



A wonderful gorge: the canyon of Ponte Alto, just outside Trento

Charming but not showy, sombre but elegant. No, this isn't a description of Grace Kelly but of the city of Trento. Which, however, under its composed and distinct airs of a dame from bygone times, hides an impetuous and feral temperament. A wild and primordial soul, right outside the city, survives protected by the mountains, amidst deep ravines, majestic waterfalls and splendid rocky formations.

The good news is that to visit them you don't need to arm yourself of a machete or become a modern-day Indiana Jones. All you need is a pair of comfortable shoes (spoiler: flip-flops and stiletto heels do not fall in this category). On an intercity bus (Nos. 9 or 10) you can arrive in the Cognola district and from there take a short walk to reach the 'Orrido di Ponte Alto' gorge.

In Italian, 'orrido' means 'horrendously ugly', but in this context it also means 'something that perturbs or scares you'. Actually, the Orrido di Ponte Alto is a bit scary, since it is a steep crag the bottom of which is not readily visible. While you are suspended dozens of meters up between the rocky cliffs, engulfed by the crashing sound of the water, the city and civilization as a whole suddenly seem to have disappeared and you feel ... small. An amazing and at the same time destabilizing feeling.

A visit to this canyon is the equivalent of a triple trip into the past and the fifteen thousand years in which the turbulent stream excavated the mountain that separates Trento from Valsugana, opening its way into the Adige valley. At the same time it is a trip into the early history of tourism and of the first rudimental engineering works that, starting in the 16th century, were built to try to contain the fury of the floods that threatened the city.

The Fersina stream, in fact, has always proved useful to the local communities to irrigate the fields and to drive the mills, but it has also always been unpredictable and problematic. You would never guess it when visiting its source as it originates as a tiny rivulet from the beautiful Erdemolo lake. As it descends from the Valley of the Mocheni, however, it grows in power and speed and its impetuous waters drag along all kinds of detritus: pebbles, large rocks and tree trunks. As it approaches Trento, the Fersina unleashes its 'obscure' nature and frighteningly destructive strength.

This is why in the 16th century the city started building some of the world's most ancient waterworks. These structures are precisely what create today's Orrido di Ponte Alto waterfalls, with two spectacular jumps that dig deep into the walls of red rock and luxurious vegetation with a deafening roar and unexpected reflections of light. Children and adults alike are dumbfounded by the spectacle.

In the past things were quite different, however. The inundations of the Fersina were too many to count, as were the attempts to stem the fury of its floods. The first 'serious' works were commissioned by the Prince Bishop Bernardo Clesio who in 1537 ordered the





construction of the first “weir” (‘serra’ in Italian), basically a large low-head dam, to stop the detritus transported by the Fersina uphill of the city and avoid it ending up inside. Up to 20 meters high, the first weir to be built was made of wood and this is why it was destroyed several times by the raging waters. This continued to happen up until 1850 when the more advanced hydraulic technologies and an anti-flood plan prepared with Hapsburgian precision arranged for the weir to be built using gigantic squared blocks of local stone. A second weir was added to the original one in 1882, called the Controserra Madruzzo. Thanks to these water containment structures, today the Fersina arrives at Trento’s door with two wonderful waterfalls, the first about 25 m high and the second almost 40!

And more: thanks to these majestic waterworks built on the Fersina, on the 6th of May 1889 for the first time Trento was lit by the electricity produced by one of the world’s first hydroelectric power plants!

Let’s face it, this is an authentic marvel of Nature and of human intelligence.

The first to realize what an attraction the Orrido di Ponte Alto could be was Massimo Fontanari, a man renowned for his business spirit and intuition. In the early 20th century, just as the concept of tourism was starting to bloom, Fontanari purchased the Ponte Alto inn that had functioned as a post and carriage stage. He had it renovated and enlarged and transformed it into a restaurant. In addition to this, the Fontanari family had the brilliant idea of using the path accessing the weirs – previously used only by the waterworks’ maintenance technicians – to take tourists to visit the gorge. And, of course, they had to pay a ticket to be taken there. In a very short time Ponte Alto and the restaurant became an attraction much favoured by Trento’s citizens as well as by crowds of visitors from all over Italy.

After a long period of inactivity due to safety reasons, in 2017 the Orrido di Ponte Alto was once again opened to visitors and is currently run by the Ecomuseo Argentario eco-museum that includes the Monte Calisio plateau and its environs.

The restoration works have attempted to recover as much of the original path as was possible. This means that today visitors can experience their adventure at the waterfalls and amongst the rocks led by expert guides. As the path descends, visitors enter the gorge of the Fersina stream and look out onto the two falls on two splendid jutting balconies. Be prepared for the surprise! The second balcony, accessed via a special spiral ladder, leads you directly underneath the waterflow front of the Controserra Madruzzo weir ... and you find yourself literally inside the second waterfall, ready to be hypnotized by the gigantic mass of water as it plummets for 40 metres into an abyss.

Once you have finished visiting, don’t go back into the city just yet, but stay on the hill and enjoy the panoramic view of Trento from high up. To get the best out of it timewise (and to avoid getting lost), follow one of the trails suggested by the Ecomuseo Argentario on Monte Calisio, a pretty mountain that is attractive not just for its charming landscape and its





biodiversity. The name “Argentario” in fact derives from the silver mines that have been mined there since ancient times (*argento* is the Italian word for silver). Imagine that the most ancient mining laws of Europe were signed right here in Trento way back in 1215! That is why today the Argentario is a gigantic “gruyere cheese” made of hundreds of labyrinthian tunnels (called ‘canòpe’) that criss-cross it throughout.

The mountain of Trento wasn’t just rich in metals, however. It also supplied the so-called ‘Trento stone’, a calcareous sedimentary rock that came in various colours: white, grey, green and red. Trento’s streets, its palazzi, its walls, the Porta Veronensis and Port’Aquila gates, the Castle of Buonconsiglio, the cathedral, the towers ... In short, all of medieval Trento was built using this stone. This is an ancient story based on fascinating technology that is all revealed when visiting the Cave di Pila extraction sites.

As for more recent history... well, suffice it to say that here we stand in one of the focal points of the Festung Trient, i.e. the Fortress of Trento. This consisted in a mastodontic complex of Hapsburgian fortifications that enclosed the city of Trento from 1860 to WWI in a sort of fortress. More than 10 thousand tonnes of rock were extracted from Monte Calisio to build tunnels, artillery posts and trenches and to defend the city in the east. The path that leads to Dos di Castel Vedro is a panoramic route abounding in what remains of the military artefacts and with a breathtakingly beautiful lookout onto Valsugana.

Today we are hiking on Monte Calisio in comfortable shoes and with trekking poles. In ancient times, however, those who travelled here were at best a stonemason or a miner ... and at worst a soldier fighting the world war. Actually, we live in fortunate times!

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