

**PROJECT REPORT
CINQUE TERRE VOLUNTEER TRIP
October 15-23, 2025**



OVERVIEW

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led a volunteer trip to the village of Riomaggiore, in the picturesque region of Cinque Terre, Italy, which in 1997 was recognized and added to the UNESCO World Heritage List as a "cultural landscape." Six volunteers, traveling from the United States, trip leader Nancy Hartsig, and our local guide Giovanna Prennushi from our Italy partner Mandala Tours met in Florence, Italy to begin their volunteer trip.

Cinque Terre has a rich cultural heritage, reflecting centuries of human settlement and adaptation to the challenging environment. The hillsides are covered with terraced vineyards and olive groves, a traditional agricultural practice that has been maintained for centuries. 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. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, Cinque Terre National Park is committed to preserving its natural and cultural heritage. Efforts include sustainable tourism practices, protection of marine ecosystems, and maintenance of traditional agricultural methods. The park faces challenges such as managing tourist impact and environmental preservation, which are addressed through various conservation programs.

On this trip we had the privilege of working at 3 different sites within walking distance of our hotel in Riomaggiore. As we have done on past trips, we provided support to Azienda Agricola Possa (Possa), an organic farm and winery nestled within the Cinque Terre National Heritage Designation. The property, spanning approximately 6 acres and overseen by Samuele "Heydi" Bonanini, is perched high above the beautiful Ligurian Sea. Heydi has played a significant role

in the community by reviving the production of ancient wine and preserving the ancient dry-stone terraces, which serve as crucial defenses against erosion along the steep seaside cliffs. These terraces, some of which date back to the 10th century, are constructed with locally sourced stones and are meticulously maintained by hand.

We again provided trail restoration on the farm of Barbara Olcese and Stefano Catoni, Azienda Agricola I Foresti di Riomaggiore. Barbara and Stefano recently renovated a 500-year-old farm house that is traversed by one of the national park trails between the village of Riomaggiore and the upper road that connects the villages. Part of the charm of attending their cooking classes is the hike to the farmhouse, only accessible on foot, and the panoramic views it offers of the Cinque Terre coast. The very steep and ancient trail whose name was Loc Castagnei, Place of the Chestnut Trees, is now referred to as Loc Costa Piaggio, the Piaggio Coast Trail and is the only route that connects their farm to the village. Steep trails such as this are subject to significant storm wash which fills in the steps with dirt and subsequently vegetation making the trail hazardous to navigate. Owning property within the Cinque Terre National Heritage Designation comes with the obligation to maintain any of the park trails that traverse that property.

In addition to these two sites, we had the opportunity this year to work alongside one of the trail crews of the Cinque Terre National Park (Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre - PN5T) helping with a variety of tasks along the SVA Trail from Riomaggiore to Montenero. This trail is also known as the pilgrimage trail, a stone paved and terraced trail used to reach the Sanctuary of Nostra Signora di Montenero, at the peak of the hills overlooking Riomaggiore and all of the Cinque Terre coastline. This opportunity was made possible by the collaborative effort of our local guide Giovanna and PhD Geologist Dr Emanuele Raso of PN5T. The trails within PN5T receive about 4 million visitors a year, in contrast to the mere 4000 inhabitants. There are not enough local resources to keep up with the restoration efforts needed to protect the slopes from erosion, thus protecting the villages and the livelihoods of the residents.

The volunteer group of 8 people (6 volunteers, 1 trip leader and 1 local guide) completed 226 hours of volunteer time between the three projects. Tools used during the week: Hand hoe/cultivators, soil knives, trowel, whisk broom, buckets.

DAILY RECAPS

Wednesday, October 15, Arrival - On the first day, our volunteers met in the late afternoon in Florence, Italy for introductions, orientation and project briefings presented by the trip leader Nancy Hartsig and local guide Giovanna Prennushi. We then took a stroll down to the Arno river and Ponte Vecchio and circled back via the Uffizi Gallery, Palazzo Vecchio and the Duomo to arrive at our restaurant for a delicious antipasto, bruschetta and pasta dinner.

Thursday, October 16, Travel to Riomaggiore - This morning after breakfast we loaded our gear into a van and left for Lucca where we had an excellent tour of the walled city hosted by our guide Giovanna who kept us all engaged and moving. We experienced a first which was a stop at the beautiful Cathedral of St Martin where we had the opportunity to enter and see Lucca's ancient relic of a wooden cross, carbon dated to 782, which was recently restored and put on display. The Renaissance walls that encircle the city of Lucca are renowned for their grandeur and architectural significance. They are among the best preserved Renaissance walls in Europe. What's unique about the Lucca walls is that they were transformed into a public park in the 19th century, making them an integral part of the city's recreational and cultural life. The

top of the walls is now a tree-lined promenade. Before lunch we had time to stroll along the walls and shops while a few decided to take a bicycle ride along the top of the walls to take in the beautiful panoramic views of Lucca and its surroundings. Then, after a delicious lunch, we hopped back into the van to Riomaggiore. After arriving and settling in at the hotel, the team discussed the following days' volunteer projects and logistics, then we walked down into the village in time to enjoy a beautiful sunset on the water before arriving at our restaurant for a delicious seafood dinner. The weather was perfect for our first full day and introduction to Cinque Terre.

Friday, October 17, Day 3 – PN5T at Via Grande and Azienda Agricola I Foresti di Riomaggiore: We experienced another first today. Thanks to the diligent efforts of Giovanna, working with PN5T's PhD Geologist Emanuele Rosa, the park agreed to host us for a half day on this trip to work side by side with a trail maintenance crew of the National Park. After breakfast, we took a short van ride uphill to meet the trail crew – Davide, Simone and Massimiliano – as well as Giulia Bianchi a natural resource specialist in the Biodiversity Office of the park. We focused on a 1.5 km section of the SVA trail, also known as the Via Grande, the pilgrimage trail that climbs to the monastery above Riomaggiore. Work included clearing 25 steps of an overgrown trail that crossed this pilgrimage trail, cleaning up a small landslide, clearing a rainwater regulation channel for improved water flow on the hillside, and removing piles of logs and dead branches from a terrace above the trail. In addition, we helped to rebuild a 10 ft. long layer of dry-stone terrace by sorting and carrying rocks of various sizes for the crew to shape and fit into place.



Next, we had to hike back up to the Monastery and then down the other side to reach the farm of Barbara and Stefano, where we had a "molto bene" lunch before beginning work on the park trail that goes past their cooking school / farmhouse. The afternoon's activities included collecting buckets of small rocks for Aziz, a stone mason, who was in the process of rebuilding a

section of stone steps below the farmhouse, and beginning to clear the uphill park trail known as Loc Costa Piaggio.



Saturday, October 18, Day 4 – Azienda Agricola Possa and Possa Cantina: Today the weather was beautiful, and we were anxious to get to Heydi's vineyard this morning before his employees stopped work for the weekend. Rain was expected on Monday and Tuesday which would prevent us from working on the terraces then for safety reasons. The van dropped us at the roadside entrance at the top of the vineyard, and we walked down the steep steps admiring the variety of flowering plants, blooming rosemary shrubs and garden sculptures to meet Heydi's new employee Bala from Gambia. Bala speaks 17 West African languages in addition to Italian and English! He came to Cinque Terre 11 years ago and is trained in dry-stonewall building.

We collected loose stone along a 70-foot section of terrace on one side of the vineyard and loaded it onto the monorail for transport to the other side of the vineyard where a terrace wall was being repaired. This was an 18-ft section of wall that needed an additional foot of height to level it with the existing walking path. On the lower level of this wall, we sorted additional smaller stones that would be used as backfill for the rebuild. We took turns supplying him with stone and chinking the gaps with smaller stone as he went along. On the top of this wall, we needed to clear away dirt from the existing path so that the larger facing stones and stabilizing backfill stones could be added. Then, with the final layer of stones in place to create a level walking path, we raked loose dirt over the stones so that the rain would wash it down filling any remaining gaps between the layers. In addition, some volunteers used hand clippers to clear vegetation from a 70-foot section of wall and cleared dirt from a steep, 52 step section of stairs that connected several levels of terraces.



After a productive half day in the vineyard, we enjoyed a late picnic lunch overlooking Heydi's vineyard and the Ligurian Sea and said goodbye to Bala. Next, we walked back down to Riomaggiore to Heydi's wine cellar to meet and work with Rodrigo who is from Columbia. We helped to destem about 4 crates of grapes that will go into Heydi's 2025 Sclacchetrá wine, a traditional wine of the region that is only consumed on special occasions (birth, confirmation, marriage...). It was a short afternoon as there was a scheduled wine tasting in the cellar, so we took advantage of the sunny afternoon to walk the Via Dell' Amore which is the seaside walking path that connects Riomaggiore to Manarola. We enjoyed gelato and a walk around the village and then returned to Riomaggiore for our dinner.



Sunday, October 19, Day 5 – Azienda Agricola I Foresti di Riomaggiore and Pesto Class:
Today we returned to Barbara's farm for more trail work and the much-anticipated pesto making class. We learned the proper techniques for making Ligurian pesto and enjoyed the fruits of our labor – fresh pesto with hand-pressed Croxetti pasta, and bruschetta followed by Barbara's

special recipe tiramisu for dessert. She also indulged us in our attempt to roast chestnuts that we had gathered along the trail we worked on the day before.

We completed soil and vegetation removal from 174 feet of the park trail's stone steps and walls that pass above Barbara and Stefano's farmhouse. This section of trail has fewer steps than the downhill side we had worked on last year as each step up has a 2-3ft landing of paved stones. In addition, we worked on a secondary trail that connects the park trail to the main road above the farm. The latter included clearing off 37 stone steps, removing loose stone in the path, trimming overgrown junipers from the edges of the trail, and removing 2 bags of plastic and paper trash at the trailhead by the road.



Monday, October 20, Day 6 – Possa Cantina: Today was to be our rest day. However, heavy rain was expected so we decided to move our rest day to Tuesday and spend the day in the wine cellar destemming grapes again with Rodrigo. To make it more 'interesting', the village had a planned utility outage this morning so there was no power in the cellar for almost 2 hours. We were able to open the doors to the large windows to let some light in, which then made for some entertainment of passers-by who kept stopping to watch or poke their heads in to ask what we were doing.

While Giovanna prepared a picnic lunch for us, we took advantage of a break in the weather to walk around the village and stretch our limbs after huddling around the large totes of grapes. In the afternoon we were joined by Heydi's mother, Madame Bonanini. In between conversations in English, Italian and Spanish while destemming, we watched Heydi's black and white 1942 documentary of life in Riomaggiore and read aloud excerpts of a book: *Between Vineyard and Sea – The Wine of Cinque Terre* which was very appropriate to the task at hand. We filled the red tote (~6 cu ft.) that we had started with on Saturday and half-filled the white tote (~3 cu ft.) as well. Rodrigo then transferred these grapes to the stainless-steel vat. Heydi joined us when we were finished and offered us a tasting of his award winning 2021 Sciacchetrá, and Madame Bonanini offered slices of homemade Cinque Terre Panettone cake to go along with it. We then said our thank-yous and goodbyes, at least until next year!

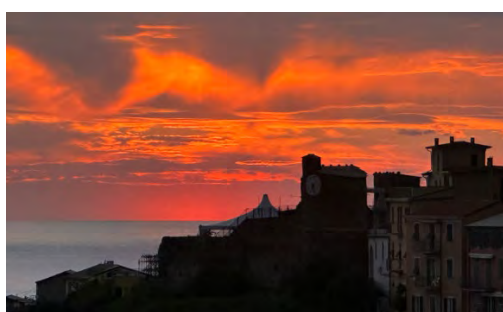


Tuesday, October 21, Day 7 – Rest Day:

Today was our much-anticipated rest day and everyone was eager to explore all of the villages of the Cinque Terre. We started the day by taking a train ride to the furthest village of Monterosso where Giovanna gave us an introduction to the historic center. We then separated so that everyone could meander through each of the villages at their own pace. Often, we would run in to each other – climbing the tower at Vernazza or enjoying a glass of wine in the square at Corniglia. There were many churches to admire, which usually involved ‘hiking’ to the top of the villages, as well as quaint small streets that led away from the historic centers.



At the end of the day, we met back at our hotel to share the day’s adventures over a final glass of local wine and pecorino cheese in the company of our patio friend and enjoyed our last memorable sunset in Cinque Terre.

**Wednesday, October 22, Day 8 – Travel Day:**

The group packed up their belongings and thanked 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 Portovenere, often considered the sixth village of Cinque Terre, and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Giovanna led us on a brief tour through the village to the Church of St. Peter, originally a site of pagan worship, where we could climb to the top for a windswept and breathtaking view of the Bay of Poets and then we circled back via the bayside of the village with its multicolored buildings that also served as a wall to the city.





We then had time before lunch to leisurely stroll the paths up to the fort or through the bustling main street filled with shops, restaurants, and gelaterias. After lunch we hopped back into our vans for the drive to Florence. After checking in to our hotel, we met for our trip debrief before walking to our last dinner together. We said our goodbyes then as several of us would be leaving early for our flights home or our trains to our next destinations.

Summary of Project Accomplishments

- 226 hours of volunteer assistance over 4 days:
- Day 1:
 - o Cleared soil and grass from 2 (~6ft long) stone water drains.
 - o Cut overhanging juniper limbs along 10 ft section of the pilgrimage trail.
 - o Removed buckets of dirt from a small landslide that covered a 6 foot section of trail.
 - o Cleared soil and grasses from 25 steep stone steps of a trail that crosses the pilgrimage trail.
 - o Widened a rainwater regulation channel to improve water flow on the hillside.
 - o Moved a large pile of old cut logs and branches from an upper terrace above the pilgrimage trail.
 - o Sorted and carried stones of various sizes for the crew to shape and fit into place along a 10-foot long dry stone terrace.
 - o Cleared soil, grass, vines from 44 steps and wall of the Loc Castagnei trail.
- Day 2:
 - o Collected scattered stones along a 70 foot section of terrace; transferred via monorail to rebuild a separate 18 foot section of vineyard wall.
 - o Trimmed vegetation from same 70 foot terrace wall.
 - o Assisted stone mason with moving soil, placing stones and filling gaps to finish off the 18 foot wall.
 - o Cleaned a 52 step section of steps connecting several vineyard terraces.
 - o Spent about 90 minutes destemming harvested grapes in preparation for fermentation.
- Day 3:
 - o 174-foot section of the Loc Castagnei trail - Cleared vegetation along walls, landings and stone steps

- o 56-foot section of a small upper trail that connects Loc Castagnei trail to road – trimmed junipers, cleared 43 steep stone steps
 - o Collected 2 bags of plastic and paper trash along upper roadside trail.
- Day 4:
 - o Continued to destem grapes, filling 2 totes with an estimated 12 cubic feet of grapes for fermenting.

Thank you!

We thank all of our volunteers who participated in this Cinque Terre Volunteer Trip with ConservationVIP®. We came together as strangers and left with a wealth of new experiences and new friends. Thank you for your commitment and dedication to our mission.

We would like to thank Samuele (Heydi) Bonanini for his ongoing collaboration with ConservationVIP®, which has allowed us to continue to contribute to the conservation efforts in this UNESCO designated region. Thank you also to Bala and Rodrigo, Heydi's workers, who guided us in the work of the vineyard and the wine cellar.

We thank Barbara Olcese and her sous-chef and husband Stefano, for their impeccable hosting and culinary excellence – best pesto and best tiramisu ever!

A big thank you to Mandala Tours for continuing to be a trusted ground operator with ConservationVIP® and for arranging for Giovanna Prennushi to work with us again in this beautiful region of Italy. Giovanna as always excelled in her planning and leadership. In addition to being our guide and translator, she coordinated daily schedule and activity modifications with our hosts so that we could navigate the mission's priorities despite the weather. And she was instrumental in establishing the contacts with the park this year so that we could offer our volunteer efforts to them as well.

And finally, a heartfelt thank you to our contacts at Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre, Dr. Emanuele Raso and Giulia Bianchi and their trail crew Davide, Simone, and Massimiliano for giving us the opportunity to contribute to their environmental conservation efforts. It was an enjoyable and collaborative experience and one that we hope to be able to expand upon in the future. There is a very nice article in their recent newsletter "Beyond the Journey: Volunteering at the Park" in which they speak of our day with them. In addition to a thank you from Park President Lorenzo Viviano, they offer a sincere testimonial which is a fitting and meaningful close:

"The collaboration with ConservationVIP shows that travel should not only be consumption, but can become an act of participation: choosing among the "most beautiful heritage landscapes" does not only mean admiring them, but becoming an active part of them. In this sense, environmental volunteering creates unexpected synergies and a real bond between those who come from outside and those who have lived in that area for generations."

Arrivederci!