



Via Ferrata

During WWI while the British and French were drowning in the mud of Flanders, their Italian allies were engaged in an equally terrifying conflict against their Austrian foes along a battlefield that cut across the Dolomites from Passo di Monte Croce in the east to Marmolada in the west. But, hidden in the swirling mountain mist were two far more foreboding enemies: the freezing winter weather and the precipitous terrain.

In order to maximise ease of movement across the rugged, fickle peaks, the two armies attached ropes and ladders across seemingly impregnable crags in a series of fixed-protection climbing paths known as '*via ferrata*' (plural '*vie ferrate*') or 'iron ways'. Renovated with steel rungs, bridges and heavy-duty wires after the war, using the *vie ferrate* evolved into a cross between standard hiking and full-blown rock-climbing and allowed non mountaineers access to areas otherwise out of bounds.

To tackle one of these exhilarating trails you'll first need to don basic climbing equipment (helmet, pads and gloves) and carry a special Y-shaped harness fitted with two karabiners. Faced with technical difficulties and high levels of exposure on many *vie ferrate*, hikers lock themselves onto fixed metal supports grafted into the rock with the karabiners to assure their safety and arrest potential falls.

Vie ferrate exist all over the Dolomites and you don't have to be a Himalayan Sherpa to enjoy them (Note: Via Ferrata routes are graded separately from the other walks in this book into beginner, intermediate and advanced levels; see Degrees of Difficulty box, p49). Madonna di Campiglio and Cortina d'Ampezzo are the gateways to some of the more spectacular routes. Aside from offering a vertigo-inducing adrenalin rush, the trails also have an important historical value and remain closely associated with their WWI origins. Indeed, the scars of this

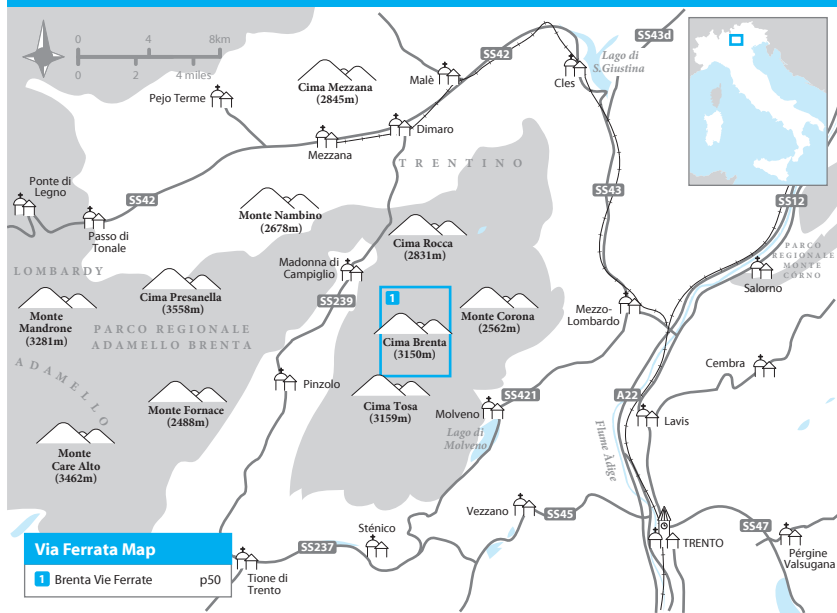
TECHNIQUE & SAFETY

You don't need mountaineering experience to use *via ferrata* equipment, though proper attention to safety and technique is essential. Before even setting out you should familiarise yourself with your harness and equipment. Always check to make sure that your harness waist strap is doubled back through the buckle. Use a specifically designed energy-absorbing device – most belaying devices or figure-of-eight abseil devices are not sufficient. In the event of a fall this device will hugely reduce the impact on your equipment and body.

Once on the route you must ensure that you are clipped into the wire cables with one of your two karabiners at all times. When you come to a bracket, use your free karabiner to clip into the cable on the other side of the bracket before unclipping the first karabiner and continuing. On ladders it makes life easier to loop your lanyard over your forearm while climbing. On vertical sections of cable and on ladders, always unclip one of the karabiners after you have 'leapfrogged' a bracket. Falling with both karabiners attached will prevent your energy absorber from working.

More experienced and confident walkers only clip into the cable on the most difficult sections and can therefore move extremely quickly. The decision whether to clip in or not on any given section is ultimately your own.

VIA FERRATA



brutal and lengthy conflict are still etched indelibly over a mountain landscape littered with ingeniously sculpted tunnels, trenches and emplacements. History buffs can visit the large open-air museums at Lagazuoi and Cinque Torri (on the popular Alta Via 1 long-distance path; see p39), which showcases tunnels, battlements and restored forts.

While maintenance of *vie ferrate* continues, the CAI has placed a ban on the construction of any new routes.

EQUIPMENT

The core of the *via ferrata* system is a climbing harness and a *via ferrata* kit. The kit has two specially designed karabiners tied on either end of a length of dynamic (shock-absorbing) rope, commonly referred to as a lanyard. This rope passes through a simple, but extremely important, energy-absorbing device, which in turn is attached to the harness with a locking karabiner. See the Technique & Safety boxed text (p46) for more on the energy absorber.

You can use a straightforward 'sit' harness for a *via ferrata*, but many people use a waist and chest harness combination. This

is especially recommended for children and for climbers with heavy packs, so that in the event of a fall they are prevented from flipping upside down (with the associated risk of head injuries). Although not essential, a helmet is strongly recommended. *Via ferrata* kits can be rented from most equipment shops in the Dolomites for less than €5 per day.

If you want to buy your own gear, it's best to do so in Italy; expect to pay at least €50 for the full kit. Alternatively, it should be possible for gear shops in other countries

WARNING

Vie ferrate can never be guaranteed to be safe. Rockfall, lightning, avalanche, sudden weather changes, ice on the rock and cables, and inattention while clipping the cable are all factors that can lead to serious accidents. While the equipment on popular *vie ferrate* is generally sound, it is not fail-safe. Above all you need to remain alert and use your judgement.