



**PROJECT REPORT  
CINQUE TERRE VOLUNTEER TRIP  
OCTOBER 3 – 11, 2023**



**Executive Summary**

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led a volunteer trip to the picturesque region of Cinque Terre, located near the village of Riomaggiore in Italy. In 1997, the Cinque Terre was recognized by UNESCO and included in the World Heritage List as a "cultural landscape." This part of the eastern Italian Riviera is a remarkable cultural landscape of immense value, representing the seamless integration between humans and nature, and creating a place of exceptional quality.

Thirteen dedicated volunteers, who had traveled from the United States, including trip leaders Carol Clark and Nancy Hartsig, gathered in Florence, Italy to commence their volunteer trip. Andrea Mezzani, a knowledgeable guide from our partner Mandala Tours, joined the group for the orientation meeting and remained with us until the early evening of Day 8. Giovanna Prennushi, from Mandala Tours, then joined the group to accompany us for the remainder of the trip.

The primary focus of our project remained in the charming village of Riomaggiore, where we worked to restore and rebuild the iconic ancient dry-stone walls that are

integral to the heritage of humanity, traditional land usage, and landscape design in the area. These terraces, some of which date back to the 10th century, are constructed solely with locally sourced stones and are meticulously maintained by hand. When these stone walls deteriorate or collapse, it can lead to erosion, landslides, the loss of flora and fauna, and disrupt the livelihoods of local residents.

During this trip, our work continued at Azienda Agricola Possa (Possa), a renowned farm and winery nestled within the Cinque Terre National Heritage Designation. The property, spanning approximately 6.18 acres and overseen by Samuele Heydi Bonanini (or Heydi for short), is perched high above the beautiful Ligurian Sea. Heydi has played a significant role in reviving the production of ancient wine and preserving the invaluable ancient dry-stone terraces, which serve as crucial defenses against erosion along the steep seaside cliffs.

Throughout the course of the trip, approximately 380 volunteer work hours were dedicated to various tasks. These included clearing brush and competing plants along approximately 1990 linear feet of vineyard rows, as well as clearing about 20 feet of rock steps leading to the lower terraces.

The group also focused on reconstructing an existing section of grapevine terrace impacted by a section of wall that had collapsed this past spring. This work involved removing excess earth and rock leftover from that terrace rebuild which occurred since the last volunteer trip in May. The larger rocks were utilized to complete a new 30 square foot terrace wall, while smaller rocks and soil served as a foundation for widening a section of a path that had been narrowed due to erosion. Excess dirt and vegetation also needed to be removed from around the grapevines that had been buried from the wall construction. In this particular area, a total of about 540 buckets or 140 cubic feet of rock and soil were removed. Volunteers also contributed to constructing a 72 square foot wire pergola to support the vertical growth of the vines.

### **Detailed Trip Report**

On the first day volunteers met in the late afternoon in Florence, Italy for introductions, orientation and work briefings presented by the trip leaders and guide.

The following day, after the morning briefing, breakfast and checking out, everyone boarded the ground transportation to Riomaggiore. Along the way we stopped in the ancient walled city of Lucca to rest, eat lunch and to examine the stone walled city. Meeting with the local guide, Linda, the group learned of the history of the city and the fortifications. Some attribute the birth of this city to the Etruscans, and it is documented that Lucca was founded by Romans in 180 AD. These defensive walls were built between the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century and are made of red bricks with a series of curtains and bastions.



*Lucca*

After arriving in Riomaggiore in the afternoon and settling in at the hotel, the team discussed the following days' work projects and logistics. Then the group met for dinner near the church square,

### **SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:**

After breakfast the next morning, the volunteers took a short drive uphill to reach the Possa worksite where they were warmly welcomed and introduced to the project. Heydi, the owner of the wine farm, provided a captivating description of the farm and its significance, while also briefly explaining the tasks at hand.

Heydi's assistant, Mamadou, was unable to join the group this year as he was heavily involved in a critical project in Manarola, working alongside Heydi. In the close-knit communities of Cinque Terre, it is common for locals to support one another on various initiatives. Nevertheless, Moussa, another assistant, was present to guide the volunteers through the work periods. Despite occasional challenges in language translations, the group managed to establish effective communication and achieved exceptional performance on both projects.

One team continued work in the terrace wall area that had been damaged during the previous spring. Following the significant progress made by the ConservationVIP® trip in May 2023 in clearing the fallen terrace grounds, Heydi and his team dedicated several months leading up to the harvest to reconstructing the wall, creating a newer and larger structure. Our group continued the work on this project. Setting up a bucket brigade, the team removed a significant amount of dirt and rocks left over from the summer wall building to get the vine rows back to normal field conditions. Some of the bigger rocks were used to supply Moussa with additional rock to top off the last foot of height on a new 10 ft. long by 3 ft. high wall. The team backfilled this wall with dirt and used smaller rocks to chink the open spaces within the wall to minimize settling. Many

buckets were carried away and deposited over the side of another section of terrace which will be used to widen that terrace in the future. Once the excess material was removed, we threaded wire between the high wall and the grapevine posts creating a 6 ft. x 12 ft. pergola to support vertical growth of the vines (see photo below). It is important to keep the vines off the ground to discourage excess root growth which takes away from foliage and fruit growth.



The other group climbed onto the different levels of terraces and began clearing terraces and vine rows of competing vegetation and fallen rocks. This October was hotter than usual and both sites were exposed to sun and high temperatures as well as humidity making the soil hard and dry.



#### Other activities:

Between hours of working in the vineyard and on the dry-stone wall, the group was able to experience several local activities. The group was treated to a lesson on making pesto, tiramisu, and fried sage. Pesto is a sauce made from basil, cheese, pine nuts, oil, and sea salt. Basil is grown all over Cinque Terre, and it is particularly famous in Riomaggiore. We also did a short hike along one section of the Cinque Terre Trail up to the Sanctuary of Our Lady at the Church of Nosta Signora di Montenero, an area only accessible by foot with grand views over Riomaggiore and the sea. The photo on page one shows the view from the top of this hike.

Day 6 was a well-deserved rest day. Most volunteers chose to take a short train and park-bus ride up to Volastra to hike along another Cinque Terre trail to Corniglia where some stayed in the village to explore on their own and some hiked further on to Vernazza.

After our last full workday, we were treated to a history of Riomaggiore vineyards and a tasting of Heydi's wines in one of Heydi's wine cellars, enjoying the fruits of our labor.



On the 8th day, the group packed up their belongings and expressed their gratitude to the staff at our host hotel for their excellent service and delightful breakfasts. We then boarded the private transportation vans to embark on the journey back to the bustling city of Florence. Along the way, we made a stop at Porto Venere, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. The group took a refreshing break by exploring The Church of St. Peter, marveling at the breathtaking views of the Bay of Poets from its portals, and leisurely strolling through the bustling main street filled with shops, restaurants, and gelaterias, and enjoyed another local meal before driving into Florence for the night.

### Summary

The restoration of ancient dry-stone walls in Cinque Terre is a significant undertaking that necessitates a grasp of traditional construction techniques. Through its efforts in restoring these walls, ConservationVIP® is contributing to safeguarding the cultural heritage of the region.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to all the devoted volunteers who participated in the Cinque Terre Volunteer Trip with ConservationVIP®. Your valuable contributions, suggestions, and unwavering patience were instrumental in helping us navigate the complexities and challenges of establishing and nurturing relationships in this region. Thank you for your commitment and dedication to our mission.

A big thank you to Mandala Tours for continuing to be a trusted ground operator with ConservationVIP® and for arranging for Andrea Mezzani and Giovanna Prennushi to work with us in this beautiful region of Italy. Andrea went above and beyond as he not only served as our guide, but also provided invaluable personal assistance to the volunteers throughout the trip. He also took care of the logistics, such as organizing the contracted accommodations and meals, ensuring everything ran smoothly. Without Andrea's dedicated support, this trip would not have been as successful. We are also

grateful to Giovanna for stepping in and closing the trip on a high note during the last couple of days.

Moussa, Heydi's worker, was patient with us as he continued to teach us how to work with the dry-stone walls, and to clear the fields.

We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Samuele (Heydi) Bonanini and his ongoing collaboration with ConservationVIP®, which has allowed us the opportunity to contribute to the conservation efforts in this UNESCO designated region.



Ciao!