

# ITALY: RESTLESS ALONG THE RIVIERA

Pizzas aplenty, five coastal  
villages, a hike—and a  
wonderstruck writer

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Mounted on cliffs that rise  
up the Ligurian Riviera  
like magic beanstalks,  
the five villages of Cinque  
Terre form a part of the  
Cinque Terre National  
Park—a UNESCO World  
Heritage Site.



To reach the

apartment you have to exit from the station, turn left, cross the bridge, turn right on the first corner and in about 330 feet, you will arrive." My husband and I didn't, however, arrive at our stay rental in Levanto in the Cinque Terre region of Italy.

Perched along the hillsides of the Ligurian coast, Cinque Terre ('five lands') comprises the five villages of Monterosso al Mare, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore. The region boasts of all the elements that make up a memorable summer holiday—spectacular views of the sea, hiking trails alongside vineyards and olive groves, and all the pesto and focaccia one can hope to relish.

At Levanto, (not part of the 'Famous Five' villages) we continued looking for our apartment along well-paved, urban-ish streets with supermarkets, and stocky apartment blocks where I rang the doorbell at one home, with some hope. The resident and I had a genial ten-minute bilingual conversation where each of us picked the *lingua* we knew and tried to make sense of the directions. It became evident that we had still not

'arrived'. On the street outside, a stranger cast a cursory glance in all directions, and finally told us that we had taken the wrong exit from the train station. Little did we realise then, that even upon finding our apartment, it would take us twice as long to settle in.

Late evening sunlight slanted in through lace curtains in the studio apartment that was designed to resemble a cottage. The skylight had its own remote control that would gladden the heart of the Quartermaster from the James Bond franchise. There was a sparsely equipped kitchenette with some supplies left behind by previous residents. I opened the bathroom door, and gazed fondly at the feature that had swung our decision in favour of this apartment—a washing machine. Before setting out to buy supplies, we decided to get the washing going, only to discover that the supplies in the apartment included all manner of seasoning and two kilos of salt, but no detergent.

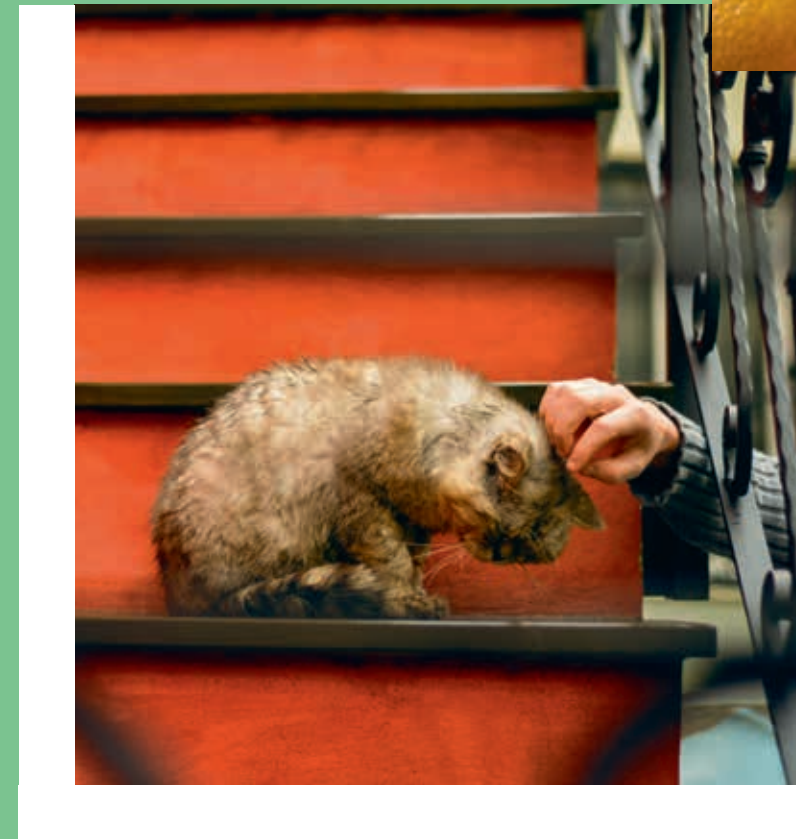
Every supermarket we visited that evening sold detergent in quantities that were ridiculously disproportionate to the single load of laundry we intended to run. Eleven thousand kilometres away, those little detergent sachets we scoffed at and left behind back home in India must have had a frothy laugh at our expense.

In the line of shops nearby, was a quaint *panetteria* where an elderly woman sat behind the counter. The very modest display of breads and the absence of any other customers should have been a telling indication of its popularity. As Italian *nonnas* are known to do, the woman gushed over me as though I was her long-lost grandchild. I should have seen the elaborate cliché coming from a mile away, but I was enamoured by her wrinkles, her silver hair, and the gentle cadence with which she charmed us into buying bread that cost us a small fortune—more than even the large detergent pack that we reluctantly bought next door.

Back at the apartment, the washing machine emitted a muffled clank and displayed an error code. The instructions that we found online were in Italian, unintelligible but lyrical, as though Casanova had been commissioned to seduce us into washing our dirty laundry. Finally, after scrutinising the vertical drum, and running a finger along its edges, I came upon a clasp that needed to be secured for the machine to run. I still didn't know if our grand plan of hiking the hills the next day would work, but if we had to sit it out, we would do so under the Italian sun, eating expensive Italian bread, and dressed in clean clothes that smelled of Italian detergent.

At the Levanto railway station the next morning, the aroma from the café next door to the information counter was accompanied by the sound of a voice tutoring a tourist on the noun etiquette of cappuccino ('Uno cappuccino, due cappuccini'). At the counter of the Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre, I admitted to being apprehensive about hiking the terrain, having just recovered from a heel fracture. I was also new to any activity that necessitated equipment of the kind being carried by the seasoned hikers we were surrounded by. The woman at the counter sized me up, asked if my shoes were comfortable and if I was carrying enough water, then deftly declared me fit to hike.

The entire Blue Trail linking the five villages is 11 kilometres long and can be hiked in about five hours. Although there was a trail between Levanto and the first village, Monterosso Al Mare, we chose instead to take the train to Monterosso and



The statue of Saint Francis of Assisi, taming the wolf of Gubbio (top left) marks Monterosso al Mare; Seaside scenery mimics the sparkle of Mediterranean lemons and oranges (top right) juiced for sale; At the Vernazza harbour (bottom right), popsicle-toned fishing boats freckle the water; Stray cats (bottom left) lazing in nooks add to the villages' craggy charm.

CHRISTOPHE BOISVIEUX/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES (STATUE); IMAGE BY ERIK PRONSKIE PHOTOGRAPHY/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (FRUIT); KATIE MAY BOYLE/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (CAT); MINIMUM/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (HARBOUR); PREVIOUS SPREAD: CMICOLINO/ISTOCK EDITORIAL/GETTY IMAGES





then hike the 3.5 kilometres to Vernazza. The trains between villages carry all manner of tourists, from sunbathers to surfers, daredevil divers to hikers. A large group of us soon spilled onto the promenade outside the Monterosso station and stopped in our tracks, spellbound by the magnificence of the sea that lay sprawled before us.

“All the elements of an Enid Blyton adventure!” exclaimed my husband, “Hiking in the hills, swimming in the sea, and maybe even a picnic.” For those weaned on books by Blyton, the craggy hillsides and the turquoise-blue seascapes of Cinque Terre appear to be the perfect setting for adventures to unfold. The only adventures we had encountered so far were of the domestic kind. But for a while, as we walked along the ramp at the beginning of our hike, we became those intrepid children who sought out mysteries involving criminals on the loose, hidden treasures in uninhabited islets, abandoned houses and unmarked trails.

At first, it was a well-paved *sentiero* or pathway, along the hillside bordering the sea at Monterosso. It gave way to stairs at the head of which, the path continued more or less at the same level for some distance. We caught frequent glimpses of the azure waters of the Ligurian coast as we wended our way through vineyards, olive groves and long stretches of dry stone walls. I later learned that these walls were the work of skilled masons who used no cement to bind them, instead strategically filling up wedges between the large boulders with smaller ones.

We met hikers coming from the other way, helpfully alerting each other to unsteady handrails and unstable stones along the path. Some of them advised as they passed us, about taking deep breaths. I put it down to my appearing winded on the more rigorous stretches. A few cast meaningful glances, and greeted me with exaggerated namastes. As it turned out, their singling me out for special attention wasn't because of the colour of my skin, nor was I wearing my nationality on my sleeve. They were just reacting to my t-shirt that screamed yoga, with its printed shloka and silhouette of a meditator.

With no food stops on the trail, and the June midday heat spiralling, we feasted on fruits, perched on a large rock under a tree. At one point during the two hour hike that we took twice as long to complete, we stopped for the now-famous view of Vernazza, where three- and four-storeyed houses in pastel colours clustered around the bay, built on what must have once been uneven, uninhabitable land. A particular shade of salmon pink dominated the palette, which, under a different sun, could have made one's face pucker at its intensity.

The *sentiero* ended at a kiosk, beyond which, the path meandered past backyards with cats lounging under fuchsia boughs of bougainvillea. As we wove through the *carucci*, stair trails, the houses we had seen from afar loomed over us, with the day's washing hanging from some of the first floor windows with their dark green louvered shutters. We found stairs leading down to the sole main street, and arrived at a piazza. It appeared hundreds of tourists had the same idea as us—to grab lunch.

Skipping the queues snaking out from various *pizzerias*, *ristorantes* and *trattorias*, we first stopped at a *gelateria* where we ate scoops of ice cream that balanced dangerously on their cones. We added a grown-up spin to our Blyton-esque picnic by buying a bottle of white wine, joining the queue that led to one set of Batti Batti *Focacceria's* tall doors,

and emerging triumphantly out of the other, arms laden with food.

Our picnic—sitting on the walls that overlooked the bay, with legs dangling over the edge—was a celebration of freshly made food from local produce. The pizza was sumptuous, with a rich tomato sauce, an audacious slather of mozzarella, and a blessing of basil pesto. The focaccia was crisp on the outside, and fluffy to the bite. The sections where the baker had made indents on the dough, smuggled a burst of salt from the brine that the slab of dough is bathed in before being baked to golden perfection.

Only one Blyton element remained to be added to our holiday now. On our last morning in Cinque Terre, at the beach in Monterosso Al Mare, we ran into large Italian families—children building sandcastles, and *nonnas* swimming gracefully in the shallows, chiding their twenty-something water-averse granddaughters. While my husband swam, I sat on the shore with the waves gently lapping against me, wondering if amid adult preoccupations, we had lost the sense of adventure that we had nurtured as children. Did we ever have it? Or had we always lived vicariously through the adventures we read about?

Then again, in retrospect, I was glad to be free of adventures and misadventures of the Gosh! Jolly! By Golly! kind. It would have been a distraction from a place of such immense beauty, and lacking the decadence of a languorous post-swim aperitif. ★

## Getting There

There are no direct flights from India to Italy. Flights from Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru to the capital Rome usually involve one or more layovers in Middle Eastern gateway cities such as Dubai, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi, or ones in European cities like Stockholm and Frankfurt. Direct, frequent flights are available from Rome to Genoa and Pisa—the closest major airports to Levanto. Both Genoa and Pisa are connected to Levanto by regular railway services.

Facing Page: Buildings in pastel and citrus tones (top left) are a fixture; You can run into delivery men carting wheelbarrows (top right) along the steep streets of Manarola; Grab a bite of lemony anchovies or a pasta al pesto in the region's many seaside restaurants (bottom right); The Manarola railway station (bottom left) affords sweeping country views.

JVT/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (WINDOW); DIANA ROBINSON PHOTOGRAPHY/MOMENT UNRELEASED/GETTY IMAGES (MAN); OMERSUKRUGOKSU/ISTOCK UNRELEASED/GETTY IMAGES (STATION); MYCHADREZZ/ISTOCK EDITORIAL/GETTY IMAGES (RESTAURANT)