

# Around and About in the Dolomites

by Martin Joffe



*Descending down from Pizzo Di Val Umbrina*

*All photos by Molly Joffe*

It was early September when we walked into Italy from the Martin-Busch Hütte (1896m). By the afternoon we reached Merano, from where we would begin a clockwise tour of the Stelvio National Park around the Ortles-Cevedale group (Trentino). A ten-day tour was planned with the aid of reports culled from the Internet, the Tabacco map 048 (Val di Peio/Val di Rabbi/Val di Sole) and also by stringing together various day hikes described in Gillian Price's Cicerone guide. After the Ulten Valley we went down Val di Rabbi to Malè. From there we side tracked south to Madonna di Compiglio for a five-day via ferrata tour in the Brenta alps. Back to the Val di Sole our route took us to Peio, from where we crossed west to the Passo Gavia, the details of which are described below. Passing the Forni glacier and Val Zebbru we visited Bormio, Trafoi and Sulden before descending the Martell valley and returning to Merano.

Sometimes we choose a very long single day, taking a direct line to avoid longer deviations which, whilst more manageable, would have taken two days. Below is the description of our long "direct line" challenging hike west from the tiny hamlet of Peio Pease to Rifugio Berni in an area southeast of Bormio.

With perfect weather it was a little after 0900 when we reached Il Fontanino di Celentino, known for its natural mineral water rich in iron and carbon dioxide. Wasting no time, we began climbing on a jeep track heading to the various farms above the large dammed Lago di Pian Palu.

We had not gone more than a few hundred metres when we found the road blocked due to forestry work taking place ahead. We had no choice but to ignore the “no entry” sign and hike on, and then anxiously ascend to Malga Palù. Luckily, when we did encounter the forestry crew, they were friendly enough and waved us through. After this, we did not see another person until reaching our destination many hours later. Now more relaxed, we proceeded steeply from Paludi on a path heading northwest (CAI-SAT path n. 110) towards the end of the Val Piana.

The next challenge was the crossing of what the CAI notes describe as “the impetuous torrent that runs through it with a wooden bridge.” At the crossing point, the remains of the old wooden bridge lay on one bank with only a loose rope spanning the stream. Holding on for dear life, we cautiously hopped from one submerged rock to another until safely on the opposite side. The well-defined trail continued in a westerly direction towards the Sforzellina Pass (3006m). The crossing of this pass was not part of the day’s plan because of an intimidating glacial crossing indicated on our map of the Passo Gavia. Instead, we headed north towards what the trail description called the “obvious” waterfall originating from Lake Val Umbrina. We found a sign pointing north but no trail, and so began a long climbing scramble. An occasional heap of stone suggesting a marker and an occasional faded red splash on a rock reassured us. Now, four hours into the hike, we still had long way to walk.

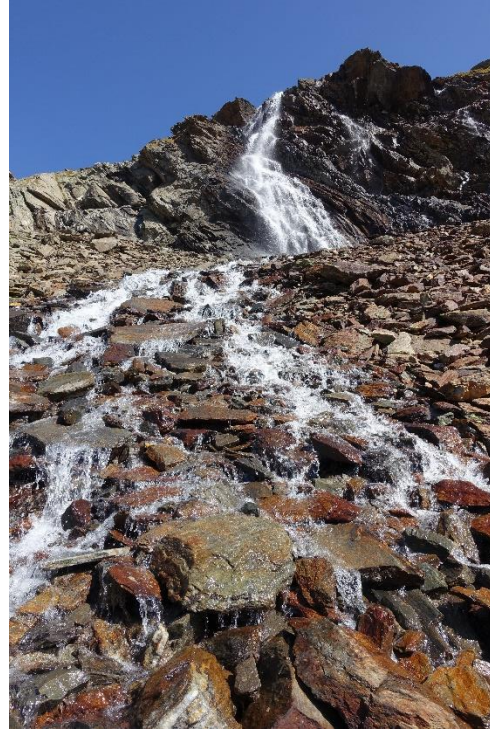


*Crossing the impetuous torrent*

Eventually, we reached the base of the waterfall where a trail climbed along one side before leveling off with the torrent flowing between boulders and submerged rock. Once again, the trail markers were infrequent, and stepping over the fast-flowing water we again cautiously jumped from rock to rock to reach the opposite side. Finally, we reached the most gorgeous of glacial lakes, Lago Val Umbria (2875m), the water of which was the most stunning cobalt blue. It was already 1400 and after a brief lunch break, we continued northwest climbing towards the crest of Pizzo di Val Umbria (3224m).



*Lake Val Umbria*



*Ascending trail through waterfalls from Val Umbria*

The challenge of crossing torrential streams and falls, traversing uneven ground without a trail and being quite alone in this desolate landscape was nothing compared to what lay ahead. The previous week's storm had left a thick blanket of snow on the steep, north facing boulder strewn ridge that led to the crest. With the crest looming as much as 100m above, the snow obliterated any trace of the trail or trail markers. We were forced to scramble up an extremely steep, snow-covered slick rock face which we later discovered was a mere 30m to the side of the true trail. The ascent was truly terrifying! It took us a good half hour to reach the crest, but not before having to pick our way over a wide tangle of rusting WWI barbed wire. Following the rocky ridge between the remains of trenches and fortifications of the Great War, we soon reached the Bivacco Battaglione Ortles (bivouac, 3130m), a former military barrack that is now used as a collection point for WWI relics.

It was now late afternoon, and cloudy skies were already darkening. We began a long descent past two alpine lakes, spotting several ibex on the way down. The glacial run off from the Dosegu glacier formed a torrential river of brown water. Along the southern bank a path led down to a wide plain then rising over a knoll we could make out the Gavia pass. Finally, we passed the abandoned Gavia refuge. The path then rose slightly for a short distance to a bridge over the Gavia stream, then crossing to the road to the Rifugio Berni just shy of 1800m.

The warden and his wife spoke not a word of English and besides Nonna (Grandma) there were no other guests. Using Google translate we agreed on a room for the night and a menu for dinner. They were puzzled by the route of our nine-hour outing. Looking towards Passo della Sforzellina, the warden pointed to a well-defined trail easily skirting around the remnant of a now very small glacier. This crossing would have saved us about two hours! As is often the case these days, the sizes of the glaciers were quite different from those on our map, in spite of the map being only seven years old.

The next morning, we walked leisurely north for four hours, to Rifugio Forni, from where the next day we would tackle the long crossing of Val Zebrù to Bormio.



*Dosegu glacier waterfall*