

## via ferrata it



## cortina

ITALY

**Katy Dartford** wants to improve her head for heights, so she's in the Dolomites of Italy clipping into the airy 'iron roads' or via ferrata

**WHAT:** Via ferrata

**WHERE:** The Italian Dolomites around Cortina

**HOW LONG:** A long weekend or more

**DIFFICULTY:** There are routes of all grades, exposure is a common theme though!

**LOOK OUT FOR:** Red-shirted squirrels, WWI tunnels, prosecco cake and exposed routes



In 1939, the red-shirted Scoiattoli, or Squirrels, climbing club was formed in the northern Italian town of Cortina, marking an important date in the history of Italian alpinism. The men and women of the Scoiattoli weren't professional climbers, but they were dedicated to testing their limits against the sheer rock faces of the Dolomites. At the Rifugio Lagazuoi, one of the highest mountain huts in the Dolomites at 2,752m, I buy a red, felt Scoiattoli badge with one aim in mind: I'm a keen rock climber but I haven't got much of a head for heights and I need to tackle the problem. Lack of experience in big, airy routes has made anything with a bit of exposure feel significantly harder, and the home of the Cortina Scoiattoli and the birthplace of via ferrata seemed an ideal place to tackle the problem.

Via ferrata means 'iron paths' and these routes consist of fixed cables, ladders and bridges in the rock that were created during the First World War to help move troops and artillery across the mountains. They are now a way for non-climbers to explore isolated and otherwise un-reachable parts of the mountains; places normally only mountaineers can enjoy.

I'm met at the Francheschi Park Hotel in Cortina by mountain guide Mario Dibona. Mario has scaled K2 and Everest and was a climbing adviser on Sylvester Stallone's *Cliffhanger*, which was filmed here. Together we hike up to the start of the via ferrata Giuseppe Olivieri, graded difficult because of its steepness and the airy route to the summit of the Tofana di Mezzo at 3,244m. We put on our harnesses, helmets and gloves and practise clipping two

carabiners alternately into the iron cables that run along the rock walls, always making sure one is attached as we move along. For extra security, Mario ropes me up with himself and the two other climbers of the group; a gnarly looking couple from Finland called Rami and Mina. This must be a serious route, I think. We begin by tackling a near-vertical climb to reach the lofty southern arête of Punta Anna at 2,731m.

After about an hour, I'm getting into a good rhythm of clipping quickly in and out of the cable. We arrive at the top of Punta Anna and head left to a scree slope, catching breath-taking glimpses of the peaks of the Tofana de Rozes, Marmolada and the summits around Passo Giau and Civetta. I'm beginning to relax and enjoy the climbing, despite the airy drops below my feet. As we continue we reach a steep and exposed pull up on to the summit which, without looking down, I manage with relative ease, imagining I'm two metres off the ground.

Drawing a sigh of relief, we remove our climbing gear and take numerous photos. But it's not all over – the descent is almost more adrenaline-packed than the ascent. Mario tells us to run down the loose-looking scree and speeds off down the slope like a mountain goat. As my feet sink into the pebbles, sharp stones slide into my trainers and I wish I'd worn boots. But the momentum does actually make it easier to run than walk. After a few slides on to my backside, we finally reach the Rifugio Dibona, where we stop for a beer to toast the 300m of via ferrata ascent we just completed.

Tired but satisfied, I'm eager for the next day's via ferrata, which will be the intermediate graded Degli Alpini. The route climbs 300m along the south face of the Col dei Bos (hill of cows) at 2,559m. The Italian military established this via ferrata in 2007 and, because it's still used for training, it isn't marked on any maps, so it feels like a hidden gem.

Mario meets us again and we hike from a restaurant called Grill Da Strobel to the start point. The air is warm and thick with the smell of pine, and chuffs swoop in the sky above us. We pass the remnants of a First World War hospital and see soldiers carrying out various training exercises,

including what looks like a daunting Tyrolean traverse (a zip wire) between two peaks. As we reach the start, this time Mario doesn't rope us up. He calls me a squirrel and sends me off on my own.

The route begins with an 80m vertical wall that I thug my way through until I reach a wide grassy ledge, which is followed by a short exposed wall. From here the climb gets easier until the final 100m, which contains a few vertical segments. But I manage to power



Photo: Rami Saaristo

The steep scree descent

through and am rewarded with glorious views on to the entire Ampezzo basin. When the rest of the group catch up we whoop and high five, before heading for a local speciality for lunch – beetroot ravioli at Rifugio Laguzoi – then a walk around the nearby First World War tunnels.

That's the end of my first via ferrata experience, but that afternoon we get a chairlift to the impressive Cinque Torri rock formations and hike to Rifugio Averau, the oldest *rifugio* in the Dolomites (it's comfortable and modern inside). We stay the night, tucking into prosecco cake and amaretto cream, which I'm told is only made in this hut, and the next day hike down the Giau Pass.

Looking out across the Cinque Torri, where the Cortina Scoiattoli club was formed, I decide to return soon to climb some of the airy bolted lines on the five pinnacles. After all, I am now – according to Mario anyway – a Cortina squirrel. ■

## need more info?

### » GETTING THERE

We flew to Venice Marco Polo: BA flies there from Gatwick and Monarch from Birmingham. It's a two-hour coach transfer from Venice to Cortina, costing €22 one way with Cortina Express: [www.cortinaexpress.it](http://www.cortinaexpress.it). Milan and particularly the budget airline favourite Milan Bergamo are other options although further away.

### » STAY THERE

I stayed in the four-star Francheschi Park Hotel and had a night on the mountain at Rifugio Averau. Half-board rates at the Francheschi Park Hotel are from €75 per person per day ([www.franceschiparkhotel.com](http://www.franceschiparkhotel.com)), and half-board in dormitory accommodation at Rifugio Averau costs from €55 per person per day.

There are more budget friendly options in Cortina including some campsites. Camping Rocchetta ([www.campingrocchetta.it](http://www.campingrocchetta.it)) and Camping Cortina ([www.campingcortina.com](http://www.campingcortina.com)) are right next to each other, about 2km from the town centre.

### » EQUIPMENT

To get started on via ferrata you need standard alpine walking gear, plus a helmet, gloves, a comfortable harness and a via ferrata kit that consists of short lengths of rope, carabiners and a braking device. If you don't want to buy this there are a number of outdoor shops that rent via ferrata gear in Cortina, or if you use a guide they should provide you with kit. A day's rental of the full via ferrata kit is about €15. Some routes may need a headtorch if they go through tunnels.

### » WHEN TO GO

Via ferrata is generally carried out from late spring through to early autumn, although three routes have been made accessible for winter: Col de Bos in Passo Falzarego; Cristallino d'Ampezzo, which crosses the suspension bridge of the via ferrata Ivano Dibona, and the challenging Sci Club 18 on Mount Faloria. Lifts are open in Cortina from about mid-June but not all routes require a lift to get to them. To check which lifts are open go [www.cortinacube.it](http://www.cortinacube.it) and click on 'summer'.

### » WHERE TO EAT

As well as the huts mentioned in the text and our hotel, we ate at El Brite de Larieto, a working farm and restaurant just out of town. Everything on the menu is made at the farm, from cured hams and cheeses to the local fennel seed bread and gnocchi. The cattle even have music played to them. Call +39 368 700 8083.

### » GUIDEBOOKS

Try Cicerone's *Via Ferratas of the Italian Dolomites* which is two volumes, both £15.95 by Graham Fletcher. Volume 1 covers the Cortina area.

### » GUIDES

We used Mario Dibona, [www.dolomitiskirock.com](http://www.dolomitiskirock.com).