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South Tyrol

> *Field Journal. Sunday, July 10, 2016.*
> Lagazuoi Mountain Hut: 2,752m over sea level. Sunny skies, t-shirt temperatures, oxygen thinned out by the high altitude. Vertical rock walls surrounding us, in every direction. Mountains encircling other mountains, pale in colour, treeless, mostly snowless, with steep scree fields lying at their base. It's a rather humid day; the vista fades out beyond 60 or 70km. Yet, faint outlines of taller glaciers appear in the distance. Dozens and dozens of camera-toting tourists bustle around us, mostly with shoes unfit for walking past the hut. Emanuel and Gustav suggest we have an espresso and maybe some freshly-baked apple strudel before we set out to walk. April and I order a cappuccino to go with a shared slice of pie. Autumn wonders if it's too early for ice cream. "You can have ice cream when we have a beer, at lunchtime," we tell her, "that way we can feel like we've actually earned something."

It was only in 2009 that UNESCO declared the Dolomite Mountains a World Heritage site. It was late, by all accounts, if anyone had their minds set on preserving a pristine, untouched wilderness. Omnipresent cable cars, smoothly-paved roads, extensive networks of trails and ski runs, busy mountain towns endowed with some of the most advanced tourist infrastructures in the world, and postcard-perfect landscapes had long made the Dolomites a favourite destination of middle and upper-middle class continental European holidaymakers. Ever since the 1956 Cortina winter Olympics this small corner of Northeastern Italy had begun a dramatic transition from a farming-based economy to one inspired, fueled, and dependent on the mountains in all their summer and winter leisure glory. The World Heritage brand and recognition seemed more like a badge of pride for the hard-working locals than a business magnet meant to attract tourists.

As it had been the case for a few decades, by the time we visited the area in 2016 it was perfectly normal--indeed almost obligatory--to enjoy the splendor of Dolomitic nature with a perfectly-brewed cappuccino in one hand and a camera in the other. Indeed it was likely, if not customary, to find oneself spending a full day high in some of Europe's tallest mountains by shelling out anywhere between 10 and 20 Euros to ride in a cable car all the way to a busy summit, walking no more than 300 feet to the nearest hut, ordering a gourmet lunch, snapping a selfie, posting it on Facebook using the hut's Wi-Fi signal, and then making one's way back to a hotel in town after getting a little suntan. Finding a spot to park one's vehicle down in the valley would constitute, by far, the mightiest challenge of such a day.

Our plan for our first Dolomitic hike together was only slightly more ambitious than most people's. Reaching the Lagazuoi Pass by cable car and departing on foot from the Lagazuoi Hut Emanuel Valentin, Gustav Willeit, and the three of us would head not back down for the lower Falzarego Pass--where our car was nearly double-parked--but north, away from the pass and downhill toward the Badia Valley, where

Emanuel's vehicle awaited us. It was a modest day hike meant to acclimatize us to the rarefied mountain air, test our boots, and to speak with Gustav about his art.

Emanuel and Gustav had been friends for many years. Both in their early 30s they had spent their childhood in the town of Bruneck, deep in South Tyrol's Puster Valley. Emanuel had recently completed his Ph.D. at the University of Bozen--the province's capital city--with a focus on cultural heritage. Wearing his hat as our gatekeeper, fixer, and translator he had thought well of introducing us to Gustav: a Swiss-trained visual artist with a passion for stormy Dolomitic landscapes. It was the first of over a dozen interviews Emanuel had systematically arranged and planned for us with trademark Germanic-style efficiency. Gustav, like us, liked to hike, and since it was a pleasant Sunday we had all agreed to scatter our cars across mountain valleys and retrieve them a few hours later by way of foot and cable car rides.

Among some of our favourite pictures of Gustav's were compositions showing bleak atmospheres heavy with clouds, somehow contradicting the sun-kissed, idyllic postcard-like prints that had rendered the region famous around Europe. Even more uniquely, Gustav did not always hide cable cars or roads in his photographic landscapes. Though he knew very well that such infrastructures lessened the mountains' wild character, he was fully aware they also had an important democratizing effect on their austere nature. "In my opinion, he explained, "if you look at it in a visual way, these structures take away something from wild nature. The view is spoiled by the look of the structures built by men, but on the other hand they give the opportunity to people to go up the mountains and enjoy the beauty." Clearly, it was a popular argument if anyone were to judge by the the busy parking lots and the full coffers of the region's economy.

Gustav had spoken those words in Italian, not in English. With Emanuel on translation standby in case of need, Phillip had needed to wrestle with his linguistic demons and somehow managed to resurrect his native tongue for the sake of conducting interviews with Italian speakers. It was a necessary compromise for everyone. South Tyrol had been in Austrian hands until the aftermath of WWI, when winners and losers gathered to count their spoils and re-draw international boundaries. In 1919 as part of the Treaty of St. Germain South Tyroleans--largely Ladin- or German-speaking--suddenly found themselves holders of an Italian passport. Despite Mussolini's attempts to later "Italianize" the region with forced immigration from the southern regions starting in 1922, South Tyrol to this day remained proudly autonomous and deeply rooted in Germanic and Ladin traditions.

Unable to speak Ladin or German, however, Phillip had resigned to the fact that despite all of his best attempts to relegate it to a closet in his memory the Italian language was still quite convenient. Phillip had left Italy in a serious huff when he was 23 years old, with a one-way ticket to a new way of life. Finding himself speaking Italian nineteen years later wasn't just awkward, it was distressing. Languages have a way of becoming rooted in the mind and the body. When you change languages you change your mind, the ways you sense the world, and your

entire way of being. Going back to a language you have shedded long ago is like wearing an old skin, a skin that now hurts to wear.

After the formality of the on-camera interview Gustav started to feel comfortable with colloquial English, and as we continued the incessant descent toward the Badia Valley Autumn took over the conversation with the young and somewhat shy artist. Hairpin turn after hairpin turn the steep trail wound down its way below the treeline and the scree fields eventually gave way to red firs and small meadows. Light on her feet and knees Autumn broke into a tangible lead with Emanuel and Gustav on her heels, while April and Phillip had to turned their attention toward their rapidly-tiring knees instead. It was time for a beer and ice cream.

When UNESCO inscribed the Dolomites in 2009 it was the geological value of the rock and the spectacular nature of the landscape that were considered to have outstanding universal value. As a photographer, Gustav was innately aware of the sublime nature of the mountains. His moody pictures, invariably snapped during tenebrous weather, lent the mountains a foreboding feel and connoted very clearly that wildness--whatever was left of it--came to life intermittently in the Dolomites. Wildness, Gustav observed, “still exists but it’s diminishing too fast. There are just few places where you won’t see men’s footprint. Although I can see they are trying to stop this virus.”

“This virus?”

“Yes, I see this reality as a virus. People are destroying nature.”

It was hard to disagree. We were now at a fully-functioning mountain restaurant at 2,000m of altitude. A hot plate of homemade gnocchi with creamy pesto was now in front of us, and large beer mugs had already emptied before the food had even arrived. A hut like that in the middle of the mountains required supply roads, electricity lines, and sewage pipes. Whether or not such human presence was a virus, however, remained to be seen. Indeed the beauty of the landscape had been rendered even more enjoyable by its easy accessibility, just as Gustav himself had argued.

“We should get going soon, it’s going to start raining any time,” Gustav somberly predicted as we all--minus Autumn--downed a small glass of pungent grappa to end our meal. Before I could even pay the bill Autumn was already back out on the trail, with Gustav and Emanuel following her like big brothers. Within minutes the heavy downpour began. Thunder followed. By the time we reached our cars we were soaked.

The next day April’s toenails looked blackish purple. Five hours of walking on a steep downhill trail had caused gruesome blood blisters to form underneath both of her big toenails. The discomfort was excruciating. The trouble wasn’t so much with sitting or laying down, of course, but with walking. The plan for the day was to interview four people at a heritage sawmill and visitor centre in a small town called Tiers, not too far from our “basecamp” in the small village of Seis. This was something we could could easily carry out by driving there and back, but the real looming trouble was the eight-day-long trek slated to start a few days after. As April

agonized to slowly climb the stairs leading down our rental apartment to the car garage we all knew the next days would be a serious challenge.

Margarethe Ploner, Paul Psenner, and Markus Villgrattner welcomed us to Tiers on a gloriously sunny day, with the air rendered crystal clear by a flash thunderstorm (Italy is the world's leader in lighting and thunder and July is prime time for sudden storms). Margarethe, Paul, and Markus were all retired from decades of municipal work. Tiers was one of the towns whose territory lay inside the boundary of the Schlern Rosengarten Naturepark and World Heritage Site and the three--working in their respective and successive roles as mayors and council members between 1980 and 2010--had been instrumental in bringing forth the nomination to UNESCO.

The Schlern-Rosengarten Naturepark was formed in 1974. Later in 2009 it was inscribed onto the World Heritage list as one of the nine mountain parks constituting together the 141,903 hectare site. Stretching out over three Italian regions and two autonomous provinces--separated by towns and small cities, the parks are not contiguous with one another--the World Heritage site encompassed 18 peaks above 3,000m, encompassing mountain valleys rich in human history and extremely different from one another linguistically, economically, culturally, and politically. Without at least a year to dedicate ourselves to all of the nine parks we settled for a more modest objective, which consisted of learning everything we could about the Schlern-Rosengarten and the nearby Puez-Odle Naturepark. In addition to proximity to one another (though, separated by the Gröden Valley, they did not share a border) the two were in the same province and shared the distinction of being the most visited and arguably the most easily recognized, due to their iconic scenery and highly-developed tourist infrastructure.

Growing up in Tuscany, five hours south of South Tyrol, Phillip had spent nearly all of his childhood summers here. Ever since the age of nine his parents would bring him to the Dolomites year after year, often holidaying for as long as an entire month at a time. Those treasured childhood memories had a lot to do with why we were here. Not only would Phillip's familiarity with the region could assist us with travel planning, we thought, but his background knowledge on social, historical, and political issues could help us make sense of the cultural complexities of the region. And then there was the language bonus. Though extremely rusty his Italian skills would make our fieldwork easier, we reasoned. At least in theory.

Italy has 51 World Heritage sites, the nation with most sites in the world. Notably, only four of those 51 are natural sites. Millions of tourists travel to the boot-shaped country every year, and yet most remain completely unaware of the existence of the Dolomites--typically reaching no farther than Venice or Verona on their northeastern itineraries into the country. Only German and Austrian tourists for many years seemed to know about the existence of South Tyrol and its stunning beauty. Germans and Austrians could continue speaking their language after crossing the Italian border and enjoying their favorite outdoor leisure activities and cuisine. This had ensured the Dolomites' popularity within central Europe well before World Heritage inscription. In fact, Margarethe, Paul, and Markus explained,

inscription onto the World Heritage list was deemed controversial from the very birth of the proposal.

“At that time I was vice-mayor and mayor between 1974 till 1990 and then at another time mayor from 2005 till 2015,” Markus recounted in German to Emanuel, who immediately endeavored to translate into English. “At that time, in 1974, the natural park was founded. It was the first natural park in the province. It was a bit difficult because two municipalities did not agree and one the municipal councils voted against it. But our municipality did vote for it.” After the Schlern-Rosengarten was gazetted as a park the controversy surfaced again some thirty years later over the World Heritage nomination. Locals were afraid that UNESCO would bring in extra levels of protection and bureaucracy which would cause serious challenges especially for the farmers active in the area. Others, especially in the tourism industry, were convinced that their visitation numbers were already profitable enough and no more visitors were needed. So not every municipality voted to have “their” mountains added to the nomination. Even today the Sella mountain group, the Langkofel, and Plattkofel mountains remain outside the boundaries of the World Heritage site because politicians from the highly-visited Gröden Valley thought UNESCO recognition had nothing too valuable to offer them.

On the Seiser Alm--Europe’s largest high-altitude meadow and the site of our trailhead for the following day--“there were especially farmers who were very strongly against it,” Paul explained. “They had the opinion that their activities would be very much limited because of measures that would be taken by UNESCO, like limits on the amounts of manure to be used, and so forth. You cannot over-manure these mountain pastures. You have to see them from the caretaking side. Naturally, the same way as the people from Gröden with their mountains, who wanted to commercialize their place properly, the farmers also naturally had it in their best interest to use, commercialize and cultivate their lands as they wished.”

“So, six years later, has World Heritage inscription made a difference?” April asked in English. Emanuel--whose brain by then was rapidly starting to burn out after translating Phillip’s questions from Italian to German, and our interviewees’ answers from German into English--again provided the spot translation. “Ya!”, they answered in unison. The place had become better known around the world and now travellers from Asia, the UK, and North America had started showing up. “Even Canadians like yourselves!” “Interesting! But,” Phillip replied in Italian, “I should point out that I know this place well because I was born and raised in Italy and I spent a lot of time here as a kid.

“Oh,” replied Margareth with a surprised look, “that explains your funny Florentine accent!”

Back in the 1980s when Phillip and his Florentine parents used to visit the area the Italian language almost had to be whispered, rather than spoken out loud. Half a decade before, in the 1920s and 1930s, Mussolini’s attempt to Italianize South Tyrol had zeroed in on the German language as the root of all problems. Following his policy Südtirol was then renamed Alto Adige. Bozen was Italianized into Bolzano. Mountains, valleys, and towns all received Italian names, often

invented overnight by overzealous Italian bureaucrats. Children raised in German-speaking homes could no longer speak their language in school.

Yet Mussolini's strategy--in part hampered by his growing alliance with Nazi Germany--never truly succeeded. Most of the forced Italian immigration confined itself to Bolzano; Italians preferred to live in the city, and so the residents of smaller communities in mountain valleys quietly continued to cultivate their German roots. Then World War II and its aftermath shifted everyone's priorities. Following reconstruction, South Tyroleans gradually became more vocal about their thirst for greater autonomy from the Italian state. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the Südtiroler Volkspartei--a populist party lobbying for greater autonomy for the region--became more demanding and ever more popular. At first, Italian authorities pushed back. Conflict--at times violent--began to escalate. By the 1980s more than a few South Tyroleans had taken to the view that Italian visitors like Phillip's family were something to be tolerated, at best, rather than welcomed. However, the situation changed in the 1990s. New concessions over the autonomy of the province of South Tyrol, rendered necessary largely in light of the evolution of the European Union, were signed by the involved parties. The new agreement was hailed by international observers as one of the world's most progressive divisions of power between a federal state and a regional government. To make things even better, a strong regional economy created even greater harmony.

Days later, April's toe was still extremely painful. The toe nail would soon fall off, we thought, so that shouldn't stop us from setting out for our planned 8-day trek. We had been in South Tyrol for nearly two weeks by now, but most days had been spent driving from interview site to interview site with little or no time available to explore the two mountain parks that had brought us here. Our trek was an ingenious plan to remedy that. With our itinerary we were to carve a large figure 8 across the two parks and the one valley in between them, starting off from Seis and the Schlern-Rosengarten park, moving through the Seiser Alm, down to the Gröden Valley and back up to the mountains, first to the Puez-Odle park, then to the Sella Joch, and up through the Langkofel, back down to the Seiser Alm, and finally back to Seis. Unlike New Zealand--where we had to pack everything but the kitchen sink in our backpacks--this time we could stay all along the way at mountain huts and sporthotels, and have three square meals (and snacks) anywhere throughout the route. With our backpacks containing mostly camera gear and a few changes of clothes we set off for our trek in the morning of July 15, by forking out some fifty bucks for the 20 minute cable car ride from Seis to the Seiser Alm. "I like this way of hiking," observed Autumn after sprawling out on the leather-covered seat of the chairlift awaiting us immediately after the first cable car ride. This, we would soon find out, was not meant to last.

With the Panorama chairlift behind us, our trek had now finally begun. Starting at 2,009 meters of altitude from the Hotel Panorama we would walk downhill for about an hour, south through the Seiser Alm, and then begin to hike up the Schlern mountain. We knew the 600m elevation gain to the Schlerhaus--the hut

where we had reserved a room--wasn't exactly child play. Phillip remembered the trail as a relentless climb going up in a series of hairpin turns, but he could not remember how long it would take. The view from the top, and the promise of a summit ice cream for Autumn, were all the motivation we seemed to needed to start walking cheerfully.

Phillip's memory included a sadder note too. He and his family would enjoy their summer hikes not alone, but together with a large group of friends. One day back in 1987 Phillip and his group of friends and acquaintances hiked the Schlern and stopped at the Schlerhaus for lunch. The sky suddenly closed in and everyone decided to leave in a rush to beat the thunderstorm. Fifteen minutes into the hike downhill from the hut a young girl in his party told her parents that she urgently had to walk back to the hut to use the restroom. And so they did, while the rest of the group kept walking downhill. An hour later the thunderstorm began to roar. Being on an open mountain face during a thunderstorm is unpleasant, to be sure, but also extremely dangerous as lighting can easily strike bare and wet rock. Though wet, Phillip and his group made it to their cars safely and drove away. Thirty minutes later a lighting struck the mountain and hit that young girl's family. Her father died.

A few days before our Schlern summit hike we had gotten to know the meadows of the Seiser Alm a little bit. Thanks to a fortuitous last minute introduction we had received an invitation to visit a working farm owned and operated by the Waldboth family. The farm, only a few hectares in size, had been in operation for over 700 years--just about seven centuries before the creation of the park. It wasn't the only farm in the area. Though most of the territory controlled by park authorities lay above the vegetation line and thus farmland, parkland also included mountain meadows that had been in private hands for nearly a millennium. The meadows had been passed down family lines to first-born sons, undergoing essentially no division along the way as part of a primogeniture-based system anthropologists call impartible inheritance. Not only had the meadows been part of the region's sustenance-based economy since the Middle Ages, but they had very much shaped the structure of family economies and seasonal rhythms and ways of life, in a way that no park or World Heritage inscription could have possibly altered. So, uniquely, the World Heritage site was a patchwork of public and private lands--the latter's ownership status further complicated by rights of passage and historical patterns of common use.

Like other smallholders in the area Richard and his father mainly used their land for the sake of their small herd of cows. The cows yielded milk, which could be sold to market through a farmers' co-operative whose small tank trucks could be seen every morning chugging along the narrow roads criss-crossing the meadows. Richard, tall, thin, in his early 40s, was mesmerized that a Canadian filmmaking "crew" had bothered themselves with reaching out to him and found him at work. "Sure I can meet with you," he had announced over his cell phone the day before, "but are you sure you're interested in me? I am just a farmer." For us, the idea that someone could be "just" a farmer was nonsense as we knew he had volumes to

teach us. “We would be thrilled to see what you do at work, and honoured to learn from you,” Phillip had reassured him in Italian.

Softspoken, humble, and genuinely warm Richard soon realized that his broken Italian--of which he seemed embarrassed--was actually better than Phillip’s. Being on a common plane seemed to put him at ease. In a not so distant past it was actually still possible to make a living from farming alone, he had told us, but now life had changed. The family had found it necessary to open a guesthouse in town, called Mutzhof, and could no longer afford to hire seasonal workers to help with the farm. Despite all this they lived well, and still enjoyed their work.

While we spoke Richard’s father patiently worked at cutting the grass with a scythe, concentrating on the spots too hard to reach with an engine-driven mower. We were lucky to be there to witness the rhythmic art of scything; meadows were cut only once a year, in July, and the practice had a deep ritual significance. Scything unfolded through a poetry of rhythm. Wide swings of the scythe were followed by the grating sound of grass being swept away, and then by the raspy metalling twang of the blade being sharpened by hand. In past times the hay would be stored in small wooden huts scattered on farmland around the meadows. As the snow would melt at progressively higher elevations with the arrival of summer, herders would move up the mountain, spending nights at small huts--still an unmissable architectural heritage visible everywhere on the mountain landscape. Throughout late spring and summer cows could eat fresh grass while the rest was cut and stored for autumn and winter. Then in late September, with the arrival of the first snow, herders would bring the cows home. The advent of motorized transportation meant that many farmers could now immediately bring down freshly-cut grass down the valley, to their *masi*, but seasonal rhythms continued. The definition of heritage as natural couldn’t possibly be more wrong in excluding intangible cultural heritage like this--we thought.

Co-existing with other rules of natural heritage and park conservation was even more difficult to accept at times, Richard explained. “Sometimes they raise a fuss over nothing.” One of the latest sources of contention was the spread of marmots throughout the territory. Marmots used to keep to higher mountain fields and only very rarely venture down to the lower altitude meadows. Now enjoying higher degrees of protection than in the past, they had multiplied and taken to digging holes in the ground on lower farmland. “It’s easy for a cow or horse to stick a foot in one of those holes and get hurt really bad,” Richard lamented.

Though admittedly less curious of a feature than marmots, cows too were inseparable from the mountain landscape that the World Heritage Committee had labeled “spectacular” and “quintessentially Alpine.” The prettiest amongst them were the grey ones, a local Alpine cow species that Richard and his father were happy to raise in an effort to help their preservation. Though not as productive as other kinds, grey Alpine cows were a key element of local history and it was stunning to see how “just a farmer” like Richard could play such an essential role in heritage preservation simply in virtue of day-to-day work. True heritage isn’t something you preserve, after all, it’s something you do.

The trail to the Schlern summit, in the meanwhile, had begun to lift its back. In the morning, after a hearty breakfast, we had decided that it wouldn't be necessary to stop for lunch at the Saltner Hut--our last chance for food before the Schlerhaus. That decision was quickly turning out to be a terrible mistake. With the midday temperatures rising into the mid 20s and a limited supply of water--and no snacks--our legs were starting to give in. April's bad toe and the increasingly thin levels of oxygen weren't helping either. Autumn, in particular, seemed to struggle the most. Hairpin turn after hairpin turn her complexion seemed to turn as pale as the mountain's summit now clearly visible in front of us. A serious sugar crisis seemed to be getting nearer.

A quick estimate--collected from refreshed-looking hikers heading back down the mountain--revealed that we were still fortyfive minutes away. We had been hiking for well over four hours without any food when Autumn, at last, crashed to the ground.

"Hey, are you ok?"

"Chocolate." Was her response. "Sugar. Anything."

An hour later, with her face stuffed with a coconut-flavoured Ritter Sport bar and a slice of cake freshly-baked by the Schlerhaus kitchen staff, her smile was back.

"The Dolomites are widely regarded as being among the most attractive landscapes in the world," the World Heritage inscription reads. "Their intrinsic beauty derives from a variety of spectacular forms such as pinnacles, spires, and towers, with contrasting horizontal surfaces including ledges, crags, and plateaux, all of which rise abruptly above extensive talus deposits and more gentle foothills. A great diversity of colours is provided by the contrasts between the bare-pale coloured rock surfaces and the forests and meadows below. The mountains rise as peaks with intervening ravines, in some places standing isolated but in others forming sweeping panoramas. Some of the rock cliffs here rise more than 1,500m and are among the highest limestone walls found anywhere in the world. The distinctive scenery of the Dolomites has become the archetype of a 'dolomitic landscape.' Geologist pioneers were the first to be captured by the beauty of the mountains, and their writing and subsequent painting and photography further underline the aesthetic appeal of the property."

As awe-inspiring as they may be in their moody pale grey during the day, however, the Dolomites truly show their uniquely beautiful face at sunrise and sunset. After dinner, as the sun began to descend behind the Schlern summit, the Rosengarten mountain group visible in front of us from the Schlerhaus shed their pale shroud for a warm orange veil, which gradually shifted to pink and then rose. A herd of cows munching short, thin grass provided the soundscape, with deep-toned bells hanging down their necks. Though modest in its interior design ambition the Schlerhaus's exterior--faint-coloured slabs of rock standing tall in contrast to the short dark grass littered with thousands of miniscule white limestone pebbles--fit the scene well: stark, bare, and imposing in its linear and angular verticality. Though

we are known to disagree with UNESCO’s rhetoric every now and then, this time our dissent over the aesthetic value of the spectacle before our eyes was fully muted.

After a good night’s sleep Autumn was back in top form. Punctually a good 50 to 100m ahead of the rest of us she led the way throughout the morning along the rocky and grassy ridge connecting the Schlern with the Rosengarten mountains. The evening before, however, we had decided to adjust our plans slightly. Instead of descending to the Grasleitenhutte and then climbing up again to the Gasleitenpass hutte we had re-routed our path straight to the Tierser Alplioch hut--a more leveled trail right at the foot of the imposing Rosengarten. This flexibility was a unique function of the social and geographical imagination that over the years had shaped the place into what it was now. Unlike places more familiar to us like the forests of British Columbia or New Zealand where a single route connecting remote campsites was normally the only option other than bushwhacking, the Dolomitic landscape was a meshwork of methodically-numbered pathways--brightly colored on limestone rock in the shape of the Austrian flag--which branched out from one another like a system of interurban highways. A 1:25,000 topographical map with a legend more detailed than Google Earth put us in an enviably controlling position over our route. 1-4, 4 today. 4, 8, 7, 8a, 8 the next day.

Making things even easier for planning purposes was the unique fact that the Dolomites, somewhat surreally, looked incredibly small. Not a smallness that took away from their imposing vertical presence before your eyes, but a smallness that made them look confined, discrete, finite, and thus somehow approachable. The Dolomites were mountains you could spot from any distance--largely because of their sudden verticality almost exploding out of the ground. Upon sighting them you could then quickly approach and eventually touch them with your bare hands, as if to say: “Tag! I made it here.”

At the same time their smallness often created narrow ridges between them, ridges surrounded by remarkably steep scree fields which would have made every hiking child’s parent alarmed, to say the least. Autumn, leading the pace with a gleeful smile on her face, looked nonchalant, seeming unaffected by the ongoing chorus of admiring Italian mountaineers constantly remarking “Mamma mia! Che bambina brava!” as she trudged along vertiginous passages with her head in the clouds and her self-confidence and legs a world away from the lows of the Overland Track.

It was one o’ clock when we made it to the Tierser Alplioch: a brand new hostel-style whose bare red roof and clean minimalistic Scandinavian design felt in stark contrast to the richness of its international menu. Feeling somewhat guilty to call it a day by lunchtime, we spent the rest of the afternoon and evening stalking marmots with our telephoto lens and failing, dismally, to visually convey with our cameras the smoothness and coldness of the Dolomitic rock. This was no “wild” place by common standards; no nature here could be reasonably called pristine or untouched, but the sublime character of the landscape felt by no means any less mighty.

On July 17 we woke up early and set out for the nearby Seiser Alm again, after descending from the Rosengarten. The Seiser Alm is what geographers would call an alp: a grassy pasture found on a mountainside. There are many alps around the Alps, as the etymology of each word naturally suggests, but the Seiser Alm is one of a kind. Fifty-two square kms in size, 1,850m of average altitude, the Seiser Alm is surrounded by a handful of mountain groups reaching above 3,000m, each marked by distinctive and immediately recognizable shapes. There was the diagonal and perfectly flat surface of the Plattkofel (Flat Rock in English), the hand-like shape of the tall Sassolungo (Long Rock, in English) and its neighboring towers, the saddle-shaped Sella (indeed, Saddle), the postcard-perfect Schlern (whose stylized figure, you will recognize on your next grocery store trip, is used as a logo by the sweets-maker Loacker), and the jagged and slightly tilted Puez-Odle group.

Early tourism on the Seiser Alm dates back to the 1930s. The first gondola, reaching the Alp's northern edge from the town of St. Ulrich was opened in 1934. Four years later the first chairlift was also inaugurated, opening up the first ski field in the area. Today there are about 20 uphill transportation facilities on the alp: a mix of chairlifts, gondolas, and smaller cable cars most of which operate during both winter and summer. Partly subsidized by the province and the region to keep tickets affordable (sort of), uphill transportation infrastructures might be perceived to enable laziness and detract from the natural character of the highland, but on the other hand they are a better alternative to the car. Back in the 1980s, Phillip recalls, it was relatively easy to drive up to the Seiser Alm from the town of Seis, reach a desired destination, and have a picnic not too far from one's car. As a result the narrow paved pathways were regularly congested and many of the meadows, on a busy August day, would almost feel like a city park. Following World Heritage directives, and capitalizing on the recent inauguration of the massive Seis-Seiser Alm cable car, car traffic to the Seiser Alm had undergone a series of restrictive measures over the last decade and was now de facto shut down to all but farmers and a few hotel guests permitted to drive only for the purpose of checking in and checking out.

Access restrictions, we had learned a few days before in Kastleruth from mixed-media artist Hubert Kostner, were part and parcel of a new philosophy of environmental conservation and tourism management which had taken roots since the beginning of the new millennium. Deadset against mass tourism, Hubert found, the region had become focused on "quality tourism." Quality tourism was synonymous with stringent measures over road access to high elevations, for example, and with data-driven environmental management. But quality tourism had its pernicious effects too, according to Hubert. Quality had become a veneer for exclusivity and high prices. Three, four, and five star hotels were in constant competition with one another to provide new frills every year. If one had a sauna, an indoor pool, an outdoor pool, a spa, and an executive chef, the one across the street should have the same features also, only better. Crowding and environmental impact were being fought with the high costs of the latest artisanal food fashions, relaxation massages, and silk-covered comforters.

Hubert was born and raised in the Dolomites. Now in his early 40s his art adorned public buildings and spaces around the region, inspired by his admiration for the landscape and a critical attitude toward the consequences of tourism. “My work can be traced back to old postcards,” he explained, “what characterizes these places is our ‘scenography,’ as I call it.” By “scenography” Hubert meant the sublime and idyllic scenic value of the landscape: “our landscape is so beautiful, so surreal, it’s like a scenography.” Over time he started collecting postcards and pieces of linden wood, carving scenic landscapes in the wood and polishing them in laquer. “Its essence is symbolic because on one side you have nature and on the other side you have a cultural intervention, which now has become touristic. And the touristic intervention is like a laquer that covers the original substance.”

Hubert’s beautifully-lit, cement-walled studio looked out to the mountains and the meadows, with a chairlift visible not too far in the distance which connected the town of Kastleruth with Marizenhutte, at the western edges of the Seiser Alm. “To me the image of a cable,” Hubert told us pensively gazing outside, “with chairs hanging from it and going down, it’s just gorgeous.” Growing up in the Dolomites meant there was an easy association between chairlifts and a way of being outdoors. “It’s part of my inner child,” he told us with a smile. But from an environmental standpoint there had to be a limit, he thought. Chairlifts and gondolas in and of themselves may have had a limited footprint, but with the arrival of mechanized uphill transportation come restaurants, hotels, roads, cars, and endless problems.

Hubert’s words kept ringing in our ears as we approached the Floralpina Sporthotel, at the end of our third day’s hike. Offering an indoor and an outdoor swimming pool, a 520 square meter spa with indoor and outdoor Jacuzzi, a Kneipp basin (not sure what that was), a bio-sauna, a steam room, a Finnish sauna, and a relaxation room to all guests, the Floralpina featured bedrooms with minibar, satellite TV, telephone, balconies, and all the toiletries and bathroom appliances that could never have fit in our backpacks, plus an outdoor cafe and a fine dining restaurant where the waiters wished the three of us couldn’t eat so fast.

“This is too much, guys, what kind of mountain hut experience is this supposed to be?” April, in her trademark modesty, balked upon stepping onto the hotel’s premises.

“Mom, this is for research, remember?” Autumn scolded her with a devious smile as she led the way to the check-in counter.

And would we need a dedicated parking spot for our vehicle? No, we walked here, we informed the friendly check-in clerk.

“Oh, wow, you did?!” The surprise was telling.

Our brief stay was, er, rewarding. But if we didn’t slip into the realm of ridiculousness at dinner time, with the five course meal served by the formal-dressed Floralpina staff (Autumn: “which one of these three forks should I use for which course, dad?”), we surely did the following day. Two chairlifts and three gondola rides--and several Euro banknotes--were essentially what our hike of the day consisted of. Making our progress in between valleys even more convenient, if

that was possible, a underterrenean conveyor belt of the type you might find at a Tube station transitioned us effortlessly from gondola number two to gondola number three. This is silly, one might have remarked. Then again one would have soon realized that the conveyor belt nearly annihilated the need to use a private vehicle to get from one side of town to the other.

To be sure, very little of this was “wild”--other than in reference to the creativity of the planners involved perhaps--but what had begun to transpire is how drop-dead gorgeous nature could be managed so effectively, so expansively and expensively, and so thoroughly that absolutely nothing could be left to accident. And the result was mesmerizing: from every tree to each meadow, from trails to every mountain sceneries, from towns to villages, the Dolomitic landscape was so impossibly beautiful and inviting that anyone but the most wilderness-tested visitor would have just fallen in love with it at first sight and promptly ordered a rich slice of pie to celebrate *la dolce vita*, followed by a cappuccino and a visit to a Kneipp basin.

Landscapes like the Dolomites aren’t so much “manufactured’’--to refer to filmmaker Edward Burtynsky’s visually arresting documentary on factory spaces and industrial wastelands, *Manufactured Landscapes*--but rather *manicured*. To manicure is to take meticulous care of something in order to make it look more attractive. To manicure is to polish, to trim, to shape, and to beautify. Complicit in the Dolomitic manicure were municipal authorities, provincial and regional governments, environmental and commerce organizations, and the World Heritage committee itself--all united in maintaining and enhancing the supposedly intrinsic beauty of the landscape. This was how the “scenography” came to be: a mis-en-scene that so cleverly obscured the culture and society hard at work in making nature look “intrinsically” beautiful. The Dolomites were on the UNESCO list for a good reason, but rathern than natural heritage a more proper classification for them might have been next to any other work of art and architecture on the long list of Italian cultural heritage sites.

Trouble is, Margarethe, Paul, and Markus--and arguably the many other people around the region involved in applying for the site’s inscription onto the World Heritage list--weren’t quite aware there was a third category beside cultural and natural heritage. “We just didn’t know at the time there was such a thing,” Margarethe told us. It was an excusable omission. Through there are now over 35 mixed sites around the world, their number pales in comparison to 1,017 cultural and natural heritage sites. Not to mention that the very notion of a mixed cultural and natural site might be downright confusing to people accustomed to a world made of tidy categories: either monuments or mountains, either art or rock, either civilized or wild.

Little of this dichotomy made sense to Giovanni Mischi. Giovanni, a Ladin historian, had recently published a book on the role played the larch tree in the ecology and history of the Dolomites. He lived in a vila in the Gader Valley in the small town of Longiarú--at the northeastern edges of the Puez Odle Naturepark. In South Tyrol a vila, Giovanni was quick to explain, had nothing to do with the

concepts of Roman-style villas or plush Hollywood villas we might be more familiar with. A vila was a hillside compound made of several buildings--anywhere from three or four to as many as a dozen called masi. Neighbors within a vila could be relatives or friends, but regardless of their relation they shared some common facilities and helped each other out with work and everyday life as needed.

Masi was the plural noun, maso the singular. “A maso is the combination of house and barn,” Giovanni explained. On one side of a maso you could find the people, and on the other side the cows. On one side human residents, and on the other animal residents. Culture and nature, living together, in the same place, taking care of each other. It was a good arrangement for both, and with such an expression of anti-dualism right in his living environments it was obvious how someone like Giovanni could have very little sympathy for the separation of cultural and natural heritage. His maso, called Ciasa de Mair, or the mayor’s house, was a fully-renovated home: modern, spacious, comfortable, and impeccably polished and orderly. The cows’ quarters seemed nearly as hospitable.

Despite their heritage value many vilas and masi had been slowly disappearing over the last fifty years, either to make space for residential spaces or remodeled as mountain restaurants called “malghe.” “What has happened over the last 50-60 years is impressive,” Giovanni reflected, “every town in the Badia Valley used to depend on local agricultural revenue. Nowadays agriculture is still somewhat important in the local economy, however it is perhaps the smallest link in the chain. Economic development has depended on tourism. These days nearly everyone lives off tourism, even agriculture indirectly, and all of this has consequences for our natural environment,” Giovanni spoke using measured words, with the authority of a teacher. “For example, look at the ways our meadows are cut and our natural landscapes are cared for.”

We had been looking indeed. There was hardly a meadow that didn’t look as though you could just sprawl over and treat it like a luxurious therapeutic bed without as much as a sleeping mat or a blanket. “Around here meadows are cut because there are still people attached to their land,” Giovanni continued. Beside their emotional attachment farmers mowed grass so lovingly thanks to economic incentives and subsidies issued by municipal authorities. Even at their vila the meadows were cut by Giovanni and his wife “for the love of it.” “We do it for the sake of the environment,” he reflected, “we just do it to take care of the landscape.”

The geographical and historical significance of that fact had not escaped his attention. “The masi appeared here 6-,7-, 800 years ago. Before then nature was intact. Following that there has been tillage, deforestation. Deforestation has led to the growth of meadows and meadows led to fields. These meadows are not natural,” Giovanni argued, “not even the high mountain meadows. High mountain meadows are in part the result of artificial work. No matter how beautiful this landscape is,” he continued as lightning suddenly struck in the distance, “we should not think of a natural landscape or intact nature.” As thunder roared for a few seconds, he collected his thoughts and finished the argument: “We should think of this as a cultural landscape.” Hardly anyone could have come up with a better

explanation of what a mixed heritage site actually stands for. Nonetheless the Puez-Odle Naturepark was a UNESCO natural heritage site, regardless of farmers' work and Ladin history, and notwithstanding the ongoing manicuring happening day in and day out by the hands of multiple parties.

Our fourth day of trekking, or better yet lift-riding, had ended within the boundaries of the Puez-Odle park, right underneath the Mont de Stevia and the Odle group. Checking in for the night at the Regensburger Hut we ordered a dinner of eggs, bacon, and roasted potatoes and took to our separate rooms. The Regensburger was an old-fashioned mountain hut, no pools or saunas, with shared bathrooms and dormitory-style spaces. So while Autumn took to her drawing journal (no TVs available either) the two of us ordered a pair of radlers (naturally, the necessities were there) and began consulting our trusted map as the sun went on to pull its usual pink magic with the formerly pale rock.

Scattered around us in all directions, we realized, were a handful of the "malghe" we had read about. Malghe were small "inns," our map legend told us in English, offering local agricultural products. Neither restaurants nor cafes, neither teahouses nor pubs, "malghe" were all of the above and beyond. Malghe had been converted from a former life of hard agricultural work, either having served as masi or as summertime lee for herders. Typically serving food from mid-morning to late afternoon, malghe featured a few savory Italian and German dishes made with ingredients farmed or harvested nearby, as well as beers, wine, and a selection of goods baked onsite. So rather than packing a salami wrap the average credit-card-carrying hiker could rest one's legs for an hour or two and enjoy pumpernickel bread with Alpine cheeses, knoedels with melted butter and parmesan cheese, a slice of strudel filled with apples from the region, and a cold Bavarian beer. With a lunch like that, and legs tired from hiking all day, who could actually need a spa or a relaxation to fall asleep at their hotel, we wondered.

Well, more people than you might think, according to Fritz Bromberger. Fritz owned the Utia de Borz hut on top of the Wurzjoch, a 2,006m mountain pass between the town of Brixen and the upper Gader Valley at the northern edges of the Puez-Odle World Heritage site. Smacked right in front of the imposing Sas de Putia--an iconically triangular slab of grey rock reaching 2,875m--and atop a meadow surrounded by scattered patches of forest--the hotel-style hut featured a quintessentially Alpine dining lounge and cozy bedrooms appointed with Swiss pine furniture. "Guests' expectations have increased," Fritz recounted, "Even at 2,000 metres of altitude people don't want to have cold water or candlelight, they want comforts. Years ago the people who would go high up the mountains were expert walkers, people who knew what it meant to go up a mountain, who had an idea what to expect. Now the group is wider and many people don't care about the significance of mountains; they want the same comforts they have at home. And the question is: is it sustainable? The costs for building and maintenance at such heights are enormous."

In his sixties, Fritz had developed a unique mechanism to cope with the stresses of running a growing business: he hiked. Or more descriptively, he galloped. Every day he had a chance he would set aside some time to hike around the many trails branching around the Sass de Putia, occasionally even accompanying guests all the way to the summit in the middle of the night. “On a clear day at sunrise you can see glimpses of Venice,” he liked to say. With April’s toe nails still healing we had decided it was best for Phillip alone to accompany Fritz on one of his routine morning walks: a four-hour-long 18km loop around the Sass de Putia. Lean, stocky, and with his lungs accustomed to the thin air Fritz could simultaneously talk and sprint up and down the steep trails while Phillip struggled to keep up.

Tourism in the region had changed dramatically, Fritz reflected. People--just like Phillip’s parents when he was a child--used to take a whole month off for holiday. They would drive up to the Dolomites, park their car, and hike new trails day after day until their month off work ran out. During the winter most employers would give their workers a week off so they could enjoy what middle-class families called “the white week”: an entire week spent on the slopes skiing and relaxing. “Now it’s all changed,” Fritz commented with a tinge of melancholia. “Nowadays people have this hit and run mentality,” he continued, they show up for a few days, maybe a weekend, and then they’re off to the next destination: Venice, Tuscany, Rome or maybe somewhere in Austria or Bavaria.

The World Heritage designation had caused some changes as well. Before UNESCO and its logo arrived to the Dolomites the mere sighting of, say, a Swiss tourist was a source of marvel, Fritz confided. “I recall one time several years ago someone from the United Kingdom showed up at our hut and we had to spend a few hours tracking down someone that could speak English to him. Now we see Chinese, Japanese, Americans, Canadians, Australians.” They too, however hit and run. As the trail wound its way up a ridge behind the Puez group, Fritz--seemingly never out of breath--went on: “people nowadays fork out lots of money on a nice car. These are luxury vehicles, they are as comfortable as living rooms. So they don’t mind spending their holidays driving around from destination to destination: a day here, a day and a half there, and onward.”

Like most Dolomitic hikes the Sass de Putia loop traversed a wild variety of grounds. The hard fractured limestone soil; faded creamy white and ash blonde. The loose scree, gently giving way under heavy boots. The forest dirt, tangled with red pine roots, moist with previous nights’ rainfalls, and ripened by random smatterings of cow patties. The open fields; short blades of grass growing on soft topsoil sequinned by myriad blue, red, and yellow wildflowers. Every ground, it seemed, had its distinct smell too. The alkaline Dolomitic rock. The pungently crisp aroma of coniferous trees. The medley waft drifting from Gentians, Geraniums, Euphorbias, Arnicas, and Edelweiss flowers. The full-flavored, gamy odour of fresh cow manure--quite possibly the most soothing stench in the nature world. And the sizzling, savoury spice of German wieners and potato rosti: the most telling sign a hut’s kitchen staff was working hard nearby. It was time for brunch.

The Italian language is thought by many to be pleasant to the ear, musical, even playful. Yet many visitors of the Bel Paese fail to understand that the Italian language is largely a compromise: a historic exercise in diplomacy and negotiation. When Italy was united in 1861 the country was divided into a cacophony of towns and regions each with their languages and dialects marked by multiple accents and infinite local variations. Florentine, it was decided, had yielded enough popular literary masterpieces that it could be learnt easily by most, and so the Italian language soon became synonymous with it. With its roots deep in Latin, however Florentine Italian had no word for “wild,” or at least no word that truly matched the connotations of that word in English or German. The Italian word for wild, “selvaggio” more closely approximates the English “savage,” with its numerous negative connotations. So many Italians turn to the word “nature” instead, often remaining agnostic on whether or how deeply that nature is entangled with the human world.

Take the ground, the well-kept grassy soil that Fritz and Phillip resumed walking upon after their stop at the Schluterhutte. “Farmers are well-subsidized, from the province, from the EU,” Fritz explained, “and that benefits tourism too because they take care of the place very well. Without the farmers cleaning up, the place would be a disaster. All the grass would dry up. From mid-August on everything would be brown and ugly. Tourism benefits because nature is cared for and cleaned, and that brings lots of tourism. Because tourists then find *una natura eccezionale*--an outstanding nature.” There was that word: nature. Clearly this wasn’t pristine nature; it was very much touched by the hands of farmers and for that no less exceptional or outstanding, no less natural. Farmers’ work indeed, we had been told by Klaus Puntaier at the Tiers sawmill and visitor centre, was proven to contribute directly to the biodiversity of the region. Without their activities the low-nutrient soil--called *prati magri* in Italian, or thin lawns--would have been a home to significantly fewer species. Thanks to them this was now a biodiversity hotspot, however and almost as if to underline that fact Fritz was now walking with a freshly-picked wildflower in his hair. “A local custom,” he said, as he suggested Phillip might try and do the same.

It was now noon, and Phillip (with the flower still dangling off his hair) had somehow managed to keep up with Fritz’s unrelenting pace downhill without losing a meniscus. Fritz had a full workday ahead of him whereas Phillip was looking forward to a badly needed a nap and a foot massage. But before the outing was over there were more questions, especially about Ladin, Fritz’s native language. Ladin is a Romance language originating from the Rhaeto-Romansch family of languages. Over a millennium ago Rhaeto-Romansch was spoken by people spread out as far west as Eastern Switzerland to as far east as the Northern Adriatic coast. Due to the movements of Bavarians and Venetians across borders, as well as shifting politics, customs, and economies, the Rhaeto-Romansch family eventually split into three chunks. One became confined to the Grisons canton in Switzerland, one to the Friuli region in northeastern Italy, and one to the Dolomites.

Today, in the Dolomites Ladin (the local variation of Rhaeto-Romansch) is spoken in the three valleys hugging the two World Heritage sites we had chosen to explore: the Gader, Gröden, and Fassa Valleys. Linguistic preservation policies have ensured that Ladin is still spoken in schools and state institutions. Curiously the Mussolini regime didn't fight the Ladin language as much as he did German, erroneously perceiving it to be little more than an Italian dialect. Local Ladin speakers are proud of the fact that their native tongue is now an officially-recognized language, and a very rare one to boot. It had been a "*bondi,*" Fritz said, patiently giving Phillip a quick Ladin 101 lesson, without any "*piova*" and only a little bit of "*vent*." A good day, without rain and just a little bit of wind. And with that Phillip thanked Fritz, bid him *sarevede* and the two went on their separate ways.

> *Field journal: July 21, 2017*
> *Day 6 of our trek. We are up before everyone else at the Regensburger Hutte and after a 30 minute walk we reach the mountain station of the Col Raiser cable car before it's even open for the day. Down in the valley we quickly make our way through the town of St. Christina and two chairlifts later we are the base of the Langkofel mountain. We descend down a ridge and then climb again to 2,154m as the fog closes in on us. We stop for lunch at the Comici Hut. The place is a circus. Thirty years ago this was a bit of a dive. Now there is a dog bar, children's slides, a snack bar and a full-service restaurant, a cell-phone charging station, a mountain bike service station. The bathroom decor looks like it was lifted out of a night club. Two Italian families overhear us speak English and ask if we are from the UK. Canada, we tell them. "Canadians? But your mountains are so beautiful! What brings you here?" they ask. "Yes," we explain, "our mountains are beautiful, but here it's different. When we go hiking in Canada we don't get to choose among fifteen different kinds of freshly-baked pie for lunch."*

Beauty is the reason why so many people care about wildness. A beautiful place is often a place worth preserving, worth fighting for. There are many places around the world that are considered to be wilder than the Dolomites. Some of them are protected, but most aren't, and maybe, just maybe, it's because they aren't beautiful enough. They aren't beautiful enough for people to care. We are not justifying this attitude, but we know it's there. Beauty is not the same as wildness, but the raw emotional power of wildness resides largely in its beauty--this much is true.

Turn to the official page of the Dolomites World Heritage site: DolomitiUnesco.it: "The Dolomites have always had a huge impact on those who admired them for the first time and it is not a secret that they are acclaimed as the most beautiful mountains on earth. In fact, they actually contribute to the definition of the concept of 'natural beauty' developed in the years preceding their 'discovery', thanks to the philosophy of the aesthetic of the sublime. Long before being painted and photographed, the Dolomites were described by scientists and

climbers through reports that clearly told the extraordinary emotion that invaded their minds looking at them, in fact they used words that corresponded exactly to the categories of the 18th century aesthetic of the sublime: amazement, transcendence, verticality, intense colors, grandeur, essential purity, monumentality, mystical asceticism and tormented forms." Interestingly enough, this wasn't always the case.

Before the 18th century mountains were often thought to be grotesque, ugly, abominations of nature. The Alps weren't always so sublime. Alpinism itself was a recent invention. Before people from the city turned up with ropes and boots, ready to climb and enjoy the highest peaks, residents of mountain regions would never dare go up. "And why would you?" they might have reasoned, "it's dangerous, it's exhausting, it's pointless." And yet alpinism took off, in large part inspired by the same attitude that encouraged the cultivation of an artistic education and imagination. Mountains were monuments, according to this ideology, their raw natural purity a close correspondent to the essential creativity of the artist's mind.

Like high culture and the fine arts, however, mountains' beauty wasn't at first meant for everyone. Skill, physical prowess, sacrifice, fatigue, danger were for a very long time understood to be crucial tests for anyone keen on appreciating their sublime character. Amazement, transcendence, grandeur, mystical asceticism and all that could only be rightly perceived after an arduous day of walking. The beauty of wild nature exacted a price be paid through the body. That's the way it was.

A little over an hour's walk away from the Comici Hut lay the SellaJoch Resort. Until a few years ago it was actually called the Sellajoch Hut. It was, rusty, gritty, and unkempt; a functional hostel of sorts with a long history as a basecamp for high altitude climbers. Now, after a massive renovation, it featured a swimming pool, a sauna, a steam room, a wine cellar, and a fine dining lounge. "All our rooms," the hotel's website taunted, "are furnished with pine wood. This fine wood has a relaxing effect and, thanks to its scent, it improves the quality of sleep, transforming every stay into a rejuvenating experience." Luxury didn't stop there. Rooms also featured private saunas and large screen entertainment centers equipped with PlayStation. And since it was located atop a major pass between two valleys you could drive there.

The notion that the sublime is something you have to strive for is rapidly disappearing from our world. Places like the Dolomites are still as beautiful as they have always been but it is the conditions for the appreciation of that natural beauty that have changed. Comfort and convenience are now part of the experience of nature, and for some people--maybe most--without those qualities beautiful nature is simply unimaginable, hampered by fatigue, risk, and inaccessibility. But this commodification of nature was old news in the Dolomites. For decades after the Cortina Olympics tourism had grown in the region in parallel with obtrusive infrastructures ready to accommodate more and more visitors. Then someone, somewhere in a Dolomitic valley must have gotten wise to it and changed the rules. No more masses, no more infrastructure, no more crass commodification. A new vision of the sublime for the new "hit and run" quality tourism was needed.

On day 7 we set off from the Langkofel Scharte at 2,685m and crossed through the vertiginous scree fields separating the Langkofel from the Plattkofel. The loose scree and a few patches of snow made our advance slow at times, but we eventually made it back below the treeline and after a few hours reached the meadows of the Seiser Alm again, where we found refuge for the night at the Zallinger Hut. In the morning of day 8, tired from the long downhill walk of the day before, we dragged our sore knees and toes to the Panorama Hotel, where everything had begun eight days before. Walking proudly into the lounge and announcing to the confused desk clerk that we had been walking for eight days straight, we all knew that this had been a challenge only in comparison to the average hotel guest's routine of spa treatments, newspaper-reading, and wine-tasting.

"You know, guys" Autumn, unasked, volunteered her summative read of our trek, "this hike was fun and everything, but I don't feel any accomplishment. In New Zealand, I kind of hated it, but at the end I felt like I had achieved something. This one was so beautiful, but it wasn't really challenging." Autumn, and the rest of us, might have had her heart set on the old version of the sublime. The ice cream and the radlers were nice, but somehow they didn't feel deserved.

At lunchtime Emanuel, whom we hadn't seen in over a week, joined us at the Panorama. He ordered his food in German, while April and Autumn asked for theirs in English, and Phillip in Italian. Without flinching, the young waiter took it all down. This Alp, Emanuel observed, was dominated by agriculture, "The agriculture has increasingly been replaced by the monoculture of tourism." We nodded in agreement. "For example, the traditional dresses, a few decades ago, were only used for certain ceremonies and rituals, like going to mass on Sunday. Nowadays you have the performance or the presentation of these traditional dresses to tourists in settings disconnected from traditional rituals. And so it has become a kind of public performance of your culture, which is of course an adaptation to the modern world with all its influences from the outside. So, sometimes there is a question about the authenticity of this performance."

"Have the locals lost their souls to tourism," April asked.

"Maybe, somehow, it's a normal development. Culture is always changing and adapting to new situations. If today's society revolves around tourism then new and old traditions go in the way of tourist performance. So it's difficult to say that anyone has lost their soul. The Dolomites 50 or 60 years ago were inhabited by peasants who produced what they needed for a living. Now they, and the hoteliers, and the restaurateurs, and the shop owners have found another way to survive. You might say it's not authentic, but what exactly is authentic culture anyway?"

Because of his PhD in cultural heritage, and the fact that he spent several days with us interviewing people, Emanuel had given these issues more than a fair share of thought and his insights were not only profound but also quite agreeable to us. Change, he explained, was part of culture. Not only had the Dolomite region experienced drastic economic change following the early arrival of tourism and its subsequent evolution toward mass consumerism, but they had also experienced

another source of change more recently. After the 1980s and early 1990s environmentalism had taken deeper roots. That had slowed down commercial and residential developments and road building. Then UNESCO arrived, bringing even more prestige and even more regulations.

"You now have a lot more people coming to this area," Emanuel remarked, "you have tourists from countries that you didn't have before, and the issue of protecting the area now has become an international issue. No longer is it up to only national or regional lobbies. I've heard people who say that at first everyone wants to be a World Heritage but once they are in they want out because they recognize the burden from all the restrictions and obligations. So, yes, it brings prestige but you also risk becoming expropriated. It's become more and more difficult for young people to own land in these valleys, or to own a house because the prices have gone up a lot in the last few decades. Tourism generates income, but the prices go up and it becomes difficult to live here. Hopefully in the future this won't become another Venice, where all the locals had to move out of the city because the foreigners bought everything up."

That was the condition of the new sublime. A stunningly beautiful place which attracted no longer just a few people from the surrounding regions, people with the time, the patience, and the passion to cultivate its appreciation. The new sublime was still beautiful but now it attracted people who were here today and in Venice tomorrow. People who needed to get to the summit fast, post a selfie on Facebook quick, and move on. Travellers who, unprepared and unwilling to invest weeks, could maximize comfort, convenience, and luxury in two or three days of plush decadence. And that, ironically, even made some kind of environmental sense. Hit and run luxury tourism had a serious price tag, the kind of price tag that only few could afford. Fewer people meant fewer cars on the road, fewer footsteps on the trails. Fewer people who paid more money, a lot more money than mass tourists do, was a reality that made economic sense too. As a result the new sublime nature came with white pine saunas in your room, relaxation massages, and subsidized meadow-cutting.

"So is this a wild place, Emanuel?"

"Yes, it is a wild place. But for me the issue of control comes up. Wild places are places where we lose control a bit, we lose control over nature," Emanuel responded. Only thing is, we thought, this was hardly a place out of control. From the amount and type of cow manure that could be spread out on the fields, to the landscsape liens that regulated the architectural design of masi and homes, from what foods could be served in a malga to the sections of a meadow that a path could cross, absolutely everything, it felt, was under control here. "But you see, this isn't place like the Amazon," Emanuel was quick to clarify, "this isn't a place where there are no paths to walk and untouched nature everywhere around you. But you've seen for yourselves how if a hiking path here brings you to the top, to the very top of a mountain, it gives you a feeling of wildness, a feeling of being out of control and being exposed to the forces of nature." Like the fog and the sudden flash storms. That was precisely the feeling that Gustav's photographs captured.

That was the feeling of the wild thunders and the lighting bouncing against bare rock walls, echoing through hollow valleys of cold pale stone. And that feeling, thankfully, was still free of charge and available to all.