

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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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