With a promise of excitement as well as escapism, via ferrata is suitable for any walker with a sense of adventure. And there’s no better place to try it than the Dolomites - home to stunning alpine scenery, exhilarating mountain trails and the largest collection of via ferrata anywhere on the planet.

You really don’t need to be a hardcore hiker to get involved. The expansive beauty of the Dolomites provides routes for all abilities. But whether you are a first-timer or dab-hander, there’s nothing like the liberation that comes with conquering wild summits and traversing alpine ridges, far above the world.

Forget humdrum stomps and mundane rambles. Take on a walking adventure you will remember forever.

In this short guide we’ll cover:

- A quick introduction to via ferrata
- Safety and equipment
- Recommended routes in the Dolomites
- Getting to grips with Marmolada
- Via ferrata in the UK and Europe
Via ferrata makes the inaccessible, accessible. Think of it as a cross between hiking and rock-climbing - without the need for experience in either. Take on stunning mountain passes. Scale epic peaks. Get a glimpse of the world normally reserved for experienced rock climbers. Time to lace up those walking boots!

Via ferratas are routes that make it easier to negotiate mountain terrain. It’s all done through a series of ladders, stemples (think: large iron staples), steps, bridges and fixed cables - pinned into mountain faces at intervals of around 3-10 metres. Not only do these cables give adventurers something secure to clip on to for safety, they also double up as a climbing aid. Perfect.

But before you make plans to tackle the tallest mountain you can find, be aware that no two via ferratas are equal. Some can be conquered by anyone with a sure foot and a head for heights. Others require generous helpings of strength, endurance and technical ability. To help you find the right level of via ferrata, grading systems provide an indication of a route’s length, exposure and difficulty. Grading is not a precise science - and different grading systems exist - but it will definitely help you find your feet.

So where did via ferrata start?

Well, when you are fighting a war in the mountains, it helps if you can move as freely and quickly as possible. So it proved in WW1, during a long and brutal conflict between Italian and Austrian forces in the Dolomites. As both sides scrambled to take up advantageous positions, troops built a network of cables and ladders to make mobility easier. Many of those original via ferratas can still be climbed today, allowing you to tread deeper into history with every footstep. Yet while WW1 dramatically expanded the number of via ferratas, experts believe that basic routes have existed since 1903 in the Dolomites - and from as early as 1843 in the Alps. The first recreational via ferrata route in the Dolomites was put up in 1903 (Delle Mèsules/Possnecker Grade 4C).
With any mountainous activity, there are safety considerations. But staying out of danger is as simple as following basic ground rules. And because all the safety equipment you need is both affordable and readily available, seeing the world at its most beautiful needn’t cost the earth.

For most via ferrata first-timers, the big question is: is it safe? In a word, yes. You attach yourself to fixed cables using a basic via ferrata kit: tails, a harness and karabiners. (Type K will fit comfortably over the cables and automatic locking gates beat screw gates - via ferrata involves plenty of clipping and unclipping.)

The one specialist piece of kit you will need is a KISA (kinetic impact shock absorber). With via ferrata, unlike traditional rock climbing, you could fall for several metres to your last pin if you lose your footing on a vertical stretch of cable. Falls from this height generate lots of energy and can cause injuries. KISA’s absorb this energy to keep you safer. Finally, a helmet will protect you from falling stones. (You can hire everything you need for via ferrata if you’d rather not purchase.)

Beyond that you will need gloves, sturdy walking boots with ankle support, walking trousers and a rucksack. Remember that the weather can change quickly in the mountains, so plan your clothing carefully (it’s best to have multiple layers and a weatherproof jacket ready to roll). You should also stick sunglasses and suncream on the list of must-haves.

Of course, any type of mountainous activity is never risk-free. But you can dramatically reduce your chances of getting into trouble by following a few basics:

- Stay on top of weather forecasts.
- Don’t overstretch yourself by attempting a via ferrata that’s graded beyond your ability.
- Never clip into a section of cable until the person in front of you has clipped out.
- And carry a good map.

Reputable walking guides will take every step to keep you safe on the mountains. But if you are going it alone, do your research on your chosen via ferrata (websites, guidebooks). Good preparation can make all the difference if something unexpected happens.
Stun the senses in the Dolomites

The Dolomites are one enormous playground for via ferrata lovers; a maze of 170 routes across mountain landscapes of intoxicating beauty. Let’s just say you won’t want to forget your camera.

There are some places in the world where it’s impossible not to marvel at Mother Nature’s beauty. But the unique landscapes of the Dolomites have also been shaped and scarred by the battles of WW1, where explosives buried in tunnels behind enemy lines blasted new shapes into the mountains. Tunnels, trenches and other relics of the war are still strewn across the landscape today. Thankfully the sound of gunfire and explosions has been replaced by the innocent chirps of skylarks and the cool breath of the alpine breeze.

Do you have what it takes to tackle Marmolada?

They don’t call her the Queen of the Dolomites for nothing. At just under 11,000 feet, Marmolada is the highest mountain in the region. The glacial peak dominates the skyline. And there’s a via ferrata right to the top.

Without doubt, the summit trek is a journey you will never forget. Yet while it’s not technically difficult, its length, exposure and altitude (along with the descent of the summit wall and glacier) require basic alpine experience and a fair level of fitness. Paths are well marked, but a compass might prove handy in the event of a whiteout (This is the mountains, remember).

The summit ascent begins with a trek to a ridge at the western end of the vast south wall (800m high and 3km wide). It takes around 90 minutes or so to clear the first glacier as you wind through impressive slabs of mountain, carved out by the retreating glacier. Then the real fun begins as you reach the wire and begin your ascent.

The ridge is prone to icing and best climbed after a period of good weather. Yet rain or shine, the feeling of hauling yourself up this hulking great rock takes some beating. One hundred and fifty metres from the summit you unclip from the wire and follow a path to the peak. From there you can expect not just an incredible sense of achievement, but incredible views too. In fact, on a clear day you can sometimes see Venice - 100km away! Not a bad backdrop for the celebratory coffee you can purchase from the small café at the top. If you’re lucky there may even be an Austrian brass band serenading your conquest. Toot, toot.

Much as it would be nice to stay at the top forever, what goes up must come down. The descent is straightforward and safe - newly wired in 2005 - but you may require crampons. Collett’s offer weekly guided glacier treks and summit ascents of the Marmolada - and can provide all the equipment you need for your adventure. Prices are just £95 per person. See colletts.co.uk/glacier.
The Dolomites might be the home of via ferrata, but it didn’t take long for thrill-seekers in other countries to cotton on: taking a bird’s eye view of the world without learning to rock climb is jaw-droppingly fun. As a result you can find via ferrata right across Europe. Here are some of our favourites.

Honister, UK
Standing at a whopping 2,126 feet, the peak of Fleetwith Pike in the Lake District is more than twice the height of The Shard in London. And you can take a route straight to the top with two via ferrata to choose from.

Yorkshire Dales, UK
Deep in the Yorkshire Dales lies a quiet pocket of extreme beauty: How Stean Gorge. And the best way to see it is - you guessed it - from above. After a short training session (where you will, quite literally, be shown the ropes), you are free to take on the exhilarating route: crossing high above gushing water and scaling gorge walls.

Tyrol, Austria
The Zugspitze - the highest mountain in Germany - straddles the border between Germany and Austria. It’s home to the Stopzelzieher (the Corkscrew), one of the most epic via ferrata routes outside the Dolomites. After nearly 1,800 metres of ascent, you will be glad of the cable car back down to Earth.

Seebensee Lake, Austria
If you can find a body of water more beautiful than Seebensee Lake in Austria, let us know. Take in the glassy, crystal-clear water before scaling the sheer cliff beside the thunderous roar of Seeben Waterfall. Breathtaking.

Stryn, Norway
It’s the most popular via ferrata in Norway - and with good reason. Opened in 2012, via ferrata Loen will take you across Gjølmunnebrua - a hanging bridge across a Nordic fjord that is quite simply spectacular.
From beautiful accommodation to seamless route planning, we help lovers of the great outdoors get the best from their hiking holidays. And if you can find a UK holiday company with a better knowledge of the Dolomites and via ferrata, your post-hike drink is on us.

Lots of holiday businesses offer walking holidays that sound great. Then you arrive only to find yourself at the mercy of a strict itinerary, with little say on how you spend your time. We do things differently. With us you design your holiday - from the ground up - just the way it should be. If you want to join one of our free daily guided walks, that’s great. If you’d rather do your own thing, that’s fine too. We will be on hand to help you plan a route - and can send you out with laminates if you are on your own journey of discovery.

We specialise in the Dolomites, but offer holidays all across Europe. Every member of staff has lived in at least one of the destinations we operate in. So our guests get the inside scoop on the local culture, the tastiest places to eat and - of course - the best places to hike. We know that little things can make a big difference. That’s why we offer hassle-free kit hire and can introduce you to the most experienced local mountain guides. We will even rustle up a packed lunch to keep you at your peak.

You set the agenda. We give you the insight. Mother Nature provides the backdrop.