

1. Sauna with a view at Forestis
2. Heated indoor/outdoor pool at Forestis



# RISING SPAS

The breathtaking Dolomites form a backdrop to a region whose history informs its opulent spa culture.

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On arrival in South Tyrol, the scissor-sharp peaks of the Dolomites pierce the sky with impossible-looking geometries. The rest of the Alps might be the archetype of cone-shaped mountains but the Dolomites? They're the Earth's free-form abstract sculptures. The striking scenery is a backdrop to multiple cultures, languages and cuisines. Once a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, this tip of Italy was annexed after the First World War but retains its unique identity. New visitors are often surprised by the enduring dominance of the German language here, with the Habsburg past still influencing the area, perhaps most distinctively in its thriving spa traditions.

With an Austrian reverence for nature and the positive effects of its thermal springs, the region's spas reinterpret a rough-hewn mountain aesthetic as a springboard for contemporary raw-timber architecture with the landscape itself providing the visual fireworks.



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Our first stop is one of the area's newest retreats. Opened in 2020, Forestis is composed of three wood-sided towers connecting to an old Habsburg sanatorium. Not far from the small town of Brixen with its baroque cathedral, the hotel's vertical building minimises its footprint in the forest and offers the greatest views from each glass-fronted and terraced room: a face-to-face encounter with the mountains. When the sun goes down, these rocky pyramids flush a rosy alpenglow thanks to their unusual mineral composition, as if the snow and rock were lit from within.

It is a view made all the more sublime by the time spent in the soothing spa. As I sit sweating in the glass-faced pine sauna, a bevy of deer meanders into the field in front to graze, unfazed by my proximity. At the heated outdoor pool, a swimmer pauses between each lap to stare at the horizon, with steam rising from her skin into the chill. "The mountains change every minute here," she says dreamily, as low clouds of pulled cotton encircle the crests.

Resorts conjure notions of indulgence but in the Dolomites, spas and hotels are designed like everything else: with an eye on maintaining resources, respecting the forests and safeguarding uncontaminated land. The isolated region has long run on hydroelectric power and the spas themselves use wood pellets to fire saunas, with



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construction in local timber followed by reforestation projects. "The way we do sustainability is very common in the area," says Forestis's Lukas Burkia, as he leans against a hotel wall where paint has been eschewed in favour of a beeswax-sealed coating of powdered Dolomite stone remnants. "Sourcing locally and responsibly is tradition here: people really appreciate the nature that they live in."

At the Adler Lodge Ritten, about an hour's drive south towards Bolzano, 20 pitched-roof contemporary cottages in raw pinewood encircle a lake, with cow-skin rugs, overstuffed Chesterfield chairs and other touchstones of classic (and somewhat rustic) Alpine decor. A cluster of saunas perches on stilts among towering spruce trees and there's an icy pool for cold plunges too – a common practice at spas in the Dolomites. This bracing bathhouse tradition is a reminder of the region's past as part of the Austrian Empire, rather than of Italy, where cold dips are feared despite the popularity of frigidaria in ancient Rome's bathhouses.

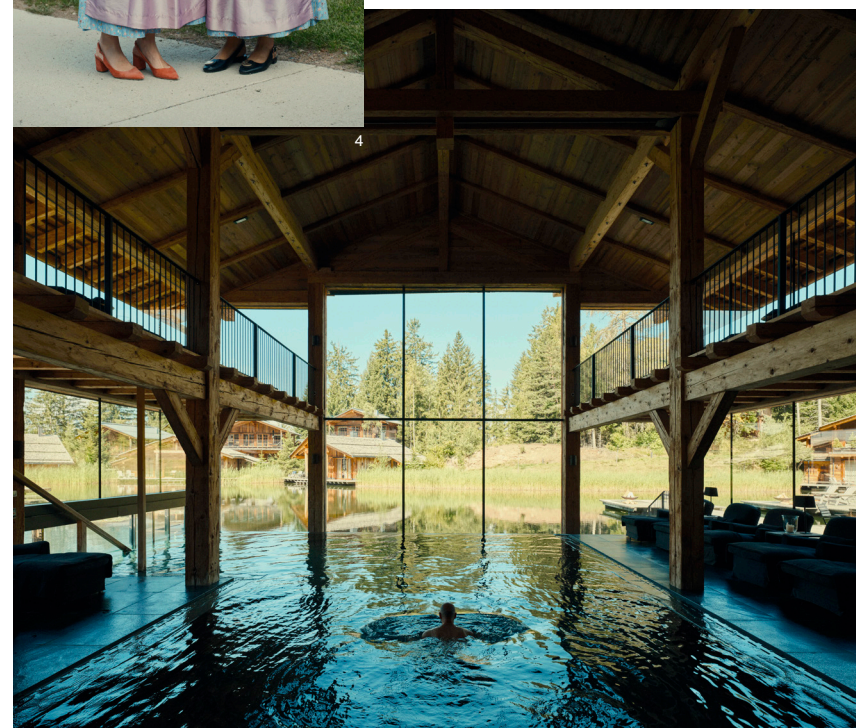
Heated by the sauna and rapidly chilled by the water, an icy plunge at Adler Lodge Ritten makes the impossible possible: you enter a whole new state of being, veins thrumming and body vibrating, with the frigid air feeling suddenly invigorating and perfect, and not at all chilled. Guests are immersed in the restorative elements and

encouraged to undergo treatments such as basalt hot stone massage and deep tissue massage using oils infused with woody aromas of the forest.

Sigmund Freud enjoyed the Ritten plateau so much that he extended a short trip to several months here. I follow in his footsteps along the Freud Promenade, a path through the woods, before returning to the Adler, drawn by the scent of fragrant fireplaces. Dinner is served in the soaring lodge, where chef Hannes Pignater transforms ingredients from the surrounding regions to create some of the most satisfying food I've ever found in a hotel. "We have an identity here that includes Italy, Austria and the nearby territories but we go beyond tradition to conjure the powerful emotions of the mountains," says Pignater, explaining that the Adler, which offers all the meals, snacks, wine and cocktails a guest could desire, has a duty to keep things interesting for visitors, most of whom stay for several days and return every year.

Our last stop is the San Luis resort, a colony of chalets and deluxe tree houses, high on the Avelengo plateau. Everything at San Luis has been crafted from raw timber and clay, and swathed in black linen – a minimalist's forest getaway, constructed using old-fashioned Alpine techniques, such as high-moon harvesting for naturally resistant wood and forgoing glue and any modern shortcuts. Greeted by an affable, wide-eyed cat

1. Former Habsburg sanatorium at the heart of Forestis
2. Take the plunge at the Adler Lodge Ritten
3. Adler's chalets
4. Staff at the Adler wear traditional Tyrolean outfits
5. Forestis spa
6. Adler's sauna among the trees
7. Main lodge at San Luis
8. Adler's central pavilion





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at my window, I get the fireplace going and heat up the chalet's private sauna that faces the lake, while my new friend purrs away, sharing my delight. After a languorous swim in the pool in the main lodge – a cathedral-like construction with a soaring roof, glass walls and an abundance of lit candles – I meet Ilse Meister, the matriarch of the San Luis's family of owners. She is a former fashion stylist and designer with a long silver mane, a penchant for precise outfits of dark wool and a stringent sense of aesthetics.

"In this area you have so much to learn from the way things were done in the past, when people knew how to work in harmony with nature," says Meister as we look out at San Luis's lakeside bonfires illuminating the early evening. Her sense of rigour demanded traditional building techniques but also fostered the streamlined modern aesthetic that makes each chalet such an inviting place to contemplate the landscape. "In simplicity you find the ultimate beauty," she says. "It's what life in the mountains teaches us."

There's perhaps an irony in turning to such upscale spas for lessons in simplicity but in our daily lives that are so often jammed with traffic, frantic text messages and urgent to-do lists, a simple wooden sauna bench with a window onto hushed mountains has become the greatest of luxuries. — K



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1. Family matriarch Ilse Meister
2. Breath of fresh air at the Adler
3. San Luis chalets look out onto a lake
4. The Dolomites glimmer in the distance



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#### The Dolomites address book

##### Getting there

The closest airports are Verona, Milan and Innsbruck. Fast trains take you to Bolzano from where public transport, including a stunning funicular ride up to the Adler Lodge Ritten, can bring you to any of the hotels, as can the taxis at the station.

##### Spa hotels

##### Forestis

One of the newest of the Dolomites' nature-bound retreats, the essentialist architecture and mountain-peak views are as calming as the extensive spa. *Palmschoss 22, Brixen; forestis.it*

##### Adler Lodge Ritten

Part of a family of Adler spas in the area, the all-inclusive Ritten location offers guests Alpine cabins, suites a cluster of tree-level saunas and superlative meals. *Stella 20, Soprabolzano; adler-resorts.com*

##### San Luis

An eminently tranquil getaway set on an idyllic woodland plateau. Visitors enjoy private timber chalets with their own saunas overlooking the central lake and the spa's pool flowing from the main lodge to the outdoors. *Vöranerstrasse 5, Halfling; sanluis-hotel.com*

#### Eat and lodge

##### My Arbor

A hotel and spa, the real draw here is the delight-filled restaurant, serving perfect takes on South Tyrolean and Mediterranean cuisine, with local farm ingredients and frequent evening tastings of artisan wines and beers from the area. *Via S Leonardo 26, Sant'Andrea; my-arbor.com*

##### La Finestra

A chalet on the Plose slope with windows facing out over the valley of Brixen and the mountains beyond. This is where skiers fuel up on rich mountain dishes such as butter-soaked *Knödel*. *Frazione Eores 298/1, Afers; lafinestra-plose.com*

##### Rossalm

One of Italy's mountain *rifugi* offering simple rooms and fare. Rossalm is a favourite with hikers along the Plose trail for its freshly made and simple Alpine dishes, and a gathering spot for spritzes and beers at sunset. *Kreuztal 80, Brixen; rossalm.com*