

JAN **Central Market Cooking Classes**

28 Tue

Central Market
REALLY INTO FOODJAN **The Westin SNOWbriar**

28 Westin Stonebriar Tue

ADVERTISEMENT

ARTS ENTERTAINMENT > TRAVEL

Italian Riviera finding new ways to manage tourism impact on historic hiking trails

An estimated 2.5 million people passed through the Cinque Terre last year, and officials are encouraging a slow-paced approach.

By Amy Laughinghouse | Special Contributor

Oct. 8, 2016 | Updated 12:00 p.m. CDT | ⌚ 1 min. read



Angelo Celsi must run the most lucrative lemonade stand on the planet. Despite his isolated location on a dirt trail on Italy's northwestern coast, an estimated 2.5 million people passed through this area last year.

That's because this isn't any old dusty path. It's part of 120 miles of undulating trails that flit through pine-scented forests, flirt with postcard panoramas of the

blue [Ligurian Sea](#), and snake alongside terraced vineyards as they crisscross the [Cinque Terre National Park](#).

ADVERTISEMENT

The park, which was established in 1999 and is a UNESCO reserve, encompasses more than 9,500 acres and connects five of the Italian Riviera's most picturesque coastal villages: [Monterosso al Mare](#), [Vernazza](#), [Corniglia](#), [Manarola](#) and [Riomaggiore](#).

As Celsi juices lemons and oranges harvested from his own orchards, the wiry octogenarian explains through my guide -- Beppe Salerno, founder of the tour operator [Tourissimo](#) -- that his brother used to run the stand. When he died, Celsi took over.



News Roundups

Catch up on the day's news you need to know.

Enter your email address

SIGN UP

Or with:



By signing up you agree to our [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

"I'm more successful," he says, passing a parched, sweaty hiker a plastic cup. "Maybe it's my look," Celsi smiles, fluffing his snow-white beard before posing for a photo with a trio of French girls.



Eighty-year-old Angelo Celsi, one of just 4,000 residents within Italy's Cinque Terre, sells freshly squeezed lemon and orange juice along one of the park trails. (Amy Laughinghouse)

ADVERTISEMENT

Take your time

While the trails nearest the park's borders outside the villages can be relatively peaceful, the path from Monterosso to Vernazza where Celsi has set up shop teems with a steady stream of hikers from around the world on this sunny afternoon. I eavesdrop on fellow Americans, Brits and Australians, many of whom seem surprised at the arduousness of the trails.

"They really need to work on these stairs," one young American grunts as he descends stone steps gouged from the hillsides. "And by stairs, I mean, they need an escalator."

The Aussies, meanwhile, have paused for a beverage at a scenic overlook, where one hiker checks their progress on his iPhone. "We've only been at this for 17 minutes and 30 seconds," he grimaces, casting a desperate glance at the incline that awaits him.

ADVERTISEMENT

According to Beppe, who has worked as a guide since 2000, "Somebody who is in shape could do the whole trail between the villages in two days, but it's better to take your time.

"Hike a bit, then visit a village, do a boat ride, have a wine tasting."

Tourissimo, which launched in August 2015, offers biking and walking tours primarily in Beppe's native Italy.

"But the cycling and hiking are not the central point," he insists. "It's how we move from one cultural experience to the other. We want our clients to meet the locals, talk to producers, have time to just enjoy. Every day, there should be at least one 'Tourissimo experience moment.'"

This slower-paced approach, emphasizing the Cinque Terre's winemaking heritage, seems to be exactly the sort of tourism that park officials hope to encourage, while at the same time they're struggling to cope with wear and tear on the most popular coastal trails.

Such is the concern about the influx of visitors to the Cinque Terre, which has only 4,000 permanent residents, that park president Vittorio Alessandro implied in February that limits would need to be imposed.

Initial reports suggested that no more than 1.5 million visitors would be allowed this year, causing a wave of panic among would-be holiday-makers. Shortly thereafter, the president issued a clarification, stating that his staff was merely examining ways to manage tourism.

ADVERTISEMENT

Old World, high-tech

Mateo Perroni, head of the Environment and Biodiversity Office, meets me at park headquarters in Manarola to explain what this means for the future of the Cinque Terre. Dressed in a T-shirt and shorts and sporting a cloud of wild, curly

hair, he spreads out a map on a meeting room table, pointing out where the park has installed electronic heat sensors to monitor footfall on the trails.

In the future, officials hope to use this data to inform visitors how many hikers are on particular paths in real time, and encourage them to walk during off-peak hours, such as before 11 a.m. and after 4 p.m. in the spring and summer.

ADVERTISEMENT

The park already requires walkers to purchase a "trekking card" to access the coastal paths, with the option to buy a Treno MS card, which also provides passage on the train that runs from Levanto to La Spezia and stops at all five Cinque Terre villages. Only two of the towns on this line -- Levanto and Monterosso -- sport broad, sandy beaches, so hiking remains the main draw.

"The aim of the Cinque Terre card was, OK, you don't want to pay? You can walk from one village to the other along higher trails through the vineyards, which are more representative of our cultural heritage," Perroni says.

"Because our trails were not born for hiking and recreational tourism. They were built to serve agriculture and assist communication between villages and the vineyards. So we should obtain double benefits. One, we reduce the number of visitors on the coastline, and two, we increase income to maintain and restore the trails and give support to farmers."

While the Cinque Terre's towns are typically touted as fishing villages, they were, in fact, chiefly populated by wine producers before hiking tourism took over in

the '80s. As more and more vineyards have been abandoned, the stone walls supporting the terraced vines have begun to crumble, leaving the hills more prone to rock falls and landslides, which caused the closure of the coastal paths from Corniglia to Manarola and the Via Dell'Amore from Manarola to Riomaggiore.

ADVERTISEMENT

So really, I reason, I'd be supporting both the vinicultural community and tourism by tucking into some Cinque Terre wine. Fortunately, Tourissimo's seven-day Cinque Terre hiking tours are like a movable feast, offering ample opportunities to sample local libations and regional food specialties.

Young vines high up in the Cinque Terre hills give hope that this Italian region's winemaking tradition will continue. (Amy Laughinghouse)

Life before

Today, Beppe has arranged for a private tasting at the [Vernazza Wine Experience](#) after our three-hour hike. Emerging from the trail, we curve around a boat-filled harbor and climb labyrinthine stairways flanked by sunny-hued houses and shops, finally emerging on a clifftop terrace overlooking the coast.

ADVERTISEMENT

Here, sommelier Alessandro Villa greets us with bubbling glasses of prosecco and fresh focaccia, followed by a bottle of Cinque Terre Vendemmia 2015 white wine, made from the area's classic combination of bosco, vermentino and albarola grapes. This is served alongside surprisingly "un-fishy" salted anchovies, eaten with bread and olive oil in the traditional Ligurian way.

We finish with savory hunks of parmesan cheese, washed down with golden Sciacchetrà wine from Riomaggiore.

As we wine and dine, Villa, a native of Vernazza, reminisces about life before tourism. Up until about 1980, he says, "I was playing football all day on the main street. There was nobody!"

The Cinque Terre wasn't even accessible by highway until the mid-20th century, and the first visitors that Villa remembers were mainly "intellectuals coming on sailing boats" in the '60s and '70s.

ADVERTISEMENT

"During the '70s, the first women without dresses also arrived," he says, referring not to ladies in shorts, but nudists.

"Vernazza was very Catholic and conservative. A woman without a dress, it was a shock.

"After 1970, there was a new wave of tourists, arriving by train, cars, boats. I remember ships coming from Portovenere, La Spezia, Levanto and two or three new restaurants opening at the same time. My mother closed all the windows," he smiles, explaining that, among the older generation, there was a "fear of strangers, fear of people arriving by the sea," dating back to a 15th-century Ottoman invasion of Italy.

At Vernazza Experience in Vernazza, Italy, try salted anchovies in olive oil paired with a white Cinque Terre wine. (Amy Laughinghouse)

'So instead, tourism!'

As for Villa, he welcomes visitors with open arms. "Agriculture is very hard, and there's no money," he says with a shake of his head.

"So instead, tourism! Money, more easy, fun and beautiful women," he grins.

We would love to linger longer ourselves, but a boat awaits in Vernazza's harbor to whisk us off for a swim in the clear azure water. While our dip is refreshing, I'm equally entranced by the views of the coast. I marvel at the stubborn determination that must have been required to carve the vineyards and villages into those high, haughty cliffs that tumble down to the sea.

ADVERTISEMENT

Federica Luppi, a Tourissimo guide who worked on designing this tour, points to a lone church perched atop a green slope. "That," she says, "is where we're going tomorrow."

So early the next morning, we find ourselves in Riomaggiore, slogging uphill along the main street and onto a steep, forested footpath, serenaded by cicadas.

This path, she explains, is an old religious route leading to the [Santuario di Montenero](#), which we glimpsed yesterday, and judging from the shrines festooned with grapes and fresh flowers along the way, it's still used by pilgrims today.

When we finally arrive at the church, I'm gasping, not only from exertion, but at the panoramic view of the coastline. Here, we pause to break bread -- a trio of focaccia varieties purchased at Panificio Rosi in Riomaggiore -- before continuing on through vineyards staked with young vines, an encouraging sign that some stalwart winemakers are carrying on the Cinque Terre's agricultural traditions.

ADVERTISEMENT

Walter De Batte of Prima Terra winery in Campiglia, Italy aims to produce Mediterranean wines that reflects the terroir of the Cinque Terre. (Amy Laughinghouse)

Tasting the terroir

We meet one of those individuals, Walter De Batte, at [Prima Terra winery in Campiglia](#), a hilltop town so quiet that a dog doesn't hesitate to claim a shady spot in the middle of the road. De Batte, who greets us at the 19th-century stone barn that serves as his bottling and tasting room, bears a world-weary resemblance to Robert De Niro, with a halo of gray hair framing a suntanned face and the sleeves of his shirt rolled up at the cuffs, ready to do whatever needs doing.

While De Batte produces a maximum of 8,000 bottles a year, there's no shortage of work. He employs just two other people year-round, plus three or four more during the harvest, when everyone pitches in to pick the grapes scattered across his 8 1/2 acres, most of which lie within the park.

As we gather around a creaking table in the barn, surrounded by stainless steel vats and metal wine racks, De Batte explains, through Beppe, that his goal is to make a truly Mediterranean wine that expresses the dry, rocky soil and the influence of the sea. He achieves this by allowing the grape juice to steep with the skins -- an unusual process for white wine -- for up to a week. "The skins carry the terroir," he says. "If you take them away, you lose too much."

We sample three vintages, including two whites: the floral, citrusy 2015 Carlaz, made from 100 percent vermentino grapes, and the bolder, heartier 2012 Harmoge, combining vermentino, bosco and albarola.

My top pick, though, is the 2011 Cerico. In this region of primarily white wines, it stands out as a rich red blend of grenache and syrah. I purchase a bottle to take home with me as a liquid reminiscence, a corked encapsulation of Italy's dramatic and challenging Cinque Terre coast.

If you go

Tourissimo's next Cinque Terre Magnifica Hiking Tour is Oct. 10-16. \$3,995 per person sharing a double room. Private tours can also be arranged. For more details and 2017 dates, visit: tourissimo.travel.

Cinque Terre National Park: Trekking cards from \$8.50 adults, \$5 children.

Treno MS cards from \$18 adults, \$11.25 children.

parconazionale5terre.it/Eindex.php

Vernazza Wine Experience: cinqueterrewinetasting.com

Prima Terra winery: primaterra.it/en

Amy Laughinghouse is a London freelance writer.



By Amy Laughinghouse|Special Contributor