



APT Val di Non

Val di Non snowshoeing

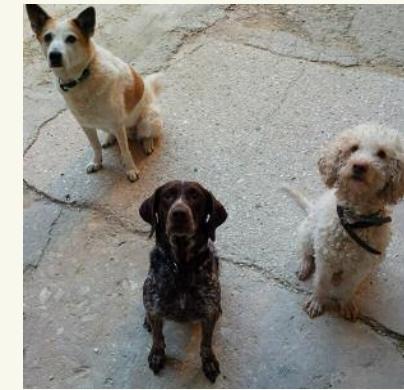
INSIDE:

A Valley of Castles 5

Adoptable Animals 7

Ridesharing in Venice 8

New App in Prontopia 8



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Winter Adventures in Trentino's Val di Non

Are you sure the ice will not break?" I asked, perplexed, as my fellow snowshoers and I followed our guide towards the center of the frozen lake and away from the safety of the shores.

"I'm positive!" said the guide cheerfully, *Livio Sicher*, and, with a grin, he jumped and landed heavily on the frozen patch, snowshoes strapped on, to prove his point.

We were standing on the snow-covered icy surface of *Tovel Lake*, the largest lake in the northern Italian region of *Trentino*, and one of the most beautiful, both for its incredible colors, which range from dark blue to emerald



Livio Sicher and the author

green, and for its setting, nestled as it is among the rugged peaks of the *Brenta Dolomites* in the *Adamello-Brenta Natural Park* of *Val di Non*, the valley of Trentino synonymous with apples known by the Melinda brand name — the only apples in Italy to have *Denominazione di Origine Protetta* status.

I was on my third trip to this valley to the north of *Trento*, Trentino's regional capital, in less than a year (there would be a fourth one a few months later). Surrounded by mountains covered with magnificent forests of fir, larch and pine trees, and with a long history that

continued on page 4

Trentino Alto-Adige became a region in 1948.

Every available space in *Gabriella Becchina's* house and yard is filled with pet supplies — crates, food, toys, and medicine — for the 30 animals she fosters at her animal rescue, *Animalsicilia*, and for her two pets. When she moved to *Castelvetrano* on the island of *Sicily*, in 2003, Swiss native Becchina didn't intend to run an animal rescue by herself from her family-owned palazzo. Nearly 15 years later, she has rescued more than 100 dogs and cats and has become a pillar of the local animal rights community — an oddity in a place where animal welfare isn't a priority.

It all started when she found an abandoned one-month-old dog, a Scandinavian sheepherder-Canaan mix that she adopted and named Pupa, at the gate of her family's olive farm in May 2004. At the time, her father, a Sicilian native, had retired in Sicily and opened an olive farm in the town. Seeing potential for growth, Becchina moved to Castelvetrano to help her parents operate it — and unexpectedly discovered a passion for rescuing animals that she didn't know she had.

continued on page 2

Helping the Strays of Sicily *continued from page 1*

Soon after, she started taking in more strays, and formed Animalsicilia in 2004. Now, she devotes at least six hours a day to caring for the animals on top of her full-time job in the tourism industry.

Becchina describes her rescue as "part foster home, part makeshift shelter, part sanctuary." Until four years ago, Animalsicilia was completely self-funded — a cost of 15,000€ annually — but Becchina has since begun raising small amounts of money to subsidize the cost of vet bills, medication, food, and special health needs.

Animalsicilia is just one of five nonprofits that Becchina runs, under her umbrella company *Nicely Sicily* (www.facebook.com/nicelysicily).

Each nonprofit focuses on a different issue, with "the idea being that progress in every area has an influence on the progress made in another," she says. Besides Animalsicilia, *Corallo Bianco* focuses on mental health, *GrandOliva* is dedicated to olive oil production, *Movimento in Piedi* raises civic awareness, and *Bellumvider Cultural Society* focuses on art and culture.

Also under this umbrella is *Key to Sicily* (39-388-9879332; www.keytosicily.org), Becchina's travel company that provides concierge services, event planning, itinerary planning, and tours. Guests can receive advice on anything Sicily-related, from activities and tickets to restaurant recommendations and someone to call for help if they get a flat tire while driving on a rural road. Key to Sicily plans all types of events, from weddings to cooking class parties and creates itineraries for all travelers: families, LGBT travelers, those with

Keith Sullivan



Ambera attitudes toward animal welfare, while southern Italy and Sicily have not. Perhaps this is because of Sicily's *Mafioso* culture, or because its geographic location between developed western Europe and less-developed North Africa also puts the island at a cultural crossroads as it holds strong to its traditions and resists sociopolitical change.

As a result, there is little societal pressure on police to enforce animal cruelty laws — the culture simply doesn't demand it. To most Italians, pets are not seen as part of the family or let inside the house, but rather as guard dogs, or as farm animals that help with hunting or are left to wander around vineyards and streets. Hunters often poison stray dogs in the countryside with bait because they view the dogs as competitive predators.

disabilities or severe food allergies, eco-conscious travelers, and those who want to learn about genealogy.

A Country Divided

Italy has been a unified country for more than 150 years, but in the case of some cultural issues, it is still divided. Northern Italy, Becchina explains, has adopted Western



Gabriella



Skitch

"Dogs are still considered by many to be toys, disposable objects, or if roaming free a nuisance," says Becchina.

Owners often abandon their pets when they get sick, have unwanted litters, move away, go on their annual August vacations or tire of taking care of them.

It's illegal to relinquish pets at a shelter, so dogs and cats get dumped on the street.

LAV, an animal rights organization in Italy, estimates there are a total of 600,000 strays on the streets in Italy and 160,000 in shelters, but Becchina believes that figure is grossly underestimated, with 1 million on the streets and 600,000 in shelters in reality. She estimates Castelvetrano alone, a town of approximately 31,000 people, is home

to some 14,000 strays. The tight-knit rescue community in Castelvetrano tries to sterilize and rehome as many of them as possible.

There is little population control, as neutering pets is widely unpopular, even when owners have the money and access to a veterinarian, because people of all generations see it as going against nature. "People will admit they have too many cats, but will still decline to have them sterilized even if they have the resources and access," says Becchina.

The culture revolves around protecting one's own family or group and own interests, a result of the Mafia's influence, and discourages people from caring for animals or donating to

The island of *Sicily* lies 100

charity. "Sicilians are ashamed to be seen doing good," explains Becchina. "The number one priority is to protect your own family and the interests of your own group. Doing good is seen as a weakness because it is an opening for someone to take advantage of you."

For as many people mistreat animals in Castelvetrano, Becchina believes there are people who inconspicuously look out for stray animals' welfare. Though people don't often confide their intentions to her, she notices small things, such as the strays' cleanliness, good temperament, and apparent good health. She hopes people who don't want to reveal themselves as animal lovers will eventually come forward and join her cause.

Despite the community's lack of understanding of the importance of animal rights issues, Becchina is persistent. She says, "It is a labor of love and you have to believe the passion you have for the cause is right, and you can't allow anyone to shut you down or shame you even though every possible obstacle can try to get in the way."

Tough Laws, Weak Enforcement

In 1991, Italy became the first country in the world to legally affirm the right of stray dogs and cats to life and protection. With this legal protection came strict laws banning animal cruelty and calling for the establishment of animal shelters nationwide.



Poppi in the garden



Gabriella with Delia and Marilyn

Each town is required to have its



Sherise and Keith Sullivan who adopted Ambera

own publicly-funded animal shelter and to take in strays, provide for their medical care, and rehome them or catch and neuter them before releasing them. Unlike in the U.S., it is illegal for shelters to euthanize healthy animals. Veterinarians are also required to abide by a code of conduct that includes ethical practices and standards for equipment.

These same laws state that anyone who owns more than five pets (defined as dogs and cats) must become an official shelter. There is no provision for people like Becchina who run rescues, which only exist as informal, unrecognized organizations. Still, this doesn't stop city police from calling unofficial rescuers like Becchina and asking them to take in strays where public shelters don't exist.

However, none of these laws are well-enforced in southern Italy. Shelter facilities are limited, as not every town fulfills its duty, and rescues are only run by private citizens. There is no equivalent to American ASPCA or humane society organizations. Shelters fall into three categories: city-run, privately owned, or a combination of

the two run by the city in conjunction with a nonprofit.

Corruption in management of the shelters is rampant: Public officials pocket donation money meant for the shelter and put it toward their political campaigns, and politicians aren't inspired to solve animal welfare issues because as long as strays keep coming in, the shelter can stay open and make a profit. Most shelters in all three categories are overcrowded, facilities and care are inadequate, and the number of shelters is far too few to accommodate all of the strays.

Further, most nonprofits set up to care for animals are fake, with the organizations' staff not caring for

continued on page 7

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“Pineta is my base whenever I travel to Val di Non; it’s a place where I feel pampered and at home at the same time, thanks to two generations of the Sicher family, warm hosts and skillful hoteliers.”

goes back to the *Anauni*, the original inhabitants of the valley, conquered by the Romans in the 1st century BC, Val di Non has it all: natural beauty, hiking opportunities, delightful mountain villages, ancient castles, incredible food.

A Noneso Local

It is indeed under the expert guidance of *Livio Sicher* that I have discovered so many of Val di Non’s beauties. Livio is a born-and-bred “*noneso*” (the Italian name for the residents of the Val di Non), very proud of his valley, and happy to show others why.

He is one of the owners of *Pineta Hotels*, a family-run hotel in the tiny village of *Tavon*, set in an idyllic position overlooking the mountains and right next to the woods. Pineta is my base whenever I travel to Val di Non; it’s a place where I feel pampered and at home at the same time, thanks to two generations of the Sicher family, warm hosts and skillful hoteliers. (39-0463-536866; www.pinetahotels.com; rates start at 100-200€ per night with board, depending on the season.)

I also like Pineta for their packed schedule of activities, with daily hikes in summer and snowshoeing



Tovel Lake



Pineta Hotel

Snowshoeing is easy, eco-friendly, slow-paced and allows you to enjoy deep snowy forests and winter landscapes away from crowded ski slopes — what’s there not to love? In fact, the *nonesi* love it so much that every year on January 6, the day of the *Befana* (Epiphany), they organize the *Ciaspolada*, a 7K snowshoeing run/non-competitive walk that attracts thousands of participants, making it the largest snowshoeing gathering in Europe; it takes place in Fondo, at the northern limit of Val di Non.

Fondo isn’t too far from *Le Maddalene*,

excursions in winter (all led by Livio), which makes it ideal for solo travelers too. Snowshoeing — which essentially is hiking in the snow using a pair of oblong platforms attached to the sole

of your boots so you don’t sink — was invented as a leisure activity right in Val di Non.



Maddalene

speaking territory annexed to Italy after World War I.

Maddalene

In the Maddalene, you can go on a foodie-friendly snowshoeing tour amid snow-covered

pastures and woods, with gorgeous mountain views and the chance to stop at the *malghe* found along the trail. “Malghe” are literally the pastures where animals graze in the summer, but the word also describes the wooden-and-stone structures that house stables, storage sheds for milk and tools, and the staff’s housing quarters. Today, malghe often include a rustic restaurant offering typical local dishes and they make for a popular lunch stop with hikers.

Another worthy excursion in the upper Val di Non is the one to *Lago di Tret*, which, like Tovel, is often frozen in winter. Don’t be surprised if you see a

This region was conquered

hole in the ice near the shore: apparently, a group of locals runs and then dives into the lake every morning at 6:30 — call it an all-natural burst of energy. I didn't dive in when I visited, although I did snowshoe on this lake too (trailing Livio, of course — as with Tovel, all went according to plan, i.e., we didn't sink).

Nearby is the *Passo della Mendola*, the mountain pass that connects Trentino with *Alto-Adige*, and the departing point for a more challenging snowshoeing hike to the top of *Monte Roen*, a popular mountain in Val di Non for its panoramic views over the Brenta Dolomites and the Ortles-Cevedale group.

Foodie Excursion

If you like the idea of an easy snowshoeing excursion that comes with the added bonus of abundant and delicious food, then you should attend the one organized weekly by Hotel Pineta to the *Altopiano della Predaia*, a vast plateau extending between the slopes of the *Monte Roen* and the panoramic *Corno di Tres*. An uphill stretch leads to a

viewpoint encompassing the Valley of the Adige and, in the distance, many of the peaks of the famous Dolomites (which I always have fun trying to recognize with Livio's help — he knows them all).

The best part of this excursion may not even be the view, or the quiet beauty of the snow-covered forest: it's "*il pranzo in baita*" or *grigliata*, a feast of grilled meats and cheeses, polenta, *peperonata*, beans, and cabbage, skillfully prepared by *Nicola Sicher*,

Livio's nephew and Pineta's tireless manager. The lunch takes place in the cozy wooden *baita* (cabin) owned by the Sichers.

A winter vacation in Val di Non doesn't have to be just about snowshoeing; the beauty of this valley is also in its historical attractions. Because of its strategic position, Val di Non was acquired by the Romans and often disputed in the Middle Ages, a time when numerous castles were built.

A Valley of Castles



Castel Valer



Castel Thun



Bishop Room

In fact, Val di Non is the valley with the largest number of castles in Trentino, the most famous being *Castel Thun* (39-0461-657816);

www.castelthun.com) Erected in the 13th century, imposing and austere, Castel Thun is one of the best preserved in the region, standing guard atop a hill at the entrance of the lower Val di Non. For centuries, it was the magnificent residence of the Tono, one of the wealthiest and most powerful feudal families of Trentino.

Protected by a mighty defensive system, Castel Thun features original furnishings and a precious art collection; portraits of prince-bishops, silverware, porcelains, carriages, all contribute to give a glimpse into the comfortable life of the rural aristocracy of the past. On the first floor, the highlight is the *Stanza del Vescovo*, the Bishop's Room, covered in precious Swiss pine (*cirmolo* in Italian). From the gardens, the views over the valley are beautiful.

If Castel Thun is a symbol of Val di Non, the recently-opened Castel Valer (39-0463-830133;

www.visitcastelvaler.it) is no less intriguing. In a panoramic position among apple orchards, it has been inhabited by the same family, the Counts Spaur, since 1438; you may actually spot the current resident of the castle, *Count Ulrico Spaur* (or smell his cigar), as you tour the castle during the guided visit.

This includes several rooms, including the *Salone degli Stemmi*, which displays the emblems of all the families who united with the Spaur; the *Studio*, where a genealogical tree of the Spaur family on

parchment paper is on view; a kitchen equipped with copper and iron pans and ladles; a chapel with perfectly-preserved frescoes from the 15th century; three frescoed and wood-plastered rooms, the *Stanze Madruzziane*, which take their name from *Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo*, who resided in the castle during the Council of Trent (1545-1563), a major event in the Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation.

continued on page 6

From the gardens (where events are held in summer) and the elegant loggia, you have panoramic views of the valley, with its signature apple groves the artificial Lake of *Santa Giustina*, and Castel Thun itself.

Sanctuary of San Romedio

Speaking of Val di Non's landmarks, a much beloved one, exuding an aura of sacredness and mystery, is the *Sanctuary of San Romedio*, located in a spectacular position at the end of a gorge carved by the Rio Romedio stream, perched on a 70-meter-high rocky spur, in the midst of a forest.

The sanctuary, one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Europe, consists of five churches and chapels built in different time periods that follow the shape of the rock and are connected by a 131-step steep staircase covered wall to wall with ex-votos. The first church, built around the year 1000, stands in the upper part of the complex over the tomb of Saint Romedius.

According to legend, Romedius was a former noble turned hermit who was able to tame a bear and then ride on it to Trento to meet the city's bishop. The sanctuary was built on the place where Romedius retreated to live with his bear, and today, it includes a wildlife area where a bear lives in semi-captivity. Every year on January 15, the Feast of Saint Romedius is celebrated with a special mass and the traditional tripe-based pilgrim's dish. The Sanctuary of San Romedio can be reached on foot from Hotel Pineta through the forest (30 minutes) or from *Sanzeno* via a spectacular walk carved



Sanctuary San Romedio



Massimo Corra

into the rock of the canyon (45 minutes).

With so much to see and do, you'll need to be well fed, and there's plenty to try in Val di Non for the eager foodie. The meatball-shaped, smoked *mortandela* is the cured meat typical of the Val di Non, and a Slow Food presidium, made only by a handful of local *salumieri*.

Meat, Wine and Cheese

Among them are the *Corrà*, the owners of the *Dal Massimo Goloso* deli in

Non is the *Teroldego Rotaliano*, a full-bodied red.

Cheeses are obviously excellent around here, and the one you'll most often see on menus, used in many recipes, is *Trentingrana*, which belongs to the family of the *Grana* cheeses, those with a granular texture and long aging time. The peculiarity of Trentingrana comes from the flavors and scents of the grass and flowers that end up in the hay fed to cows grazing on Trentino's pastures. A good place to buy Trentingrana and other local cheeses is the *Caseificio Sociale di Coredo*, where visitors can also see the *casari* (cheesemakers) at work.

Pineta works closely with these local food artisans; their products are often employed for the dishes prepared at the hotel's restaurant, *Alla Pineta*, helmed by the young and talented Mattia Sicher (Livio's son).

Tastings are also regularly held in Bruno Sicher's *cantina* — cellar. (Bruno is Livio's brother and was Pineta's chef before retiring.)

Tell me, what could be better than returning to a lovingly-run hotel with plenty of delicious food and drink (homemade apple strudel and grappa included), especially after a thrilling snowshoeing hike on a frozen lake?

For more on this wonderful destination, visit www.visitvaldinon.com and www.visitrentino.com

—Silvia Donati

Silvia Donati is a journalist based in Italy. Her articles have been published in Italy Magazine, Telegraph Travel, BBC Travel, Forbes Travel Guide, ANSA. She likes to write about the lesser-known aspects of Italian travel and culture and is always up for a hike.

The official name of Italy

Sicily Animal Welfare *continued from page 3*

animals and embezzling money for their own personal benefit.

Castelvetrano's first public animal shelter opened in 2006, but was mismanaged and closed after six years and did not reopen until 2014. When the shelter closed, its animals had nowhere to go, so the tight-knit rescue community took them in. People who ran private shelters and informal rescues adapted their spaces with enclosures, and are still fostering some of the dogs left over from the crisis.

Given the problems with money laundering in nonprofits, Becchina strives to be transparent in her expenses. When tourists learn about Animalsicilia and want to help with vet expenses, Becchina doesn't accept the money herself, but instead directs people to donate at the vet clinic.

When adopting an animal overseas, it is both cheaper and safer for the animal to fly home with its adoptive owners rather than hiring a pet moving service. Becchina's base adoption fee is 250€, covering vaccinations, microchipping, sterilization, socialization, a pet passport and other medical expenses. The total cost to adopt an animal to the U.S. including additional expenses, such as a universal airline-approved dog carrier and a plane ticket for the animal, is typically between \$1,200 and \$3,500.

Next Steps Next Steps

Becchina is heavily involved in all aspects of animal welfare in Castelvetrano. She and others fight relentlessly for animal rights and, when the city's shelter

reopened, pressured the staff to run it appropriately. She volunteers at the shelter regularly and assists in medical procedures such as sterilization there, and even served in local public office to understand the depth of the problems hindering progress in animal rights.

Adoptable Animals

Sisters *Vivien* and *Marilyn* are 4-year-old terriers and are playful, sweet, and energetic. They are great with children and other dogs, and are obedient and social. Both would fit in perfectly with a family.



Marilyn

Delia, a 4-year-old female Husky/Maremma sheepdog mix, is wonderful with children and other dogs, and is well-adjusted and smart. She is deaf, but not disabled – she just needs better visual cues.



Vivien

Chiara, a 5-year-old female, loves company and a lively home environment. She gets along well with quiet, respectful people and domesticated cats, but not other female dogs.



Delia

Grey, a 5-month-old male kitten, was rescued unharmed from the mouths of two dogs. He is loving and cuddly and ready for adoption, but still needs to be neutered and toilet trained.



Chiara

Darko, a 4-year-old male border collie, was found injured in 2014 by an American tourist, who turned him over to Animalsicilia and paid for his vet care. He is very smart and an excellent ball catcher and retriever.



If you're interested in adopting any of these animals, please contact Gabriella at animalsicilia@gmail.com

Now she is launching a crowdfunding campaign to open a proper shelter so she can spend more time on advocacy and less time on fixing up her home for the animals. The shelter will provide boarding for pet owners on vacation, education on animal welfare, pet therapy, an agility space and a sanctuary for old or disabled animals.

Donations to Animalsicilia for food and supplies can be accepted through PayPal (www.paypal.me/give2gabriellasicily). Donations to the vet clinic must be wired directly to the clinic; email animalsicilia@gmail.com for instructions.

"At the local level, as there is no dialogue in the community around animal welfare," Becchina says. "The only way we can leverage our progress is at the school level with small children, and educate them young."

She is also launching a new website for Animalsicilia, whose Facebook page (www.facebook.com/pg/Animalsicilia) is a resource for locals, expats who live in Italy, tourists interested in adopting a pet to bring home, and those who want to report an animal welfare issue to authorities.

"Animalsicilia can harness the power of the expat community who sees animals suffering and wants to help. It's a unique opportunity to make change," she says.

—Elaine Murphy

WHAT'S NEW IN VENICE

RIDE-SHARING GONDOLAS AND WATER TAXIS

The new app *KiShare* is bringing ride-sharing to Venice's waterways, allowing users to join other passengers for gondola, water taxi (*motoscafi*), and road taxi rides.

"We decided to start KiShare because we are gondola drivers and many times people ask us if they can share the gondola or a taxi, and also because we want to increase the quality of the services," says *Franco Grossi*, an eighth-generation gondolier (who appears in the Venice episode of season two of *Dream of Italy* on PBS).

Gondola tours organized by companies often cost 30€ to 40€ per person for a 30-minute, six-person tour, a total of 180€. KiShare charges 160€ for a 60-minute gondola ride for six people — about 26€ per person.

Ever wish you had a friend in an Italian city who could advise you on the best way to get around, what to do and where to go? *Prontopia* aims to change that, and is launching in *Venice* as a way to connect travelers with local Venetians who can help them at any point during their visits.

"We launched in Venice because it can be a challenging place to navigate," says Shannon Kenny who runs the site *ItaliaKids.com* and founded Prontopia along with Davis Brimer, who once worked with her at a tech start-up.

1€ = \$1.22 at press time

A one-way water taxi fare from the city center to the island of *Murano* costs 60€, and a one-way road taxi to *Marco Polo Airport* costs 40€.



Shared between four people, the fare can cost as little as 10€ per person — significant savings compared to shouldering the entire cost alone.

Once users download the app, they can find and connect with other users nearby, select a meeting point, and view the closest gondola or taxi stations. Though KiShare calculates the water taxi prices for fixed routes,

guests can take the water taxis to other destinations as well.

The social aspect of the app allows solo travelers, couples, and others to meet like-minded people and travel in more comfort than in a train or *vaporetto* (public water taxi). Users can chat through the app to book rides or communicate if they are running late, share photos and exchange contact information. Users can also choose how many people they want to share the ride with, as well as their companions' age and other attributes.

The KiShare app is available for free on Apple and Android devices. It works from anywhere in the world and is available in nine languages. Users can book their rides months in advance or the day-of. Look for KiShare to expand throughout Italy.

GET HELP FROM A LOCAL, ON DEMAND

Travelers can request a local on demand for help getting around Venice, whether to greet them upon arrival at the train station or airport and guide them to their hotel, help them with their departure, or give directions. Locals can also refer visitors to qualified tour guides during their stay.



Following a test period, Prontopia's updated app will be released sometime this year and travelers will be able to request immediate assistance from locals for whatever their needs may be. Until



then, travelers can book assistance through the Prontopia website at least 24 hours in advance. The service costs 20€ per hour.

For travelers, the bonuses of "enabling a human connection to solve an immediate problem," as Kenny puts it, include getting to know an authentic part of Venice through a local's perspective and feeling connected to a community. The 40 locals who currently work for Prontopia are proud to act as ambassadors for Venice.

For more information, visit www.prontopia.com

— Elaine Murphy

The are 127 squares in *Venice*.