



# The Dolomites Adventure By Adrian Ainsworth

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Miniturismo.co.uk organised their third long distance MINI adventure to the Alps in June 2007. The trip consisted of 2000 miles of driving peaking with a five day stay in Canazei in the Italian Dolomites. On offer on the trip were a massive 50 passes to navigate and the challenge (for those who wanted to) was to do as many as possible. We decided to join the gang for the last few days of their stop in Canazei and because it was a long way to travel just for the weekend, RVW and Storm (Ray and Gail) opted to stay on with us in Canazei for an extra day. They would catch up with the MINI group on the Tuesday to continue their journey home with them. From Canazei we were to head south to continue our summer holiday in our apartment in Port Cogolin. In keeping with the “challenge” theme we decided to make our first challenge getting from Le Havre to Canazei in one hit. It was an 825 mile road trip which was to take 13 hours! Is this a European record for the longest distance driven in one day to attend a MINI event? (Ady)

## Day Zero – Thursday 7th June 2007

I closed Windows down, put my jacket on and left work. Outside Peanut was waiting packed and ready in CheckBeast. It was 5.30 and our holiday had begun! We had a two hour drive to Portsmouth to catch our overnight ferry to Le Havre and this passed off without hitch. In Portsmouth we had dinner at the Harvester, which seemed a lonely affair as last time we dined there it was with all the MINI gang that did the Loire Valley French Weekender in March. Then we refuelled with Optimax and joined the queue to board the boat. It was now that we had our first panic as we discovered there was a problem with the loading ramp and the top level of cars had not been able to disembark when the ferry had come into port. It was an anxious and frustrating wait but fortunately it was fixed and we boarded at 11.30! It was straight to bed for an early start to a very full day the next day. (Ady)

## Day One – Friday 8th June 2007

The mission for today was to go directly from Le Havre to Canazei in the Dolomites in one hit. To this end we had decided to pack food to eat on the go and would only be stopping to change drivers or for toilet and fuel stops. Accordingly, we were up early for breakfast on the ship to ensure we started with full tummies. Our first small hitch was the new docking time of 8.00am instead of 7.30 which we had originally expected and consequently we only got on the road at 8.30, at which point TomTom gave us an ETA in Canazei of 9.15pm. We had agonized over the route prior to departure and for better or worse had decided to plunge for going through Paris, out towards Metz, into Germany and then down through Austria. With hindsight heading towards Dijon and crossing Switzerland would have been the better option!

We reached Paris without hitch but got bogged down on the peripherique which did however give us time to wave hello to the Eiffel Tower and renew our friendship with the good old Expo centre which we seem to encounter every single time we go to Paris. The Paris crossing had cost us 30 minutes of precious time and our ETA was already back to 9.45. A good run followed after that until just before Metz where we were diverted from the

motorway to follow slow moving traffic through beautiful countryside for about 30 miles, until we rejoined the motorway. Our joy at being back on track was short lived however, as we quickly encountered motorway road works and more slow moving traffic. It was at this point that we realized we should have paid more attention to Chrisandjax's internet posts as they had actually warned about these road works, but sat in England and reading about



everyone in Canazei over a glass of wine, its significance did not sink in. Finally we got through it but our ETA was now 10.15 !!!

Some fast roads in our favour were called for and Germany kindly supplied them. Audis seem to be the Car of the Year as every Herr and his Onkel seem to have one. We picked out two fast moving Audis to use as our markers and rushed through Germany reaching

speeds of 135mph. All too soon we were out of Germany and into Austria where we should have bought a ticket to use their motorway, but we didn't know, didn't see any notification and luckily we didn't get stopped. We were very impressed with Austria as we drove through both on motorway and country roads. It looked beautiful and we made a mental note to explore it further another time. Our ETA, thanks to German and Austrian motorways, had recovered to a more respectable 9.45. However the challenge was on as we still had all the glories of the roads of the Dolomites, including the Sella Pass to negotiate. Unfortunately it fell to me to drive across the Passo di Sella with an impatient Beastie next to me, in the dark, pleading his desperation for a glass of wine with his mates in Canazei. I am proud to say that I crossed the Passo di Sella without extending our ETA! However it has probably cost us upwards of £350 as we both agreed that spotlights would be a good addition to CheckBeast's inventory.

Jaffa (Kev) had been texting us throughout the day and as we arrived at the hotel he was stood outside to guide us in and welcome us. No sooner had we got out of the car and said hello than Jax rushed out with a bottle of Prosecco and two glasses. We felt immediately at home and amongst good friends and promptly settled down to an evening of fun and drinks with our Miniac friends. (Peanut)

## Day Two – Saturday 9th June 2007

RVW had rung us earlier in the week and mentioned that a lot of the gang fancied a trip to Venice and having said we would like to come along they planned it for the Saturday. We awoke on Saturday morning to beautiful sunshine and not a sign of the Curse of RVW – a perfect day for a trip to Venice. To save us having to drive after our long trip on Friday, RVW and Storm kindly said we could travel with them in their mini. The plan was to drive to a train station on the outskirts of Venice and then catch a train in. However this plan was scuppered, courtesy of George Bush, as a strike and demonstration in the Grand Station

in Venice in protest against the War in Iraq had stopped the trains from running. Fun and games then once we realized we would have to attempt to drive into Venice and park the cars. As most of us have strengthened sports suspension we were a little worried that the locals might think we had returned for more gold! As it turned out our journey into Venice went so well and we parked with such ease, that we wondered if Jax had somehow managed to affect



the traffic lights on her blog-phone! So concerned were the locals of our intentions to steal gold that the car park attendants insisted that we left our mini keys with them. You can imagine the consternation this caused diehard Miniacs!

After an initial drink together in a street café not far from the car park, we all went our separate ways to explore Venice and it was fun wandering around and periodically bumping into different members of the gang. Just when we were feeling peckish we bumped into RVW and Storm and had a pleasant lunch with them. Afterwards we had a little wander and shop, where everything seemed to fall into place. Beastie saw some shoes he liked- the last pair, his size and the perfect fit – first purchase under the belt. Halfway up the Rialto Bridge a lovely pair of leather gloves smiled at me – strange how they looked exactly the right size for my hands. The lady sprinkled a little talc inside them and hey presto the second purchase completed. Yes, St Marks was wonderful, and yes, Venice was beautiful, but really we just enjoyed the fine shops. We met back at the small café where we had all started our day arriving leg weary but in good time. Carol and Jaffa and RVW and Storm however had managed to get themselves hopelessly lost and when poor Carol arrived back she was so tired that I thought maybe we should have brought our mobile defibrillator with us! RVW and Storm didn't actually manage to find the café but did find the corner of the bus station where the cars were parked, so we found them as we went back.



We broke the journey home with a stop for a meal. It had been a hot, tiring day and we all appreciated the chance to sit down and relax with a bite to eat. At this point RVW presented Beastie with a little gift he had found in Venice which he thought would be appropriate for a man who has too often told the tale of his encounter with the Postman.

Not being shy Beastie immediately donned his gift - a pinny with a picture of a naked man on the front. Beastie later told me that he rather liked the pinny as the proportions of the gentleman model on it did not make him feel too inadequate! (Peanut)

## Day Three – Sunday 10th June 2007

We went down for breakfast with no real plan in mind of how to spend the day other than we wanted to do some fun driving. Paa100 told us what some of them were planning which involved driving a few passes, a cable car ride and some ice cream. It sounded good so we plumped for that. Others in the group were doing the cable car ride, followed by a walk in the snow and mountains and some photography. That sounded good too but you can't do it all and we wanted to drive!



The day was awesome for us and the fun started straight away as the hairpins began almost as soon as we left the hotel and headed for the cable car. This was real James Bond stuff as the cable car seemed to ascend almost vertically up the side of the mountain. Our ears had been popping just on the drive to the bottom of the cable car. They popped with a vengeance as the cable car rapidly ascended the mountain.

From the top the views were

stunning, the drinking chocolate hot and gloopy and the snow ball fights plentiful. There seemed to be a large hole in the mountain which the snow was pouring down but we couldn't get close enough to see properly. Wigley did his best to see to Jane's consternation. Every step closer he took was punctuated with the worried tones of Jane saying "Stewy... Stupot... STU..." Fortunately he heeded Jane's warnings and lived to fall down another hole in the future. Finally, it was time to descend in the cable car and I thought of Minisoopercooper and his dislike of heights. This was not the ride for him at all! Halfway down we spotted some climbers who were halfway up the vertical cliff we were rapidly dropping down and my hands went all clammy just looking at them – my God what they were doing looked scary.

From here we did our first real pass of the day. Stu led the way; Spaci went second, followed by us in CheckBeast. Paa100 brought up the rear in



his X3 with its humongous wall of torque. The three minis were pretty evenly matched in performance and an exhilarating rhythm of speed was established as we demolished hairpin after hairpin. A brief stop at some bizarre souvenir shop gave us all a rest before we headed off for lunch at the top of yet another pass. Chrisandjax had been flirting with us all morning in their GP while catching us all on their video and they too joined us for lunch. More fun driving followed in the afternoon which was also punctuated with a few fun stops.

First we stopped at a rather interesting shop which specialised in some fine metal sculptures and Wigley, Chrisandjax and Paa100 all bought some pieces. My personal favourite was Wigley's which was a small flock of birds in flight which hung on a wall, as this reminded me of the Breitling planes you see in jeweller's shops behind their Breitling displays! Next we went about half a mile down the road and had a pleasant walk along a very deep and narrow gorge which was spectacularly crossed by a narrow road bridge above us. Spaci braved the icy waters of the river which flowed along the bottom and had a wee paddle. My suspicion is that he did not feel his feet for two days after that! Paa100 knows that any good day is incomplete without ice-cream and while we were at the sculpture shop he had made enquiries to find the best Gelateria in the area. We arrived at a bustling square in a small village by a lake and miraculously found the last 5 car spaces all together seemingly just

waiting for us. Lacking imagination myself, I blatantly copied Kev from the Forest's ice cream choice. It was based around strawberries and I was not disappointed. Peanut was in Heaven with her banana split! It was at this point that Spaci confirmed that the Swiss are mad by sneaking off and paying for everyone's ice cream. It was a really nice gesture though from a man who simply explained that he had had such fun with us all on this MINI adventure. From here we



had a brief halt as we crossed a dam before heading back to the hotel for our evening meal.

RVW and Storm and ourselves were staying in Canazei for an extra night but for the rest of the group this was their last night. We all dined together as one large group (much to the chef's distress) and naturally the fun got more raucous as the night wore on. My pinny got another airing to the great amusement of those who hadn't yet seen it and Paa100 had another of his party games up his sleeve. The man really is a class leader in the party games department. March had seen him excel when he brought balloon modelling to The French Weekender and now we had to follow diagrams to produce paper aeroplanes! The winner would be determined by flying them from his balcony to see which flew the furthest. Nathalie proved to be the victor in this game. Great fun! A little later on Jaffa showed us some of his photos from his day and they were stunning – a wonderful close up of a bird in flight with the twisty hairpins of a pass on the ground below as a backdrop and a delightfully evocative photo of a girl prostrate along the top of a wall with a huge sky of

moody clouds behind her, were just two that stuck in my mind. I had to show Peanut and disappeared off to find her. She was downstairs with the rest of the gang and silly me, I immediately forgot why I had gone looking for her. Er yep it was that kind of a fun night! Fortunately she saw the photos at breakfast the next day. (Ady)

## Day Four – Monday 11th June 2007

At breakfast we said our goodbyes to the rest of the group and shortly afterwards we waved them off as they did six laps of the roundabout in front of the hotel before roaring off down the road with their exhausts popping in the wonderful way the Mini exhausts do. RVW's red mini and CheckBeast were left all alone and you could see their headlights droop and their bumpers sag as they started to miss their mini mates already. First job then was to cheer them up with a wash and clean and we promised to take them out for a fun drive in the mountains.

The four of us opened a large map on one of the tables in front of the hotel and pored over it with great intent. It did the trick, it fooled the minis into thinking we knew what we were doing and they cheered up and we promptly set off to do the dozen or so passes we had found on the map! In the end we got round to doing 3 or 4 but it was great fun nonetheless.

The first pass we did was through a lot of forest and was single track and very twisty. Not especially fast but immense fun and with some stunning scenery. A lovely log cabin



supplied us with a fortifying cup of hot chocolate and we were all fascinated by a man in a shed outside making polenta in a large wooden bowl. The whole process looked a bit like mixing concrete only it was bright yellow. Before long we were on our way once more and our next hurdle was to navigate past the 311 large cows that had suddenly appeared to litter the road in front of us. Intimidating on its own but each cow had its own large and very loud bell and seemed to be in no hurry to get

out of our way! Eventually we got past without incident but I kept thinking that this would be Chrisandjax's worst nightmare, as they had encountered a horse in the recent past which mistook their GP for a park bench and tried to sit on it – the result wasn't funny.

Meanwhile high in the skies above us dark forces had spotted RVW and to let us know he had been seen, a smattering of rain and dark cloud was sent our way. We took no notice and the Gods got angrier. More rain and wetter roads resulted and now we found we weren't going round the hairpins quite as we should, the cars didn't turn when we turned

the steering wheel and walls started to loom on our flanks closer than we liked. The Curse of RVW had truly reared its head, so as a nod of respect we curtailed our driving and pulled in for lunch, which was a modest but tasty ham and cheese panini.

A little more driving followed after lunch as we headed back for the hotel. We got there about 4 o'clock and had tea and Kit Kats in RVW's room and had a play with his laptop which sported Microsoft's all singing and dancing Vista operating system. RVW had a fine set of pictures from the trip and I was most impressed. Anyway after a while we retired to our room as Storm said she wanted wild sex with RVW and as this would require lots of imagination on her behalf she needed a bit of time. We arranged to meet later for dinner in the hotel. Dinner was not the raucous affair it had been the previous night but was very pleasant nonetheless and the wine still went down rather well. Peanut and I had a lasagne and tagliatelle which we split between us - very nice. All too soon it was bedtime on our final day in the Dolomites.

## Day Five – Tuesday 12th June 2007

We met early for breakfast and before long we were ready for the next leg of our adventures. We were heading 450 miles south to our home in Port Cogolin and the excitement of playing with speedboats, while RVW and Storm were heading north to rejoin the Miniacs and their fun and craziness at Lake Titisee, stopping off for lunch at Innsbruck. As we left Canazei Tomtom gave our ETA as 4.17 and incredibly we arrived at exactly 4.17 - we were both very impressed.

Our journey south took us past Genoa and on to Ventimiglia where we hit the coast. From here the motorway hugs the sea past Monaco, Nice and Cannes and on to our exit about 20 miles from Port Cogolin. We had done this trip before in our open topped Pug and we remembered that it was a relentless succession of bridges and tunnels. However, second time round there seemed to be even more of them than before! As the afternoon wore on we had a constant stream of texts and calls from various members of the gang. Jaffa informed us that both Julie and Chrisandjax had been caught speeding on their journey to Germany and also commented that 'The Curse has not yet arrived' which prompted us to text RVW to see how he was getting on. RVW told us he too had been caught speeding in Austria and consequently received a fine as well, for not having the necessary ticket for driving on their motorways He was at this point in Switzerland, presumably avoiding Austrian police and their harsh regime (doubtless this explained the glorious weather we were having in Port Cogolin). Not a good day for the Dolomites!

Well our Dolomite adventure was over and we had emerged almost unscathed (I'm sure we need to change our brakes – and they have only done 12,000 miles!) and speeding ticket free. For us it was a great adventure and it felt very special meeting up with all our Mini friends for a few days of fun in the Dolomites. We always come away from these adventures hungry for more and we can't wait for our next mini adventure! (Ady)

PS. Our days in Port Cogolin that followed the Dolomite adventure were full of glorious sunshine. However, on Friday 15th June the Gods noticed that RVW had once more stepped on French soil and was loitering in Le Wast near Calais waiting to return to Blighty. It was too much for them to bear and in their panic they sent us an hour of torrential rain, thunder and lightning the like of which we have only seen... er twice before! Do not doubt the existence of The Curse of RVW!