Tour Code
**XALP**

ADVENTURESABROAD

# HIKING THE EASTERN ALPS

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

**14 days**

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### Day 1 Arrival in Ljubljana, Slovenia

Welcome to Slovenia! Our three-country alpine journey begins in Ljubljana, one of Europe's smallest capitals, nestled in a basin between the Alps and the Karst plateau. Where Roman Emona once stood, Slovenia's modern capital now spreads along the leafy banks of the Ljubljanica River, with a 16th-century castle commanding the heights to the east. The historic centre restricts car traffic, allowing comfortable exploration on foot.

This evening we gather with fellow travellers for our first meal together.

Overnight in Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

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

Before focusing on mountain landscapes, we explore the Karst Plateau in southwestern Slovenia—the region that gave its name to "karst topography" found worldwide. We visit Skocjan Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage site where the Reka River has carved through limestone creating underground chambers, waterfalls, and natural bridges. Our two-hour guided walk reveals extensive dripstone formations in this subterranean system. An additional hour-long surface walk explores the karst landscape above the caves.

This afternoon we visit Predjama Castle, a Renaissance fortress built into a cave mouth halfway up a 123-metre (404-foot) cliff. The castle's dramatic position against the rock face makes it one of Slovenia's most photographed landmarks. An audio guide accompanies our hour-long exploration of this unique fortification.

Walk Summary: 3-4 hours. 6-7 km (3.7-4.3 miles), 250 metres (820 feet) elevation gain/loss. Maintained stone paths with numerous stairs in caves and castle.

Overnight in Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

We depart Ljubljana and drive across the Veneto region into northeastern Italy, ascending into the Dolomites—our home for the next five days of alpine hiking. This dramatic mountain range, designated a UNESCO World Heritage site for its distinctive pale limestone peaks, rises abruptly from green valleys in a series of jagged towers and vertical walls. The name "Dolomites" comes from French geologist Déodat Gratet de Dolomieu, who first described the region's unique carbonate rock in the late 18th century.

At Lago di Carezza (Karersee in German), we walk around this small alpine lake renowned for its extraordinary colours—turquoise and emerald waters reflect the surrounding spruce forest and the towering Latemar massif. Local Ladin legend tells of a sorcerer who created a rainbow to capture a water nymph's heart, but when she discovered his trick, she shattered the rainbow into the lake, giving it these brilliant hues.

We continue to Bolzano, capital of South Tyrol province. Despite sitting in northern Italy, this bilingual city reflects centuries of Austrian rule that ended only after World War I. Street signs appear in both Italian and German, and the architecture blends Mediterranean and Alpine influences. Bolzano occupies a strategic position where valleys converge, making it a crossroads between Italian and Germanic cultures for over a millennium.

Walk Summary: 30 minutes. 1 km (0.6 miles), minimal elevation change. Natural lakeside path.

Overnight in Bolzano.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 4 Bolzano - Selva Gardena (Dolomites)

While Bolzano's medieval centre merits exploration, our primary reason for visiting lies in the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology, home to Otzi the Iceman. This natural mummy, dating to approximately 3400 BCE, was discovered in 1991 in the Otztal Alps on the Austrian-Italian border. The Copper Age man's remarkably preserved remains and possessions provide extraordinary insights into prehistoric Alpine life.

We drive up into Val Gardena, a tri-lingual valley where Italian, German, and Ladin are spoken—each village bears dual names reflecting this linguistic heritage. Our base for the next four nights sits in this valley surrounded by dramatic Dolomite peaks.

This afternoon we hike from Selva Gardena (Wolkenstein) into a side valley featuring a small chapel dedicated to St. Sylvester, patron saint of cattle. Wood-carved Stations of the Cross line the trail, with 13th-century Wolkenstein Castle ruins visible on the heights above.

Walk Summary: 5.5 hours total. Morning: 2-3 km (1.2-1.9 miles), flat walking, Bolzano streets. Afternoon: 10.5 km (6.5 miles), 270 metres (886 feet) elevation gain/loss, mixed paved and natural trails, some steep sections. Altitude: 1650 metres (5413 feet).

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 5 Activities from Selva Gardena

We begin with a cable car from Santa Cristina, ascending to upper pastures at 2000 metres (6562 feet) with views across the valley to Odle, Gran Fermeda, and Peitlerkofel peaks. Sassolungo's distinctive elongated profile dominates the southern skyline. The cable car system here, like much of the Dolomites' mountain infrastructure, was developed initially for military purposes during World War I when Italian and Austro-Hungarian forces fought bitter mountain campaigns across these peaks.

Our loop trail ascends gradually through alpine meadows past the Pieralongia rock outcrop—a distinctive limestone formation popular with climbers—to Malga Pieralongia mountain hut. From here the trail steepens considerably as we climb toward the Seceda Ridgeline, the dramatic highlight of today's hike.

The ridgeline provides one of the Dolomites' most photographed panoramas. The distinctive jagged peaks of the Geisler/Odle group rise across the valley—their pale limestone towers catching light differently throughout the day, glowing golden at sunrise and rosy pink at sunset. This alpenglow effect, caused by light scattering through the atmosphere, makes the Dolomites particularly beloved by photographers. The sheer scale becomes apparent from this vantage point: vertical walls dropping 500+ metres to valley floors, ridges extending for kilometres.

After time to absorb views and photograph the peaks, we descend via the loop trail back to Col Raiser cable car station. Mountain huts along the route offer lunch options—traditional speck (smoked ham), canederli (bread dumplings), and strudel—before the cable car descent.

The afternoon is free in Santa Cristina to rest or explore this alpine village.

Walk Summary: 5.5 hours. 8.5 km (5.3 miles), 370 metres (1214 feet) elevation gain/loss, natural paths and 4WD roads, steep sections to ridgeline. Altitude: 2000-2500 metres (6562-8202 feet).

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 Activities from Selva Gardena

This morning we use Val Gardena's cable car system to reach over 2150 metres (7054 feet) at Seilbahn St. Ulrich, beginning our hike toward

Sassolungo—the "long rock." This imposing limestone massif, with its distinctive elongated profile, dominates views from throughout the valley. The Sassolungo group formed millions of years ago as coral reefs in a tropical sea; tectonic forces later thrust these ancient seabeds skyward, creating the Dolomites' characteristic pale towers.

Our loop trail traverses high alpine terrain with constant views of jagged peaks and deep valleys. Rocky footing occasionally demands attention to the path, though most sections allow comfortable walking while absorbing the surrounding panorama. Mountain huts dot the landscape, remnants of farming traditions when families summered livestock in these high pastures. We return via the same cable car to Ortisei for lunch.

Optional afternoon hike: Those seeking additional mileage can climb steeply from Ortisei to San Giacomo Church. The trail gains about 410 metres (1345 feet) via switchbacks through forest, emerging at the church with commanding views across the valley toward Sassolungo. The descent completes a loop back to town, passing through meadows often populated by grazing cattle wearing traditional bells.

Walk Summary: Morning: 3-4 hours, 6.5 km (4 miles), 165 metres (541 feet) elevation gain/loss, varied terrain at 2150 metres (7054 feet) altitude. Optional afternoon: 2.5-3.5 hours, 6 km (3.7 miles), 410 metres (1345 feet) elevation gain, moderate difficulty.

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 7 Activities from Selva Gardena

We drive east into a different section of the Dolomites, reaching the town of Canazei in the Fassa Valley. The Ladin language predominates here—this ancient Romance language predates Italian and survives in isolated mountain valleys throughout the region. Our two-stage cable car ascent brings us to the Viel del Pan trail at over 2400 metres (7874 feet).

The name Viel del Pan translates as "Bread Path," reflecting centuries when merchants transported flour and bread across these high passes between valleys. The trail offers extraordinary views across multiple massifs: Pordoi, Catinaccio (Rosengarten), Sassolungo, the Sella Towers, and Marmolada—the Dolomites' highest peak at 3343 metres (10,968 feet). Marmolada's glacier, visible from our trail, has retreated dramatically in recent decades, a stark indicator of climate change impacts at high altitude.

Watch for marmots whistling from boulder fields and alpine choughs riding thermal currents along cliff faces. The mostly level trail leads out to Rifugio Viel del Pan, where we pause to take in the views before retracing our steps as far as Rifugio Fredarola. From here a different trail descends to Passo Pordoi, where our vehicle waits. We return to Val Gardena by road, stopping for photographs of the dramatic Sella rock towers.

Due to tomorrow's early departure, dinner is on your own this evening in Selva Gardena.

Walk Summary: 3 hours. Natural crushed rock paths with some rocky sections. Altitude: 2400 metres (7874 feet).

Overnight in Selva Gardena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

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

Tyrol, the historical region straddling the Italian-Austrian border, formed part of the Holy Roman Empire from the 12th century and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire until World War I's conclusion split it between the two modern nations. South Tyrol remained Italian despite its predominantly German-speaking population, a source of tension that eventually led to significant autonomy agreements.

This morning, still in Italy's South Tyrol, we complete our final Dolomites walk around Lago di Braies (Pragser Wildsee), considered one of Italy's most beautiful alpine lakes. The bright turquoise water—coloured by glacial minerals—reflects the Seekofel peak rising directly from the southern shore. The lake reaches depths of 36 metres (118 feet) and sits at 1496 metres (4908 feet) elevation. A wooden boathouse at the northeastern shore, dating to the early 20th century when the area became a tourist destination, provides the lake's most photographed scene.

We cross the Brenner Pass into Austria's North Tyrol region, one of the Alps' most important north-south passages since Roman times.

Innsbruck, which hosted Winter Olympics in 1964 and 1976, lies in a broad valley where the Inn River flows west toward the Danube. The city's name literally means "bridge over the Inn."

The afternoon is free to explore Innsbruck's Altstadt. The medieval quarter centres on the Golden Roof (Goldenes Dachl), a three-story balcony added to a building in 1500, its roof covered with 2657 gilded copper tiles. The Alps rise dramatically on all sides—the Nordkette range to the north reaches over 2300 metres (7546 feet) directly from the city edge.

Walk Summary: 1-2 hours. 3.5 km (2.2 miles), 100 metres (328 feet) elevation gain/loss. Natural rocky and earthen lakeside path.

Overnight in Innsbruck.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 9 Activities from Innsbruck

This morning's hiking showcases Innsbruck's dramatic alpine setting. Chairlifts carry us to Tulfeinalm, where we join the Zirbenweg Trail—named for the Zirbe (Swiss stone pine) that thrives at these elevations. This mostly level forest road traverses mountainside at around 2000 metres (6562 feet), offering sweeping panoramas across the Inn Valley 1000 metres below. The Karwendel range dominates the northern horizon—a limestone massif extending into Germany with peaks reaching 2749 metres (9019 feet).

The trail passes through stone pine forests interspersed with alpine meadows. These ancient pines, some over 400 years old, grow slowly in harsh mountain conditions, their wood prized historically for furniture that releases aromatic oils. Side trails branch toward higher peaks for those wanting additional elevation challenges. We conclude at Patscherkofelhaus mountain station and descend by cable car to Igls, a village that served as the Olympic bobsled and luge venue.

After lunch we tackle Wolfsklamm (Wolf Gorge), one of Tyrol's most dramatic natural features. The trail follows a torrent through a narrow canyon where vertical limestone walls close in overhead, water thundering through passages carved over millennia. Wooden walkways and steel staircases—some sections quite steep—ascend alongside waterfalls and through spray-filled chambers. The steady climb requires effort but the gorge's raw power makes this among the region's most memorable hikes.

At the top, St. Georgen Monastery sits on a plateau, with the small Maria Tax chapel nearby. The descent follows gentler terrain back to valley level. These pilgrimage sites have drawn visitors for centuries, long before modern hikers discovered Wolfsklamm's appeal.

Due to tomorrow's early start, dinner is on your own this evening.

Walk Summary: 6-7 hours total. 14 km (8.7 miles), about 390 metres (1280 feet) elevation gain. Zirbenweg: 7.7 km (4.8 miles), mostly level at 2000 metres (6562 feet) altitude, 90 metres (295 feet) gain and 160 metres (525 feet) loss, forest roads with valley views. Wolfsklamm: 6.2 km (3.9 miles), 300 metres (984 feet) ascent through narrow gorge, wooden walkways, steel stairs, spray zones, dramatic waterfalls, then a gentler descent to valley level.

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 310 metres (1017 feet) of elevation gain and loss over the course of both hikes, evenly distributed on both hikes. Distance is about 8 km (5 miles) over the course of both walks, roughly 4 km (2.5 miles) each. 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

Kaprun village dates to the 10th century, its name derived from Celtic for "whitewater"—appropriate given the powerful glacial streams that engineers harnessed in the 1950s to create Austria's largest hydroelectric complex.

Our morning loop trail circles above Kaprun, offering views across Zeller See to surrounding peaks. The path passes through forest and meadows, crossing streams and traditional alpine farms where cattle summer in high pastures. Lunch can be taken in Kaprun centre or saved for the afternoon's high-altitude experience.

This afternoon we ascend by cable car and chairlift to over 3000 metres (9843 feet) at Kitzsteinhorn. The Top of Salzburg viewing platform at 3029 metres (9938 feet) provides breathtaking panoramas—both figuratively and literally, as thin air makes simple walking more laboured. Views extend across glaciated peaks of Hohe Tauern National Park, with Austria's highest summit, Grossglockner at 3798 metres (12,461 feet), dominating the horizon.

The Schmiedingerkees glacier flows below the platform, one of few remaining Austrian glaciers substantial enough for year-round skiing. The National Park Gallery explains glacial formation and the ecological changes occurring as climate warming transforms these high-altitude environments.

Walk Summary: Morning: 3-4 hours, 6.7 km (4.2 miles), 240 metres (787 feet) elevation gain and 255 metres (837 feet) loss, mostly natural paths. Afternoon: additional walking at 3000 metres (9843 feet) altitude, short distances recommended.

Overnight in Zell am See.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

We depart Austria and drive south through the Karawanks range, the natural border between Austria and Slovenia. These limestone peaks form a distinct range separate from the main Alpine chain we've explored.

Arriving at Lake Bled after several hours, we pause for lunch beneath the Julian Alps. This setting has made Lake Bled Slovenia's most iconic destination—the small island with 17th-century baroque church appears on virtually every tourism brochure. The lake formed when the Bohinj Glacier retreated, leaving this basin fed by thermal springs.

We walk up forested hillside to Bled Castle, perched atop 130-metre (427-foot) cliffs with commanding views. The castle dates to at least 1011, making it Slovenia's oldest. Inside, a museum traces regional history, while a wine cellar and courtyard invite contemplation of the mountain-ringed scenery.

The afternoon is free to explore independently. Traditional pletna boats—flat-bottomed wooden craft rowed by licensed oarsmen—ferry visitors to the island, where 99 steps climb to the Chapel of St. Maria. Local legend promises happy marriages to husbands who carry their brides up these steps into the church.

Walk Summary: 20-30 minutes ascent. 1 km (0.6 miles), 130 metres (427 feet) elevation gain, moderately steep forest path.

Overnight in Bled.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 13 Lake Bled : Scenic Walk & Leisure Time

This morning we walk the path encircling Lake Bled, offering changing perspectives of island, church, and castle. The lake measures 2120 metres long and 1380 metres wide, receiving clean water entirely from thermal springs emerging through the lakebed rather than tributaries.

These thermal springs led to Bled's development as a European spa resort in the 19th century when Austrian and German aristocracy discovered the area's curative properties. Grand hotels from this era still line the northern shore.

The afternoon is yours to conclude this journey as you wish. Active options include Vintgar Gorge (1.6-kilometre boardwalk through a river canyon, 4 kilometres away), a pletna boat ride to ring the island church's wishing bell, climbing again to Bled Castle, or tackling trails into surrounding hills.

For relaxation, swim from designated lakeshore areas, rent rowboats, sample krem□nita cream cake at various cafés, book spa treatments, or simply claim a sunset café table with local wine and alpine views.

We gather this evening for our farewell dinner.

Walk Summary: Morning: 2-2.5 hours, 6.5 km (4 miles), mostly flat. Mixed natural path and paved walkways.

Overnight in Bled.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 14 Departure

Departure to Ljubljana Airport (approximately one hour, please plan accordingly)

Bon voyage! Nasvidenje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast