As Wild As You Want

In The Aosta Valley

Words and Images by Katy Dartford





"If there have been many bees in the summer, then there will be plenty of snow" our slightly eccentric yoga trekking teacher, Marzia Mosca, had told me earlier. Well, the snow had already started dumping down in parts of the Alps by the end of August, and now in Champoluc in the Aosta valley, Italy's smallest region surrounded by Europe's highest peaks, there seemed to be plenty of bees around. So I was going to make the most of the glorious sunny conditions here for the next few days on foot, bike, water and rock, before it was too late.

I'm being slowly lowered down about twenty meters of slimy rock face, the icy alpine water below reflecting my fear back at me. It's not the height that worries me or scrambling over slippery rocks, I am a rock climber after all, but I have a deep aversion to cold and I can't quite believe a wetsuit is going to protect me from it. But in a split second I plop into the pool and a shot of cold runs down my spine, water somehow managing to penetrate a gap somewhere in the suit. I'm in the canyon of Chalami, at Pont St Martin, accompanied by Italian guides Stefano Percino and Andrea Demaria, from Champoluc adventure company: AWAY (As Wild As You) With me is mountaineer and adventurer, Squash Falconer, the Aosta Valley Ambassador, who last May summited Everest. I've a lot to live up to so try to put on a brave face, however Squash and I end up being the "naughty schoolgirls" of the group, running off ahead and trying to find our own way through the boulders. Fortunately, Stefano, isn't much like your classically, half- starved, serious looking mountain guide, and finds it all rather amusing. We jump in bubbling pools and throw ourselves down an amazing 25 ft slide which sends us spinning upside down, water up our nose and round our brains. After about an hour and a half we've slid, plunged and swum through the chilly canyon, feeling very satisfied and very brave.

I've lately, more and more enjoyed walking in the mountains, but for me, and certainly for Squash (who on the morning I arrived in the valley, became the first British women to climb then paraglide off the top of the Grand Paradiso mountain) it's

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generally been more "alpine" in style; getting up at daybreak and trying to reach the summit before the day warms up, or slog it out mountain marathon. I'd never actually 'relaxed' on a hike, or stopped to meditate and to breathe in the alpine air.

But now I'm "yoga trekking" in the shadow of the Monte Rosa, and I soon discover its calming benefits. Our guide, Marzia says practicing it amongst the peaks helps mental balance and promotes emotional and physical energy, which improves concentration and endurance. Willowy Marzia learnt the Asian arts out in Nepal and India, but it was only seven years ago that she put yoga together with walking. We are met after breakfast at the Stadel Sousson, a rustic looking seven bedroom modern refugio, on a tranquil, southwest facing meadow above the village of Champoluc. It opened three years ago but has been there since the 1500's and is a short and bumpy ride away in a jeep from Champoluc, the ski spot of choice last season for Boris Johnson. Marzia takes us through some breathing exercises with a straight back and relaxed shoulders helping us to breathe completely, rather than with short breaths that stress the mind.

Next we have some Nordic walking instruction: "we walk wrong, we go too fast, we need to breathe better," says Martzia. We are told to hold our sticks at a 90 degree angle and not to put them in front of us as this makes you lean forward, "It's better to plant them slightly behind you so that your lungs are open and you can propel yourself forward using all or your body, then on the descent use both sticks in front of you to give you balance," we're advised.

As we head off through the lush valley of Cime Bianche, with the Matterhorn's and Breithorn's white peaks in the distance, through a forest of rhododendrons which only reveal their bright red flowers for two weeks in June, we attract some attention from local builders fixing up a restaurant roof who wolf whistle as we strut past.

Marzia suggests we go silently and listen to the mountains. But stopping me gossiping would require quite a steep ascent, and fortunately the route is mainly relatively undulating. Also Marzia's 'yoga dog' keeps dashing past me, tripping me up and disturbing my rhythmic breathing…

MARZIA'S 'YOGA DOG' KEEPS DASHING PAST ME, TRIPPING ME UP AND DISTURBING MY RHYTHMIC BREATHING

After another hour hiking we reach a grassy valley where we stop to do some more breathing, then we hike on a little higher, to the freezing cold Lago Blu. Now we finally stop to practice yoga at the foot of the Monte Rosa glacier by a bubbling glacial stream, with the mountain breeze in our hair we take off our shoes and practice a few gentle cat stretches and sun salutations - nothing too hardcore, and I try to keep a straight face as gnarly trekkers pass us by looking a little bemused.

Marzia now explains another variation on breathing; with three fingers on our foreheads, a thumb over one nostril and a little finger on the other, we close one nostril and breathe in through the other, "Opening and closing" the channels … our left side is the sun and a man and right is the moon and women," apparently. It's hard to shut your eyes however with the peaks - the Breithorn, Castor and Pollux, standing proud above the tumbling glacier. I'm relieved to break for lunch before scampering off back downhill, poles planted in front. We take one more stop, to paddle in a stream by a grassy glade, before one more yoga and breathing session, then head back, well stretched to Soussun, ravenous and more than ready for an Aostan feast of fondue and local meats dribbling in honey and chestnuts, ample fuel for the next day's adrenalin-led activities.

Andrea meets us at Frachey Sport in the morning to

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One day's yoga trekking or mountain biking from Champoluc or other villages in the Ayas district costs 250 for groups of up to eight.

Book these and other activities in the Val d'Ayas through As Wild As You, an adventure company set up this year by the Champoluc mountain guide Stefano Percino

0039 33 5735 5576
www.aswildasyou.eu

Stay:
Refugio, Stadel Sousson
www.stadelsoussun.com
Between 80-140 euros half board per night depending on season.

Frantze Le Rascard.
Auberge, Restaurant
www.frantze.it
Between 55-85 euros, half board per night depending on season.

Eat:
Restaurant il Balivo,
Champoluc

For further details about The Aosta Valley in Italy
www.aosta-valley.co.uk

take us mountain biking from Campoluc to the town of Verres, about 30km away. We try out our bikes for size; unfortunately my head must be rather small as I only fit a child's helmet. In moral support, Squash decides to use a childs' helmet too and we head off towards the pretty village of Pilatz on an easy trail that's mostly flat with some good grassy downhills then a small climb before a descent with an amazing view of the mountain of Zerbion. Squash says she's never really mountain biked before, but flies down a flight of rickety steps; "well, you've just got to go for it haven't you," she says. We then head into a forest and it gets trickier, with rocky uphills and some very loose rocky downhills. I grit my teeth, sit back off my seat and hold on as I negotiate a path through the stones, whooping with delight and adrenaline as I don't fall off. Fortunately for those who haven't mountain biked before it's no problem to just get off and walk. Finally we reach a long winding road offering us an amazing downhill ride to Verres. It was a great route with a little bit of everything, and although Andreas seemed to think it was the easiest in the valley, it still had its gripping moments.

Completely worn out after mountain biking and canyoning we headed back to another refugio for the night, further up the valley. Hotel Frantze is a gorgeous, rustic building and there we are served a three course dinner using vegetables from the garden; a starter of red cabbage and fontina cheese is folllowred by broccoli crepe with mushrooms and then beef, and the next morning a hearty breakfast prepares us for rock climbing.

Stefano takes us to a crag near the village of Extra Pieraz, where the rock is more compact than in other parts of the valley. There are a good range of grades from 4 to 7b and there's a laid back vibe with mostly local climbers. It's not busy so we have our pick of the routes which are nice and juggy and slightly overhanging, just how I like them. Stefano starts us off on a 4, then as the others lay back to sunbathe, I lead a few harder routes before it's time to leave. Stefano suggests I'd be ready for the 'Spaghetti tour': a high alpine hut to hut traverse, consisting of up to 12 summits over 4000m. Fortunately, this being AWAY -As Wild As You, I might leave that wild suggestion for Squash.





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