Helmut asked me if I would be interested in joining him in having a go at via ferratas, his main interest these days in the mountains. His health prevents him from doing long mountain trips.

Meaning iron way or road, the ferratas were first established in WWI by the Italians defending the front line against the Austrians in Italy's Dolomites. At that time South Tyrol was part of Austria, but after the War Italy became a sovereign state and the Italian language dominated. Today German is still the prominent language, yet Italian and Ladino is also spoken.

There are many chairlifts in the region not only for summer visitors but also for skiers, making height gains to the start of the ferratas relatively simple and easy.

Last summer Helmut and I spent two weeks in the Dolomites, also known as South Tyrol, climbing not only via ferratas but also with a guide on two rock climbs. Separately, I hired a guide for the glacier route on the highest mountain in the Dolomites, Marmolada at 3342 metres. Helmut was close to 83 years of age and I turned 76 last July, so our ambitions have somewhat moderated with age!

For safety we brought along a climbing harness, helmet and a Klettersteig (German for climbing path) set for me loaned by Helmut. It is an expensive

spring-loaded device, which, if a fall takes place, will minimize the impact on the climber who is usually linked to a fixed cable. I sometimes used my climbing shoes whereas Helmut used his lightweight mountaineering boots. Most ferrata climbers hung on to the cables, whereas we mostly free climbed with a few exceptions.

Upon arrival from Munich, Helmut, his wife, Giselle, and I checked in at the Hotel Christiania in Alta Badia/Stern, where Helmut had stayed previously several times. Full board and lodging were very much appreciated. All approaches to the climbs were comfortably accomplished in a day from this elegant hotel, where we could always have a full breakfast, afternoon snacks and dinner in the evenings.

Although the weather forecast for the first week was for rain showers, we enjoyed sunshine every day for the following 11 days, except when cloud and thunderstorms sometimes moved in late in the afternoons and/or evenings.

The next day, Helmut led me to my first ferrata, Pizzas da Cir; a perfect introduction to the ferratas being a short but pleasant route, starting from a chairlift.

The following day, after paying a heavy toll for the private access road to one of the best known ferratas in the Dolomites, we hiked along with hundreds of other tourists to the start of the De Luca/Innerkofler protected wartime climbing path, which, partway along, includes a 400-metre tunnel (headlamp required). We enjoyed a fairly long day in good weather.

For our next outing, Diego was our guide to climb Cinque Dita (five fingers) in the Sasso Lungo Langkofel group, leading to a 2996-metre summit. Our start was immediately behind the top of the chairlift. Diego carried the rope and belay equipment, a most competent and fast climber who, for the most part, climbed solo. We rappelled much of the route to return to the refuge at the top of the cable car and a cold beer with Apfelstrudel! Our roundtrip from the hotel was about eight hours. It was a superb climbing route.

After that, the three of us took an easy day to visit the wartime outdoor museum to Cinque Torri, taking the ubiquitous chairlift to the start. An easy walk around the Cinque enabled us to read and study all the trenches built into the mountainside overlooking the valley.

Ready for a bigger climb, with my guide, Filippo, I ascended the Dolomites' highest peak, Marmolada, or Punta Penia, in perfect conditions. We rode the chairlift up to 2626 metres, then descended around the base of the glacier for 300 metres or so, from where there are fixed cables, stanchions and rungs all along the west ridge, our route to the top. Remains of wartime abounded. A welcome beer was had in the tiny refuge on the summit. Our traverse of the mountain via the glacier - the only one left in the Dolomites - took us back to the top of the lift. The whole tour lasted about six hours.

Following that adventure, we visited Bolzano's South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology to see Ötzi the Iceman, the mummy found on the border between Austria and Italy in 1991. He was a hunter of 5300 years ago who, it was discovered, was murdered. He owned a copper axe head - a most interesting find as it pushes back the Bronze Age period from earlier estimates. Most interesting.

Over the next couple of days, I enjoyed a solo walk of about eight kilometres along the valley from the hotel to Corvara and back, and a walk in the Armentara Meadows with a group from the hotel. It was a delightful exploration with the Sasso Della Croce group as a background.

On July 4 it was back to the via ferratas, this time following a long but excellent route from the valley to Pisciadù refuge. The next day was our second rock climb with Diego, this time up Torre di Piccola di Falzarego. The crux move, according to Helmut, seemed to be a 5.8 or perhaps a 5.7, very difficult, for which I needed a tight rope! The presence of numerous edelweiss at the col, near the top of the climb, made for a lovely reward.

Long-time ACC member Martin Taylor is a past chair of the Montreal Section and still a keen climber.

Right: Helmut Microys climbs one of the Dolomites' famous via ferratas, Col Rodella. PHOTO: MARTIN TAYLOR

