**NASA GODDARD SKI CLUB TRIP**

**TO BORMIO, ITALY**

**AND LUGANO, SWITZERLAND**

**MARCH 4 TO MARCH 13, 2016**

by Harvey Walden, Trip Leader

 On Friday evening, March 4, the largest contingent of Goddard Ski Club members bound for a European ski destination in recent memory departed Washington Dulles International Airport on a Lufthansa flight. There were 37 participants in all, including seven who travelled independently on their own arranged flights. We arrived early Saturday morning at Frankfurt/Main International Airport and had a longer than desired layover until we left on a connecting one-hour flight for Milan/Malpensa Airport in early afternoon. We then boarded a chartered bus for Bormio for a 3-1/2 hour ride, with a stop for refreshments. On the way at various times, we encountered rain, sleet, snow, and fog. We arrived about 7:30 pm at the 4-star Hotel Baita dei Pini just in time for check-in and then dinner. Dinner that evening, and each evening during the week, consisted of five courses: salad bar or antipasto, soup, pasta, main entrée, and desserts. Meals were served by tuxedo-clad waiters, led by Lorenzo. After dinner, our group had a briefing by hotel staff, including a ski instructor, and by Luca, a friend of two of our members, on possible day trip excursions.

 The first night, it snowed several inches overnight, adding moguls galore to the previously groomed slopes. The weather was intermittently cloudy with temperatures just about freezing. For the balance of the week, temperatures were generally a few degrees above freezing during the day with bright, sunny weather. Each day we had numerous options for an all-you-can-eat buffet style hot and cold breakfast with made to order French toast or crepes. After the initial night’s snowstorm, snow conditions on the mountains were optimal following overnight grooming. The main Bormio ski area was accessible by a short walk across the Frodolfo River from our hotel to an 8-seater cableway to the Bormio 2000 (meters) level, at which point a number of chairlifts and a further cable car were accessible. Other days during the week, skiers travelled by free shuttle bus in Bormio to either of two nearby neighboring mountains, Santa Caterina and Santa Colombano, that also had ski areas with their own networks of cableways and chair lifts. One ski pass gave access to all three major ski areas, as well as to the spas in town.

 Non-skiers had numerous options. On Monday, 28 in our group signed up for a day tour arranged by Luca which included a bus from our hotel to the train station in Tirano. There the group boarded the Bernina Line railway in a pre-reserved Pullman car of the Bernina Express, a Swiss railway that runs along the top of the Alps to the glaciers of the Bernina Pass at an elevation of 2253 meters. The altitude change of 1824 meters from Tirano to the pass is covered in only 22 kilometers without the use of cog wheels. The Bernina Line is included on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites as the highest altitude mountain railway with all-year operation. The train ride offers breathtaking vistas of the peaks, glaciers, and beautiful mountain valleys with a final destination at the world-famous ski resort of St. Moritz. There the group enjoyed a restaurant lunch and a walking tour before returning to Bormio by bus in time for dinner at our hotel.

 Tuesday was International Women’s Day with flowers distributed to all women, by Luca at our hotel and also on the ski slopes at cafes and bars. Some in our group took an intense four-hour ski instruction course. On Wednesday, Luca arranged a full-day tour of Valtellina by private bus. This included terraced vineyards, a cheese factory, and a farm, lunch in Agriturismo, and finally a visit to a wine cellar for tastings. There were so many activities that the group arrived back at the hotel almost an hour late for dinner.

 Other activities in and around Bormio that members arranged on their own included visits to any of three local spas, the favorite of which appeared to be the ancient spa, Bagni Vecchi, some 3-1/2 kilometers from Bormio, with natural thermal springs known since the First Century A.D. For the less adventurous, our hotel included a wellness center with Jacuzzi, sauna, steam room, stationary bicycle, and balance beam, for which the hotel waived its usual charge for our group. Monday evening after dinner, the ancient village of Bormio hosted an outdoor welcome party for all visitors in the main Church Square, Piazza del Kuerc, with its clock tower dating from 1498. Films in English were shown of Bormio’s attractions, and free slices of fruitbread along with glasses of mulled wine and stronger alcoholic beverages were passed out by townsfolk in native costumes. Afterwards, there was music and dancing in the square. On Thursday, a shuttle van from our hotel was arranged to take interested members of our group to Arnoga, a 25-minute ride, for dog sledding at Husky Village. Luca, who had never gone dog sledding before though a native of Bormio, willingly joined our group. Each participant, following brief instructions, controlled a sled pulled by several huskies along a pre-arranged snow-covered course. Afterwards, photos were made available.

 Friday evening, we all packed up for departure Saturday morning after breakfast by chartered bus to Lugano in the Lakes District of Switzerland. We arrived about noon, although the bus could not take us directly to our hotel, the 4-star Hotel Lugano Dante, because of the narrow streets in the old city. After checking in with free refreshments supplied by hotel staff, the group split up to enjoy walking about Lugano on our own. Most visited the parks, churches, the pedestrian shopping street, via Nassa (aptly named for our group), with its high-end stores, and walkways along scenic Lake Lugano with its fountain and sailboats. Our hotel recommended several agreeable restaurants for dinner, where we split into smaller subgroups.

 On Sunday, our hotel prepared a specially early breakfast for our group at 5:45 am, and then we boarded a charter bus for transfer to Milan’s Malpensa Airport. Our Lufthansa flight departed at 10:20 am, with a connection at Frankfurt with a pleasingly short layover. We arrived back at Washington Dulles in late afternoon, having enjoyed a spectacular and unforgettable trip to the Italian and Swiss Alps.

Note: For numerous images of this trip taken by various participants, see the web site:

 <https://goo.gl/photos/4rmYkgBNjjWRgvdk9>

(Thanks to Matt Ekinci)