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A walk on the wild side CINQUE TERRE

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Hiking Italy's Cinque Terre tops many travelers' wish lists for good reason. It consists of an ancient network of trails strung along 10 miles of stunning coastline, linking the five fishing villages known as Cinque Terre (or five lands).



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WHEN FOUR OF US, all women in our senior years, decided to head off to Italy for this legendary coastal walk, we envisioned level footpaths with seaside cafes where we could stop and rest along the way.

The reality was somewhat different. For one thing, part of the 'easy-walking' coastal path was washed away during a devastating mud slide in 2011 and has yet to reopen. Hiking from one village to another now involves a lot of hillside climbing on crumbling stone paths and staircases. And the villages, although charming, are wedged onto steep cliffs. In other words, you enjoy/endure a lot of knee-crunching ups and downs.

We had signed on with ATG, a British tour operator, for an eight-day unguided hiking trip. The company booked our accommodations and arranged luggage transfers between hotels. A local guide met with us on the first day to go over the routes and was available by cell phone for emergencies. We also had an option of taking the train which zips through a series of tunnels along the upper reaches of the towns,

or the ferry which offers a pleasant jaunt from one village to another.

We started with two days in Levanto, a walled town just north of the five villages. Although not officially one of the Cinque Terre it set the tone for the towns to come with its easy, relaxed atmosphere. We walked in the sunshine to the wide sandy beach, took dips in the Mediterranean, and tested our hiking legs on a circle route to nearby Bonasola. The serious hiking began on the coastal path to Monterosso, the largest of the Cinque Terre villages.

Since 1997, Cinque Terre has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site consisting of 10,000 acres and more than 75 miles of trails that connect the villages of Monterosso, Manarola, Corniglia, Vernazza and Riomaggiore. The villages are a picturesque tumble of colorful houses leaning haphazardly into the hills. Above them are steeply terraced farm plots and vineyards bounded by low stone walls. The area is home to 4,000 permanent inhabitants but attracts over two million visitors during the season from May to October.

Facing page: Walkers on the Cinque Terre trail above the scenic village of Manarola. This page (clockwise from top left): Local lemons in the Monterosso market. Hand-painted signposts direct hikers on the Cinque Terre trail. The village of Corniglia is perched on a hilltop above the vineyards.



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This page (clockwise from top left):

The author pauses for a photo on the Cinque Terre trail.

Relaxing cafés in the town of Monterosso.

Streetfood along the trail includes seafood sold in cones.

Facing page: Scenic view of the beautiful village of Riomaggiore.

It can be crowded during the height of summer, but at the end of September we often had the hilly trails to ourselves. The coastal paths were busier but in a congenial way, with everyone sharing maps and directions in a variety of languages. Tourists come here to hike and enjoy the natural beauty, the food (fresh from the land and sea), and the friendly villages where the locals still go out in fishing boats and where virtually all the cafes and hotels are family-run. The same close-knit families have lived here for generations.

The route to Monterosso took us along a rough stone path and through lemon and olive groves. It was a hot day and we managed to get lost even though we were carrying our exhaustively detailed ATG route booklet. Wherever we paused (and dared to take our eyes off our feet) we were treated to dazzling sea views that made the climb worthwhile.

Our days fell into an easy pattern of hiking till mid-afternoon, arriving in the village and finding the perfect outdoor bench where we could flop down with our favorite gelato (ginger and lemon in my case) and watch the passing action before going to the hotel. Later, after a rest and clean up, we would meet in the hotel garden or rooftop terrace and share a bottle of the local wine before heading off through the safe, car-free streets to find a trattoria for dinner. Every night we feasted on the classic pasta and fish dishes of the region, often at a seaside table.

Between the villages, the hilltops were dotted with Sanctuaries, ancient religious retreats. One day, as we hiked downhill toward Vernazza, I was running out of water, in need of a toilet and feeling grumpy.

Miraculously we happened upon one of these welcoming little stone refuges. It had a spotlessly clean washroom as well as a shop with water, fruit, and candy laid out for travellers to help themselves on the honor system.

We had other life-affirming moments like finding a small café high in the hills where we could sit beneath a grape arbour and drink fresh orange juice. When we wanted a break from hiking we took the ferry and were glad we were still agile enough to scramble on and off the gangplank which was challenging in choppy seas. From the ferry we could look back at the shoreline, the delightful villages, and the hillsides laced with ancient stone steps that we had managed to climb. We felt stronger and healthier after eight days in the Cinque Terre, and happy to have experienced the life there. We could now understand why guidebook author Rick Steves calls the area “one of God’s great gifts to tourism”. ■

IF YOU GO BE prepared. This is no walk in the park and you need good hiking boots and socks. Use walking poles (we had to buy them there because we travelled with carry-on luggage and the airline forbid them) and take carry-on luggage only (you’ll be thankful on the trains). For information on ATG, see www.atg-oxford.com.

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