

Can there be anything more wonderful than such a gift? I saw the light of day in the Dolomites. On a late summer's morning in September. In a small market town at the foot of the Haunold and Dreischusterspitze. My first mountain, which I could see every day as a child, was called Piz da Peres. Those four syllables were my first words in a foreign tongue. That was Ladin, the strangely melodious language of my grandmother Agnes. Piz da Peres – a sound that held promise of meadows strewn with gentian and edelweiss hidden in the rocks, of summit winds and mountain-top vistas. Of the blue of the distance, yet close enough to touch.

Today I still think of these facts and feelings when I hear the word 'Dolomites'. I took thousands of photographs. Of walks in summer and back-country skiing in winter. Of a wide-open wilderness that is not to be found down in the valley. Of the play of light and symphonies of cloud. Of the still of the night and the music of the stars. A whole sea of images that vanishes into the horizon of memory. I tried to capture such magic moments with my camera. But I soon gave up. And learned to simply look.

One day, however, Georg Tappeiner showed me his photographs of the Dolomites. It was as if, after a long period of unconscious waiting, a wish had finally come true.

I had already seen – or rather, internalised – many of the motifs. And again and again, as I walked those photographs, I thought – or rather, felt – Yes, that's the Dolomites! So invitingly serene and enticing that you want to lace up your boots and set off at once. And the next minute so unapproachably heaven-storming that you can only look up with a feeling of smallness and humility at those majesties carved out of rock. And so enigmatically veiled betimes that you think you can see one of the many creatures of legend thought to dwell there gliding out of a misty gorge. But above all the Dolomites, with their craggy peaks and pinnacles, their flowering meadows and wonderful walks, are so unique that you find yourself gazing in astonishment over and over again.

These bizarre mountains have instilled admiration, awe and doubtless also fear ever since man set eyes on them. Starting with the early Neolithic hunters. They came to the Dolomites – and what was already a relatively kind climate for a region of the Alps – to stalk the game grazing in the forests and on the grassy slopes released by the retreating glaciers of the Ice Age. Then came the age of the farmers. For thousands of years, the sun-blessed mountain landscape was home to a race of people that survived in this precipitous world because they loved it and learned to adapt to it – just like the trees and the flowers. And yet those mountain people had no head for heights, and they never set foot on the summits of the "pale mountains", to whose protection they were so committed.

As a result it was left to townsfolk to conquer the Dolomites. Some two hundred years ago, enthusiasts from just about all the flatlands of the world arrived on the scene, starting in 1789 with a



French adventurer with a good pair of legs by the name of Deodat de Dolomieu.

He studied the unique light-coloured rock and classified it – and immortalised himself within the next one hundred years as his name became synonymous with both the Dolomite rock and the whole mountain landscape lying between the rivers Rienz, Piave, Brenta, Etsch and Eisack. He was followed by the first alpinists – British, French, and Austrian. In 1857 an Irishman by the name of John Ball reached the summit of Monte Pelmo, one of the highest and most impressive mountains in the Dolomites. A little later the Viennese mountaineer Paul Grohmann conquered one 3000-metre-high peak after the other.

The end of the excitement? On the contrary. The German geologist Ferdinand von Richthofen made a discovery that no-one believed in at first: that the Dolomites are actually gigantic petrified coral reefs. An enchanted marine world that once occupied the same latitude as modern Niger and Yemen, piled up and thrust into the sky by an awesome primeval force. A seabed where you and I and every other nature lover can walk and climb – in the presence of 300 million years of living history of the Earth!

Today we know that Richthofen was right; such a fantastic open book on the history of our planet is truly unique.

On 26 June 2009, UNESCO declared the Dolomites a World Natural Heritage site. Together with the Aeolian Islands, that made the Dolomites Italy's second claim to geological fame as a site of "outstanding universal value" and "unique monumental beauty".

Georg Tappeiner reveals this beauty in photographs expressive of a quiet astonishment. Photographs that invite us to take a fresh look at the Dolomites. To see and respect these, the most beautiful mountains in the world – and above all, to treasure and protect them.

Erwin Brunner, Editor-in-Chief
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