

Winter chic finally sweeps into Italy

The last Alpine country to wake up to the joys of the luxury chalet can now deliver *la dolce vita*, says Gabriella Le Breton

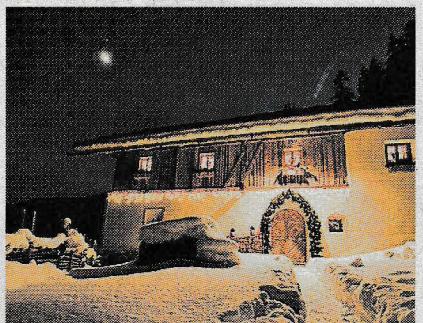
The chalet holiday is the long-time favourite of British skiers, and for good reason. Having staff to cook and clean for you in the privacy of your own plush Alpine pad is the ultimate indulgence. And, for the past decade, chalet owners and operators in France, Switzerland and Austria have been locked in a battle to outdo each other with all-singing, all-dancing properties. Pools, spas, cinemas and professional chefs have become the norm in the upmarket chalet world.

However, one Alpine country – Italy – has been slow to get in on the trend. Despite their love of *la dolce vita*, Italians have been surprisingly reluctant to enter the domain of the plush chalet. Until now, that is. Three years ago, two senior figures from the Escada clothing label, Stefano and Giorgia Barbini, said goodbye to the fashion world and opened San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge, a sensitively renovated 16th-century hunting retreat. In doing so, they ushered in a new era of luxury Italian Alpine accommodation. Happily for skiing Italophiles, the rest of the country is now following suit, in that inimitably stylish Italian way.

Unless otherwise stated, prices are for exclusive use of the whole chalet for seven nights and do not include flights and transfers.

San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge, near Kronplatz

For heritage and understated style, San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge is hard



The San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge is set in a glade of jaw-dropping beauty

to beat. As is the jaw-dropping beauty of its setting: a glade in a dense forest high above the Puster Valley, with uninterrupted views of the Dolomites. Pass through the vaulted hallway to soak up those views from the firelit library and wood-panelled dining room, heated by an old ceramic stove. Back in the hall, the downstairs loo is housed in a tiny alcove, where the lodge's original owner, the Bishop of Brixen, is said to have prayed when the snow was too thick to make it to church.

Upstairs are just charming double bedrooms and a bunk room for four children, plus a smart spa and relaxation area. Outside there is a heated pool and a helipad.

The Barbinis are natural hosts: Giorgia rustles up elegant yet authentic home-cooked cuisine, while Stefano shares his enthusiasm for all things local, hosting tastings in his wine cellar (which contains the world's largest private collection of South Tyrolean wines) and escorting guests around the Kronplatz ski area. Located a 20-minute drive from the

lodge, Kronplatz, also known as Plan de Corones, boasts 116km of pistes, including five black runs and a special Kids' Safety Park, all serviced by Italy's most modern lift network. Italy's first luxury chalet of note may have been a while coming, but it was well worth the wait.

• Oxford Ski (01993 899420; oxfordski.com) offers San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge from €21,000 based on six sharing, including breakfast, afternoon tea and dinner on six nights.

Baita 1697, Sestriere

Interior designer Lucie McCullough and her husband spent three years searching for their dream winter home in Italy's Piedmont region, settling on a derelict 17th-century farmstead in Pattemouche, a medieval hamlet that is linked by cable car to Sestriere. It took a further two years to transform the *baita* (Italian for "old stone farmhouse") into a luxury bolt-hole. Vaulted stables hewn from exposed stone

now house a cosy open-plan living/dining area and kitchen while the hay loft has become a rustic chic living area with sweeping mountain views, a wood-burner and a timber hot tub on the adjoining roof terrace. The five stylish en suite double rooms and children's dorm room, sleeping six, feature reclaimed local timber, a copper bathtub, Mongolian rugs, French antiques, Burmese bronze bowls and other exotic treasures bagged during the couple's extensive travels. To complete the experience, Jamie Oliver-trained chefs prepare dishes from a global menu ranging from Piedmontese



pasta to Burmese beef curry.

A cable car located a three-minute walk from the property whisks guests up into the resort of Sestriere, giving access to the 400km Via Lattea (Milky Way) ski area. The area also includes the resorts of Sauze d'Oulx, Sansicario, Cesana and Claviere in Italy and Montgenèvre in France. It is ideal for families and intermediates, an extensive network of blue and red pistes mean you can cruise around a large network of well-groomed, often sunny pistes.

• Summers & Winters (020 8355 4466; summersandwinters.co.uk) offers Baita 1697 from €16,600 based on 10 sharing.

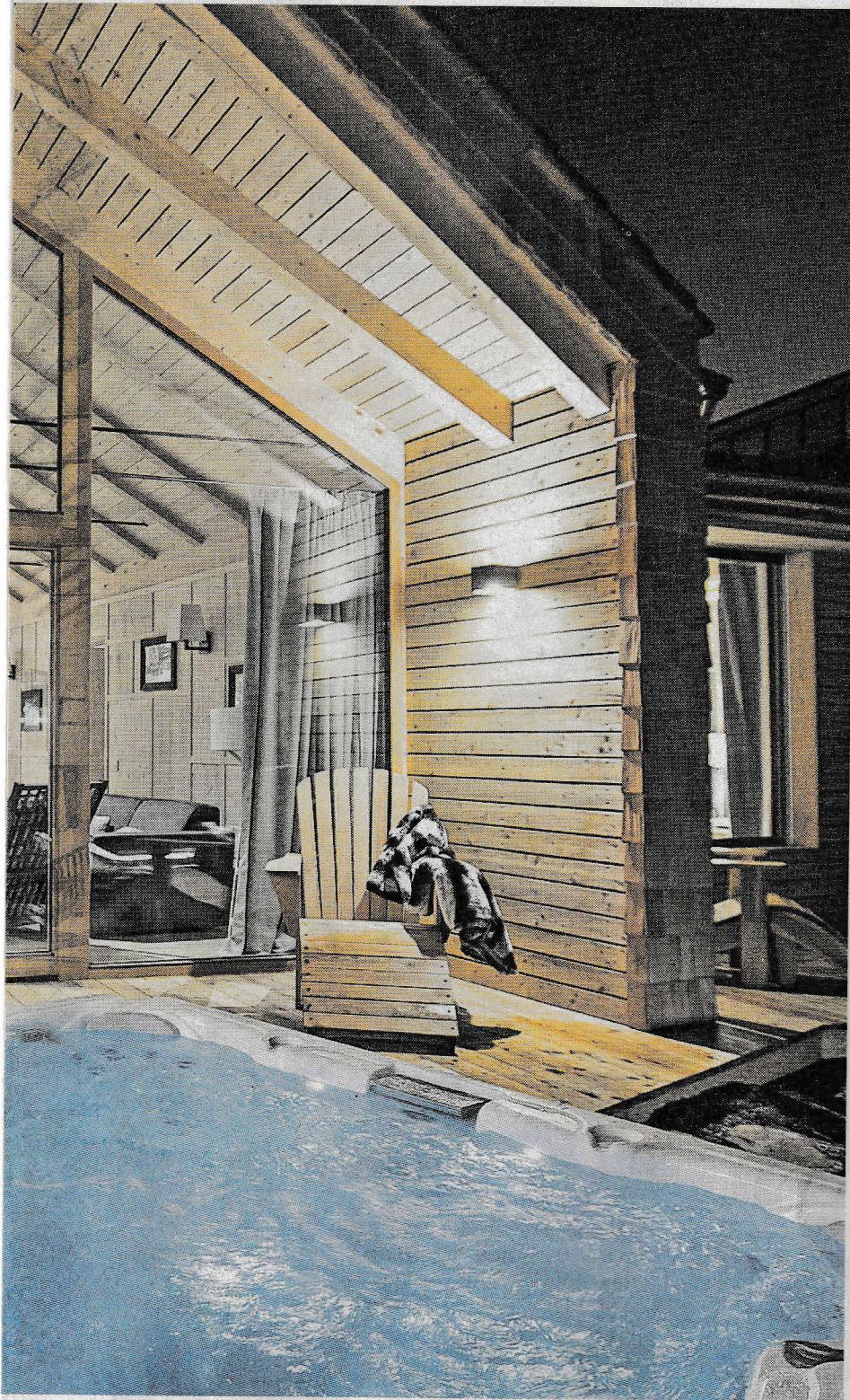


The three-suite Chalet Zeno in San Cassiano counts George Clooney among its clientele, main; the Pine Lodge, above

including breakfast, afternoon tea or canapés, four-course dinners, select wines and beers. The property is also available on a self-catering basis from €9,800, including a case of wine, welcome dinner and hamper.

Pine Lodge, Selva di Val Gardena

Pine Lodge is a custom-built, top-spec chalet in the resort of Selva di Val Gardena. Just as this chic northern Italian border region of South Tyrol blends the best of *la dolce vita* and Austrian efficiency, so its Val Gardena ski area blends



stupendous scenery and restaurants with 500km of pistes serviced by a slick lift system. The lifts, and a cluster of nursery slopes, are located three minutes' walk from Pine Lodge, a particular bonus if you've spent the day on the scenic 26km-long Sella Ronda circuit, a network of lifts and runs circumnavigating the Sella massif mountain range.

You can watch the sunset daub the dramatic limestone spires that encircle the town of Selva in pink as you enjoy sundowners by the open fire in Pine Lodge's living room since floor-to-ceiling windows offer



It took two years to transform an old stone farmhouse into the Baita 1697

uninterrupted views of the Dolomites. More eye-popping views are enjoyed from the lodge's four sleek en suite double rooms, large south-facing terrace and outdoor hot tub, while other treats include a home cinema, spa and fitness room. With some of the world's finest mountain restaurants on the doorstep guests can feast at lunch as well as enjoying Pine Lodge's four-course menu for dinner.

• Carrier (0161 820 9843; carrier.co.uk) offers seven nights from £11,535 based on eight sharing, including buffet breakfast, afternoon tea, four-course dinner (on six nights) and return flight from London Gatwick to Innsbruck.

Châlet Zeno, San Cassiano

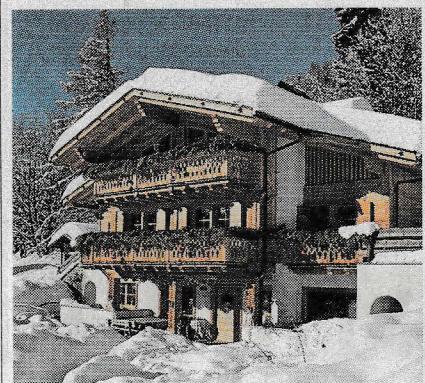
Although technically an apartment, the new three-suite Châlet Zeno boasts all the privacy and amenities of a chalet, and (not usual in a chalet) a private lift to access the accommodation. Part of the Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa, one of South Tirol's very best properties (and a favourite of George Clooney), the contemporary chalet is all pale-wood paneling and rich cream and slate grey furnishings, warmed by tweed walls and glass-encased fires. The large living and dining area is set beneath a dramatic pitched roof and there's a terrace with an outdoor hot tub from which to contemplate the views of the Dolomites. Chalet guests enjoy breakfast and afternoon tea in the chalet; for lunch and dinner they can choose one of Rosa Alpina's restaurants, including the two Michelin-starred St Hubertus, self-cater or eat out in the village. Guests also have access to the award-winning spa.

When you're not luxuriating in your penthouse, 130km of confidence-boosting slopes await you in the form of the local Alta Badia ski area, which is linked to the Sella Ronda circuit. The lifts are located a five-minute drive from the hotel and the scenic slopes are peppered with superb mountain restaurants, several of which serve dishes created by Michelin-starred chefs.

• Powder Byrne (020 8246 5300; powderbyrne.com) offers b&b plus afternoon tea at Châlet Zeno from £37,985 based on six sharing, including return flight and transfers from Venice and use of the Powder Byrne concierge service.

Chalet Fogajard, Madonna di Campiglio

Little did young lovers Amelia and Renzo know, when they convinced a farmer to sell them some land for a *baita* (old stone farmhouse) in the woods above Madonna di Campiglio in the Fifties, that their daughter Paola would be running it as a stylish agritourism chalet 60 years later. Paola and her husband Edoardo constructed a new eco-building in 2010 on the site of the original *baita*, using the timber from the old farmhouse, and installing a biomass boiler and solar panels among many other environmental measures. They also kept the name, Fogajard ("hardy beech tree" in the local Ladin dialect) for the chalet is tucked in dense forest, only accessible by 4x4 in winter. There are six classic Alpine bedrooms, each clad in Swiss pine, which can be booked individually. Paola serves wholesome yet refined cuisine in the candlelit restaurant, using produce from the family and other local farms, and sells homemade honey and



The Chalet Fogajard has six classic Alpine bedrooms, each clad in pine

liqueurs as well as shawls made using cashmere from Edoardo's goats.

Just 10 minutes' drive from Fogajard are the 150km of pistes that comprise the Madonna di Campiglio ski area. The chalet provides a shuttle service to in winter. Radiating out from either side of a long, deep valley, Campiglio's slopes are spread across several distinct areas, offering diverse terrain from tree-lined red runs into town and cruisey blues high above the tree line to short, sharp and sweet blacks.

• Chalet Fogajard (0039 465 442619; chaletfogajard.it) is available from €18,000 half-board, based on 12 sharing. It's also possible to book rooms in the chalet on a non-exclusive basis, price on request.