

The Terrors of Cinque

Now that the world has swamped the Five Lands or Cinque Terre the chosen time to be there is when the Star Spangled banner is furled and Rick Steves travel books are at their owner's bedside. Once this was an isolated place of crystal clear seas, steep terraced slopes of olives, vines & woods, some of which still partially cloak the hills today.

An area steeped in history of an insular village life spared from excessive tourist infrastructure still only crossed by the Genoa-La Spezia train line with limited vehicle movement. Times best for travel are stretching back closer to the winter months as the region suffers under a very heavy tourist trade only saved by the strict architectural constraints of the Ligurian historical preservation statutes.



A thousand photos of every village encourage even the tardiest walker to give it a go to tramp the tracks of the Terre over the space of two or three days fitting in a lingering lunch into the fray. Every village is someone's favourite and it is a personal choice as to the most attractive, active or personable place to find accommodation but nowadays unfortunately sneaking up in quality and price.

All railroads lead to the villages and ours stopped at Monterosso to set up a visit to Casa Manuel the 5 roomed family home of the erudite and somewhat eccentric artist Manuel 147 steps above the old town. The train station lands one in New Town and a pleasant walk scull dragging suitcases through a tunnel emerges onto a beach beside the stripped patterned San Giovanni Battista the towns 1220 Duomo.

The walk is a test up through the cobblestones to eventually emerge to the thunderous barking of the two roman Mastiffs Chico and Nuit the keepers of the turf. The house is well worked over and the only lounging area left is outside doubling as Manuel's studio, kitchen and a linger longer lean-to bar with views all over the bay.

The piece du resistance, looking like an ancient steam machine, is the farinata and pizza oven on the deck overlooking the terraced hills behind. The terrazzo has a large table for communal gathering with the 3 spigot beer, white and red wine dispenser nearby. The beer was frigid and beady the best in barrels from Trieste and the red was no doubt locally sourced organic new wine with the sulphurous hangover bits not needed.

The world just passes by as the guests wax lyrical and a discussion of the idiot savant from Texas was the hot topic amongst the yanks while the flashpackers of all denominations joined in. Manuel is a work in progress and it seemed his art is also with nary a brush or palette to be seen and the half finished boards always looked on the make. Why bother worrying as the view and life style does not breed any fast movements and the variety of people staying keeps the new mine host nephew Lorenzo buzzing about as the parade of instant Cinquecento pass by.



Monterosso is the largest of the Five Villages and the two best explanations for its naming are; Rufus a son of one of the ruling houses in the 10thC had bright red hair (Rufus for red) and he lived on a castle on top of the hill hence "U Munte du Russu" or there is a red glow in the sunset over the mountains for an explanation of Mountains of Rosso. The New Town area reflects a situation of visitor overload fitting into an infrastructure suitable for marginal increases in trade and visitation.

The beach is a pay only grey belt and a vision of brightly coloured umbrellas, deckchairs and pinked up burning bodies provide viewing fodder for the ever shuffling travellers. The church in old town is a classic ribboned pattern of light and dark stone but has easy viewing through a glass door and reflects the simplicity of the area.

Food in the area is well managed by the irrepressible Ciak never without a white sailor hat as he seemingly owns everything marketable. The market on the foreshore has good food supplies and what now seems the inevitable caravanserai of itinerants that are the latter day gypsies of vending.



The reason for staying is to walk the five villages and no matter the queries on the internet either north or south walking has advantages with route usually driven by the choice of accommodation. It seems by talking to one day trekkers preferences are the North/South version as the most arduous path is at the start between Monterosso and Vernazza. A lesson for first timers is no matter how brilliant the views from land make sure not to miss the four seaside villages by boat as long as weather permits and time withstanding.

The best and most economical method for hiking is a Cinque Pass that allows use of train, boat and trail over a 24 hour period all grouped together an almost unheard of democratic program for Italy. A regime of control exists in the form of "hut sluts " that pop out rather languidly asking "card please" to check who would dare walk the trails without paying. No job satisfaction here as most tourists will be willing to pay more just to participate and it is nowhere near high season.

The office we named "Informatione disinformation" luckily had only two employees so the periods of avoidance for customer contact could be increased. One only needs to partake in this séance ala minute and protest only wastes oxygen so be prepared take in the verbals but read the guide.

Trains appear every 25 minutes and on entry to Monterosso Stazione at least 60 people have studied the Trenitalia guide and are waiting on the designated platform only to be told that the train was on the other side forging an Anglo Saxon Wildebeest mass migration.

Crammed and busy loco swoops into the platform with carriages, that would give a full time job to a window cleaner, then charged on into the Cinque towns disgorging the Terre-trippers at every village forever onward to La Spezia.

Riomaggiore station is the start of this hike and finding which trail to exit into is only limited by dislocation and lack of clear guidance as one cannot take the Cinque from the bureaucrats. The village emerges after a dark tunnel or two and the Hoovering minions en masse start the journey without taking the time to view the superb mural to the pioneers of the Cinque.

This leader board shows the terracing of inhospitable hillsides which had linked and supplied the Terre and brings back memories of Ubud in Bali, but with a steeper terrain. These trails and working passages are now the haunts of backpackers and ecotourism and some financial reward is drifting down to the villagers with their natural population cap thwarting over development.

The human Le Mans start has an incongruous bunch of the aged, infirm, nearly dead, snatch packers and high heeled matrons with baby strollers ready to head out on the easy Via dell'amore stagger to Manarola.

This is a good start from an awakening village going about its quaint morning business but do not miss a walk into upper Riomaggiore as an entrée ogling the enchanted buildings.

The walk is only 30 minutes but the real deal is to see the sunset from a late afternoon finish evidently a life giving sceneoh well whose choice was it?



Manarola became a pit stop too beautiful to pass without sitting on the rocks, beering and peering whilst contemplating a premature lunch. Give in to holiday trauma and the Trattoria Il Porticciolo gripped the taste buds only 100 meters from the beach and a rapid transformation of place setting and table movement prevailed.

The pizza d'frutti mare was chockers with scampi, clams and octopus, the acciughe solate per peperoni harboured the local anchovies salted in lemon, pasta vongole and ravioli salmone value for four with vino at E40.

The easy bits first and worry about the rest later gives one the impetus to move on to the Corniglia stretch of 45 minutes which follows just above beach levels until the odd few heart attack hundred steps into town.

A tour of the tight alleys of the village, which is not nearly as crowded as others, calls for a caffeine fix and into a great espresso cafe to top up with the necessities. Great gelato is the reward for going the length of the town pathway ever onward to an observation point for a stunning coastal scenario.



It seems that April is busy and people are intersecting and chatting at regular intervals so the horrors of fulltime hot summer bring comments of how lucky not to be trekking at this time.

The Corniglia to Vernazza track heads into forested areas and has the first real ascents that may be a little daunting to the vertiginously challenged but the ultimate reward are the fantastic views.

The rock pathway has rock protuberances easily stumbled upon, dusty in parts, along stones polished by the centuries of peasant passage from collecting produce. Off the track disused terraces and ancient dwellings can be easily accessed and signs of recent use belie the seeming overall lack of inhabitants. Plodding along Cinquiescently dreaming, around a corner appears a precarious perched bar with windows out over a chasm proving to enticing to resist.

Vernazza is the place hardest to by pass and the 90 minute trip has only heightened the thoughts of a coldie and good food yet again but tomorrow is another day and the train to Monterosso is close enough.

A wander up through Vernazza reveals how busy this arterial passageway has become and the crowd at the station stretches into the tunnel to be regaled by a girl's choir on a day trip. Thunderous vacuums are created by fast moving trains blasting past the platforms on the more direct passages as they bypass this stop.



A good crisp morning after manipulating the soul around a bounteous local feast at night perched over Old Town contemplating lifestyle musing on the iniquitous state of being unable to do this forever. The oven was blasted up to rattling speed as Manuel had his patrone Ciak and potential paramours over to partake of farinata and Cinque Vino Blanc whilst carrying loud conversations across the valley to villagers cropping in the late twilight.

The walk from Monterosso was by far the more onerous of the trails but the steps straight up out of town were a good opener as the stops for breath were rewarded with sensational views. Water stops were welcome during the two hour walk as viewing platforms high above the coast broke the well maintained route as yet again the thought of food attacked with a vengeance.



The Vernazza reviews of any possible site passing as an eating house has been searched and differing opinions means more than one place will be in line for our trade. The Blue

Marlin has always been treated well online and a cheery proprietor soon inveigled "the taps on the head" into his bar and say no more the easy lunch of panninos ,insalata and pizza fungole were demolished post haste.

A conversation with the gelato shop next door soon had conversations revealing the owner had a son living on the Gold Coast and invitations to take part in the best frutti de bosco and yoghurt this side of Christendom.

Now there is no time for the indolent and the Cinque pass for the day was still alive so jump the train back to Monterosso and catch the ferry to do the villages by water. All aboard are there for the same reason and the merriment is contagious with a group of senior Italian trippers, possibly excommunicated from the local bocce club, singing sant  Lucia and brightening even further a visual feast.



All good sporting holidays must end and the continual commuting has expert methodology of Il Traino in place so the triple transfer to Sienna is a sinecure as Trenitalia synchronised its technical difficulties and laid the demons to rest.

parks.it/parco.nazionale.cinque.terre/Eindex...
parconazionale5terre.it/...
<http://www.cinqueterre.com/eng/>
<http://www.cinqueterre.it/info.php>
www.frommers.com/destinations/thecinqueterre/