

THE GWYDYR MOUNTAIN CLUB NEWSLETTER – EXTRA!

July 2025: Editor Dave Gray



Introduction

Welcome to the July Newsletter! This is an Extra! edition with an article from Steve Swygart on his and Helen's road trip in a motor home, to ski the Dolomites. As a total non-skier I learnt a lot about the sport – not least a very unexpected use for one's hairdryer! Many thanks to Steve, and also to Angela, Bill, Clare, Gill Eccles, Helen Grant, Jacqui, Lindsey, Mike Doyle, Nicki, and as ever DLJ for help with this edition. Please let me have material for the next edition, the final deadline for that is **July 25th**.

Looking Ahead

Here are the upcoming meets venues for July and August, details are on the Club Website. The meets list is constantly being updated, please **check it out regularly** on the Website. Meets added to the programme since the last edition are in bold as a reminder **in case you've missed them....**

2 July	Climbing – Penmaenbach
4-6 July	Hut Weekend
14-18 July	Midweek Hut Meet (TBC)
16 July	Climbing – Oak Tree Crag
19 July	Saturday Walk – Sandstone Trail
24 July	Evening Walk – Llanarmon yn Ial
25/27 July	Hut Weekend
30 July	Climbing – Marian Bach
2 August	Saturday Walk – Highest Mountain in Anglesey
13 August	Climbing – Penmaenbach
15-17 August	Hut Weekend (inc. Mountain Art 'Workshop')
18-22 August	North Wales Climbing (Hut based)
27 August	Climbing – Castle Inn

Venues in Focus

The planned **Clwyds evening meet** on 24th July starts from the village of **Llanarmon yn Ial**, a quiet place with an old church built and rebuilt at various times between the 13th and 19th centuries. A look at the placename takes us back 1,500 plus years, and across two oceans - and maybe right back your own front door! Let's start with 'Llanarmon'...

The church is one of several dedicated to St Garmon, hence *Llanarmon* 'Garmon's church'.

St Garmon was a significant figure in early medieval British history. Garmon is Welsh for the Latin name Germanus, and the man concerned was St Germanus of Auxerre c.378 – c.444, a prominent noble, administrator, and then bishop in what is now France, while it was part of the declining Western Roman Empire. In his pre-bishoping days he was one of six Dukes who governed Gallic provinces under the authority of the Roman Prefect. Germanus's biography was written around 480 through the patronage of people who knew him, and this document became one of the sources of the first English historical work, Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History of The English Nation', completed in 731.

An unknown late 4th century Roman nobleman (Milan)



In 429 as bishop, Germanus was sent on a mission to Britain to counter the home grown 'heresy' known as Pelagianism. The biography's story retold by Bede shows Germanus triumphing over the 'heretics' by persuasion and personal example, rather than force. The result didn't last – Pelagianism was still around 200+ years later, but much of the significance for our knowledge is in the incidental detail these sources give.

The Pelagians are described as 'conspicuous by their riches, glittering in apparel'; and one of the people Germanus was said to have miraculously healed in Britain was the daughter of a man of 'the quality of a tribune', a tribune being a senior official or military officer in the Roman empire. This is key information for historians because it indicates that 20 years after the Roman army left Britain to defend itself, the local British elite was still wealthy, and that society retained some features of Roman governance; and that this could be written about without being qualified some 50 years later, suggesting these circumstances persisted.

That's Llanarmon, what about Ial? Per Google Translate Ial is pronounced something like 'yaal'; and in English speech this comes out as Yale. Ial was a *cymwd*, in English a 'commote', which was an administrative area in medieval Wales. Ial changed hands several times, but in the mid-15th century was held for the English kings by Welsh nobleman Ellis ap Griffith, who was related to both Owain Glyndwr and the Tudor family. Ellis was the patriarch of a large family some of whom adopted the surname Yale, and several of whose members ended up in prominent roles in England and eventually in its American and Indian possessions.



One of these was Massachusetts born Elihu Yale (pictured left), President of Madras under the East India Company. He became a very successful and wealthy man, but was no saint, being involved in corruption and in the company's slave trade in India. His claim to fame though is that his donation of books and goods worth £560 (just over £100K today) towards a new building at Connecticut College led to it being renamed Yale College, now Yale University.

Last but not least, a distant cousin of Elihu Yale in the American Yale family was Linus Yale Junior, 1821-1868 (pictured right), a businessman and inventor who

followed his father as a manufacturing locksmith, to found the modern Yale Lock Company. Rather the domestic locks we know so well, Linus specialised in sophisticated locks for banks in the early days, and was quite a showman – he offered a reward of \$3,000 - \$67,000 today – to anyone who could pick his locks in a public demonstration.

(All photos credit Wikipedia)

Another upcoming July meet is a **Saturday walk** on the **Sandstone Trail**. The aim of the day is to do the whole route. Way back I that with the Club over two days, camping at Beeston, and then again in the Noughties I did it in four section hikes with Sue. Nowadays the trail's southern end is in Whitchurch, giving easy access to train travellers, but back then it finished at Grindley Brook.

Here the Ellesmere branch of the Shropshire Union Canal passes from Cheshire into Shropshire in a flight of locks. To quote <https://www.towpathtalk.co.uk> '...completed in 1805 the locks at Grindley Brook consist of three locks in a staircase and a further three separate locks further along the canal. Originally built to be a key transport route for goods such as slate, coal and limestone, today the locks and canal are popular with leisure boaters, making them amongst the busiest locks in England & Wales'. Here's a photo from the website <https://downtheweedhatch.co.uk> .



A staircase lock system is one where there are more than two locks without an intervening stretch of water, or 'pound', in between, so that the bottom gate of one is the top of the next down and so on. There is a technique involved in getting up and down them without wasting water or leaving one's boat high and dry. On the threesome at Grindley it's a handy 11-step process (Clearly I.T. well before its time or what!?) to lock down and can be left to boaters to manage, although there is a lock keeper to supervise and help out at busy times.

Staircase locks are normally found where the gradient of the canal is too steep to permit the installation of pounds. The steepest set is the 'Bingley Five-Rise' on the Leeds Liverpool Canal, and there are two 5-rises of locks at Foxton on the Grand Union Canal in Leicestershire.

Per the informative website <https://blueotterboats.com> 30,000 people turned out to see the Bingley 5-Rise open in 1774, to the thunderous salute of the local militia's cannons! This staircase is a 45 minute affair going up and 30 minutes down, and is well beyond many amateur boaters, so the locks are controlled by helpful keepers. The GMC has navigated them both ways on one of Sue's canal boat trips. There are volunteer keepers at Foxton too.



Bingley has a total rise of 60 feet so the system is well taller than many fine UK rock climbs. Size is not everything! I failed to find the record shortest graded rock climb extant in the UK on line, so maybe readers can help?

Getting on to **Climbing Meets** we have two in July. first up is **Oak Tree Crag**, which Mike Doyle describes as 'A new crag with 8 routes up to F5 on natural micro-diorite. Great for beginners and aging bumbles!' This crag features in the new North Wales Limestone 2025 supplement which quite a few people have now'.

Second up is **Marian Bach** (see left) which is per Mike 'A friendly, sheltered crag with 21 climbs from F3 - F6c in the trees above a public footpath. Full details can be found in "A55 Sport Climbs 3rd edition'.

Grand Days Out (and In) – Recent Meets Highlights

Gill Eccles writes '...we travelled...north to our **Glencarron Lodge** accommodation. Thank you Teresa for finding such a super place to stay, it was a beautiful lodge and perfect for our group.

With the deluge of rain and the accompanying wind, lots of us stayed lower for the first couple of days, some walking to a nearby bothy on day one. Then a group of us visited the pretty town of Plockton, doing a circular walk with an addition to the summit of Carn a Bhealaich Mhoir.' Here's two shots of those lower level trips – both at Strome Castle...





Then with Gill on into the Fannichs... 'On Wednesday, I ventured out with a group of 7, to climb Sgurr Choinnich and Sgurr a Chaorachain. The weather was often quite atrocious, very windy, with rain and hail, whilst scrambling up and along the ridge. A first for me, crossing a rope 'bridge', then wading through a river so my boots filled up. But heyho, that's why I joined the club, for these mad adventures 🤪. It was a long but worthwhile mountain day.'



Looking North from Sgurr Choinnich summit



In various combinations on different days a number of us knocked off the munros Maol Chean-dearg and Sgorr Ruadh. Some hardy souls extended the Sgorr Ruadh day to also take in the munro of Beinn Liath Mhor.

These three hills all lie between Torridon and Strath Carron and enjoy great views in a very wild and rugged area. A network of stalkers paths helps with their ascents.



The tricky Corbett of An Ruadh Stac seen from Maol Chean-dearg



Torridon Peaks from Beinn Liath Mhor

On the quartzite ridge of Beinn Liath Mhor – translates as 'Big grey hill'!



Three 'Grahams' – hills between 2,000 and 2,500 feet with a 500 foot reascent, were also ascended on the trip.

Coming right back to sea level, here's some of those who joined Mike Mc for his **80th Birthday Wirral Walk**, using the tidal route between Hoylake and West Kirby.

This is now officially part of the King Charles III Coast Path no less. For you royalsspotter out there this is however no ordinary bit of sand – it actually has significant historic royal associations. King's Gap at the Hoylake end is where William III took ship with his army in 1690 to cross to Ireland, to sort out his remaining issues with the former king James II. Their armies met at the Battle of the Boyne. William's fleet would have awaited him in the old anchorage of the Hoyle Lake.



Thanks to Nicki for the photo, she writes 'Happy birthday and thanks to Mike for a fabulous walk and how lucky are we to live on the Wirral, such a beautiful peninsula with great pubs too 😊' Mike got a great turnout of friends new and old for his day, which as you can see had some mixed weather conditions.

Nicki also writes 'Thanks to Sue and Steve for a great walk yesterday - day 5 of the **Slate Trail** (only bit I did 😊) first time I've been glad of rain in Wales! 😊 (we only had a little bit).

Below is the view west to Moel Siabod and the Snowdon Horseshoe.



Gill Eccles summarised the whole of this successful project – ‘The Slate Trail is completed and what a super 6 days of hiking in the Snowdonia countryside it was.

Big thanks to Sue for the idea, then super organising and logistics over the three weekends. Also, big thanks to Steve, who did the reccie of it all for us.

The 6 days saw many members, both full and prospective, enjoying all or some of the sections of the trail. It was lovely to see everyone along the way.

The weather was very kind, only a little rainy on day 5, which was actually welcome in the heat, and day 6, but it still wasn't cold.'

The same weekend saw a successful **Welsh 3000's** event. Helen Grant writes – 'Challenging conditions with heat,sun,wind,rain,hail,mist and fog!

Big thank you to our support team of Glenn,Paul,Kath and Dave and children(Adelines friends)and Michel her brother.

Much appreciated .The event wouldn't have been possible without their help and support. 🙏😊.



This picture is of the group on Crib Goch. John Simpson finished the route in 12 hours 10 minutes peak to peak, whilst Helen Grant and Richard Merry did it in 17 hours 9 minutes. On her first go at this demanding route, Adeline finished the first two sections which is a fine achievement.

This picture is some of our climbers out and about – Mike Doyle writes 'Six of us had an enjoyable meet last Wednesday at the very pleasant **Nant Dulas** in great weather.'



EXTRA!

SKIING THE DOLOMITES IN A MOTOR HOME...by Steve Swygart

This project had been a little dream of ours since 2020, when we were returning back to Venice (the only/nearest airport that we could use during Covid) from a summer climbing trip to the region (with routes at Lagazuoi, Torre Firenze, in Val Gardena and Misurina amongst others) and we happened to pass through Val di Zoldo. On both sides of the road were 3000m peaks (Civetta and Monte Pelmo) and the whole area looked spectacularly beautiful, maybe on a par with Cortina – although that is really difficult to imagine! Further on towards Venice, we could see a lake coming up on the side of the road on Google Maps. Having some time before our flight, we made a detour off and parked the hire car up next to a small mobile home. The lake was beautifully turquoise, and a lady was having a swim in it. She got out and fished a deckchair from her van, telling us in Spanish that the water was lovely. Indeed, it was and although I'd been thinking about the idea of having a van, I can say that it was at precisely that moment that my thoughts turned into an imperative to get one!

Thinking about the skiing angle, we'd been skiing to the main Dolomiti Superski area (600km) for around 15 years before at that point, so we knew the main area extremely well (passes/roads/possible campsite locations), but having a mobile home offered the flexibility to be able to ski many of the outlying areas (another 600km) that you would never be able to get to on a standard package holiday with a British tour operator, such as Crystal or Inghams etc. Civetta looked an especially fantastic area to ski, so at that moment, the long-term idea was born.

It wasn't until Christmas 2022 did the dream actually start to crystallise, when we made a plan to retire in March 2023. We'd been researching mobile homes and settled on a type and make/model. We found a dealer that Christmas and placed an order, with the delivery time being 6-9 months. Just in time to have had it for a while and got used to it before spending some serious time living out of it. Sadly, the delivery time got pushed out by extended periods due to the Covid disruption of the automotive supply chain. We actually got it some 2 years later in early January 2024! With a trip to NZ immediately beckoning (like the next day), there was no time to get ourselves familiarised with it (in winter too) as we'd have to be going out in it as soon as we got back to make the most of a season's lift pass (otherwise it would have been stupidly expensive), so that put the dream on ice for another year.

So, in the run-up to this last year's ski season, we had time for some preparation. Winter tyres and snow chains were purchased (mandatory in Italy in mountainous regions from Nov-Apr), thermal covers for the windscreen and van front and a snow shovel were added to the garage. The van is an Adria Compact SP and so is extremely winterised anyway. We had already got ourselves electronic ski passes for Dolomiti Superski at the Ciampinoini lift pass office in Val Gardena in March 2023, so we bought season lift passes on-line. If you buy this before Christmas Eve, it costs 948 Euro for this last season, so with a normal 6-day (a week's ski holiday) pass for lower season being around 360 Euro, if you are going for an extended period, this is an absolute no-brainer.

Ski Civetta

So – setting off, I made the first stop the Civetta ski area, and specifically, Palafavera (1524m), as there is a good campsite opposite a main chairlift, directly underneath Monte Pelmo (3168m, shown below). It's a very quiet area with all that you need, which is actually very little. Camping Palafavera is decently equipped with a ski boot room, shower and toilet block and a little shop. Here, there are two lift networks that are a mile apart, but with pistes across the gap in both directions, down to Zoldo. The area extends over a range of hills next to Civetta (3218m), topping out at Monte Fernazza (2100m), and extending down into the next valley where the pleasant town of Alleghe is situated on a lake at 980m.



The piste map strangely shows all of this northern sector around Monte Fernazza as treeless, when it is largely (and pleasantly) wooded to one extent or another. There are some excellent runs of all colours throughout the resort, so is good for a party of mixed ability. For a small resort (80km claimed, but more like 57km?), there is a good sense of travel, as it is about 8km from end to end. Snowmaking is pretty comprehensive, as one might expect of a Dolomiti Superski area; expect nothing less. We allowed ourselves two days to ski it all and had probably completed all of the major runs halfway through the morning of day 2; the little blues on drags don't really count!

We were parked next to an older Italian couple on the campsite, probably in their early 70's, (Guiseppe and Betta) from Trento. He was a guitar-playing

apple farmer and sales rep, and she had been a Maestra di Sci, as well as an architect; not long out of a replacement knee operation. Guiseppe's father (Gino Pisoni; check out his Facebook page) had been a famous Dolomites-based climber, putting up many first ascents in the 1950's. They were still extremely enthusiastic about their skiing, and we indulged our passion of Italian ski racing by watching Dominik Paris win the downhill in Kvitfjell, as well as our mutual love of Sofia Goggia (we all agreed she's nuts, but what a champion!). And then there was the climbing. I asked about possible campsites in Madonna di Campiglio, and he phoned the son of Cesare Maestri (who lived there) to get some details! For the uninitiated, there isn't really a bigger name in historical Dolomite climbing apart from Emilio Comici and Riccardo Cassin! I asked Guiseppe why he had not got into climbing, and he said that his father forbade it, as it was too dangerous. This was probably quite a wise move, given the gear they used back then.

They had never skied the area either and we were all were blown away with its beauty. For relative locals to be so enthused tells its own story. We kept meeting them out on the piste, so eventually we skied together, and they kindly took us down to a nice restaurant in Zoldo one evening, seeing as they had a car, as they were in a caravan. If we were ever in the area, we should drop by and stay at their place, which looked fab on Google Earth. A couple of very lovely people and we will be sure to take them up on their offer at some point in the future!



Descending a black run from Monte Fernazza towards the campsite in the valley; Monte Pelmo behind

Passo San Pellegrino

No, nothing to do with mineral water, that's some way west, above Bergamo. This San Pellegrino is a pass on the road east from Moena (Val di Fassa) to the village of Falcade (where we stayed) with skiing around that pass and down to that village. The piste map lumps Alpe Lusia into this area, but in reality, they are miles apart with a 10-15 minute bus ride connecting the two.

We were staying at Eden Falcade, a campsite in the woods just below the Molino bubble at 1190m. There's a river bridge to exit the campsite and you walk through the car park to access the lift – 5 minutes tops. Again, well equipped, but sadly no boot room. Helen had a lot of problems getting her new-ish ski boots on so resorted to having to go into the shower room and get a hairdryer onto the plastic to soften it up! A USP for this campsite is the vast array of fruit and herbal grappas that they make themselves from local produce and plants etc in the woods. Needless to say, these had to be tried, being massive wine and spirits fans and so we had an evening in the bar with some friendly locals who almost certainly lived there in their caravans.

Again, this is quite a small area (67km) but there's some really long runs with big descents. For example, La Volata (Black 41) drops 630m over its 2.35km length (max 47%) and Piavac over in Alpe Lusia drops 430m over 1.31km and is max 74%. The black runs here generally justify their classification, unlike a lot of others in the Dolomites and were great value skiing. The bottom of Lusia seemed particularly suited to novice skiers, with some long tree-lined blue runs, which were particularly attractive. The best run was perhaps the long red of Le Caviette (Red 42), which took some lovely rolling terrain with interesting bends. The only problem was that it's a monolithic cable car to get back up from Col Margherita to do the best runs, owing to the massive height drop.

Generally, some great skiing in what seemed like bigger mountain terrain; recommended.



Views from the reds at Laresei near Falcade (2260m)

Sella Ronda

Well, over the near 20 years we've been skiing in the Dolomites (and always in this main area until now), one can never fail to be impressed. There's limitless piste skiing (and more adventurous ski-touring) amidst absolutely mind-blowing dramatic scenery, even for us as experienced mountaineers and climbers (and lovers of this area). We spent two weeks based at Camping Corvara on the outskirts of that town, which is on the famous Sella Ronda circuit. However, the best skiing is on the arms of the lifts radiating off of that, serving Val Gardena, (Selva, Plan de Gralba, Santa Cristina, Ortisei), Alta Badia (Corvara, Colfosco, San Cassiano, La Villa, Badia, Lagazuoi) and Arraba / Val di Fassa (Canazei, Campitello, Alba & Pozza di Fassa). We'd always travelled over this campsite on the flat lift to the Boe gondola, looking down and thinking "poor sods; looks bloody freezing down there", but in actual fact, it's a quite comfortable (if a little expensive) site with heated floors etc in the shower block and excellent facilities, and good boot room. There's some good restaurants within walking distance, as is a Spar food shop, for a change. Corvara has pretty much everything you could need (except LPG, so stock up before you get there; that's a whole other story) and if its Michelin-stars you are after, Alta Badia has those in spades. Whilst there, I had to start teaching a NEBOSH Environmental Management Diploma course I run in the middle of March to hit the national exam date in July, so I packed my gear in the garage ready for this to start. This was therefore the planned rest day activity; got to earn those season's lift passes somehow!

Whilst there, some UK friends from our Austrian ski holidays in Zurs (St Anton, Arlberg) were over in San Cassiano skiing with some other Austrian friends, and we just happened to bump into them at lunch one day up at Santa Croce, before our planned day out at Monte Pana, a really mellow area between Val Gardena and Alpi di Suisi. We all knew the area extremely well, such that you didn't need to look at the piste map to know where you are going; just ski! A great day out.



David & Elizabeth, with Helen and I at Ciampinoi (2260m) overlooked by the mighty Sassolungo (3181m)

We also made great friends with our next-door neighbours on the campsite, a German couple who lived not too far from the Dutch border, Dani and Jurgen. They were interested to tour Cornwall and Wales in their van in 2026, so who better to ask? I gave them a massive itinerary, which supplemented a book they'd recently been given.



Dani & Jurgen at Camping Corvara

Kronplatz & Drei Zinnen / Tre Cime

We might well be in Italy, but now first language German Italians will take over! Kronplatz, situated in Pustertal, a valley northeast of Corvara and near the border of Austria, is an extraordinary mountain. It's an isolated dome (2275m), draped with an absurd number of gondolas, offering easy skiing at altitude, but also challenging top to bottom runs to lift stations around the town of Bruneck to the north. From there, you can get the free train along Pustertal (it ends up in Austria) to Drei Zinnen, which is another Superski outlier that has a completely different flavour. Ski buses and joined up transport mechanisms abound; you can get off the train and walk 30m to a gondola to get to Kronplatz and walk similarly 300m over a road to get to the snow at Drei Zinnen. An absolute triumph of planning. I'd booked a week at the phenomenal Camping Ansitz Wildberg at St Lorenzen, a tiny town outside of Bruneck. I don't think that we'd ever stayed at a campsite (ever, in 40 years) that had such beautiful facilities. It's a 16th Century house in beautiful condition, with brand new top-notch facilities built across the way. Incredible showers and toilets, superfast 5G WiFi in with the price, nice views to the hills and next to the train line and ski bus stop, and a 5-minute walk into town for all facilities.

But what of the skiing? At Kronplatz, the summit area has easy open slopes going east and south, with much steeper ones to the north, facing Pustertal. Most of it below 2000m is wooded. A key feature is the long top-to-bottom runs. The two black runs to Reischach are about 5km long, with verticals of almost 1300m. If you include the blue run above it, the Ried red run to Percha (where there is a train station) has much the same vertical but is 7km long. If you go down to San Virgilio, there's a lift to take but this is 6km. It might look like a small resort, but it packs a punch! Overall, there's 5 killer blacks that people should aspire to tick in their visit; one was used in the Women's World Cup tour this year for a Super G.

At Drei Zinnen, the slope facing Pustertal has a silly number of lifts high up (must be fairly snow-sure), but once you get to the top of this and over the back, the true majesty of the area awaits. Some quite remote-feeling terrain leads down to Sexten and Val Fiscalina and up to Croda Rossa at 2000m. They've opened some new runs here and there's lots of new lifts projected to be built; some down to Sillian in Austria and over to Val Comelico, currently on a completely different ski pass entirely. Looks to be a great extension to the area!



Cima Croda Rossa (2965m) from the Rudi Hutte; Jagertee awaits.....

Cortina d'Ampezzo

After stocking up with local Alto Adige / Sud Tirol wines to bring home from Scheibers in St Lorenzen (some great personal recommendations from Manfred, who kindly assisted us), we headed off to Cortina d'Ampezzo for the last stop of our trip. We'd skied here only a couple of times on day trips out from Selva via coach, as they like to stop and do the Hidden Valley from Lagazuoi, as it is perceived that most people on a package trip there would have difficulty covering the ground in time on ski and/or not make their way through the labyrinth of terrible blue runs that plague a good part of Alta Badia. There's no question about it; the Hidden Valley is perhaps the most beautiful ski run on the planet. Once you let everyone go first out of the cable car (and then you preferably ski the red back down to Lagazuoi first as no one will be on that before going back up to ski it with much less traffic) and particularly in mid-afternoon, you are left to have an almost quasi-religious experience by skiing in slowly and taking it all in. We have been fortunate enough to have skied in many times now, but each time feels like a massive privilege to be doing it. The views are indescribably beautiful, starting with Tofana di Roznes and you pass Cima del Lago on the right lower down, on which we did an 11-pitch classic IV up a massive corner several years ago now. If you can get a table at the Scotoni Hutte further down the valley, you can feast on a steak from the grill whilst downing a Masi Amarone, if you have a large enough wallet. Passing the frozen waterfalls in the gorge, you schuss down the final red section with as much speed as you can muster, because it goes slightly uphill to another hut before a slow descent to where a horse and cart will pull you out of a riverbed and back into the lift system at Armentarola. Pure bucket list stuff, of which you never tire.



Start of the Hidden Valley run at Lagazuoi – Tofana di Rozes (3325m) on R

Anyway, back to Cortina! Cortina fits none of the standard alpine resort patterns. It is a big-time racing resort – it hosted the World Ski Championships in 2021 and will host many of the Alpine Olympic races in 2026, some 70 years on from hosting the whole winter Olympics in 1956. We've been lucky enough to have been there on a women's downhill training day and although you know they travel fast, it's not until you actually see them do you appreciate the speeds they travel. And then you get on the courses they use – the Tofanaschuss is a steep

drop down a gully with a massive boulder on its right-hand side. It's a black that's not particularly steep, but they are going down this head-first at 65mph and taking 35-40m of air at the same time, whereas I am putting several turns in at 40 mph before I get to the bottom!



The Tofanaschuss (L) and views over Cinque Torri / Averau / Croda Negra (R) from Ra Valles

It's a polished little town, not a mountain village, with its Olympic infrastructure still being added to (with a luge track) whilst we were there. This process started several years ago whilst we were there on a climbing trip, as there were drums of 33kV cable made by my company at the time (Prysmian Group, HQ in Milan) being installed. Many Italian visitors are here to relax and not ski, but what skiing is available is interestingly varied and crowd-free as well as impossibly scenic, but on the negative side, fragmented. The ski bus service is similarly fragmented and is frankly bonkers (that's what happens if you let Italians organise it – would never happen in Sud Tirol!), so we decided that we'd have to unplug the van and drive to the lift each day.

The main action focusses on the Tofana di Mezzo area (3244m) and the brilliant reds and blacks emanating from Pomedes at 2303m, which constitute the race pistes. There are some interesting blue runs going across at weird angles and down the outside of this, which are good to do, but only in good conditions, as they obviously get much slower in the afternoon stodge. By now, the weather generally was getting quite warm, and skiing was only good for the first 2-3 hours overall, and then you had to get up to Ra Valles and spend your time on the beautiful but limited fare in that bowl. Given at this point we'd had 5 weeks of brilliant skiing and now the options were becoming quite limited (every other area had closed and we'd planned it that way to be here as this was the last area to be open), it was now time to chuck in the towel on what was a fabulous trip and head for home.

Conclusions

A fabulous trip that we can't wait to do again next year! I've already scoped out a campsite at San Martino di Castrozza that offers rides to the nearest lift, so that'll be another area to tick off. We did this 5-week trip for the price of the one week we spent at Hotel Erzberg in Zurs at the start of January. It obviously didn't have as much luxury as Barbara offers in the Arlberg, but it was extremely comfortable in the van and to be able to ski every day for weeks in different conditions was very rewarding. The dream of being a ski bum finally came true.



Underneath Tofana di Mezzo (3244m) at Ra Valles

Learning Points / Do's & Don'ts

Take the Channel Tunnel – much easier, much quicker and slightly cheaper than a ferry.

Don't use the French motorway toll roads once out of the tunnel to make your way across Europe. Counter-intuitively, if you head northeast and pick up the motorway network into Belgium and Luxembourg, it'll be about 30 minutes longer one way, but it will save you roughly 120 Euros both ways in tolls. It'll take 3 days to sensibly drive there, so 30 minutes extra is nothing in the scheme of things.

You'll be travelling through Austria on their motorways, so don't forget to buy appropriate vignettes – not just for whatever day but individual sections such as the Brenner Pass (you'll be on that) require an extra vignette.

Campsites are not generally open en route in February/March, so park4night or similar comes into play. We found a deserted carpark by a small town hall next to a bakery on the first night and a carpark by a theatre/restaurant complex near Stuttgart for the next. In Ulm on the way back, Dani told us of a dedicated motorhome stop on the outskirts of the city, from which we could walk along the Danube into town the next day. We then stopped in Luxembourg at a nice campsite before catching the Tunnel back the next afternoon.

Buy a season's lift pass if you are going for more than 3 weeks and buy it before whatever imposed time limit expires; Dolomiti Superski's is Christmas Eve. Other resorts may vary.

Some campsites don't allow you to book ahead, but don't worry too much, they're all very friendly and will fit you in!

If you are going to move, move midweek if you can't book a site. A good weather forecast for a weekend attracts lots of people who turn up on a Friday night or early Saturday morning.

Italian campsite owners are very slow at removing snow and ice from roads and motorhome pitches. Their preferred technique for ensuring you can get access is to roughen the surface of the ice up at around 4pm with the edge of a digger bucket before it freezes again overnight! A telescopic ladder is also very useful for clearing snow from the van roof.

Garages selling LPG are at a bit of a premium in mountainous areas, so use the **my LPG.eu** app and Google to check they are open/still selling it.

Winter tyres and snow chains are mandatory from mid-November to mid-April in this region.

The roads are cleared of snow with remarkable efficiency, so don't stress unduly about this from a British perspective! Even if a high pass is blocked, just stay another day or two where you are!

If you are skiing for this type of extended period, there isn't the same imperative to go out in really bad weather as if you were just on a normal week's skiing holiday. Take a rest day and do a bit of shopping, read a book or have a beer or caffè corretto to chill out! There's plenty of time!

The only Brexit benefit we've ever found is to buy your gear at the end of season in one of the excellent local ski shops that do tax refund forms. Not only do you get cheaper gear (I got 30% off a new ski jacket in the sales), but they complete a form that you then present at the Tunnel customs post for stamping, and you get the VAT back (eventually, apparently – I'm still waiting!).



The van in the car park at Socrepes, skis drying off in the warm sun before the long drive home.