

# A SLOW WALK THROUGH ITALY

A mountain pathway links the romantic hill villages of Italy's Cinque Terre coastline. Angela Pearse sets off on a walk of discovery


**FINALLY, WITH ONE LAST BRUTAL** shove, my 18kg suitcase cartwheels into the apartment and clatters noisily across the floor. The last half hour has certainly been character building. When I packed for a month-long tour of Italy, the last thing I thought I'd be doing is lugging my clothes up eight back-breaking flights of stairs.

Then again, hiking in the north-western region of Liguria for three days is my younger sister Tania's idea and why we're in Riomaggiore, the first and largest of the five villages that make up the Cinque Terre. Even though eight flights of stairs is a hassle, our apartment is conveniently located close to the start of the walking track that connects each of the villages, and there's a view of the ocean – if you lean far enough out the window.

I've looked up what *Lonely Planet* has to say about the trail and I'm confident that 'slightly strenuous' translates as 'relatively flat'. However, with our different levels of fitness (my sister's good, mine lacking) I'm not sure how I ended up agreeing to attempt the entire five-hour hike in one day, when apart from the main Cinque Terre track there are many other routes to explore for all levels of fitness. My sister's enthusiasm can be infectious.

After breakfast the next morning we smother ourselves in sunscreen and heave on our backpacks. Wide grey flagstones leading off in a smooth curve around the side of the hill herald →





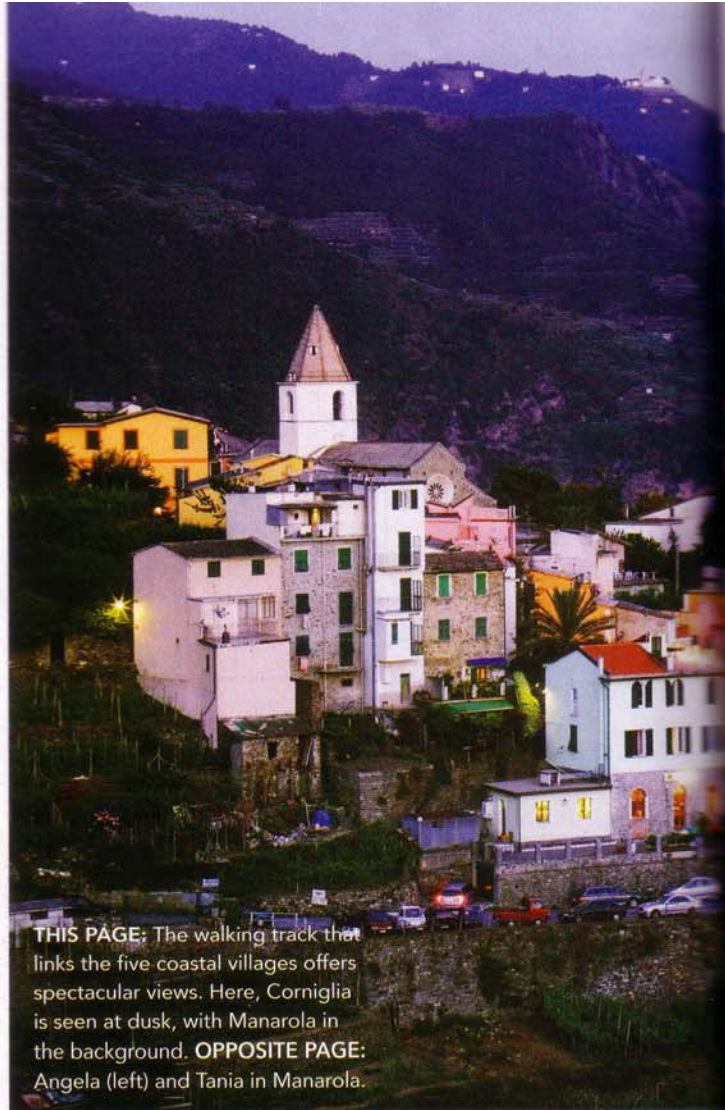
**THIS PAGE:** Breathtaking views across the ocean from Vernazza, one of five villages along the route. Cinque Terre is a UNESCO World Heritage site and the coastline, villages and hillsides are all part of a national park of the same name.

the beginning of the walk and an engraved sign tells us we're on the first section of the Cinque Terre, the Via dell'Amore, or Lover's Lane.

Emerging from a short tunnel into bright sunlight, we're immediately greeted by the drifting aroma of freshly roasted coffee from Bar dell'Amore, whose tables are intimately positioned out over a metal grid through which we can glimpse the ocean splashing far below. "Very romantic," comments Tania. I keep my fingers crossed that the rest of the Cinque Terre is as civilised as this.

After 20 more minutes of steady walking with a sheer cliff face on our right and a choppy sea pounding the rocks to our left, we reach the tiny village of Manarola. I'm feeling pleased with my efforts and that the Cinque Terre is proving to be the gentle stroll I expected.

We take a quick look around Manarola – a tight bundle of houses and a scattering of shops – before we're caught in the slipstream of a group of American girls who set off at a cracking pace to the third village of Corniglia. Soon I'm too busy lagging behind and chatting to a couple of older women with silver ferns on their caps to realise the path is becoming more rock-strewn. My sister points it out though and my heart sinks when I look ahead into the mid-morning haze and see the road



**THIS PAGE:** The walking track that links the five coastal villages offers spectacular views. Here, Corniglia is seen at dusk, with Manarola in the background. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Angela (left) and Tania in Manarola.

## EMERGING FROM A SHORT TUNNEL INTO BRIGHT SUNLIGHT, WE'RE IMMEDIATELY GREETED BY THE DRIFTING AROMA OF FRESHLY ROASTED COFFEE FROM BAR DELL'AMORE

incline steeply as it loops its way up into hills thick with grapevines. Still, thankfully I don't spy any stairs (yet).

As we approach Corniglia it seems as if its precariously perched cliff-top houses are ready to tumble into the ocean. It's a quiet, sleepy little village and although they must be used to hikers, the locals still eye us curiously as we arrive in the piazza breathing heavily after trudging uphill for an hour.

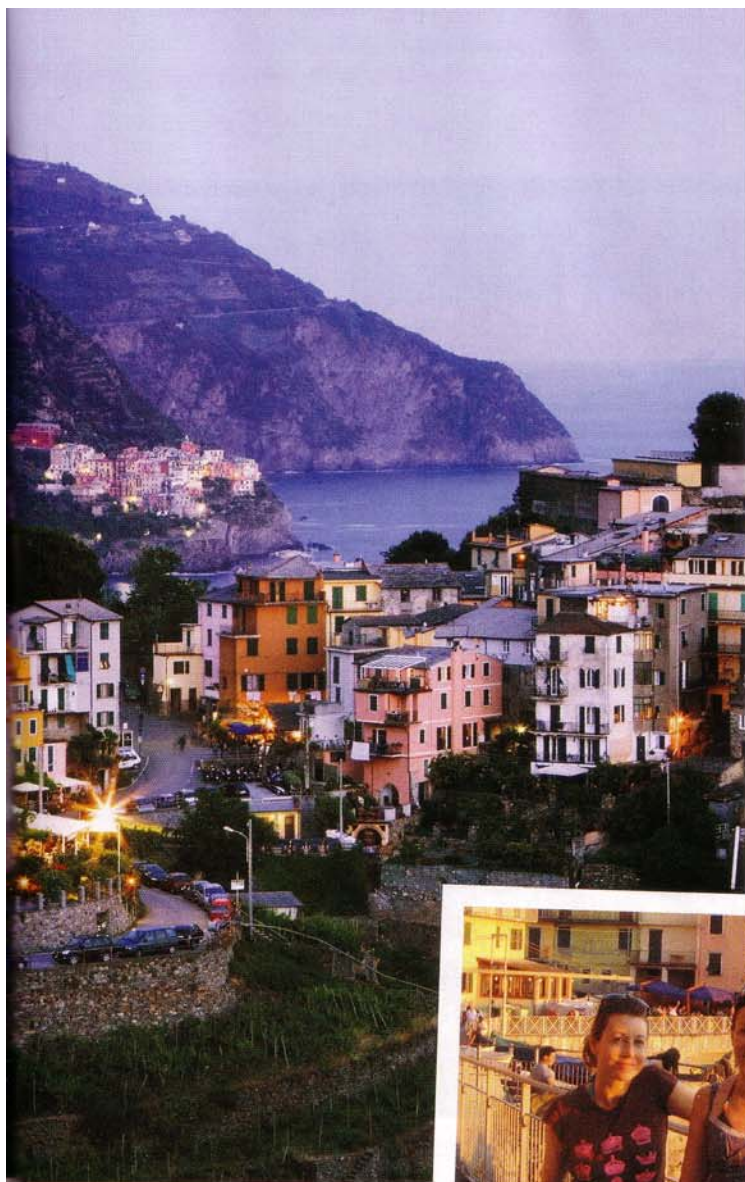
We slip down a narrow alleyway and come across Enoteca Il Pirun, a small, dimly lit speciality wine shop that proffers an impressive array of local wines for tasting. Unfortunately I don't have any room in my backpack, but I'm starting to think a whole bottle of vino could come in handy about two hours from now.

Wandering back through and out the other side of the piazza, we duck under a mustard yellow archway and happen upon Corniglia's lookout point or *panoramico*, a 180-degree view of glittering ocean stretching all the way along the Cinque Terre coastline. A sun-warmed parapet

juts over the side of the cliff and I rest there as the hot meaty aroma of oven-baked lasagne followed by the distinctive nostril-biting smell of parmesan cheese wafts down from a half-open window. It gets me thinking, reluctantly, that we have to keep on hiking as we're still quite a way from Vernazza, the fourth town on the map and where we plan to have lunch.

While Tania re-ties her runners at the start of the next section of trail I have a brief conversation with a couple of brawny Australian lads limbering up nearby. They confirm my sneaking suspicion that there are more hills to come between Corniglia and Vernazza, and lots of dreaded stairs between Vernazza and Monterosso, the final section. I gaze after them anxiously but comfort myself with the thought that people always exaggerate. Really, how hard can it be?

We find out almost immediately. Most of the rough dirt track between Corniglia and Vernazza is exposed to the unforgiving midday sun and there are some vertical



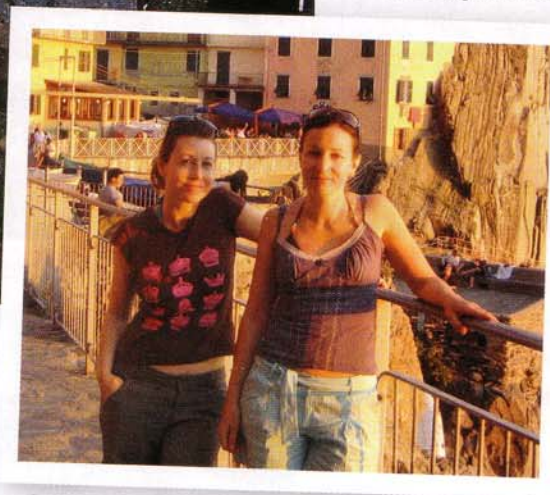
sections with lots of stairs. Tiny rivers of sweat trickle down between my shoulder blades as I puff my way up in the heat.

Near the end of an exhausting climb we pass one of the American girls sprawled under some bushes puffing frantically on her asthma inhaler. I can sympathise.

After about an hour and a half I've had enough and Vernazza's colourful piazza, which is lined on either side with restaurants, a jumble of fishing boats and four-storey terracotta houses, appears not a moment too soon. I hope the restaurants here aren't fussy about attire, because I look as sexy as a grilled lamb chop.

The restaurant we choose is called Il Gambero Rosso, aka The Red Prawn. Not only does every dish on the menu feature locally caught seafood, it's also the restaurant with the least number of accordion players tuning up outside.

Unfortunately, more appear when we're being seated in the alfresco area and the waiter comes over to our table just as the noisy throng launches into full musical flight. I can see his lips moving as he tells us what the specials are but I can't hear what he's saying over the



loud funfair-esque music. I mumble my order, Paccheri alla Gambero Rosso, a kind of flat tubular pasta covered in a thick tomato-and-fish sauce. Luckily it's only a short time before it's in front of me and then I'm oblivious to everything, even accordion players.

I'm enjoying my last tangy forkful before I notice we're in the midst of an eclectic mix of clientele. Two rich-looking Italian playboys with linen napkins tucked into the necks of their Versace shirts decorously suck spaghetti, while behind them a sweaty, red-faced British hiking party gets to grips with the language: "Acqua frizzante? Isn't that just tonic water?"

Eventually my hunger is sated, although not cheaply – \$82 for our two mains, one salad and a bottle of water. Now I know why there are people here wearing Versace.

At 2.30pm we decide to head for the last town,

Monterosso. I notice other hikers opting to stay at Vernazza to sit in the sun and eat gelato. Do they know something we don't?

They do. Soon after leaving Vernazza there are dozens of loathsome dirt stairs that lead straight up the hillside. The sharp rasp of my breathing echoes in my ears and my legs seem to be on strike. While I struggle to the top, getting more dishevelled and dusty by the minute, my sister tramps on ahead, disgusted with my weak performance. After the stairs I have

to inch along tracks so impossibly narrow it takes all my mountain goat skills to navigate them. I stop at one point to catch my breath and I'm enveloped in a deep silence. It feels like there's no one around for miles.

Eventually I catch up to Tania and together we triumphantly ascend the hill before the beach at Monterosso. But there's one last nasty surprise: A million and one steps to get down to it. We decide the Italian Tourist Board either has a sick sense of humour or enjoys torturing unsuspecting tourists with the final hurdle.

Later when we're travelling back to Riomaggiore by train after a long, restorative swim, I reflect on my experience. Although I was expecting something a little less demanding, the scenery more than compensated for the aches and pains I suffered along the way. I'd definitely do it again, as long as my knees were up to the challenge of all those stairs. Now I just pray they'll hold out long enough to make it up the eight flights I've got waiting for me back at the apartment. ☐