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The Dolomites: Italy's Otherworldly Alps

WHERE HISTORY AND HIKING MEET

Italy has much to offer visitors, from the art and architecture of Rome to the vineyards of Tuscany. Tucked away in the country's northeast corner, however, is a unique cultural and geological wonder that many tourists miss.

The Dolomites, a section of the Italian Alps known as "the pale mountains" for their light-colored rock, have much to offer. The region is home to three cultures, three languages, a melange of culinary traditions, and some of the world's best hiking trails. When naming the mountains a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009, officials called them "some of the most beautiful mountain landscapes anywhere, with vertical walls, sheer cliffs, and a high density of narrow, deep, and long valleys."

A popular setting for winter sports events, the region encompasses three native cultures and a variety of ethnic cuisines. A traditional favorite among visitors is *canederli*, hearty bread dumplings served with a variety of meats and tomato, mushroom, or spinach sauces. *Speck* is a dry-cured, lightly smoked ham made in the area, and hearty mountain breads from local bakeries can sustain a hiker for a day.

The Dolomites are rich in cultural contrasts. The three languages spoken in the region have coequal status: Italian, German, and Ladin, an ancient form of Latin. Signs are written in both Italian and German. Visitors should also be prepared to adhere to strict mealtime and bus schedules, unlike the relaxed, more easygoing pace of southern Italy.

Traditional dress resembles Swiss, Austrian, or German styles, reflecting the region's history. For 550 years, a large part of the Dolomites was under Austro-Hungarian rule. During World War I, high-altitude "iron roads," or *via ferrata*, were built to help soldiers cross the rugged terrain. The entire region became part of Italy after World War I, but today, rusty remnants of the *via ferrata* remain, serving as ladders and guides for hikers traversing the high country.

The best hiking season in the region runs from June to October. And if you love awe-inspiring floral displays, arrive in July, the Dolomites' peak wildflower season.

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THE MINDSET BEHIND OUR MACHINES

Built With the Long Haul in Mind

May is National Inventors Month, and that got me thinking about my own career. I never really thought of myself as an inventor, but I have spent a good part of my life trying to solve problems and build better tools. When I look back, I realize that instinct didn't start with building machinery. It started much earlier with the way my father taught my brother and me to think.

He taught us to ask why and how something worked, rather than just what it did. If we were taking apart a motorcycle or piece of equipment, the point was never to follow steps blindly. It was to learn the concepts, see what each part was doing, and then put it back together with actual knowledge behind it.

As I get older, I realize that way of thinking followed me into just about everything I have done. It changed how I looked at my rental business years ago, how I approached the problem of washing tents, and how we eventually built our washers at Teeco Solutions. From the beginning, we weren't just trying to build a machine that would get a tent clean. We were trying to build one that would solve the problem without creating a whole new set of headaches later.

That meant asking different questions from the start. What actually damages tent fabric? What shortens the life of a machine? Which design choices reduce maintenance and lower the cost of ownership over time? When you start there, you don't end up with a washer that only looks good in concept. You end up with one that works better in the field and holds up for the long haul.

You can see that way of thinking all through the anatomy of our washers. For example, we designed them to wash and rinse in warm water because vinyl is not the same as linen. If you wash or rinse a tent in cold water, it stiffens the material and shortens its life. But if the water gets too hot, that's no good either. We found the sweet spot is right around 100 degrees.

It also shows up inside the drum. Tent fabric is big, heavy, and awkward compared to shirts or bed sheets, so the fins had to be taller to grab more material and move it correctly. The interior also had to stay smooth. If the fabric is sliding against rough surfaces or holes, it's going to wear out over time.

We asked those same kinds of questions about the inside of the machine itself. There are cheaper ways to turn a drum, but we chose a transmission because long-term reliability mattered more to us than saving money on the front end. And once you start loading a drum with thousands of square feet of wet tent material, the weight becomes a real issue. A big drum means nothing if the frame underneath it and the components turning it are underbuilt. We gave ours a stronger frame and more bearing support because a washer shouldn't start wearing itself out under a heavy load.

When we took this approach to building our washers, we knew it was going to cost more up front. But we also knew our customers were spread across the country, and it would be difficult for us to handle service calls. Plus, we simply didn't want to build a product that would cause people problems. I think the proof is in the pudding.

We've had some of our earliest machines come back to us. They've been put through the wringer in hard-use environments for over 20 years, and they are still running. That shows me our process worked. By asking better questions and using better components, we engineered a superior machine that people can rely on for years.

-Steve Arendt

Barking Up the Right Vocabulary

Some Pups Are Secret Linguists

Does your dog quietly tilt their head at the mention of “treat” or “walk?” It turns out they’re not just getting ready to wag their tail; they’re actually listening. Our four-legged friends pick up on certain words we use often. But the cleverest canines can actually learn brand-new vocabulary by eavesdropping on everyday conversations. Does the latest study on canine communication from the journal Science mean your loyal pet might be a budding linguist?

Brainy Best Friends

Almost all dogs can hear the tone of our voice, recognize hand movements, or associate a word with a physical object they are shown. Only a handful of pups can learn the name of a new toy without even looking at it, as long as their human is glancing at the area where that toy is located. Bright breeds like border collies are particularly good at interpreting social cues to understand what their owners are talking about.

Word-Wise Woofers

Determining just how many words a dog can learn is tricky. Many dogs learn commands like “fetch,” but they wouldn’t know the difference between “fetch the ball” or “fetch the Frisbee.” Only a small number of dogs can pick up on the difference and understand that certain names refer to specific objects. Some pups are naturals with language, and owners usually notice when their dog reacts correctly to words they did not train them to understand.

Typical Tail-Waggers

To test how these brainy dogs learn words that aren’t directed at them, cognitive scientist Shany Dror of Eötvös Loránd University and the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, experimented with her colleagues. The dog got to look at a new toy, and then their owner placed it out of sight in a bucket. The owner would talk to the dog, mention the toy’s name, and look at the bucket. It proved a challenge, and typical pet dogs just gave a head tilt. However, the word-wise woofers could retrieve that toy when asked.

So, the next time your dog perks up mid-conversation, they might be learning your language.

THE COST OF TAKING TOO MUCH

When Business Cash Feels Personal

I grew up in a self-employed family, so from an early age, I understood one simple truth. If you wanted money, it had to come from the business. There was no outside paycheck showing up every two weeks. Later, when I was building my own company, that same reality followed me. The business was where the money lived, so if I wanted more for my personal life, I had to take a draw.

Over time, I got a lot better at understanding how the money worked in my business. I learned that big sales numbers don’t mean much by themselves. I heard someone say once, “Sales are vanity, profit is sanity, but cash is king.” That hit me hard because it was true. The more I understood that, the healthier the business got. I refined processes, grew our profits, and became very successful.

Even while the business was growing, I still had a blind spot. I wasn’t always managing my cash properly. I worked hard, so I wanted something to show for it. Maybe that meant a boat, a house project, a new car, or some other reward. None of that sounds crazy on its own. The problem was timing. Every dollar I pulled out for myself was a dollar the business no longer had to grow.

If I’m being honest, that took a while to fully see. There were times when I would pull money out, spend it, and then feel pressure almost immediately. So I would go back into the business, hustle hard, make something happen, and get that money back. A little while later, I might do it again. It became a cycle. Looking back, I wish I had understood sooner that you can put just as much pressure on a company with personal spending as you can with a bad business decision.

The point of all this isn’t to say you should never enjoy the rewards of hard work. You should. Just make sure your personal spending aligns with your goals as a business owner. It all worked out for me in the end, but it would have been a lot easier if I had lined those two things up sooner.

Before & After

Lessons From a Long Walk

LEAVING ROUTINE TO FIND PERSPECTIVE

When I stay stuck in daily life too long, I get myopic. I start grinding through the day and stop seeing the bigger picture. My creativity drops, and so does my ability to see opportunities. That’s why, every so often, I intentionally pull myself out of normal life for a couple of weeks.

This time, it took me to Costa Rica. Part of the reason for going there was simple. I live in St. Louis, and winter gets cold, gray, and short on sunlight. Sunshine helps, but the bigger reason was that I needed a reset. Over the years, I’ve learned that when I step away from my routines, my mind clears.

We walked 180 miles across the entire country, usually 12–15 miles a day. Some days were hot. Some were soaked with rain. One day in the jungle, we were slipping through mud with wet shoes and rough footing. It started out miserable but ended up being the best day of the trip. Halfway through, I got so exhausted I stopped worrying about how far we had left. I just focused on the next step. Once I did that, my stress dropped, and things got calmer inside my head. That lesson stayed with me for the rest of our walking trip.

Along the way, we passed through coffee and banana farms and little stores where we would stop for food and talk with people. Most of those we met had far less than the majority of us in the modern Western world, but they were much happier. Their lives were simpler. Seeing that reminded me that a simple life has a lot of value.

That was the biggest gift of the trip. I came home with fresh ideas about my business and my personal life. I want to simplify things. I want to bring people in to do tasks I do now that I don’t enjoy. I want to line up my health, family, and business goals a little better than I have.

For me, that’s the value of stepping away. You’re not escaping life. You’re getting a chance to see it more clearly. Sometimes, the best way to move forward is to step out of life long enough to remember what matters.