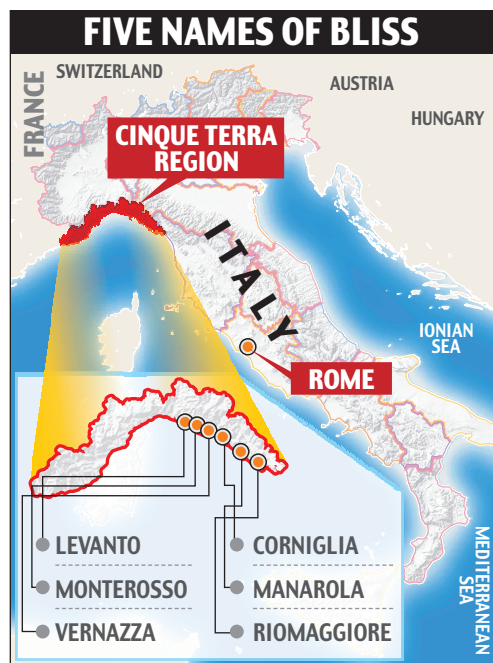


# WATCHING THE SUN GO DOWN IN ITALY'S RUSTIC QUINTET



**SUN SAND & SERENDIPITY:** Monterosso is the most sophisticated of the five. It has a resort town vibe and a beach dotted with colour-coordinated deck chairs and umbrellas



By Kalpana Sunder

**T**HIS IS the Italy of my dreams — tiny fishing towns, houses with green shutters and faded facades, laundry hanging from the balconies and the smell of the ocean. There's wine, great views, the sun, sea and sand. Life here is in the slow lane. There are no McDonald's, upscale malls, speeding Vespas or camera-crazy tour groups. There's not much going on here — but that's the point!

The Cinque Terra (meaning the 'five lands' and pronounced cheen-quay ter-rah), a stretch of five villages along the Italian Riviera between Pisa and Genoa, is a marvellously scenic region. These villages were linked to each other for centuries by boats or mule paths along dramatic cliffs. To preserve the Cinque Terra's natural wonders, the entire region has been declared a national park and has enjoyed Unesco protection since 1997.

We make a small, unpretentious sea-side town Levanto our base for exploring the Cinque Terra. Levanto has a gorgeous stretch of beaches, olive-growing hill terraces and a park with a hiker's statue — because of its popularity with hikers. We pick up the Cinque Terra card which gives us unlimited rides on the local trains to the villages and access to the scenic hiking trails. Hiking buffs are everywhere with their lethal ski spears and mountain boots.

The Sentiero Azzurro, or the Blue Trail, connects all the five hamlets, and is a five-hour hiking trail. All trails are clearly signposted, and classified, based on how arduous they are. We decide on a mix of train



**LAIDBACK LIFE:** Residents of Cinque Terra have plenty of time to stop by at the neighbour's for a chat

rides and hiking between the five villages, and enjoy this region in bite-sized chunks.

Monterosso, the first village, is four minutes away from Levanto by train. It is the most sophisticated of the five, with a resort-town vibe and the largest port. We see the yachts of the rich and famous dock here, and hear that it has a thriving nightlife.

The modern section of the town is separated by a tunnel from the old part, dating back to AD 643. In the centre of the old part is the black-and-white striped 13th-century church of San Giovanni Battista. We trek uphill to a 14th-century convent on the craggy hill for a marvellous view of the Ligurian Sea.

The beach has soft, white, talcum powder sand and is teeming with sun worshippers, umbrellas for hire and deck-chairs matching the colour of the ocean. We take the commuter train to Vernazza, the second village, through tunnels with small peep windows showing us tantalising and flickering glimpses of our destination — a little boat, the azure sea, a craggy face and a sheer cliff. Vernazza is clearly the pick of the pack.

It is an ancient Roman village, dating back to the first century. Colourful homes line the cobblestone path from the station to the

perfect natural harbour. It's packed with quaint shops, gelateria and restaurants re-dolent of pesto sauce, a Ligurian specialty, and freshly baked focaccia bread. We walk along the Via Visconti, the town's bustling main street, and reach the harbour with its rock-strewn shoreline.

We decide to climb the narrow and twisting stairs to Castella Doria, an 11th-century lookout tower (built to defend the town from pirates) and are rewarded with the most stupendous views of the entire region. Beyond the village, we see vineyards on hill terraces that defy gravity. For centuries, the local farmers have carved steep terraces on the slopes, propped up by nearly 7,000 km of latticed stone walls. The locals say that there are more stones here than in the Great Wall of China!

The next village is Corniglia — the only village not on the water. From the train station, a footpath, the Lardamia zig-zags up nearly 400 steps to the hillside town which is impossibly perched 90 metres above the ocean. We choose to save our soles and take a convenient shuttle bus instead. It is a small village with to-die-for views of the Ligurian Sea, and pink-and-white homes with billowing laundry. As we get off at the Man-



**TERRACED WONDER:** Vernazza looks inviting from the train window



**VILLAGE BY THE SEA:** In Manarola, pastel houses spill down a steep black cliff overlooking an impossibly turquoise sea

arola station, our eyes are magnetically drawn to the pastel houses spilling down a steep black cliff overlooking the impossibly turquoise sea and harbour. A pedestrian tunnel from the station leads into the village square-lined with shops and al fresco eateries. We love the lazy ambience and decide to linger here for lunch at a Trattoria.

We reach the end of the trail at Riomaggiore — a jumble of rose, yellow, coral and orange homes, rising in tiers leaning on each other. This village is built into a river gorge. Greek refugees came here to escape persecution. Space is a premium here, we can tell, when we see flat rooftops as a playing ground for kids and pets! Near the station is a colourful giant-sized mural by an Argentinean artist featuring the workers who constructed the stone walls, without any cement, running through this entire area.

Back in Levanto, we are in time for a bewitching Cinque Terra Sunset. The strip of beach is deserted, except for a few teenagers and a couple on their passeggiata (evening stroll). We have a glass of white wine, sitting on a bench, and watch the corals fade to rose and then violet. The hills are bathed in a dusky glow, and the sound of the breakers on the shore is reassuring. We have been lured into the timeless web of Cinque Terra's appeal.

— Kalpana Sunder is a travel writer based in Chennai

A small boat, the azure seas, a craggy face and a sheer cliff. This has to be heaven.