



# And breathe...

There's more to a mountain break than skiing, as **Deborah Cicurel** discovers when she heads to the Italian Dolomites, where the allure of the spa trumps the slopes



**T**he first thing you notice when you step outside is the air. It's the sort of air you forget exists while rushing around a congested city: fresh, cool and so palatable you want to take big gulps of it. And the great thing is that you can stand there and greedily inhale it for what seems like hours. Though you might look a little strange, it'll be a while before a car comes by and hoots at you.

That's the beauty of Ortisei, the postcard-pretty capital of Val Gardena, in the Dolomites. Unlike so many packed ski resorts, buzzing with the clomp of ski boots and exasperated calls for the bill, Ortisei is quiet and serene – the perfect place for a wellness break.

If you're part of a family where one half loves to ski from nine to five, with only a cursory break for a fleeting cappuccino, and the other wants to luxuriate in the mountain air, enjoy the scenery and give the gondolas a miss, this is the destination for you.

In the winter months, keen skiers and boarders can experience Val Gardena's impressive 500km of interlinked slopes with a single ski pass. If you're used to shelling out hundreds of euros a day for a private ski guide, you can save your cash for daily rounds of hot chocolates: Ortisei's Adler Balance Spa & Health Residenz, the hotel I've travelled to in an attempt to escape London's frenetic pace for a few peaceful days, arranges ski groups daily with experienced instructors at a mere fraction of the price you'd usually pay for a lesson.

Those who love travelling to the mountains for more indolent pursuits will find a good home in Adler Balance. The modern, edgier cousin of the Adler Dolomiti Spa & Sport Resort, which has been around since the early 19th century, the Balance acts as a medical competence centre where guests can do a full detox, diet, fitness or yoga programme, or even indulge in some light aesthetic medicine.

The two hotels are connected by a long underground tunnel, through which endless spa offerings are promised on mysterious doors: salt grottos, panoramic saunas, blossom steam baths and more. The treatment options include everything from Dead Sea mud wraps and candle massages to Ayurveda counselling and meditative walks.

In fact, there are so many different pampering options that you could stay for a month and not be able to experience each different therapeutic treatment. I have a good head start with three relaxing sessions: an anti-stress massage, which seems to cure my inability to nap during the day in seconds, an Adler Staminale Green facial treatment that leaves my skin glowing and smooth, and an arnica mud pack, during which I am slathered with fango – warm mud from Italy's

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thermal springs – before being wrapped up and lowered into a warm bath to allow the mud's soothing, regenerating and tension-relieving properties to do their magic.

If being pampered is, unfathomably, not your thing, you can indulge in solitude, too: the salt grotto comprises the hotel's underground lake, where you can weightlessly, mindlessly float in the saline water and feel the high-grade salt relieving any tension in your body; before hitting the sauna, which is enriched with crystal salt from the Himalayas.

Another must-do is the Panoramic Whirlpool after sunset – the best place to enjoy the twinkling lights of Ortisei. The hotel has views covered – there's also a panoramic relaxation area with floor-to-ceiling windows and an open fire, where you can unwind with a good book and the rare sound of silence, as well as a sauna and an open-air brine pool from which to enjoy the mountain vistas. ▶



► Away from the spa, it feels therapeutic just sitting on a sun-drenched sofa in the hotel's cosy lounge, basking in the rays while gazing at the dramatic surroundings of the Dolomites, recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its impressive natural beauty. The lounge is small but elegant, with cowhide poufs, chic wooden coffee tables and stuffed bookcases.

If you manage to muster up the energy to wear something other than your dressing gown and venture outside the hotel, walking around the tiny



town of Ortisei is a chance to browse its quaint, eclectic shops where you can pick up everything from carved wooden goods to homemade honey in the cabins that line the streets.

Make sure you head back in time for dinner. Adler Balance attracts people from all over the world thanks to its detox and weight loss programmes, although if you hadn't signed up for one, you'd be forgiven for never knowing these health-centric courses took place here.

At breakfast, tables are heaving under countless loaves of freshly baked, fragrant bread, while dinners are a five-course affair with a different menu every night: lamb with a tuna and coffee crust, carnaroli risotto with blueberries, aubergine and tofu pie... and there's no chance of watching the waistline and going for three courses instead, as the friendly waiters look genuinely devastated if you try to skip a course.

This genre of indulgence, though, is the best sort: despite the five-course dinners, steaming hot chocolates and indulgent breakfast crêpes – and the fact I haven't done much but eat and fall asleep in various rooms in the spa – I do feel trimmer somehow. Eating, lazing, drinking and snoozing, but still feeling healthier: how is that possible? It must be that matchless mountain air. ■

#### NEED TO KNOW

A three-night, half-board stay in a Junior Suite at the Adler Balance Spa & Health Residenz from approx. £495 per person, including vitality cuisine, access to Aguana Waterworld (the largest wellness zone in the Dolomites), Adler Fit extensive indoor and outdoor sports and leisure programme. Adler Beauty Package from approx. £125, including one facial, one pedicure and entrance to the Salt Grotto; Adler Health Screening Package from approx. £285, including bioelectric check-up, food intolerance test, personalised body package, anti-stress massage and dietary supplement, [adler-balance.com](http://adler-balance.com)