

# LA DOLCE VITA

*Tuscany is renowned for the finer things in life – its history, culture and fantastic food. But it also offers some superb slopes, primarily in the resort of Abetone. We taste both on an action-packed break*

WORDS Chris Madigan

**U**nsurprisingly there is an Italian resort where former Olympic giant slalom and super-G champion Deborah Compagnoni, former world super-G champ Isolde Kostner and current Olympic slalom champion Giuliano Razzoli all raced as kids. You might be more intrigued to learn that the resort in question is not in the Alps but an hour away from Florence and Pisa. As I arrived in sunny Tuscany on 1 April, there was always the possibility that this was an elaborate *pesce d'aprile* joke. But far from it.

Abetone is an old border post on a pass through the Apennine Mountains that connects the provinces of Tuscany and Emilia Romagna. Skiing began here in a modest way around a century ago. Then, in the 1950s, there was a boom when local boy Zeno Colò won Olympic and World Championship downhill gold. After a lull, when resorts in the Italian Alps gained complete domination, investment in

Abetone's lifts (in fact all 22 are less than 10 years old) and an ongoing programme of hotel improvements are helping to put the resort back on the map.

It's a map that covers some of the best-known attractions in Italy. Fifteen minutes after picking up our hire car at Pisa airport, we parked (for €1!) just metres from the leaning tower in an uncrowded Piazza dei Miracoli [Square of Miracles] – surely impossible in summer.

An hour was enough for some vertigo in the four-degree tilt of the campanile, to light a candle in the cathedral and to hear a priest singing psalms beautifully in the baptistery, before driving north-east. As we left the littoral plain, the tall, thin

**IN FACT ALL 22 OF ABETONE'S LIFTS ARE LESS THAN 10 YEARS OLD**

poplar trees and Mediterranean pines – like broad umbrellas – gave way to birches, the more familiar conical Alpine pines and firs (or *abete*) that give Abetone its name. The hills became sharper and denser, the classic Tuscan hilltop villages perched more precariously, until the true high mountains – up to 2000m – revealed themselves, resplendent with snow.

The village itself shows signs of bad times and good. The hotel we stayed in – the strangely named Albergo Abetone e Piramidi – in particular is beautifully refurbished. All thick white walls and sturdy wooden beams, this was the former customs house. The pyramids in the name are two big milestones in the village marking the summit of the pass. Other buildings capture a certain era – Lupo Bianco is a very 1950s dancing bar. The centre of the village has a classic Tuscan terrace piazza, but instead of overlooking terracotta roofs and domes, this one offers views of an ice rink, a nursery slope and Monte Cimone (2165m), ►

the highest peak in the Apennines, topped with a military observatory.

There are chairlifts accessing the mostly north-facing slopes at points along the pass, but we started at the gondola, a two-minute drive from our hotel. It reaches the highest lift-served point, Monte Gomito, which means the elbow, at 1892m and, looking north from the top, I spotted a band of white on the horizon – the Alps. But I felt no wistful pangs since below lay 50km of pistes and, as there had been a dump of snow the previous evening, plenty of accessible off-piste too.

The red and blue motorway pistes back to the gondola base invited us to floor the accelerator but, even at top speed, this old Jag was frequently overtaken by new Ferraris. These slopes are where the annual Pinocchio races take place. The name (after the character first created by Florentine writer Carlo Collodi) belies the seriousness of these international junior races, which are a rite of passage not only for Italian racers but for many a Great Britain team member over the years.

The Rifugio Ovovia at the foot of the gondola has a manic clubhouse feel to it, large families gathered around big tables, kids still wearing helmets wolfing down polenta after a morning's training. This building and the beach huts where the clubs store their kit are due to be replaced by a US-style lodge with accommodation, restaurant, ski rental and clubhouse.

We opted for a quieter lunch at Rifugio Pulicchio, located close to the top of the Pulicchio chairlift at 1680m, which has an Alpine hut feel. Some of the food, such as the *speck* and *bresaola* (dry cured beef with a squeeze of lemon juice) and strudel, draws influences from Austria. But our main course of ravioli with butter and sage was traditional Italian. Equally, there was no doubting the origin of our wine – a gentle Tuscan Sangiovese that wouldn't impair an afternoon on the slopes.

After lunch we headed further from the village to Abetone's back bowl – a sunny open space called Val di Luce (valley of light), which also boasts a small resort base. A selection of fast chairlifts gave us the opportunity to dive into all sorts of shortish and gentle off-piste pitches that are ideal for anyone's first forays into the deep (or, frankly, for anyone who knows how to enjoy life without getting po-faced about whether it's a challenge). As well as budding freeriders, this base is perfect for beginners, with two hotels (including the new, luxury Val di Luce Spa Resort) right by the nursery slopes, which are in the trees, separated from the boy racers' runs.

I was curious about a rundown farmhouse in the middle of one piste



**THE RED AND BLUE MOTORWAY PISTES BACK TO THE GONDOLA BASE INVITED US TO FLOOR THE ACCELERATOR**

**Fast facts**

- Resort 1220m
- Slopes 1220m to 1940m
- Lifts 22
- Pistes 50km, 45% blue, 45% red, 10% black
- Snowmaking 80%
- Six-day lift pass €131
- Tourist office
- 0039 0573 60231
- [www.pistoia.turismo.toscana.it](http://www.pistoia.turismo.toscana.it)
- [www.multipassabetone.it](http://www.multipassabetone.it)



here, and a huge, imposing building that looks like a baddies' lair. Which isn't far from the truth. It was a retreat for Fascist officials in the 1930s, before – as my host put it – “the wind changed”. Only the bar is used now. The smaller building was the summer chalet of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's daughter.

The following day we explored the slopes directly above the village, where

there is a less historically burdened 1930s building, the Rifugio Selletta. This used to house the top station of the original lift, two sleds on a fixed cable. The refuge, which has five bedrooms, has a beautiful dark, wooden main room with a fireplace, antlers and carved pillars showing ski styles through the ages (although I seem to have missed the skiing-in-Speedos years). It made the perfect spot for a

Clockwise from top left: Cowboy builders, a problem since the 12th century; The mummy's teeth began to chatter – milestones at Abetone's village high point; Devout powderhounds

PAOLO CRAZZINI, CATE LANGMUIR



Clockwise from top: Florence's cathedral eyes the slopes; Viennetta tries a new look; Nice package! Luigi feels overdressed compared with Speedo-sporting oldtimers

PAOLO GRAZZINI / GATE LANGWUIR

mid-afternoon drinks stop. We found this sector of the area to have a relaxed, family atmosphere, with skiers and boarders meandering along easy blue and red pistes that cut through the woods. And it was here we discovered Abetone's newest lift – a six-person sofa – and its oldest – bucket chairs built for slimline Italians.

Quite how anyone remains slim around here is a miracle. Tuscan cuisine doesn't just have something for every taste – it has a four-course meal for every palate. Even the après bar Ciustè in the village has an

all-you-can-eat buffet, although it can't match the quality of most Tuscan cuisine.

That evening at La Capannina, in the centre of Abetone, I enjoyed a rich pigeon breast, while my vegetarian companion sampled gnocchi with black truffles. Not that the food locally is all so posh. In fact, her favourite Tuscan dish was bread soup. This sounds less than promising, but it was a meal in itself, thick with artisan bread bursting with tomato and herb flavours.

But the real treat came the following night at the trattoria da Fagiolino in

## TUSCAN CUISINE DOESN'T JUST HAVE SOMETHING FOR EVERY TASTE – IT HAS A FOUR-COURSE MEAL FOR EVERY PALATE

neighbouring Cutigliano, a 20-minute trip by car. For over 50 years Luigi Innocente and his father before him have stoked the wood-fired grills and ovens to cause carnivores dilemmas – the traditional Florentine steak (a rare T-bone), roast kid goat, or kidneys? But as the name, which means green beans, suggests, the vegetables here are delicious too. *Pasta e fagioli* is made with cannellini beans, drizzled with olive oil and accompanied by Chianti Classico; and the crowning glory is the *funghi*. All sorts of mushrooms were on the menu – porcini, morels, ceps – but most intriguing were the delicately flavoured *funghi dormienti*, which grow under the snow in the woods.

Cutigliano is one of those classic Tuscan hill towns – narrow winding streets and shuttered windows – found all over the Apennino Pistoiese, the mountains named after the valley town of Pistoia. This historic town is only 45km from the great cultural centre of Florence, so we thought it rude not to spend a couple of nights in the city before returning to Pisa.

As we visited Florence in spring, we avoided the crowds that are common in summer. Even Easter weekend was relaxed, other than in the scrum around the Ponte Vecchio bridge. Walking out of our hotel – the Rocco Forte Hotel Savoy – on Piazza della Repubblica we armed ourselves with ice cream cones from the gelateria Grom. We crossed the Arno river to the Oltrano district, where the blossoms were out in the new Bardini Gardens, and went to see my all-time favourite sculpture – a fat, naked Bacchus on a tortoise – in the Boboli Gardens. And all the while we could soak up the views across the city to the pristine snow-capped peaks of the Apennines in the distance. ■

**DETAILS, DETAILS** A three-night half-board stay at the Albergo Abetone e Piramidi (0039 0573 60005; [www.abetonepiramidi.it](http://www.abetonepiramidi.it)) costs from €240 a head. One night's b&b at the Rocco Forte Hotel Savoy, a Leading Hotels of the World property (00800 1010 111; [www.lhw.com](http://www.lhw.com)), starts from €130 per person. Half-board packages to Abetone and Florence cost from €450 a head for four nights in two-star hotels including equipment hire, lessons, lift passes, excursions and visits to art galleries. For more info visit [www.abetoneaprn.it](http://www.abetoneaprn.it).