



SWITCHBACK

MYRES ADVENTURES'
DRAMATIC DOLOMITES TOUR





BACK- CHALLENGE

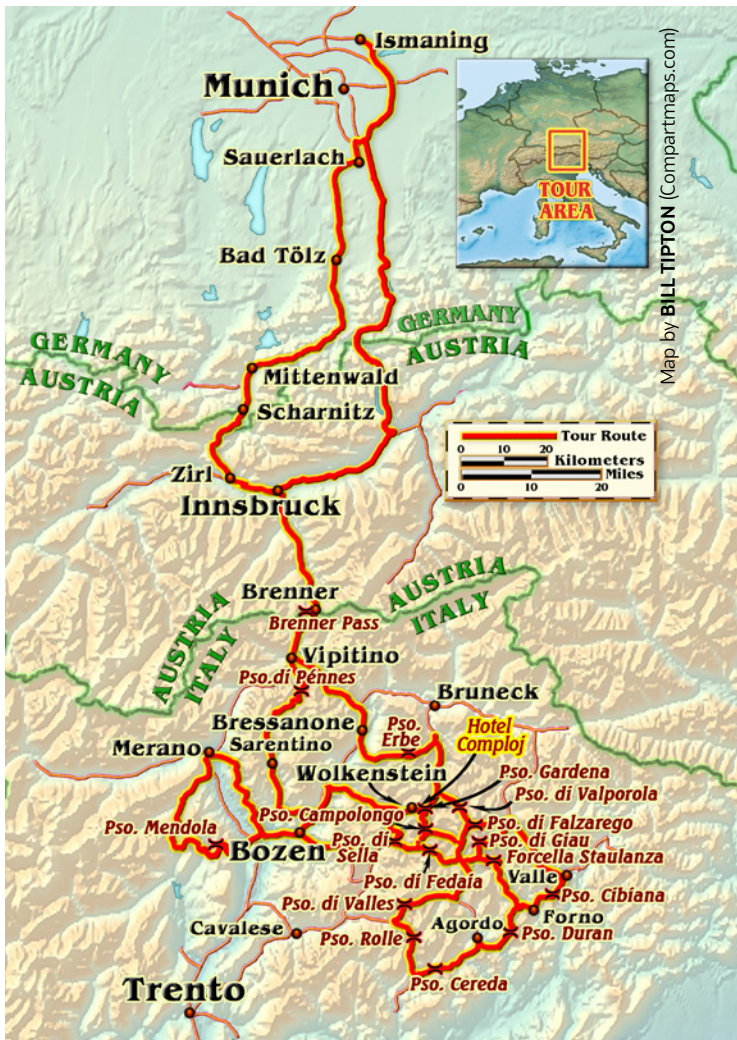
STORY AND PHOTOS BY **GREG DREVENSTEDT**



Every organized motorcycle tour worth its salt has interesting roads, captivating scenery, tasty food and comfortable accommodations. That's what you're paying for, in addition to experienced and knowledgeable guides and the convenience of having a motorcycle waiting for you when you arrive. All you have to do is show up and ride.



Facing page, top: Switchbacking up to Passo Gardena. Facing page, bottom: A short break at Passo Gardena, only a few kilometers from our hotel. This page, top: Descending from Passo Falzarego after taking a cable car to the top of the mountain. Even in late summer, a snow storm dropped several inches of snow on the Dolomites days before we arrived. Above, left: Our crew on the first day, during a lunch stop in Innsbruck, Austria. Left: Tony, always easy to spot in his bright yellow Aerostich Darien jacket, rounding one of many hairpins on the way up to Passo di Giau.



Top, left: Our tour guide Axel carving a fast line at Passo Nigra. Top, right: Fresh asphalt and stunning views on the way up to Passo Sella. Above: Located in the heart of the Dolomites, Hotel Comploj provided comfortable lodging, delicious food and charming hospitality.

Every tour also has a hook, something that catches riders' eyes and convinces them to lay down a deposit and clear their calendar for a week or two. In the case of Ayres Adventures' Switchback Challenges, the hook is short, intense tours that promise riders more hairpins, chicanes, kinks, sweepers and high passes than they can count. Covering seven days, with two travel days bookending five riding days, these tours are reasonably priced (starting at \$2,975), offer mid-level accommodations and, by staying at the same hotel during the riding days, require less hassle than tours that go from hotel to hotel each night. Ayres offers four Switchback Challenges—the Pyrenees, southern Spain, central Alps and the Dolomites.

Lofty terms such as motorcycle "heaven" or "nirvana" are often used to describe the Alps, a huge, diverse mountain range of unrivaled beauty that, because it's located in the heart of Western Europe and has been fought over and occupied for millennia, is densely packed with narrow, steep, winding roads, some in the most unlikely of places. Even within an area as exceptional as the Alps, the Dolomites manage to stand out. Designated a World Heritage Site, Unesco describes the Dolomites as "a mountain range in the northern Italian Alps [that] features some of the most

beautiful mountain landscapes anywhere, with vertical walls, sheer cliffs and a high density of narrow, deep and long valleys."

What gives peaks and ridges in the Dolomites their distinctive jagged appearance—and the mountain range its name—is sedimentary carbonate rock with a high percentage of the mineral dolomite. Spread out over more than 550 square miles, the Dolomites are made up of nine distinct, enormous formations that tower high above valleys that weave between and around them, like giant gray teeth



Above, left: With its countless hairpins, riding in the Dolomites will put any rider's skills to the test. **Above, right:** Known as Wolkenstein in Gröden in German and Selva di Val Gardena in Italian, this scenic ski town in a lush valley was our base camp during the tour. **Below:** The Dolomites are made up of nine distinct formations that rise up from the green valleys that surround them. BMW's R 1200 GS Adventure is a big bike for such tight roads, but it handles well and its low-end torque came in handy.

sticking up through green shag carpet. With 18 peaks at or above 10,000 feet, parts of the Dolomites are blanketed in snow and glaciers year-round, the run-off from which crashes down steep ravines and creates dramatic waterfalls. Popular among skiers in the winter and hikers, bicyclists and motorcyclists in the summer, the Dolomites region is riddled with jaw-dropping vistas, tangles of asphalt and picturesque villages.

But first we had to get there.

For convenience, Ayres' Dramatic Dolomites Tour begins and ends in Munich, Germany, since its airport is a major European hub (I flew there nonstop from Los Angeles). Our affable guide, Axel Papst, with 18 years of experience leading motorcycle tours all over the world, picked me up at the

airport and drove me to the hotel—a courtesy extended to all tour guests. After a tour briefing and giving our motorcycles a once-over, we walked to a local restaurant for a proper Bavarian dinner. Over tall glasses of German lager, our small group—just four solo riders plus Axel—got acquainted. There was Tony, a retired executive from Indiana and a veteran of several Ayres tours—one being the Alps Switchback Challenge that he completed the week before our Dolomites tour. There was Jeff, a retired business owner and professor from Indiana who's a riding buddy of Tony's. And there was Lou, an engineer from Massachusetts. We quickly fell into easy conversation and shared lots of laughs, which continued throughout the week.

On our first day, after taking the autobahn around





Munich, we followed Axel on back roads through villages, forests and fields, heading south through Austria, and then into Italy via Brenner Pass, a major route through the eastern Alps that's clogged with train tracks, a freeway, a local highway and an outlet mall. Having paid our dues for the sake of efficiency, we were soon rewarded with a steep climb up and over Passo di Pènnas, our first proper alpine pass. Even though it was the last week of August, the air was cold and windy and the mountains were dusted with

Above, left: Jeff approaching yet another switchback after bagging yet another pass. Above, right: The sign at Passo Falzarego was remarkably clean. Signs at most of the passes are covered in so many stickers that it can be hard to read them. Left: Many valleys in the Dolomites are crisscrossed with twisting roads and ski lifts. Below, left: Passo Fedaia provides exceptional views of glacier-covered Marmolada, the highest peak in the Dolomites, and the crystal blue waters of Lago Fedaia, created by an enormous dam.

snow. Weather can be unpredictable in the Alps, so it's best to be prepared with rain gear and extra layers.

As we would be for most of the tour, we were in South Tyrol, an autonomous province in northern Italy that was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Since more than 60 percent of South Tyroleans speak German and most of the rest speak Italian, signs typically list cities, passes, etc. in both languages. Most houses, hotels and barns are built in the alpine chalet style, with white walls, wide roofs, carved woodwork and large balconies, the railings of which exploded with colorful flowers in full bloom. We spent four nights in Wolkenstein, a charming ski town tucked in one of the Dolomites' lush green valleys. Our home away from home was the cozy, recently renovated Hotel Comploj, run by a family that all but adopts its guests. The father is a gourmet chef, and he impressed us each night with freshly made soups, pastas and local specialties.

Three of our riding days were spent exploring the best the Dolomites has to offer on loops averaging 150 miles. It was a garden of earthly delights, with the sort of smooth, winding pavement we all dream of delivering us to high-alpine pass after high-alpine pass, an up, down and all-around rollercoaster with a stunning backdrop everywhere you look. The list of passes we summited is long and glorious—Gardena, Valparola, Falzarego, Giau, Cibiana, Duran, Campolongo, Rolle, Valles, Cereda, Costalunga, Fedaia, Nigra, Pinei, Pordoj, Sella, Staulanza, Mendola and Erbe—each one unique, as are the roads that slither up and over them, and we lucked out with blue skies and cool temperatures.

Our daily mileage may seem modest, but when measured in terms of quality rather than quantity, our cup overflowed. At the end of each day, as we hoisted celebratory beers back at the hotel, exhausted and exhilarated with sore shoulders from so many tight turns, no one complained of not riding enough. A Switchback Challenge, indeed.

Ayres Adventures' Switchback Challenge tours run from August-October 2019. For more information and the full calendar of tours, visit ayresadventures.com. 46