



TRAVEL SPRING 2008

## Mountain High

THREE PROVINCES, TWO COUNTRIES, ONE REGION — COULD THE ALPINE WONDERLAND OF TYROL BE THE MODEL MODERN STATE?

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Photographs by Massimo Vitali

Every traveler has a landscape that, for him, contains the wonder and mystery behind all travel. It could be the beach, or a cathedral square, or the rain forest, or a volcanic island — for me, it is the mountain pass. The mountain pass, roughly defined, is that point on the map where the winding road up is transformed into the winding road down. It marks the border where valleys meet, and often is where provinces divide, where one nation becomes another, with a corresponding change in language and road signs. To get to the mountain pass, you begin on a fertile plain, often crossed by a river, and drive through terraced fields and sleepy villages until the road gets steeper, the switchbacks get scarier and signs of human settlement fall away behind you.

If you are in Tyrol — the proud region straddling northern Italy and western Austria — and you ascend through the Val Passiria to the mountain pass known in German as the Timmelsjoch, small vineyards and neatly tended orchards give way to a desolate moonscape fringed with ice, and the tractors from the lower altitudes, carrying bins of apples, are replaced by swarms of motorcycles. (You will later see the same bikers that passed you like movie villains in black leather warming up over plates of sausages and fries at the restaurant just beyond the pass, crowded into booths and chatting amiably with one another.)

The mountain pass is the perfect place to begin a story about Tyrol, and not just because I am something of an addict when it comes to borderlands and Alpine drama. Tyrol has been God's country to a variety of territorial landlords ever since it coalesced into a state of the Holy Roman Empire, and for much of its history, the constituent parts — Trentino and Südtirol/Alto Adige in Italy, and Tirol in Austria — were under Austrian guard. This changed with the Treaty of Saint-Germain at the end of World War I, which ceded Tyrol's southern areas to Italy. Ever since this problematic graft with the Italian state, ethnic tumult in Südtirol (the name preferred by its German-speaking majority) has turned the province into a continuing experiment in hybrid statecraft, while Tyrol's northern reaches — home to dramatic peaks, world-class ski resorts and pristine valleys for hiking — have become even more Austrian-identified. On both sides of the border, the mountain pass is a valuable natural resource and an unavoidable fact of life.

How you experience Tyrol's cultural balancing act depends on the direction of your approach. I came from the south and entered Trentino through the foothills of the Dolomites. Fortified by as much espresso as I could handle while I flew along the Milan-Venice autostrada, I made my first stop in Mezzolombardo, a small, prosperous market town nestled into a valley near the Adige River. Vineyards crept up to the edge of the road, and the smell of fallen and fermenting grapes seeped through the cracks in my car windows. It is an odor that you can almost bottle on its own, and with the grape harvest under way across every floodplain and terraced slope, it would scent my journey through Italian Tyrol.

Teroldego is a variety of grape — once renowned, later forgotten and now in the midst of an international revival — grown on less than 1,000 acres in Trentino. Elisabetta Foradori, whose wine