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Cliffhanging, Italian style

Cortina's alpine splendour is matched by its mystique, says **Cameron Wilson**.

Scenic beauty: Cortina d'Ampezzo, viewed from Faloria ski slope, with the soaring crags of the Dolomites in the background

THE town of Cortina d'Ampezzo sits in the hollow of a mountain cirque in Italy's spectacular Dolomite range. From every vantage point, you are hemmed in by the most dramatic peaks, mesas, crags and overhangs in the world.

No wonder Sly Stallone looked so good hanging about here in a ripped T-shirt for the movie Cliffhanger. Like lots of actors before him, he discovered these mountains are not so much a backdrop as they are your co-star.

The jaw-dropping beauty of the place is not having much effect on my ski guide Luciana though, as we pull into a car park halfway up Tofana peak and unload our skis.

It looks to me like the sort of overcast morning that quickly turns into a classic bluebird ski day, but Luciana is having none of it, muttering the words "stupida luce" as she clips up her boots.

The Italians have a better way of doing and saying pretty much everything, and I've just been introduced to my new favourite bit of skiing terminology.

Stupida luce literally means "stupid light" — the loss of depth perception that can occur on a ski slope under cloud cover.

The English expression is "flat light" but, as Luciana helpfully explains, this only describes the situation: in Italian you get to express your feelings about it.

The clouds and Luciana have both departed by the time I find myself on a chairlift chatting with Ernesto, who lives in Sicily and comes to Cortina every winter. We ski a couple of runs together, including the main top section of Tofana which is used for World Cup downhill races. The sky is now blazing blue and I confide to him how relieved I am that we won't have any stupida luce to deal with this afternoon.

It turns out that Ernesto's family has "estates" in Sicily — orange orchards, olives and vineyards — and I hazard a guess that he can probably afford to ski wherever he chooses.

It is undoubtedly part of the Cortina mystique that it is the destination of choice for Italy's well-heeled ski crowd.

But the overwhelming impression you get is that while money and style matter here, no one is made to feel excluded just because they lack either one or both.

It is heart-warming to watch the evening parade of women in floor-length fur coats intermingled with mums and dads pushing prams and rounding up their kids.

Even the dogs you see being walked are an egalitarian bunch — no mincing pure-bred exotics, just proper dogs like labradors, dalmatians and everyday mutts.

As for the skiing, a Cortina area ski pass gets you access to lifts on six separate mountains, all connected by a network of free shuttle buses. Lift tickets are great value compared with Australian resorts — $60 for a day pass, $160 for a three-day ticket.

The 1200km of trails make up what is officially the largest ski area in the world, but hopping on and off buses is no way to spend your ski day so the way to explore them is one mountain at a time.

Ernesto advised me that the classic Cortina ski day starts out

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