



Bewitched in the Dolomites



ITALY

Donna Dailey encounters herbalists, a living witch and Europe's oldest mummy in the South Tyrol, a region steeped in legend

the sun is deliciously warm, the sky a piercing blue, and I'm staring at a witch poised above me on the clifftop. Forget the spooky, dark forests of childhood fairytales. Here in South Tyrol, the alpine pocket of northern Italy that borders Austria, witches have inhabited the spectacular landscape of the Dolomites for centuries.

Instead of a breadcrumb trail through the woods, I've taken a cable car from the resort town of Seis, riding high up a mountainside to the Alpe di Siusi. This is Europe's largest mountain plateau, spreading over 56 square kilometres. Stepping out into the sunshine, I'm dazzled by its beauty. The rolling green meadows, dotted with wildflowers, are surrounded by grey, chiselled peaks shimmering so softly in the distance that I wonder if they're an illusion.

The striking pinnacles and razor-sharp ridges of the Dolomites are protected as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site. Locals call them the Pale Mountains, and legend has it they are enchanted.

Nearby, the witch is waiting. Martha Silbernagl's only black, witch-like garb is her ankle-length skirt, which is covered by a bright blue apron and topped with a red patterned scarf. She wears hiking boots. A flowery bandana and gold earrings frame her hearty, middle-aged face.

DANCING ROUND THE FIRE

Dressed in this traditional costume, the witch Martha, as she's known, recounts the myths and legends of South Tyrol on a walk to the Hexenbänke, the 'Witches' Bench', high above the valley where she was born. As our small group sets off on one of the many hiking paths that cross the plateau, she points to the Schlern (Sciliar), a landmark mountain with a distinctive double peak.

"They say that every Tuesday night the witches of South Tyrol went flying," Martha says. "Not only on broomsticks, but on pitch forks, hoes, even goats. Many, many women landed on the edge of this mountain. They made a big fire, and danced around it, wearing leather shoes with nails on the soles. They were dancing and singing and stamping their feet, and the metal striking on the rocks made many sparks and a dark smoke. People below saw thunder and lightning."

As we make our way uphill through the sublime scenery, Martha points out sweet-smelling black vanilla orchids, bright yellow arnica and other wild meadow plants. She ▶

1 MOUNTAIN



ABOVE Ötzi the Iceman **LEFT** The witch, Martha **RIGHT** Mountain meadows



picks juniper berries used to make gin, schnapps and speck, the delicious cured meat that is a South Tyrolean speciality. And she tells tale after spell-binding tale of witches, devils and magic.

At the top of a steep slope, a large mound of basalt boulders looms over the edge of the cliff. Martha climbs ahead to stand atop the Witches' Bench.

"Come, sit...sit here!" she cries, spreading her arms wide. "Here, I feel like a queen!" Below is a stunning view that stretches across the valley to the far horizon, taking in the town of Kastelruth (Castelrotto), tiny villages and farms. Martha points out a farmhouse that once belonged to her grandfather.

MAKING MISCHIEF

"When the witches finished their dance, they flew to the Witches' Bench and made mischief on the townspeople below," she tells us. "People believed the witches made things difficult at harvest time. The legend says that when there are dark clouds, lightning and thunder, the witches are sitting on this bench, creating it."

But for Martha - and for me - the magic here lies in the simple power of nature. "This is a spiritual place," she says. "Something without words. I just want to feel this - to listen, to hear, to look."

The drive back to Bolzano, the region's capital, winds through a charmed landscape of lush slopes, apple orchards and vineyards, castle ruins and villages crowned by red-domed churches and tall Gothic towers.

The city is equally delightful, its cobbled streets fanning out from Waltherplatz, the central square, with its striking Gothic cathedral. More people speak German than Italian in South Tyrol, and Bolzano's architecture reflects this duality. Wooden shutters, murals and flower-filled balconies adorn the buildings above busy shops and pavement cafes.

There are more bicycles than cars as we walk past the open-air market to the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology, to see the region's most famous exhibit. Ötzi the Iceman is no legend. He's a 5,300-year-old mummy, found in the nearby mountains almost perfectly preserved by glacial ice.

Peering into the cold chamber where he is kept, I am amazed at the detail still visible, down to the knuckles on his fingers and toes. Also on display are his bear hide cap, axe and other belongings which have revealed a wealth of information on life in the Copper



Age. Another legend awaits at the Parkhotel Laurin. The bar is decorated with fresco panels by the Art Nouveau painter Bruno Goldschmitt. The panels depict the tale of King Laurin, his rose garden and the lovely pink alpenglow which lights up the mountains at sunset each day.

At the very real gardens of Trauttmansdorff Castle in Merano, a fabulous array of 80 landscapes, from desert cacti to a palm beach to the world's largest grapevine, climbs up the hillside. The Forbidden Garden, a small, walled garden full of powerful – and poisonous – medicinal plants, features bizarre sculptures illustrating the legend of the magical herbalist, Belinda.

The plants are more benign at Plegerhof, an organic herb farm that sits prettily in the shadow of the Schlern. This was South Tyrol's first organic farm, where Martha Mulser and her daughters produce a range of herbal teas, salts, infusions, spices and cosmetics.

WITCH'S TEA

We tour the terraces with their colourful rows of flowering herbs. Back in the shop, we plunge in and pluck the dried flower petals from the stems to mix our own special blend of herbal tea. As I'm reflecting on how so-called witches were often herbalists who used their knowledge of plants for good, Martha offers me a cup of tea. It's delicious, and I ask for the name.

"Hexenzauber," she replies. "Witch's Tea."

On my last night in South Tyrol, we dine at Pretzhof farm. Over an aperitif of crisp, local Prosecco, we're enjoying splendid views down the narrow valley from the hillside terrace, when we hear the first rumble of thunder. Are the witches on the bench?

In the rustic dining room we feast on speck with fennel bread, ravioli with mountain cheese, slow-roasted ox with polenta and other local specialities prepared from the farm's own fresh produce. Outside, the pounding of the rain grows ever louder.

We rush to the doorway and huddle under the awning to watch the most spectacular storm. Lightning flashes across the sky in jagged, twisting cracks that arch between heaven and earth. With thunder rolling close overhead and the rain pelting down, I feel small and vulnerable on the mountainside. And I suddenly understand the legends of South Tyrol. It's easy to believe in the supernatural when the witches are dancing up a storm. ❶



FROM TOP LEFT Cookery class; traditional architecture; healing herbs; Witch's tea

WAY TO GO

Intravel (tel. 01653 617002 / intravel.co.uk) features walks in the Alpe di Siusi (Seiser Alm) on its High Dolomites walking holiday, seven nights from £730pp.

Headwater (tel. 01606 828572 / headwater.com) and **Ramblers**

Worldwide Holidays (tel. 01707 331133 / ramblersholidays.co.uk) also feature walking holidays in the Dolomites.

The Pflegerhof herb farm is open May to September and can organise tours in English by prior arrangement; pflegerhof.com.

To arrange a meeting with Martha the witch or for more information on South Tyrol, visit suedtirol.info. Free guides, apps and cultural holiday ideas are available through Culturonda at suedtirol.info/culturonda_lifestyle.