



Manarola, one of Liguria's famous Cinque Terre towns, has candy-hued, cliff-hugging buildings typical of the region.

Eschew the Tuscan countryside villa for a home in the hills of Liguria, a stone's throw from the region's coastal superstars, to truly experience the simple life in Italy.

Words **QUENTIN LONG**

While a villa in Tuscany is a fine thing, a B&B just over the border in the Ligurian hills with magnificent views – and not far from the jaw-dropping coastline dubbed the Italian Riviera – is perhaps even finer. Living not like a local but *with* locals is the genuine *dolce vita*.

We are in search of our own slice of the sweet life as we leave the freeway just after Carrara, an hour and a quarter out of Florence, and begin an ascent that would make the peloton of the Giro pause for thought. Every hairpin bend helps to create a sense of anticipation. What are we going to find at the end of our climb?

The GPS becomes a little confused by some classic Italian road planning; a forked road presents the quandary of both prongs having the same name, Via Marciano. Welcome to the quirky nuances of local life in Liguria.

Naturally we venture along the wrong Via Marciano until our little Fiat 500 ends up on a dirt road where we are one small wheel width away from a fast descent. After a call to our hosts, we correct ourselves and head along the right Via Marciano, and continue to climb.

Arriving around one more bend, parting yet more picturesque olive groves and vineyards, we arrive at Casa Colleverde. An unpretentious abode, it sits snugly on the hill surrounded by the greenery of small shrubs and trees (Casa Colleverde directly translates as 'house on the green hill'), and looks out to stunning vistas of hilltop villages and the great, endless expanse of the azure Mediterranean.

Simon and Carmelo greet us cheerily from the top of the garden stairs, guiding us into the open-plan kitchen and plying us with a chilled glass of wine. The house is a stylishly modern light-filled home, scattered with pieces collected during the couple's travels, making for a cosy milieu: an ornate and grand chandelier hangs over the main stairwell; a print of Michelangelo's David's face with red overprint is a feature in the dining room; African art pieces are dotted in nooks and crannies throughout.

Before the second glass of crisp local white is poured, Simon has us organised; dinner reservations at a few local haunts he knows we will love and some time at a private beach club is booked. And that's it. There's nothing more for us to do but head to the pool. >>

A House in the Hills

The early summer sun is unseasonably hot; fading the Ligurian countryside into a bleached version of itself. Everything slows down in this heat. Except for the swallows. They dart energetically overhead and then surreptitiously dive to scoop a beakful of water from the surface of the pool, occasionally coming so close I instinctively duck.

To the right of me, about 500 metres as the crow flies, is the village of Castelnuovo Magra. It sits like a crown atop a limestone pillar that rises from the valley floor. The bell tower of St Mary Magdalene church and the tower of the Bishop's Palace stand at opposite ends of the village; their stout defiance reminding onlookers that this village has survived more than 700 years of human pettiness.

The village of Nicola is a similar distance to the left, perched atop its own slender column of limestone. Each of the houses in the town are colourfully painted, made more striking by the terracotta roof tiles so synonymous with Italy and the faded green olive and bay trees surrounding the village.

In the distance the Magra River snakes its way towards the Mediterranean Sea just north of the port of Carrara, where for centuries the world's most sought-after rock – white marble – has begun its worldwide journey.

Our fellow guests are two couples from the Netherlands: Anne, an actress from Amsterdam who tells enthralling tales of flying to Athens to assist refugees, and her partner Dan, a successful surgeon; and Claire and Frank who are deliriously happy in their second marriage. Simon's generosity with Limoncello guarantees the conversation flows into the morning hours.

The next day we head to the Eco del Mare Night and Day Beach Club, just south of La Spezia in Lerici, the hangout for the well-heeled in these unpretentious parts. The beach is typically Mediterranean, sandy and pebbly. The restaurant under a thatched roof and with driftwood furniture is chic



and simple, like the club itself. It is such a different experience to Australian beach days, luxuriating in the curious local concept of making beaches exclusive and private. Twenty minutes down the road, the stunning towns of the Cinque Terre offer up more Mediterranean magic.

Living with locals allows us to indulge in the real essence of living like a local; not in the affectitious way many big hotels peddle 'local experiences' these days, but in a genuine, humble way. We spend lazy days moving at the same considered pace as our Ligurian neighbours and eat at excellent restaurants populated solely by locals from the surrounding towns and villages.

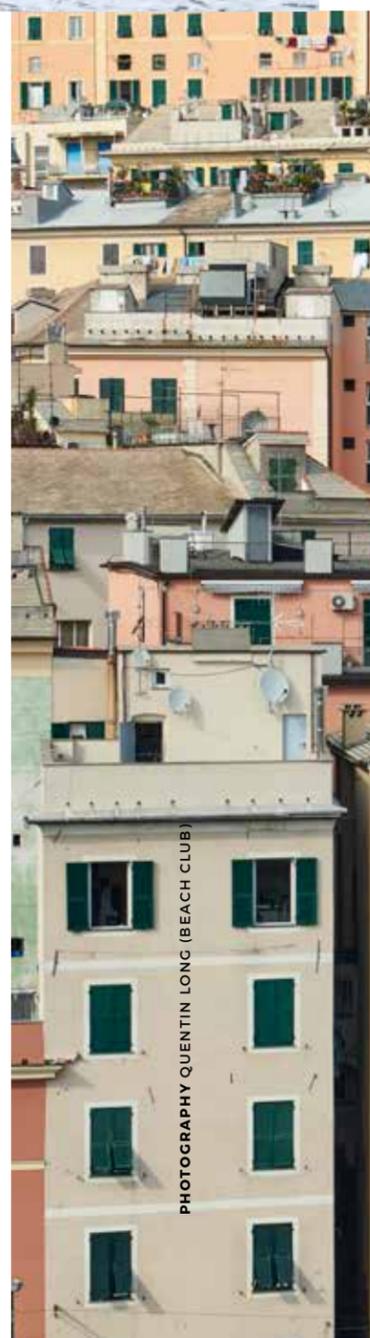
Ristorante da Fiorella in Nicola is a Ligurian delight; nothing but local produce, as you would expect in Italy, the birthplace of slow food. En route to the simple unadorned restaurant we pass the vineyard where the wine we will drink later is grown. The menu makes no concession to out-of-towners looking for the pasta and gelato cliché. Instead the mixed antipasti is classic, the frutti del mare a delicately translucent collection of local seafood given a zesty tang with a squeeze of lemon (local, of course). In Castelnuovo Magra, Trattoria Armanda is another authentic find. Dining alfresco, with views to the Magra and the sea, the menu is slightly more sophisticated: tagliatelle with truffles, stuffed veal and gnocchi with pesto. It is Liguria in a meal. Dessert is goat's milk ice-cream with orange sugar and an olive oil emulsion.

In three simple days our understanding of *la dolce vita* became authentic and genuine. This wasn't a caricature of the idyllic Italian life that visitors are desperate to consume, no matter if it is delivered in the most unauthentic way, but the real thing, as lived by locals every day. IT >>

Houses in town are colourfully painted, made more striking by the terracotta roof tiles so synonymous with Italy.



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE: A boat gently bobs in Cinque Terre; Typical homes on the Italian Riviera. OPPOSITE FROM TOP: A lazy afternoon spent at the private Eco del Mare Night and Day Beach Club; The picturesque hilltop town of Ortonovo.



PHOTOGRAPHY QUENTIN LONG (BEACH CLUB)





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *The living room at Casa Colleverde; An airy guest room to rest awhile; Vernazza is one of the spectacular Cinque Terre towns, less than an hour's drive from the house; Decorations at Casa Colleverde evoke the nearby Ligurian Sea.*

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DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Emirates flies to Bologna via Dubai from Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane; it also offers two-stop routes to Pisa via Dubai that connect to local carriers in Europe.

PLAYING THERE

Merrion Charles is a globally renowned private travel consultant specialising in Italy and in particular villas; positioned to help you discover the insider's Italy; merrioncharles.com

STAYING THERE

Casa Colleverde has three rooms each sleeping two. It is also available for exclusive use. Price on request. Casa Colleverde is 55 minutes from Pisa airport and 2 hours 30 minutes from Bologna airport; casacolleverde.com



PHOTOGRAPH: QUENTIN LONG (CASA COLLEVERDE INTERIOR DECORATION)

INSIDER'S SECRETS

Lucio Galletto of LUCIO'S restaurant, Sydney

WHAT IS THE ONE THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE MEDITERRANEAN BEFORE VISITING SO THEY CAN GET THE MOST OUT OF IT?

As we explain in *Coastline* (Murdoch Books, \$59.95), the western Mediterranean is many countries but also one country – The Land of Olive Oil. There should be no borders between eastern Spain, southern France and western Italy because their cuisines and their cultures all grew from the Greek traders who landed there 2500 years ago, plus later influences from the Romans, Arabs and the Vikings. So when you're travelling along that coastline, it's fun to spot the similarities and differences, and go to the villages that show how the area used to be. You'll be enchanted by the recurring image of olive trees, vineyards, pine forests, solitary houses and fishing villages.

NAME THREE LESSER KNOWN TOWNS THAT VISITORS SHOULD SEE TO REALLY OWN THE CLAIM THAT THEY HAVE SEEN THE BEST OF THIS PART OF ITALY.

Of course I'd have to say Bocca di Magra, the fishing village where my family built a restaurant on the seashore in 1950 and where I grew up. Bocca di Magra means 'mouth of the Magra River', and that area was once a magnificent Roman city called Luni, built with the marble from nearby Carrara. Then I'd say Riomaggiore, one of the five villages of the Cinque Terre, with vineyards and brightly coloured cottages cascading down the cliff-face to the port. And then I'd say Camogli, a beautiful fishing port where many of the buildings have 'trompe l'oeil' façades, painted to look like balconies and shutters and elaborate window frames (some with painted cats sitting on a fictitious windowsill).

IS THERE AN EXPERIENCE THAT ONLY LOCALS FROM THESE PARTS KNOW ABOUT, AND THAT VISITORS SHOULD SEARCH OUT?

Visitors usually seek out the path called Via dell'Amore, which connects the villages of the Cinque Terre, but locals now find that too crowded. I would recommend walking a forest trail called the Via Francigena, which took pilgrims

from France to Rome 1000 years ago. You can get onto that trail near the town of Aulla, on the Magra River. And while you are there try the testaroli. Not to be missed is the beautiful coastal walk from Lerici to Bocca di Magra via Montemarcello.

WHAT DO LOCALS LIKE TO EAT AND DRINK HERE THAT MUST BE TRIED BEYOND THE USUAL FARE?

In *Coastline*, we give recipes for Cuculli Genovesi – a kind of dumpling made with potatoes, pine nuts and parmesan; Gattafin, a kind of fried ravioli stuffed with wild greens and ricotta (which is also the national dish of Monaco, under the name Barbajuan); and cheese-stuffed focaccia, which is a speciality of the village of Recco, near Genoa. Also the beautiful red prawns, often eaten raw from San Remo and the Tigullio Gulf. The most popular local wine is a white called Vermentino.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE RESTAURANT ON THE ITALIAN RIVIERA?

I'm biased, but I'd have to say my family's restaurant in Bocca di Magra, which is still run by my cousin Mario Guelfi. It's called Capannina Ciccio and it specialises in locally caught seafood (and sometimes the dishes I mention above). When you go, please say hello to Mario for me.

WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND DOING FOR THE PERFECT SUNDAY IN LIGURIA?

For locals Sunday is the day of the long family lunch, in your own garden or in the garden of a restaurant, ideally with a view of the sea. It would be a good day to take a ferry ride past the villages of the Cinque Terre, to get a proper perspective on this rugged coastline.

WHAT IS THE ONE THING VISITORS SHOULD TAKE HOME AFTER A VISIT TO THE ITALIAN RIVIERA?

A sealed jar of locally made pesto sauce, since this is an area that is obsessed with growing the world's best basil. And a visit to the Carrara town of Colonnata will result in a number of beautiful white marble pieces, not least of which is the classic mortar with olive wood pestle – heavy to carry but well worth the effort. You may even be lucky enough to find an antique one in one of the many markets.