

THE IRONWAY

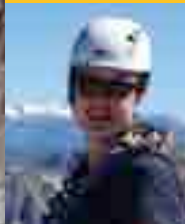
*The First World War saw many devastating battles take place across Europe, with the Italian Dolomites being one of the lesser-known settings. **Justine Gosling** follows in the footsteps of thousands of soldiers as she tackles a few classic via ferrata routes...*





ENJOYING RUGGED 360 DEGREE VIEWS

WHO'S WRITING?



Around her 'proper' job working in a central London hospital and volunteering her skills in international humanitarian disaster zones, JUSTINE GOSLING plans and undertakes her own unsupported multi week expeditions that tries to engage people in history, often in the Arctic.



was devouring the cheese roll held in my right hand as I stared out at the dark clouds gathering above the mountain peak. We'd make this lunch stop a short one, keen to get to the next hut before the storm arrived. Curious, my left hand scoured the ground next to where I was sat. It was littered with tiny scraps of rusting metal and nails, resting between the pretty yellow flowers and stones. There I saw it. A small, metallic, imperfectly moulded sphere. It stood out because of its shape and lack of corrosion. Once I picked it up and felt the weight of the small piece of lead, I knew that it was a bullet.

Almost without a doubt fired over 100 years ago in the 'White War', this little lead bullet and the 22" shell I found nearby weren't the only reminders of the horrors of WW1 in these mountains. Built by the soldiers over a century ago, the via ferrata, translated as "iron way" in English, was one of hundreds of cabled climbing routes that brought me to this lunch spot.

I was high up in the Italian Dolomites, a UNESCO world heritage area, on a week long hut to hut tour with KE Adventure Travel. I would be traversing the mountains just as the soldiers did over a century ago on the **via ferrata** cables they installed to assist the mobility of troops and supplies to those stationed up there. After the Great War, mountaineers

VIA FERRATA

vi:ə fe'ra:ta/
noun

noun: **via ferrata**
plural noun: **via ferratas**

1. a mountain route equipped with fixed ladders, cables, and bridges in order to be accessible to climbers and walkers.



appropriated, and expanded the routes.

I was here because as a non-climber, I wanted the mental and physical challenge of climbing as well as the spectacular views. But what I was really interested in was the history of how this "iron way" came to exist and how much of it was still here. Between June 1915 and October 1917, the Austrian and Italian armies fought a ferocious war in the mountains of the Dolomites, the border between the two countries; not only against each other but also against the very hostile conditions. Named the 'White War' due to the freezing, high altitude, snowy conditions that the soldiers fought in, the battle was like no other the world had ever seen, or has since.

The front line was 370 miles long with over 60 miles situated above 2,000m. More troops perished from the cold, rock falls and avalanches than in combat. An estimated 60,000 soldiers died in avalanches alone. After heavy snowfall in December 1916, avalanches buried 10,000 Italian and Austrian



PROGRESS BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY



CLIPPING ONTO THE FIXED LINES



TRAVERSING CRUMBLING TRAILS



STUNNING VIEWS

troops in just two days. Soldiers used the terrain as a weapon by simply pushing rocks over the mountain or provoking avalanches to wipe out the enemy. Hundreds rest where they fell, under the ice or down crevasses. It was only in 2012 that the bodies of two Austrian soldiers was discovered after the glacier, due to climate change, had retreated 45m from where it was a century ago. The men emerged from the ice, just bones inside tattered uniforms with shrapnel metal still encaged inside their skulls.

The war was never won. In the autumn of 1917 the Italians retreated from the mountains in order to defend Venice. Both sides simply upped and walked down the mountain, abandoning everything. An estimated 600,000 Italians and 400,000 Austrians died on the Italian Front. Despite these unique and hellish conditions, the Italian mountain war remains today one of the least-known battlefields of the WW1.

Our trip departed from the wealthy alpine town of Cortina. Now part of Italy, pre-1918 this whole mountainous area of Tyrol was part of Germanic Austria under Habsburg rule. Day one eased us in gently with a beautiful hike up to our first mountain hut, Fonda Savio (2,367m). We slept snugly in dorm rooms that had no lights except the burning orange horizon that poured through the window and faded as our eyes closed for the night.

The second day gave us our first taste of via ferrata and the precarious heights on the grade 3B Via Merlone route. The Italians called the front line the “il fronte vertical”. As I stood hanging off a rusting ladder hundreds of metres above the ground, I understood why. In WW1, progress was measured in vertical centimetres rather than substantial horizontal dis-

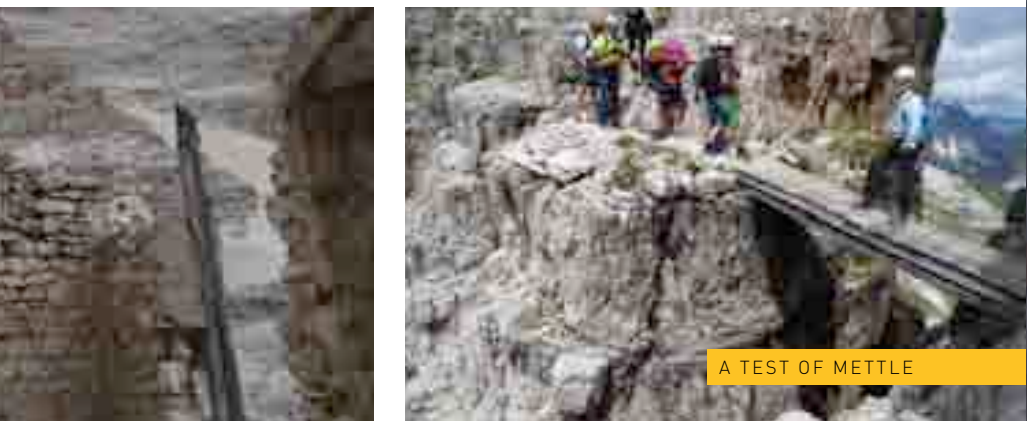
tances usually associated with battlefields.

As a group, we didn’t talk much whilst climbing, I had to concentrate on every hand hold and foot placement as well as unclipping and clipping the karabiner back onto the safety cable. The only sound so high up was the constant clunking of metal from this safety process and the occasional warnings to each other of lose or slippery rock. My concentration was such that I barely noticed the great distance to the ground.

I learnt to trust the cables and my harness quite quickly. The security of the via ferrata gave me the confidence to stretch out across the mountain, reach for that slightly higher hand hold and step across the wide gaps. In times of fear, I told myself that I was lucky I had all the necessary safety equipment, that it wasn’t snowing or blowing a gale, I’d had a full meal and that I wasn’t being shot at by an enemy. It took over an hour to reach the summit, but we were rewarded with a spectacular panorama of Monte Piana and Monte Piano as well as the iconic towers of the Tre Cime di Lavaredo. The views offered by the Dolomites was perfectly described by John Murray in 1840:

“They are unlike any other mountains, and are to be seen nowhere else among the Alps. They arrest the attention by the singularly and picturesqueness of their forms, by their sharp peaks and forms, sometimes rising up in pinnacles and obelisks, at others extending in serrated ridges, teathed like the jaws of an alligator”.

Day four’s via ferrata, Sentiero de Luca (graded 2B), took us to the summit of Monte Paterno (2,746m) and its spectacular 360 degree views. Beams of sun penetrated the clouds to light up patches of the valley far below. Since returning, it wasn’t that ►



incredible view that I tell everyone at home about, but what I saw along that route. I was fascinated by the decaying remains of the tiny wooden huts, rusting tin food cans that surrounded them and the barbed wire that sprouted from the ground, all of which now slowly tumbles down the mountain in regular rock falls. I tried to imagine what it would have been like here for the soldiers 100 years ago. Alongside the new bridge we were crossing, just a couple of planks of broken wood remained on the cable bridge next to us, spanning a drop of hundreds of metres below where I could see the outline of enemies' trenches at ground level. It really hit me here how I was literally walking in the soldier's footsteps, and at times how close the enemy was.

From Rifugio Dibona we took path number 404 beneath the imposing Tofana di Rozes (2,740m) to the ladders that lead up to the 'Galleria del Castelletto' tunnel. Italian military engineers constructed tunnels as they offered a degree of cover and allowed better logistical support. Unable to break the stalemate of trench warfare, they began tunnelling with pick axes under no man's land and placed explosive charges beneath the enemy's positions.

The Austrians had an out post here called Castelletto that gave them valuable control of access to the valley below. The Italians couldn't knock them off their post, so changing strategy they decided to tunnel beneath them and blast them off the mountain. It took six months to dig the 507m-long tunnel we entered. At the very end of the tunnel and at our exit point, they placed 35 tons of dynamite. The Austrians knew what was going on, and could hear them chipping away at the mountain and having conversations, but there was nothing

they could do. They were ordered to hold their position at all costs and simply awaited their fate. On 11 July 1916, at 3:30am a huge explosion blew away the whole summit of Castelletto taking many lives. Such was the anticipated significance of this battle for Italy, Italian King Victor Emmanuel III and General Luigi Cadorna, the army chief of staff, watched from a nearby mountain.

Without head torches, the tunnel was a black hole whereby I may as well have been walking with my eyes closed. Upon entering, the temperature plummeted as the sun's burning rays outside disappeared, and I was left shivering as the sweat on my back suddenly cooled. Drops of water continuously fell upon me, almost like an open tap and I repeatedly lost my footing slipping on the slimy wet rock under foot. The tunnel was steep. Over the 507m distance the height gain in the tunnel is 120m. I'd estimate that some sections were ascended at a 70-degree incline, forcing me to crawl like a mole through this man made cavity in the mountain.

While we had head torches, I wondered what the soldiers used to light the way? Fuel would have been too precious and limited as a resource to burn due to the difficulties in getting up the mountain. I imagined the soldiers above, listening and waiting for their fate as the Italians cut through the mountain beneath them.

Giovanni Lipella via ferrata (graded 4C) began at the exit of the tunnel and took us to the summit of Tre Dita where I found a bullet. Our longest and hardest climb saw us scale overhanging ladders and included some big hand hold reaches and jumps over drops with hundreds of metres below. The



mountainside was riddled with openings to caves and tunnels. Never before had I felt so close to the events of history, I was almost on guard, expecting the enemy to strike. I was so absorbed in the time warp.

The war here was a sideshow to the fighting on the Isonzo, which was a sideshow to the Western and Eastern Fronts. Essentially, the war in the Dolomites earned no rewards for either side, it simply kept soldiers away from other, more strategically important battlefronts. But for the soldier, all that would have mattered was his patch, and trying to stay alive.

I simply can't imagine what those in the battle must have gone through. I was here in the height of summer, well fed and our group was mostly alone. The physical challenge now was significant; my muscles ached at the end of each day from the steep hiking and hauling myself up the mountain. But I wasn't undertaking this challenge in the depths of winter, starving, nor was I hauling up heavy, vital supplies that I, and others, depended on. When surrounded by such beauty it was hard to reconcile with what happened here a century ago.

These mountains could tell some epic stories, of heroism, comradeship, hellish storms, and of life and death. Climbing the via ferrata has to be the closest experience you can have to understand their lives up here. Whilst climbing, the soldiers were always in my thoughts. I felt as though by being here I was paying my respects to them, and the via ferrata routes ensure that they will never be forgotten. The trip really brought to life the hardships and challenges the soldiers faced and sacrifices they made. What an educational and historically immersive adventure it had been. **At**

3 OTHER VIA FERRATAS IN EUROPE

Along with the route detailed in this article, there are many other via ferratas you can try in Europe. If you fancy expanding your horizons, we've picked out three more spectacular via ferrata routes for you to check out.

BOCCHETTE WAY, DOLOMITES, ITALY

Absorb yourself within the mind-blowing scenery of the Dolomites on this fantastic route, which offers thrilling exposure that'll get your heart pumping, but is safe enough for those who have no previous climbing experience. This route is available with tour company Mountain Tracks (www.mountaintracks.co.uk).

SOUTHERN FRENCH ALPS

The Southern French Alps offers another fantastic via ferrata. If the staggering views aren't enough to tempt you, then how about pure thrill of getting back down via the mile-long, giant tyrolean zip line at speeds of up to 80mph! Undiscovered Mountains (www.undiscoveredmountains.com) offers the activity on their customisable adventure holidays.

ALETSCHE, SWITZERLAND

Set beside a beautiful sparkling glacial lake, this via ferrata is on the biggest alpine glacier in Switzerland and boasts exciting scrambles, steep rocks and a giant suspension bridge. The route is moderately difficult and you can read more at www.myswitzerland.com.

LET'S GO

ITALY

HOW TO GET THERE

The best airport to fly into is Venice's Marco Polo Airport. Flights here are available with various budget airlines. Return tickets from London are available from £50, while from regional airports (Manchester, Birmingham and Bristol) fares are roughly double. From Venice, you'll want to head to Cortina, a great starting point for a via ferrata adventure in the Dolomites. An express bus service is available between the airport and Cortina, taking roughly two hours. This can be booked in advance of your trip online at www.cortinaexpress.it.

WHEN TO GO

While a visit in winter offers a special kind of atmosphere, summer is very much the best time to visit if via ferratas are what you are coming for. The best time to go is between June and September. Perhaps not surprisingly, the months of July and August are when the area will be at its most busy.

HOW TO DO IT

If you are experienced in via ferrata or climbing you can head to the Dolomites and enjoy the various routes independently. Via Ferratas of the Italian Dolomites: Vol 1 and Vol 2 (www.cicerone.co.uk) will be very helpful in this case.

Those that are new to the activity are recommended to travel with a tour provider, be that a local one or a company from

home. Justine travelled with KE Adventure Travel (www.keadventure.com) on the company's Dolomites Via Ferrata trip. The eight-day tour costs £1,345 during which you will take on several classic routes, staying in comfortable mountain refuges as you go.

WHAT TO TAKE

You'll need to take your standard hiking getup including light and warm clothing, waterproofs and hiking boots. Tight trousers don't work well on via ferratas, so bring loose or stretchy ones. Sunglasses, a hat, lip balm and sunscreen are of vital importance to protect you from the sun and you'll want to bring a personal first aid kit, too. You'll need a 30-40 litre rucksack, a head torch, and a sleeping bag for the refuge. Gloves are very useful, too, as they will protect your hands from the cables (fingerless biking gloves are a great choice). You'll also need a climbing harness, helmet and via ferrata lanyard with auto-locking karabiners, but if you're on an organised tour these are usually provided for you.

EXPERIENCE AND FITNESS

If you're going with a tour operator, no previous ex-

perience is necessary, but you will need a good level of fitness and a head for heights. If you are a regular walker then you should be fine. To climb via ferratas without a guide in the Dolomites, you should have substantial previous experience in this activity, as it can be very dangerous if not done right. Always check the status of routes and the weather outlook before departure. **AT**

