



**An extract from 'Mountain Flower Holidays in Europe'
By Lionel Bacon**

[Reproduced by kind permission of the Alpine Garden Society]

The Dolomites is a mountainous region of North-East Italy, running up to the Austrian frontier. It is a scenically distinctive and beautiful area, whose name derives from the predominant local rock formation, dolomite, which is a crystalline magnesian limestone. These mountains are wonderful and exciting to see: great pinnacles and castellations of rock with vertical and horizontal cleavages. The crystals have curved surfaces, which catch the light giving constant changes of colour. The Dolomite mountains are not so high as the Central Alps, reaching only some 3,300m, and there are only small areas of glacier and permanent snow.

Road communications are good, and the Dolomites Road [Strada dei Dolomiti, Dolomitenstrasse] runs through the Dolomites from south-west to north-east, and good branch roads lead across the mountain passes on either side. Probably the quickest road-route from England is via the German autobahn to Innsbruck, entering Italy at the Brenner Pass.

The flowers are abundant and varied, the alpine pastures at both lower and higher levels vying with anything that the Swiss Alps can offer, but presenting in the main the same plants that are found in the Eastern Alps. Above the valleys, the mountains are wooded, coniferous forests predominating, and here again one meets the flora of the Eastern Alps. Over the forests the great limestone mountains tower into the sky, glaring white in the midday sun, grey in the cloud, glowing red at sunset and dawn. It is here in the limestone crevices of the cliffs and in the jumbled scree at their feet that the special dolomitic plants are to be found. A few are endemic to the area, others spreading into the neighbouring limestone mountains, for the magnesium limestone is not confined to the Dolomites, but forms a component, in varying quantity, of other limestones in neighbouring districts. This is no doubt one of the factors that determine whether plants which one associates with the Dolomites are totally confined to that area. An example is *Physoplexis comosa* [better known to alpine gardeners as *Phyteuma comosum*] centred in the Dolomites but extending westwards to the lake district as well as into Austria and Jugoslavia.

Plants which grow in dolomite are obviously tolerant of magnesium carbonate [which is very alkaline] and it is likely that those which are confined to the dolomite actually need it. It seems that an excess of lime [calcium carbonate] impairs the ability of some plants to take up their magnesium requirement [as well as iron], so that the Dolomite endemic plants are by no means always tolerant of lime or chalk in the garden, and indeed some appear to do better in an acid or peaty soil. Calcifuge plants are to be found in the Dolomites for quite another reason. The dolomite, probably of marine origin, was deposited over non-calcareous primary rocks, and there are areas in the Dolomites where these rocks break through the limestone crust so that two types of rock, each with its characteristic flora, are to be found within a small area. The Pordoi and Rolle Passes provide well-known examples of this.

Halfway between Cortina and Bolzano [and also accessible from Brunico in the north], there is a great block of dolomite mountains, the Gruppo di Sella; a solid spectacular mass reaching 3151m which Farrer described as a plinth without a statue. It is encircled by a road which can conveniently be described as a 'square', though indeed it is neither a circle nor a square, but 48km of twisting and exciting road, climbing over four passes and dropping steeply between them: a wonderful drive. Along its southern side is a stretch of the Dolomite Road, crossing the Pordoi Pass [2239m], the

highest point on this fine road. On the west side of the 'square' the road traverses the Sella Pass [2214m], the saddle between the Sella group and the great spike of the Sasso Lungo, Farrer's statue without a plinth. So to the north-west corner of the square where, leaving on your left the road which runs away down the Val Gardena, you turn eastwards to cross the Gardena Pass [2121m], and on the fourth, eastern, side of the 'square' you cross the lowest of the passes, the Campolongo [1875m] and drop down to the Dolomite Road at **Arabba**, ready to climb again to the Pordoi. It is a wonderful area, with much to see and fine flowers and is perhaps the nearest place to the finest flowers in the Dolomites.

Running southward from the pass is the Viel del Pan – the famous 'Bindelweg' extolled by Farrer and many others since: and it is this relatively level track which has lured so many of the society's members to the Pordoi Pass. It has everything: scenery, dolomite flowers, calciphobes. First it skirts the Sasso Becce, an isolated block where much of the dolomitic flora is gathered together. *Anemone baldensis* is at your feet as you leave the hotel. *Leontopodium alpinum* is here to be found as a true crevice plant on the cliffs, in company with *Paederota bonorata*, *Saxifraga crustata*, *Potentilla nitida*, *Rhodothamnus chamaecistus* and *Thlaspi rotundifolium*. In the rough grassy scree below the cliffs are *Primula halleri* and *Soldanella minia*, but the most remarkable thing here is the variety of colour of *Gentiana verna*. Among the deep glowing blues are purples no less intense, soft greys and violets, and we have even seen a plant on which every flower had each petal divided along its length – half blue, half purple.

Then the path begins to curve away to the east, crossing a neck of black schistous scree, and this is the eastern end of the Sasso di Capello, the outcropping of igneous rock whose vast sheer cliffs drop down towards the main road as it runs from Pordoi to Arabba. On and among these rocks and screes are to be found many of the finest calcifuge flowers of the high places of the Eastern Alps. There are yellow mats of *Vitaliana primuliflora* [*Douglasia vitaliana*] and with them purple mats of *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, the great golden salvers and red trailing stolons of *Geum reptans*, *Ranunculus glacialis* in white and pink, *Primula minima*, *Leucanthemopsis* [*Chrysanthemum*, *Leucanthemum*] *alpina*, *Androsace alpina* [generally white flowered and tight clumped here] and further to the east the *pièce de résistance*, *Eritrichium nanum* in as fine a form as you will find anywhere, growing among the wire netting of old gun emplacements in loose schist from which we have seen the whole plants kicked out by sheep.

All this lies above you and to your left as you follow the Bindelweg, for it skirts the southern slope of the Sasso di Capello, where the curious blue and white striped form of *Gentiana acaulis*, which is one of the oddities of the area, may be found. The path at long last drops down to the Lago di Fedaja, and from here you may climb, or take the chair-lift, into the great glacier-crowned mass of the Marmolada [3342m], the highest mountain in the Dolomites and one of the sites for *Primula tyrolensis*. You can of course scramble up from the Bindelweg to the crest of Sasso di Capello to see the *Eritrichium*, but on a fine day, it is the views across to the Marmolada, and far away to the east, that are the special attraction of this part of the Bindelweg. Nearly all the flowers may be found near the neck where the Bindelweg runs between the Sasso Becce and the Sasso di Capello, and from here too you can look away westward steeply down the valley that runs behind the Sasso Becce to Canazei in the Val di Fassa, a thousand metres below. *Pulsatilla alpina* and *P. apiifolia* grow here together with *P. vernalis*, *Soldanella alpina*, *Pulmonaria angustifolia*, *Ranunculus pyrenaicus*, *Crocus vernus* and *Primula elatior*. This is an association of plants to be met with frequently in the Alps, where they spring to life together as the snow recedes from the high passes around the end of June. The one that always intrigues me is the last. By what freak of nature has the oxlip of our East Anglian woodlands become a snow breaker at 2100m in the European mountains?

While this does not complete the list of interesting and lovely plants to be found on and around the south side of the Pordoi Pass [for instance the androcases *AA*. *Chamaejasme*, *lacetea*, *hausmannii* and *helvetica* have all been mentioned by visitors to the area], it should be sufficient to justify the Pordoi Pass, or somewhere in its vicinity, as a place to stay.