

WALKING ITALY

# Mediterranean rock star

Five charming villages perched on rocky, rugged cliffs were on the menu for a ten day walking holiday in Italy when Briar Jensen walked the walk and enjoyed regional food using an elegant villa as the 'base camp'.

“Set off at the pace you intend to finish at – that’s my motto,” said Patcee, as we began the first of many upward climbs. In her mid-70s, Patcee had recently undergone a revision of her 18-year-old hip replacement, having worn out the original playing tennis. As the oldest of our group, which included women in their late 40s, late 50s and early 60s, Patcee was an inspiration to us all.

We were eight Australasian women on a 10-day walking holiday of Italy’s Le Cinque Terre, five tiny fishing villages clinging to rugged cliffs that plunge into the Mediterranean, approximately halfway between Genoa and Pisa.

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Conditions: \*Prices are per person, twin share, subject to availability and seasonal surcharge. 5106TTKD

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## WALKING ITALY



Walking past drystone walls and vineyards.

But we were not lugging packs or moving from hotel to hotel. We were staying in a gorgeous private villa in the nearby town of Levanto, from where we were escorted each day by our Australian guides, Bidy and Lesley.

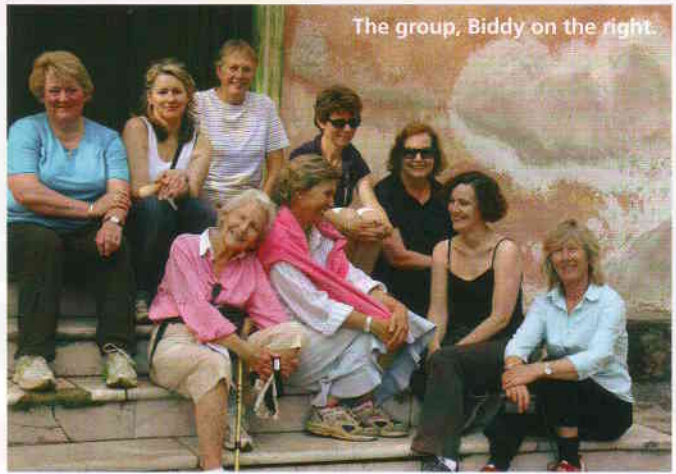
Established by Bidy Naylor, these walking holidays for women are designed as respite from the responsibilities of life at home, whether family demands or a high-pressured job. Bidy and Lesley organise everything, from accommodation and transport to meals and excursions, allowing guests to totally relax.

From the moment we arrived at our villa and were offered glasses of chilled prosecco (local bubbly) and ushered to a shaded outdoor table for lunch, surrounded by potted crimson azaleas, I knew this was my sort of holiday. For the next 10 days we combined walking and sightseeing with delicious regional food and wines.

Le Cinque Terre (five lands), originally only accessible by sea, is rich in medieval history and the drystone-walled terraces cradling the hills testify to man's tenacity to cultivate this harsh environment. Due to this historical significance the region is now a national park and popular hiking destination.

Our first walk was the famous Sentiero Azzurro (Blue Track), which we started from the easternmost village of Riomaggiore. Via dell'Amore (Lovers Way), which leads to the next village of Manarola is an easy level path cut into the rocks with stunning views down to the crystal waters of the Mediterranean. Along the path a 'lovers' chair' is silhouetted against the sky while on the adjacent railing hang intertwined padlocks, signifying the bond of those who placed them.

Riomaggiore and Manarola, squeezed into clefts in the cliffs, are a patchwork of multicoloured, multi-storey buildings tumbling down to the water's edge. Their tiny rock encircled



“ Le Cinque Terre (five lands), originally only accessible by sea, is rich in medieval history ”

bays provide little protection for the many gozzo (local fishing boats) so the colourful craft crowd the waterfront streets and perch precariously on doorsteps. Terraced vineyards and olive groves horizontally stripe the hills beyond the towns.

From here we walked up to Corniglia, a tiny village perched atop a rocky headland with stunning views up and down the coast. Built around the year 1000, the village only has about 500 residents. We picnicked in the shady town square beside an ancient olive press.

The pathway from Corniglia to Vernazza initially runs alongside drystone walls that terrace vegetable gardens full of tomatoes, basil and cucumbers, before giving way to grapevines and olive trees. Weathered timber doors in the walls, once leading into tiny gardens, now dangle carelessly open onto towering cliff edges.

Vernazza, built around a small harbour, is dominated by the austere stone tower of Castello Belforte, which contrasts with the waterfront piazza dotted with colourful cafe umbrellas. We stopped here for icy gelatos and while some of the group decided to explore the town, three of us chose to tackle the slightly more challenging final leg to Monterosso al Mare which culminated in hundreds of ancient stone steps leading down to the town.



In the following days we walked the hills behind the villages, through woodlands of chestnut and pine, amongst wild blackberries and mint, past young men harvesting olives and weather-beaten farmers selling *Vino di Casa* (house wine). We came across 11th century ruins at Punta Mesco and visited the hilltop church of Madonna di Montenero. As we looked back along our routes we were amazed

at how far we had walked and how high we had climbed. Our sense of achievement was invigorating and inspiring.

Coming back to the villa each afternoon was like returning to a friend's house, where you can make yourself at home, but are pampered with piping hot tea or a pre-dinner aperitivo. From pot plants in our bedrooms and fresh flowers on the dinner table to mosaic tea lights on the mantles and soft background music, Biddy's homely touches were everywhere. And then there were the lively dinner conversations.

"I used to remember the places I visited by the men I met," said Patcee one night, quoting a friend, "now I remember them by the frescoes."

As I looked up at our villa's frescoed ceiling I knew I'd never forget this holiday. •

*The writer was a guest of Valentine Travel and flew with the assistance of Thai Airways International.*

## TRAVEL TIPS

**How to get there:** Thai Airways International flies daily to Bangkok with connections to Rome four times a week and Milan three times a week. Tel.: 1300 651 960 or visit [www.thaiairways.com.au](http://www.thaiairways.com.au)

### More information

Cinque Terre Tourism, visit [www.cinqueterre.it](http://www.cinqueterre.it)

Valentine Travel, Tel.: 0409 011 233; visit [www.valentinetravel.com](http://www.valentinetravel.com); email [biddyn55@optusnet.com.au](mailto:biddyn55@optusnet.com.au). Walking tours for 2007 include Tuscany and Le Cinque Terre in Italy and Brittany in France. Contact Biddy Naylor regarding dates for Valentine Travel information sessions to be held in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane.

### Don't miss

A trip on the local ferry service for spectacular views of Le Cinque Terre from the water. A visit to the town of Portovenere where the church of San Pietro stands dramatically atop a rocky outcrop which dominates the harbour entrance.