



Paths of IRON, Nerves of STEEL

FORGET ROCK CLIMBING. FOR A TASTE OF
REAL ADRENALINE IN THE MOUNTAINS,
VIA FERRATA IS THE ONLY WAY TO GO

🔗 📷 ABIGAIL KING

THE CLOUD DISAPPEARS, leaving clear air ahead of me. Clear air ahead, clear air behind and, as my mind and stomach spin, I see clear air below. Over 2,000m of it, in fact, a gaping emptiness between the rocky ledge that my toes are perching on and the distant, twisting roads of Italy's Ampezzo Valley. My hands grasp the cable that's bolted into the rock, while my pulse tries to ignore the disturbing knowledge that my heels are resting on nothing.

This isn't rock climbing, it's via ferrata, and I'm chasing clouds in the Dolomites.

It all started this morning, as I tightened my helmet and settled into my harness. Experienced climbers can use via ferrata

unsupervised, but novices like me need to go with a qualified Alpine guide. So I'm here with Filippo Beccari, a quiet yet confident Italian, who has somehow managed to convince me that the intermediate route, rather than the one for beginners, would be a good idea.

The grass is still wet from the early morning dew and the clouds track across the sky in a scattered formation. After a short walk to the base of the Col dei Bos, I spot my very first one: my first via ferrata.

Today, this is an adventure sport that's spread across the world, from Italy to France, Germany, Canada and beyond, reaching an imposing 3,800m or so on ➤



Opposite, a brave smile: the writer tackles the Col dei Bois via ferrata route; left, an old-school iron anchor point for attaching the cable



Clockwise from main image, view down the Col dei Bos route; Alpine guide Filippo Beccari; World War I memorial; archive postcard; via ferrata, 1930s-style



Mount Kinabalu in Malaysia. It all started up here in the Dolomites though – not as a sport, but as a way of saving lives.

When World War I broke out, Italy was in trouble. Battles with Austria straddled these peaks, yet Italy's soldiers knew more about the beaches in the south than the rocks in the north. With no time to train, they devised something else: via ferrata.

The name means "iron path" and the original concept was simple: drill a cable into the mountain and let people walk, scramble or climb past, clipping onto it for safety, rather than using belays.

Fast forward a couple of decades, and the Italian Alpine Club had a bright idea. They spruced up the signs, replaced the rusting metal and – lo and behold – a new adventure sport was born.

A few of the original via ferrata still snake through the grass, but these wisps

of iron aren't the only ghosts from the war. The crumbling wall of a disused hospital forms a silhouette on the horizon, while soot-blackened tunnels reveal the places where the soldiers used to live.

I can't think about that now. I need to focus on getting this right. Via ferrata may be open to anyone in good health, but there's still a price to pay for getting it wrong. Even with the cable, the braking apparatus, the carabiners and the extra rope that Filippo has fastened to my waist, I don't want to fall. I don't fancy dangling in thin air, straining the equipment or scraping painfully along the stone.

Metallic clinks mingle with birdsong as Filippo threads our way up. Two lanyards (short ropes) fasten to the cable. When he reaches the anchor points, he unclips one, attaches it beyond the anchor, then repeats the process with the second lanyard. His

frame seems feline against the lilac and butter rock, whereas I'm huffing after him like an unbalanced rhino.

THIS PRECISE POINT is the closest I've come to climbing today – reaching, reaching with one arm, fingertips clawing at rock. Knees bent, thighs burning as I reach, reach, wait for it, shift my weight to the next ridge in the rock.

After a climb of only 10m, panic knocks desperately at my door. I simply can't work out what to do next. Can't go up, can't go down. Can't move to the side.

I'm stuck.

I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck and I'm a little overwhelmed as I remember that this is only a medium route.

"Bend more," says Filippo, in an ethereal voice from a point I can't yet see. "Stop hugging the rock. It's safer to lean away." >

“AFTER ONLY 10M, PANIC KNOCKS AT MY DOOR”



Other PEAK PURSUITS

Here are some other activities you can enjoy in the Dolomites

1 ROCK CLIMBING

If via ferrata gives you a taste for heights, move onto tackling rock climbing the old-fashioned way.

2 MOUNTAIN BIKING

Zoom down an adrenaline-inducing mountain-bike trail from high up in the clouds. Or try one of many gentler routes around lakes and flower-laden fields.

3 HIKING

From a 30-minute stroll to an adventure that spans several days, the hiking paths around the Dolomites offer routes to suit all abilities and fitness levels.

4 FINE DINING

Enjoy a Michelin-starred meal at St Hubertus restaurant in the Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa in San Cassiano (20 Strada Micurá de Rü, tel: +39 04 71 84 95 00).

5 VISITING A MUSEUM

Go to the fascinating museum at the Lagazuoi tunnels and see where Italian soldiers lived during World War I. dolomiti.org



Clockwise from right, "Nearly there!"; a traditional mountain dwelling; the route from afar



PHOTOS: © ABIGAIL KING (THE WRITER, ANCHOR POINT, BECCARI, LOOKING DOWN, DOLOMITES, ICE); MARY EVANS (1930S); AIG-IMAGES (POSTCARD); CORBIS (MEMORIAL)

Yeah, right. I have visions of growing old right here, spread-eagled against the mountain, vultures picking at my bones.

I stay silent and do the calculations. I'm 10m up. It's 2,559m to the peak. That's 2,549m to go. This is beyond embarrassing.

"Stand on the anchor," comes the voice from above – and this time, reassuring brown eyes stare back at me.

Anchor? Ah, the attachment for the cable that underpins the whole sport.

"THE FIRST PART IS ALWAYS THE HARDEST"

It looks rubbery and, well, too flimsy to take the whole of my weight.

Still, if needs must...

I reach my foot gingerly to the right and tap my toes around its edges. My fingernails dig into the rock. Easy, easy, transfer my hips across and – ta dah! I'm still alive! From here, the only way is up, as they say, and I'm taking it.

One hand here, the next there, use your legs, climb, breathe, smile, enjoy. Soon I'm at a natural plateau, watching those clouds swirl around the limestone peaks and feeling the sun on my face.

"The first part is always the hardest," says Filippo, reassuringly.

"I've heard that before."

"We need to test you early on. If you have problems here," he gazes at the horizon, "we can get you down again. But higher up," we both gaze at the clouds, "not an option."

This is something I've never considered before. A via ferrata is a one-way affair. We're alone now, but there will be other people later. Unlike rock climbing, there's no custom route down. There's one cable, one direction, one chance.

I press on, letting a rhythm of climbing, crisp air and adventure fill my lungs.

From the summit, a mossy path leads the way home, its edges tipped with snow. I'm halfway down before I spot tiny figures on the rocks, silhouettes on the via ferrata.

Wow, I can't help but think, I did that! Dolomite Mountains (dolomitemountains.com) arranges via ferrata trips, including guides, in the Dolomites

easyJet flies to...

Innsbruck, Verona and Venice, all bases for reaching the Dolomites. Book online at easyJet.com

