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Hiking in Italy was the most challenging (and most rewarding) holiday I've had in years

The mountains are so postcard perfect I feel as if I've walked into a living museum filled with fresh air, **Alison Gzowski** writes

“Just 10 more minutes,” Arturo, our guide, says. We're at 1,600 metres elevation in northern Italy, hiking through a valley called Val Vogna. It's my first day of this week-long adventure, but it's already clear there's every reason to follow his lead.

We've zigged and zagged our way up the equivalent of the CN Tower, walked through lush meadows and taken refuge from the rain while we sampled a picnic of local cheeses, charcuterie, bread and fruit. He has talked our way into a mountain hut and ensured that we're using our hiking poles correctly and pacing ourselves. No small feat. I'm barely bringing up the rear, pausing repeatedly to bend and gasp for air.

I want to go on – the company of my three fellow hikers is delightful and the views would make Heidi envious – but I'm already aware that I don't speak mountain. I'm the only one in the group struggling. I even tripped and fell. Fortunately, if you're going to embarrass yourself, this quiet corner of Italy may be the best place to do so.

For this June week of hiking and cultural immersion, curated by the Canada-based tour group karibu Adventures, we're so far north in Italy we can almost see Switzerland. Our home base is Alagna Valsesia, a small village nestled in a narrow winding valley at 1,154 metres elevation. From here, we go on a different trek almost every day. On arrival, it's so picture-postcard perfect I feel as if I've walked into a living museum filled with startlingly fresh mountain air.

This area is renowned in Europe for alpine skiing (in the distance is Monte Rosa, second-highest peak in the Alps). More arresting than the quiet is the unique architecture, which dates back to the founders of Alagna Valsesia, the Walsers, a Germanic herding people who migrated from Switzerland around the 13th century. You can still see original Walser baitas, stone-and-wood three-storey houses, with wide porches that have what looks like wooden caging, used for storing wood or hay. Typically livestock such as cattle would occupy the ground floor, a family the middle, animal feed the top. The distinctive Walser style is also incorporated into many new homes, such as the chalet we are staying in, lending a sense of a perfectly designed village, so well kept I wasn't surprised to see a local woman casually adjust a street grate that was slightly askew as she walked by.



Above: The valley of Val Vogna is at an elevation of 1,600 meters.

Below: Small hamlets known as frazione dot the area. The self-sufficient clusters have outdoor communal ovens, chapels, and stone drinking fountains. PHOTOS BY DANIEL HAGEMAN



The exteriors of many buildings may be Walser-influenced, but the local store is Italian. We have choices of fresh cheeses (including the local semi-soft Toma, served at almost every meal and yet impossible to resist), wines, freshly baked buns, cured meats and shepherd-made ricotta, as well as honeys distinguished by the flavour imbued from where the bees feasted. Nothing is wrapped in plastic. It's a simplicity perfectly in tune with the wilderness.

The baita also dot the alpine in small hamlets known as frazione, self-sufficient clusters of the structures with outdoor communal ovens, chapels and stone drinking fountains. We come across these on our hikes, including the one Arturo talked our way into. The owners, an elderly couple, proudly told us their baita dates to 1763. They invited us to look inside their kitchen, a tiny wooden room, freshly swept, with a small sink, jars ready for preserving fruits

and tools unrecognizable to an urbanite.

It was the ultimate insider tour. Joining our group was the founder of karibu, Andrea Mandel-Campbell, and her husband, Andrea Festa, whose family has lived in the region for 500 years. Even our guide, Arturo Ramella, is a certified UNESCO Geopark expert.

Mandel-Campbell, a former foreign correspondent for the Financial Times, hatched the idea for the company a year ago. She's adamant that Canada's wilderness is a match for any international destination, and is also running trips in Temagami, Ont., and the Johnstone and Broughton Archipelago straits off northeast Vancouver Island.

On our trip, each hike offers new vistas and cultural context. The trails are well-marked and often wide enough for us to walk in pairs (some were designed this way so that cattle could traverse safely). We climb through forest, cross small

brooks by stepping on stones, and, when I am not looking down at my clumsy feet, I can stare at the endless variety of greenery across the valley.

The eye gets lost here in both the magnificence and the minuscule. We would be wandering alongside trees and rushing waterfalls and fields, and Festa would pause, staring out into the distance. I'd assumed he was waiting for me to catch up, but no: he was scanning the hills for chamoix, a kind of alpine antelope/goat. I was reminded of being in the North and seeing how the Inuit can read the land and notice what visitors can't.

As we walk along lush meadows of ferns and edelweiss, Arturo plucks a wisp of greenery and hands it to us so we can smell the herb, which is like a cross between arugula and mint. We pass a carlina acaulis, a thistle only inches high, whose flower, even when dried, opens to indicate no rain. It acts as a living barometer.

We're also peppered with historical asides. During a glorious cowbell cacophony, we hear how traditionally a herder would take their flock into the hills to graze for the summer, and stay in a rifugio, or hut. Some maintain the tradition today, and make bricks of butter (they have their own moulds to individually stamp them) and ricotta they sell in the village.

One day we take a break from the trails and see some sights in Varallo (including the 15th-century Sacro Monti). Walking down a main avenue, Festa points out a villa, once his great-grandmother's but now government offices. Within minutes, we are invited in

for a quick look. There, among the impossibly high ceilings, circular mezzanine and minutely designed tiled floors, is a room with huge slabs of rich burnt-orange faux marble on a few walls, a legacy of those long-ago Walser artisans.

Back in remote Alagna Valsesia, this insider access means a closed restaurant is opened just for our group one evening. We dine on rich cheesy polenta and taste the lightest of panna cotta. But the food is always good, no matter where we eat. We have raclette, pasta and wild boar ragu, and almost every meal involves a surprisingly lengthy discussion of which wine to order. One day at a mountain rifugio, homemade minestrone and a salad with apples and walnuts is served to rave reviews.

But I can't get enough of the water. In the mountains and in the villages, there is always a large stone fountain with cold untreated water from springs below. Constantly running at the perfect temperature, it's not just a welcome pause, but a small reminder of what the natural world can offer.

I begin to wonder if you can both lose and find yourself on a hike. Try as I might, I am unable to take on the most strenuous of the climbs. The embarrassment is mine for underestimating how much preparation is required after years at a desk, compounded by recent COVID-19 restrictions. Yet here, somehow, embarrassment turns to inspiration. I feel the serenity of having gone as far as I physically dared in the most magnificently unspoiled setting imaginable.

Among the majesty of the mountains, with their endless vistas and subtle rewards, there's an undiluted purity that feels worlds away and makes you feel as though you are where the world is best. This realization hits us all at different times.

In the midst of one hike, while looking out across snowy peaks and crystal clear waterfalls, one of the other women in the group cried openly, moved and optimistic that the world, given the chance, can be resilient and thrive.

IF YOU GO

>> Fly into Milan. karibu can arrange airport van transport. The company also takes guests to and from hikes.

karibu recommends that guests be moderately fit and able to hike three to five hours a day, with a break for lunch.

>> This year, karibu will run another hiking trip in Valsesia, Italy, Sept. 9. Tours start at \$4,550. Includes breakfasts, lunches, welcome night dinner, accommodation, guided hikes, excursions, but not flights or airport transfer. kariboadventures.com

The writer was a guest of Karibu Adventures. The company did not review or approve the story before publication.