

GOING PLACES

FRANCES HALL



Chilling out in the CINQUE TERRE



We were in Europe, wanting a dose of *La Dolce Vita* ... the good life: scrummy food, unlimited sunshine, soul-thrilling views. And the Cinque Terre on the northwest coast of Italy had come highly recommended. 'Cinque terre' is Latin for 'five lands' – which meant we had three days to explore five villages: Riomaggiore, Manarola, Corniglia, Vernazza and Monterossa.

We'd rented a small apartment in the village of **Manarola**. And as we wound our way up the hillside through narrow stone staircases, our cheerful landlord offered to carry my suitcase. At one stage he muttered something about bringing lighter luggage next time, but he was forgiven the minute we arrived, threw open the ancient green shutters, and gazed out over the Ligurian Sea.

The very-inviting rooftop terrace called for wine and nibbles. So, without further ado, we hiked back to **Riomaggiore** for a bottle of Sicilian red to toast our Italian paradise. This part of the trail is called the Lover's Walk or *Via dell'Amore*, and we stopped for an obligatory smooch at a shrine to romance – where visitors place padlocks to seal their endless love.

That first night we languished over dinner in a Mama-&-Papa restaurant – fresh fish with salads and homemade bread – while the local fisherman winched their boats up onto dry land with small cranes. Then we wandered down along the bay and watched the setting sun drench the sea in a golden glow.

Early next morning the streets were full of homeowners, chatting and drinking coffee, throwing open their doors and shouting hello to whoever was passing, the elderly out walking with their knobby olive-tree walking-sticks, and kids just sitting in the sun. Tourists hadn't yet arrived en masse, and we could pretend we were actually locals, living in their world.

We donned our walking shoes and headed to the old Roman village of **Corniglia** – up 377 steps (who's counting?) and famous for its

gorgeous gothic Church of St Peter, built in 1334. Rampaging Germans sped past us with their click-clacking hiking-poles, determined to do the five villages in one day, but we wanted to touch the sides of these exquisite places and not miss a thing.

The view from the top was to die for. Vineyards and terraced gardens clung to the hillsides by their toenails, the air scented with oranges and lemons. Rosemary, dried heather and wild red valerian erupted from every stony nook'n'cranny. And the forever-sea shimmered and sparkled, dotted with tiny fishing boats.

Coffee and gelato were our reward for

Photo: Nikki Smith





Manarola



Vernazza



Vernazza



Photos: Nikki Smith

the hike. Then we took the train back to our village, where we cooled off in a nearby swimming-hole.

Some crazy person suggested we knock off both the other two villages on our last day. So we hitched a train ride to Corniglia and set off for **Vernazza**. It wasn't easy, with stunning detours, shady olive groves, and ancient hilltop churches luring us off-track. And, at one point along the way, we popped into a gelato (icecream) place where the owner proudly held up a *Foodtown* magazine with a story about his 'Pavarotti Pleasures'.

The small fishing hamlet of Vernazza is probably the most characteristic of the Cinque Terre and is said to be one of the most beautiful villages in Italy. Founded about 1000 AD, the tiny port is ringed by pastel-painted houses, and the charming piazza is crammed with restaurants and bars.

Our final hike – to the village of **Monterossa** – was fuelled by fresh bread and locally-grown olive oil, and we stumbled at last onto a sandy beach overlooked by bougainvillea-festooned stone walls, homes and cafés.

It was time to try what we'd been told was the '*pesto besto*' in Italy. Spread over

prosciutto ham and tossed through pasta, the fresh flavours tingled our taste-buds ... and a lingering sip of *limoncello* completed our gastronomic delight.

You just can't help having a good time here. Everywhere you look, the sun is shining, the water is glittering, the views are stunning. And the Cinque Terre from the sea is another sensation all together. Looking back from the deck of the Manarola ferry, we recognised landmarks that we'd seen on our walk, and all the brilliant colours were reflected in the late-afternoon light.

Returning to the apartment, we ordered pizza from our 'local'... uncorked another velvety Italian wine ... and made our way to the top terrace, where we sat and chatted and shed a few tears at thoughts of leaving.

Far out on the water below us, a tiny fishing boat was caught in the last rays of the sun.

The Cinque Terre? It's simply *bellissimo* ... lovely!

WOULD YOU LIKE TO EXPLORE THE CINQUE TERRE YOURSELF? YOU'RE INVITED TO JOIN JOHN & ROBYN COONEY ON THEIR SEPT 2015 TOUR OF ITALY & CROATIA. PHONE 0800 277 477 FOR DETAILS – OR VISIT WWW.JOHNCOONEY.CO.NZ.

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