

## HIKING THE EASTERN ALPS

### Featuring the Italian Dolomites & the Austrian and Slovenian Alps

**14 days**

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#### **Day 1 Arrival in Ljubljana, Slovenia**

Welcome to Slovenia!

Ljubljana, one of Europe's smallest capital cities, is nestled in a basin between the Alps and the Karst (a cave-rich area). Where an ancient Roman city called Emona once stood, Slovenia's economic and political heart is now a beautifully green and wonderfully walkable town, with car traffic restricted in the central district. This allows for worry-free strolling along the leafy banks of the Ljubljanica River and perhaps a glimpse of the city's 16th century castle looming high on a hill to the east. Our three-country alpine tour begins and ends in this place that was once under Habsburg rule as well as a part of former Yugoslavia.

Overnight in Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### **Day 2 Ljubljana: Skocjan Caves & Predjama Castle**

Before our journey focuses on the mountainous marvels of the Eastern Alps, we begin the adventure today with a fascinating exploration of the Karst Plateau, a region of southwestern Slovenia known for its incredible caves. In fact the term "karst topography" which describes many of our planet's cavern-rich regions, comes from this area of Slovenia. Our first stop this morning brings us to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Skocjan Caves, a subterranean wonderland where the Reka River churns its way through soluble limestone. A two-hour guided walk will show off several special features of Skocjan, including numerous dripstone formations, waterfalls, and natural bridges. An hour-long above-ground walk will further show off the interesting characteristics of this karst region.

In the afternoon, our cave theme continues as we visit the picture perfect Predjama Castle, a Renaissance beauty that is one of the most dramatically-set buildings you will see. This Slovenian landmark was built in the gaping mouth of a cavern half-way up a 123-meter cliff! Your entrance fee to this castle includes an audio guide which you can use during our hour-long exploration in this one-of-a-kind attraction.

Walk summary: 3-4 hours of mostly guided walking, with about 250 meters (800 feet) of elevation gain/loss throughout the day. Distance of 6-7 km for the day. Terrain is generally on maintained stone path but with numerous stairs in both Skocjan Caves and Predjama Castle.

Overnight in Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 3 Ljubljana, Slovenia - Bolzano, Italy**

As we leave Ljubljana we drive across the Veneto region of Italy and begin our ascent of the magnificent Dolomites, a must-see mountain range we will call home for the next five days of fabulous hikes and activities.

Our first alpine adventure comes at Lago di Carezza, with a short walk around this brilliantly coloured lake surrounded by forest and mountains, an appropriate introduction to this intoxicating region. We will continue to Bolzano, the capital city of the province of South Tyrol, ironically located in northern Italy.

Walk Summary: About 30 minutes of walking on a natural path at Lago di Carezza involving minimal elevation gain/loss. Distance of about 1 km for the day.

Overnight in Bolzano.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 Bolzano - Selva Gardena (Dolomites)

Bolzano's medieval city center is certainly worth a look, with Gothic and Romanesque churches on display, our primary reason for visiting Bolzano goes back further in history than these two houses of worship. We're here to see Otzi the Iceman, the oldest known natural human mummy, who is housed in the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology. Dating back to around 3400 BC, this Copper Age gentleman was found mummified in 1991 in the Otztal Alps on the border between Austria and Italy. While there is much debate about Otzi's life and what ultimately led to his demise over 5,000 years ago, there is no doubt that our stay in Bolzano will be much shorter than his!

Our place for the next four nights will be just a short drive up the road in the splendid Val Gardena, a tri-lingual set of villages that speak Italian, German, and Ladin. There's a strong chance you will fall in love with this wonderful valley nestled between remarkable Dolomites peaks. The three villages of Val Gardena each go by two names (one Italian and one German), bearing witness to the mixed history of this mountainous region.

While we will see Ortisei (St. Ulrich) and Santa Cristina (St. Christina) during our time in the valley, this afternoon we will enjoy a hike in Selva Gardena (Wolkenstein), the highest of the three villages. Exploring part of the town on foot, we also venture into a lovely side valley that is full of great picture-taking opportunities, including at an idyllically placed little chapel dedicated to St. Sylvester, who is the patron saint of cows! A series of wood-sculpted Stations of the Cross also adorns the trail with the medieval 13th century ruins of Wolkenstein Castle looming high above.

Walk Summary (morning): About 2 hours and relatively flat walking in Bolzano. Distance of about 2-3 km for the tour.

Walk Summary (afternoon) Wolkenstein: About 3-3.5 hours of walking at altitude (about 5,000 feet or 1650 meters above sea level), with about 215m/700 ft of elevation gain/loss throughout the walk. Distance of about 9km during the day. Terrain is a mix of paved surfaces and natural paths with a couple of steep sections.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 5 Activities from Selva Gardena

Today we begin our walk by starting with a cable car ride from the village of S. Cristina. Once at the top station, passing log flumes and perhaps some local cows, we savour splendid views of Odlá, Gran Fermeda, and Pitla Fermeda as well as more distant views of Sassolungo. The fresh mountain air and non-stop vistas make this an incredibly memorable and photogenic hike. We ascend gradually on a loop trail that takes us up past the rock outcrop landmark of Peralongia. From here we take a little break at the Malga Peralongia Hut for toilets and a breather. From here, the trail begins to ascend, at times steeply, toward the very dramatic Seceda Ridgeline. Once at the Seceda Ridgeline, we have the opportunity to soak in the incredible vantage point and terrific photo opportunities. We will then begin our descent via the loop trail to make our way back to the Col Raiser cable car (by which we came up from S. Cristina). There will be a highly recommended option to take your lunch in one of the mountain huts before the cable car station.

Upon return to S. Cristina town, you will have free time to enjoy the ambiance of this charming alpine centre.

Walk summary: About 5-5.5 hours of walking at altitude (2000-2500 metres of altitude OR 6500-8300 feet above sea level) with about 500 metres/1700 feet in elevation gain/loss during the hike. Distance of about 12-13 kilometres (7.5-8 miles). Terrain is mostly natural paths with some 4WD access roads with some steep sections to access the ridgeline.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 6 Activities from Selva Gardena

Today it's time to let the gravity-defying technology of Val Gardena's ski lifts and gondolas give us a boost as we access the spectacular hiking trails on the south side of the valley. In the morning, we ascend from Ortisei to over 2150 meters/7,000 ft and begin our hike in the direction of Sassolungo (translated as "long rock"), a magnificent massif that seems to erupt skyward from the forests below. Hiking along a loop trail, there are a few rocky footing challenges that require you to direct your gaze downward as opposed to the stellar Dolomites views all around

you. Plenty of sit-and-stare opportunities abound along this awesome alpine trail. At the conclusion of the walk, we return to the same cable car at Seilbahnen St. Ulrich to descend and take some time for lunch.

Optional Hike in afternoon: Your tour leader and/or tour guide will take those who wish on a steep hike from Ortisei to the Church of San Giacomo (St. Jacobs-Kirche), providing a magnificent view across the valley toward Sassolungo, close to where you spent the morning. The path utilizes a number of switchbacks to get up to the viewpoint at the church from the rear side of the valley on a loop that then descends back toward Ortisei.

Walking Summary: The morning walk, beginning from the cable car station up top, takes approximately 3-4 hours, including breaks for photos and the views. The distance is approximately 8-10 km (5-6 miles).

The afternoon optional walk features an approximate 300 metre/1000 ft altitude gain and is approximately 6-7 kilometres (3.5-4 miles) in length. It usually takes 2.5-3.5 hours dependent on number of breaks. This would be considered a moderate hike.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 7 Activities from Selva Gardena

We journey to a different region of the Dolomites this morning on a drive to the little town of Canazei. Our featured walk at Viel del Plan Marmolada incorporates a two-stage cable car ride and puts us on a path that was historically used by local flour and bread merchants to get from one valley to another. With decent weather, this trail promises to show off some eye-popping mountain views, including the likes of Pordoi, Catinnacio, Sassolungo, Sella Towers, and Marmolada, which is the highest mountain in the Dolomites, at nearly 3340m/11,000 ft above sea level.

Be on the lookout for marmots, crows, and perhaps an occasional deer as we savor the splendor of Viel del Plan Marmolada, which is a mostly level one-way walk that transitions to a steady downhill finish at Lake Fedaia, a stunning jewel that you may recognize from the movie "The Italian Job." After our mountain meanderings, we return to Val Gardena on a scenic drive around the Sella Towers, enjoying a few picture stops along the way. Once back in Selva Gardena, relish one final evening in this splendid valley before we make our way to Austria tomorrow! Due to the full day today and travel day tomorrow, we leave dinner on your own account back in town.

Walk Summary: About 3 hours of nature hiking at higher elevation (2400 meters/7,800 ft above sea level) over the course of the walk, with easy up and downs on most of the trail, with a steady descent and about 300 meters/1,000 ft of elevation loss on the finish to the lake. Distance is about 9.5 km/6 mi over the course of the hike. Terrain is on natural (usually crushed rock) path, with some occasional areas of more challenging rockiness, and some wood and natural steps going down.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

### Day 8 Selva Gardena - Lago di Braies Hike, Italy - Innsbruck, Austria

Tyrol is an historical region in the Alps that straddles the border between Italy and Austria, once part of both the Holy Roman Empire as well as the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the 12th century until the end of World War I. While remaining in the Italian region of South Tyrol this morning, one last brilliant Dolomites walk is on the menu, an easy circumnavigation of Lago di Braies. Considered one of Italy's most beautiful lakes, the bright turquoise blue colour will enchant you as you pass an atmospheric wooden boathouse and countless mesmerizing mountain vistas.

In the afternoon, we cross the border into Austria and the region of North Tyrol, on our way to Innsbruck, a two-time host of the Winter Olympics (1964 and 1976) but also an outstanding summer hiking destination.

You will have free time this afternoon to discover the charming town centre of Innsbruck. The Altstadt (Old Town) of Innsbruck is a charming medieval quarter, known for its narrow cobblestone streets, colorful buildings, and the iconic Golden Roof (Goldenes Dachl). Surrounded by the majestic Alps, it offers a blend of historic architecture, lively cafes, and boutique shops.

Walk Summary: About 1-2 hours of nature hiking at Lago di Braies, with about 100m/330ft of elevation gain and loss over the course of the

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hike. Distance is 3.5km/2.2 miles over the course of the walk. Terrain is on natural rocky and earthen paths.

Overnight in Innsbruck.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 9 Activities from Innsbruck

A hearty dose of hiking is in store for you on our first full day in the outdoor wonderland of Innsbruck, starting with a morning walk that provides expansive views. Using a set of chairlifts, we ascend to Tulfelalm and follow a broad forest road on the Zirbenweg Trail. This mostly level walk offers outstanding panoramic views of the Inntal Valley lying below and the Karwendel mountain range. A few side trails offer bonus hiking up to nearby peaks, but eventually our foot journey concludes at Patscherkofelhaus, where we take a relaxing cable car ride down to the village of Igls (note that your tour leader and/or tour guide may choose to reverse the direction of the hike, beginning from Igls and finishing at Tulfelalm).

After a lunch break, our walk puts the "gorge" in gorgeous! Wolfsklamm takes us on an adventurous journey through a narrow canyon alongside a raging river to an old pilgrimage site. While the first half of this hike is steadily uphill, the dramatic scenery and waterfall wows should be well worth the effort, with St. Georgen Monastery and the little chapel of Maria Tax as additional highlights.

Returning to Innsbruck for one last evening, you may have time to catch a glimpse of the city's late-medieval Altstadt (Old Town), watched over by a grand Habsburg place and baroque cathedral.

Due to the fullness of our day and early start tomorrow, we'll not include an evening meal today.

Walk Summary: About 6-7 hours of nature hiking for the day, with about 425 meters/1,400 ft of elevation gain and loss over the course of both hikes, most of which is on the Wolfsklamm hike. Distance is about 12 km/7.5 mi over the course of both walks, with the Zirbenweg hike being the longer one at about 8.5km/5 mi. Terrain is on wooden walkways, natural rocky and earthen path, with stairs and occasional areas of more challenging rockiness, and some steepness at times, especially on the Wolfsklamm hike.

Overnight in Innsbruck.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

### Day 10 Innsbruck - Kitzbuhel - Zell am See

Departing Innsbruck this morning on an eastern drive to Zell am See, we stop first for a walk in the little medieval town of Kitzbuhel, renowned for its winter sports and downhill skiing legends as well as terrific hiking opportunities in the warmer months. With another assist from a cable car lift, we breathe in the refreshing alpine air on a terrific walk looking down on the Blixen Valley and the surrounding Alps, before descending by cable car to town for a lunch break.

An hour down the road, we arrive at the twin villages of Zell am See and Kaprun, which make up the heart of a truly adventurous and picturesque section of the Austrian mountains. Our afternoon hike is a relatively easy affair. We begin with access to Sigmund Thun Klamm, a scenic upward path along wooden walkways and trails, following the emerald waters of the Sigmund-Thun Gorge. With dramatic rock formations, cascading waterfalls, and lush alpine surroundings, the hike is a picturesque way to arrive at the alpine lake of Klammsee. From here, we begin our ascent up on paths above the valley, featuring lovely views down toward the lake as we pass through alpine pastures. This circular trail ends back down at Klammsee Lake, where you can dip your toes in the water and look for several special amphibious species who call this place home.

Finishing our day in Zell am See, we check in to our hotel and enjoy dinner together.

Walk Summary: About 4-5 hours of nature hiking for the day, with about 450m/1,500 feet of elevation gain and loss over the course of both hikes, evenly distributed on both hikes. Distance is about 11 km/7 mi over the course of both walks, with the Kitzbuhel hike being the slightly longer one. Terrain is on natural path and pavement, with some steepness at times.

Overnight in Zell am See.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 11 Activities from Zell am See

The village of Kaprun has deep roots, going back to the 10th century, when it was first mentioned as a settlement in the Duchy of Bavaria. Its name is derived from the Celtic term for "whitewater," and true to form is blessed with aquatic resources, including two reservoirs and a hydroelectric plant. Our morning walk starts and finishes in Kaprun and takes us on a fabulous loop trail around and above this pretty mountain village, offering stunning views of the surrounding peaks, Zeller Lake, and the town below. Encounter emerald forests, gurgling streams, and quaint farm scenes along with moments of serene silence, before arriving back in Kaprun centre. Depending on timing, you may take lunch in the centre of Kaprun, or for simply dramatic views, consider a late lunch at the Top of Salzburg (see the following paragraph).

In the afternoon, we set our sights incredibly high as we ascend by a series of cable car and chair lift runs from Panoramabahn to over 3000 meters (10,000 feet) above sea level to the massive Kitzsteinhorn. Step onto the Top of Salzburg viewing platform, where the views will be literally and metaphorically breathtaking, showing off the glaciated peaks of the Hohe Tauern National Park and Austria's highest peak, the Grossglockner. A glacial education is also available in the National Park Gallery.

We wrap up this marvelous day and head back to Zell am See for the night.

Walk Summary: About 3-4 hours of alpine walking in the morning with about 215m/700 feet of elevation gain/loss. Additional hiking available in the afternoon on our Kitzsteinhorn excursion. Distance of about 9-10 km/6 mi for the day. Terrain is mostly natural path with some pavement.

Overnight in Zell am See.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Zell am See, Austria - Lake Bled, Slovenia

This morning we bid a fond farewell to Austria, departing Zell am See for a southerly drive through the mountains, bound for a return to Slovenia. Arriving into Lake Bled after a few hours on the road, we take a moment to enjoy lunch in this delightful setting, nestled within view of the Julian Alps. If you've ever seen a brochure for Slovenia, there is a strong chance that it featured Lake Bled, with its distinctive small island and a 17th century baroque church thrusting out of its waters.

We'll then walk up to Bled castle from Lake Bled and ascend via a well-marked path through a forested hillside. Bled Castle is perched atop a cliff offering breathtaking panoramic views of the lake, Julian Alps, and surrounding countryside. Inside, visitors can explore a museum showcasing the region's history, a traditional wine cellar, and a charming courtyard perfect for enjoying the scenery.

Finishing our walk, you should have time to explore the town and lakeside on your own. It is possible to reach the small island in the middle of the lake using a gondola-style boat called a "pletna." Once on the island there is a small but rewarding climb up to the Chapel of St. Maria. According to local legend, a husband will be guaranteed a happy marriage if he can carry his new bride up the punishing 99 steps from the dock into the church.

Walk Summary: The trail up to Bled Castle is moderately steep, covering a distance of approximately 1 km (0.6 miles) with an elevation gain of about 130 meters (~425 feet), taking around 20-30 minutes depending on pace.

Overnight in Lake Bled.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Lake Bled - Ljubljana

This iconic lake provides an awesome opportunity to take a scenic walk on a very pleasant and easy path that encircles it, offering fantastic vistas of the island, the church, and the castle, which is built upon a dramatic 300-foot rock. Lake Bled was formed from the waters released

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when the Bohinj Glacier melted and filled this natural basin that was formed by the glacier. Interestingly enough, there are no tributaries that feed the lake. Rather, it receives its clean water from a number of natural springs. These unique thermal springs led to the development of the area as a spa resort for the European elites.

After our morning walk and lunch our journey brings us back to the place where we began, Ljubljana. There should be enough time this afternoon to enjoy a final easy stroll through the city, taking in a few of the Slovenian capital's many highlights, including the castle, town hall, national theatre, and university among others. In the evening, we gather to celebrate one last dinner together, sharing memories from our favourite alpine walks of the adventure.

Walk Summary: About 2-2.5 hours of relatively easy lakeside walking today. Distance of about 7 km/4 mi for the day. Terrain is mostly flat on a combination of natural path and paved walkways.

Overnight in Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 Departure

Departure from Ljubljana

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast