



The sea is a refuge for dolphins, the first of its kind in the Mediterranean.
La mer est refuge pour les dauphins, le premier en Méditerranée.

From the sea, the villages of the Cinque Terre – Riomaggiore, Manarola, Corniglia, Vernazza and Monterosso – seem impossibly precarious. Five brave stacks of houses are strung out like a giant’s fingerprint along the Ligurian coast just west of La Spezia, in landscape of narrow inlets, tumbling cliffs and high, vine-covered terraces. This well-kept secret was a refuge for a privileged few, including Nobel prizewinning poet Eugenio Montale (1896-1982), heir to the estate of the same name outside Riomaggiore, who spent his life musing over this idyllic Riviera and its unspoiled natural beauty. The Cinque Terre were known for their wine, a bubbling blend of Bosco, Vermentino and Albarola grapes – a precious nectar used for medicinal purposes (in small doses) and to celebrate christenings and weddings. It was praised as long ago as 1340 by Petrarch who talked of “vines lit up by the kindly eyes of the sun and most pleasing to Bacchus”. Riomaggiore and Manarola are the only two easily accessible by road, though cars are banned from the centers of all five villages. The path – known as *Via dell’amore* between Riomaggiore and Manarola – which links all five villages, has become one of Europe’s most famous easy hikes. A beautifully-maintained, late-19th-century local railway serves the Cinque Terre (4-9 minutes between stations). What better way to discover the magnificent scenery, which has now been awarded World Heritage status. The most convenient way to get here is to fly to Genoa and then hop on a train.

Monterosso is the only one of the villages that even begins to emulate a seaside resort. This is mainly because it has the only two sandy beaches and 19 of the 25 local hotels. Four-star Porto Rocca, perched on the hillside, is the nearest the coast comes to luxury (39) 0187 81 7502. It makes the most of its position with sun-trap terraces and balconies with panoramic views. The Suisse Belvedere, three stars, stands alone in the pine grove on the slopes of Punto Mesco (5 minutes by taxi from Fegina beach), (39) 0187 81 8065. The views over the Cinque Terre are breath-

taking. Of the restaurants, Peo, in the old town, serves excellent seafood dishes (39) 0187 81 8384. The house wine at La Cambusa is a delight (39) 0187 817 7546. And Miki offers exquisite food paired with excellent service (39) 0187 817 7608.

Vernazza was founded in the early Middle Ages. A ripple of bright houses, a romantic watchtower and a pocket-sized harbor: it is easy to see why so many visitors rate it above all the other villages, though it should be avoided in August. From the train station to the harbor front, via Roma snakes down past a tiny bar-trattoria, Il Baretto, good for cakes and cocktails. The piazza Marconi, framed by the bell tower of Santa Margherita and the Doria Castle,

poses the classic diner’s dilemma. The two serious contenders are Cambero Rosso, which offers modern cuisine and attentive service (39) 0187 812 265, and Gianni Franzi (39) 0187 821 398. The latter just wins with its version of the Vernazzan specialty, anchovies and potatoes. It also rents out rooms with garden-terraces. The Hotel Barbara offers clean basic rooms overlooking the harbor (39) 0187 812 398.

Corniglia is perched 377 steps above the station; the peace and quiet and stunning views are well worth the climb. The Cantina de Mananan has a one-bedroom villa to rent in the middle of its vineyards (39) 0187 81 320. The Cantina itself is the place to make for if you have worked up an appetite. This original trattoria in an 18th-century wine cellar makes a virtue out of self-sufficiency, except for cheese and salami, and will tempt you with its mouth-watering *pansoti al sugo di noci*, ravioli stuffed with walnuts.

Manarola The houses follow an S-shaped narrow valley down to the sea. Lack of a beach meant that the station had to be built a bit further away, at the end of a pedestrian tunnel. Punto Bonfiglio is the place for views back over the town, and the starting point for the short walk to Corniglia. There are two three-star hotels. The Ca’d’Andrian, (39) 0187920 040, is in the high part of town, just below the pretty 14th-century church. It’s the place to come for peace and quiet. Down by the boats, the Marina Piccola offers half board (39) 0187 920 103. Its restaurant is the only one in the village worth considering; the seafood is tasty and the walnut cake positively succulent.

Riomaggiore From the station, take the scenic path to the center of Riomaggiore, gateway to the Cinque Terre and just ten minutes train from La Spezia. If you want to stay in the center, contact one of the accommodation agencies on via Colombo, such as Afficacamera Edì (39) 0187 920 325. Robert Fazzioli, scala della Taglia, has six apartments to let around the charming little port (39) 0187 920 904. The port is located away from the center and therefore quiet. Here you’ll find Riomaggiore’s best restaurant, La Lanterna, which offers diners its rather exotic house specialty of spaghetti served with conger-eel sauce. Enjoy your meal outdoors on the tiny, cramped terrace or, if you prefer, in the wood-paneled dining room, which is a clutter of maritime scenes and sailor’s knots (39) 0187 920 589.