

Volunteer Trip Report Cinque Terre, Italy May 13 - 21, 2026



Cinque Terre Volunteer Trip Report, May 2026 Conservation Projects in Italy's UNESCO Coastal Region

Executive Summary

In May 2026, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) led a volunteer conservation trip in Cinque Terre, Italy, where participants contributed 170 hours to vineyard restoration, trail maintenance, and dry-stone terrace rebuilding. Together with local partners and Cinque Terre National Park, our travelers helped preserve a UNESCO World Heritage cultural landscape. This report details the environmental impact, project outcomes, and volunteer experience.

Overview of the Conservation Project

ConservationVIP organized and led a volunteer trip to the village of Riomaggiore, in the picturesque region of Cinque Terre, Italy. In 1997 Cinque Terre was recognized and added to the UNESCO World Heritage List as a "cultural landscape." The six travelers from the United States, including volunteer trip leader Nancy Hartsig, and local guide Tancredi Merlo from our Italy partner Mandala Tours, met in Florence, Italy to begin their volunteer trip.

Why Cinque Terre Needs Conservation Volunteers

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 contributing to the conservation of four 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 Riomaggiore property, spanning approximately 6 acres and overseen by Samuele "Heydi" Bonanini, is perched high above the beautiful Ligurian Sea. On this trip we were also able to volunteer at his newer vineyard in Manarola. 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 Castagne, Place of the Chestnut Trees, is now referred to as Loc Costa Piaggio, the Piaggio Coast Trail. It is the only route that connects their farm to the village. Steep trails such as this are subject to significant storm wash which fills 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 three sites, we had the opportunity again to contribute alongside one of the trail crews of the Cinque Terre National Park (PN5T). We helped with a variety of tasks along the SVA Trail from Riomaggiore to Montenero. This trail is also known as the pilgrimage trail. This stone paved and terraced trail is used to reach the Sanctuary of Nostra Signora di Montenero, located 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 one of our Mandala guides, Giovanna Prennushi 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.

Key Results and Impact (Quick Stats)

The volunteer group of 7 people (6 travelers, plus 1 local guide) completed 170 hours of volunteer time between four projects. Tools used during the week: Hand hoe/cultivators, soil knives, hand clippers, whisk broom, buckets.

Detailed Trip Report

Daily Summary:

Wednesday, May 13, Arrival – On the first day, the travelers met in the late afternoon in Florence, Italy for introductions, orientation and project briefings presented by the trip leader Nancy Hartsig and local guide Tancredi Merlo. Tancredi then led 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, May 14, Travel Day – Florence > Porto Venere > Riomaggiore

This morning, we boarded the private transportation van to embark on the journey to Cinque Terre. Along the way, we made a stop at Porto Venere, often considered the sixth village of Cinque Terre, and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Tancredi led us on a brief tour through the village to see the Church of St. Peter, originally a site of pagan worship, and a wave crashing view of the Bay of Poets. We then circled back via the upper walkways of the village with its colorful container gardens and entryways, back through the wall of the city and out to our bayside restaurant for lunch. We had a little more time after lunch to visit the shops or to do a steep “practice” hike up behind the village for a spectacular view of the fortress, medieval church and surrounding harbor.

Then we again boarded the van to Riomaggiore, our home for the next week. After arriving and settling in at the hotel, the team discussed the following days’ volunteer projects and logistics. After that, we walked down into the village. It was quite a blustery day, and we enjoyed watching the dramatic wave action in the port before sitting down to a delicious dinner of sea bass and salad. Then we made our ascent back up to the hotel, discussing the sights and sounds of our first day and introduction to Cinque Terre.



Friday, May 15, Day 3 – Project at Azienda Agricola Possa and Hike to Manarola

The winds calmed overnight and we eagerly leaned into our project today at Heydi's vineyard. We arrived and met Heydi's workers, Bala, Mohammed and Rodrigo who wanted our help to repair a 34-foot linear section of terrace wall. The upper (18 – 24 inches) section of this wall had become uneven and overgrown with vegetation, and there was a small tree growing out of the wall face. The project involved using small shovels and hand hoes to remove all vegetation, soil and rocks from this layer and sorting the rocks by size for backfill and rebuild. We carried larger rocks that were delivered by the vineyard monorail to the project site by hand and in buckets.



ConservationVIP travelers repairing the terrace wall at Azienda Agricola Possa

The weather turned against us at midday, so we huddled on the “kitchen porch” to enjoy a delicious picnic lunch of salad, meats, bread and cheese, compliments of our local guide Tancredi. Nancy shared a short documentary video of the Stonewalls4Life sustainability project in the neighboring village of Manarola. This was a 4-year project with PN5T and co-funded by the Life program of the European Union to restore the deteriorated terraces to improve their resiliency toward climate change.

The vineyard workers called an end to the project for the day due to weather, so we returned to our hotel for drier clothes. Then Tancredi led us on an excellent hike that included Villa dell'Amore and a scenic loop around Manarola where we could see the amphitheater, the location of the Stonewalls4Life project. We stopped for refreshments at

a local establishment on the church piazza where Tancredi engaged the server in a discussion about the local wines.



We also learned about Nelson, a wild boar who terrorized one of the local vineyards and thus had a small batch of wine named after him. Then we made our way back to the village, dodging another bout of rain, to get ready for dinner.



Saturday, May 16, Day 4 – Conservation Projects at Azienda Agricola Possa and Azienda Agricola I Foresti di RioMaggiore

This morning we returned to Heydi's vineyard under blue skies and continued where we left off on rebuilding the terrace. While yesterday we deconstructed a section of the wall, today we reconstructed the wall. We used bucket brigades to carry the stones from the monorail tram to the project site and then up the steps where they were sorted by size and delivered as needed.

Large stones were used on the outside and smaller stones were used as backfill. Then it was all covered with dirt for a level and safe transit path. Happily, we were able to finish the project by mid-day, when Heidi's workers stop for the weekend. THANK YOU Bala, Mohammed, and Rodrigo.



ConservationVIP travelers repairing the terrace wall at Azienda Agricola Possa

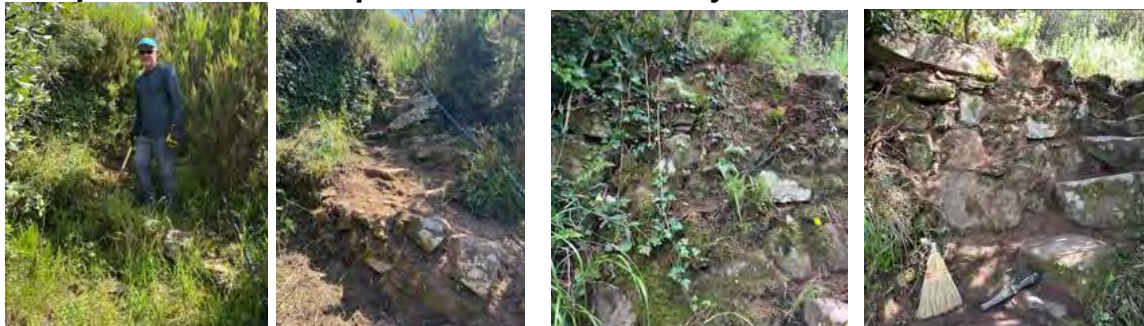


From the vineyard, we then hiked over the hill and down the other side to Azienda Agricola I Foresti di Riomaggiore where we were treated to a lunch of assorted pastas (including cocoa pasta!) and quiche at Barbara Olcese and Stefano Catoni's farmhouse / cooking school. The blue skies continued and we were treated to a rare glimpse across the Ligurian Sea to the Alps on the horizon!



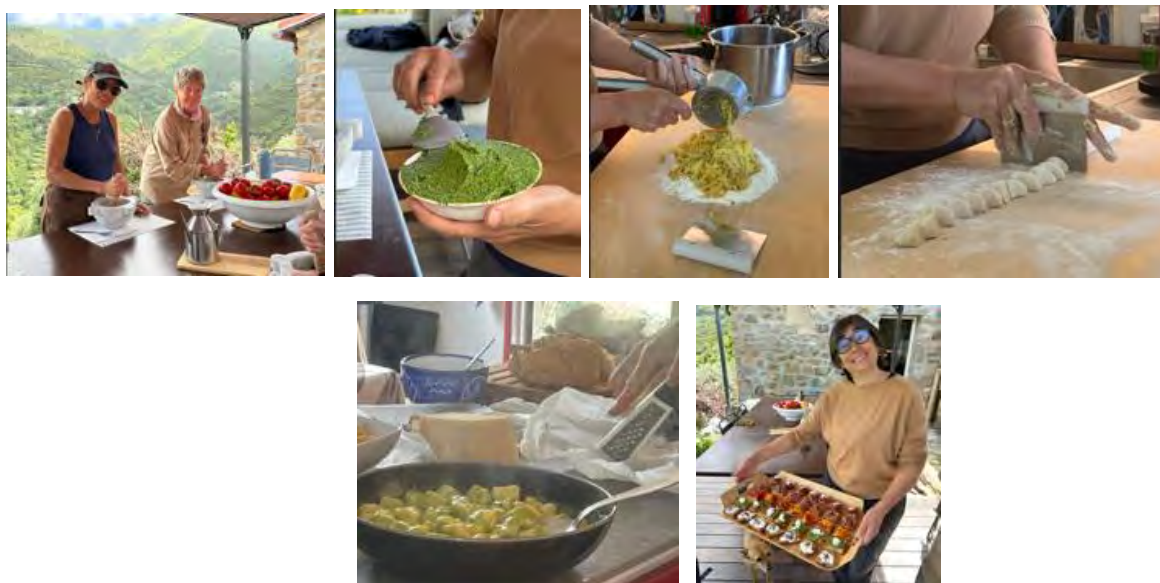
After enjoying our lunch break with a view, we started maintaining a secondary trail on Barbara's and Stefano's farm that serves as an alternate passageway, in the event of a landslide, between the main PN5T trail known as Loc Costa Piaggio and the main road above. This secondary trail is about 175 feet long with steep elevation and several sections of stone steps and dirt path which at one time were part of the terraces above Riomaggiore. The terraces themselves are no longer accessible here and the path is significantly overgrown with grasses and shrubs. The stone steps in many places were barely visible due to years of accumulated soil due to storm wash. We made good use of our hand tools (soil knives, pick axes and hand clippers) to clear steps of soil and moss, hoe the dirt paths free of invasive plants and remove moss and vegetation from the sidewalls along the path.

A couple of before/after photos of the secondary trail:



Sunday, May 17, Day 5 – Azienda Agricola I Foresti di Riomaggiore and Pesto Making:

Today we returned to Barbara's farm for more trail improvements and pesto making class. We learned the proper techniques for making Ligurian pesto and Barbara provided a very informative demonstration on how to make gnocchi. Stefano used our fresh pesto to create a masterful display of bruschetta, every one of them was delicious! We then were served the fresh gnocchi and italianini with our pesto followed by Barbara's special recipe tiramisu, fresh focaccia bread with Nutella and coffee.



After the meal we moved to the main park trail and cleaned the terraced steps that run past the farmhouse. We had cleaned these steps last year and they were in fair condition compared to the secondary trail, but there was some storm wash to clear from the steps and vines to remove from the side walls. The overall length of trail that was cleared was about 304 feet before we had to call it a day and walk back down the steps to our hotel and get ready for dinner.

A couple of before/after photos of the main trail:



Monday, May 18, Day 6 – Rest Day:

After several days of hands-on conservation work, the group enjoyed a well-earned rest day under clear skies and calm winds, choosing a scenic hike between villages as a relaxing way to explore Cinque Terre. They traveled by ferry to Vernazza, hiked to Corniglia, and spent the day taking in coastal views, local food, and quiet moments along the trail. The long but leisurely journey back to Riomaggiore offered a rewarding chance to unwind and reflect on the week's accomplishments.



Tuesday, May 19, Day 7 – Via Grande with Cinque Terre National Park and the Possa terraces at Manarola:

Today was our last volunteer project day in Cinque Terre and we split our day between two locations. In the morning, we met our Cinque Terre National Park hosts Giulia, Davide and Emiliano on the Via Grande trail to the Sanctuary above Riomaggiore. Along the way we used shears and hand clippers to trim chestnut tree branches and other invasive plants that were overhanging the path. We learned about the 1000-year old heritage of humans living off the land and sea in concert with the natural environment. We stopped at a steep cross trail that we had maintained last year and removed storm wash from approximately 100 ft of path and about 35 steps. We continued up the Via Grande to the Sanctuary where we thanked our hosts and stayed to enjoy the view and a picnic before heading back to the village.



For the afternoon, Heydi had invited us to help on his new terraces in the amphitheater in Manarola. These terraces were planted after the completion of the rebuilds by Stonewalls4Life. Heydi has planted 6000 plants over a hectare (2.5 acres) of terraces, located very high in the

amphitheater! Much of the early work has been to install 800 wooden poles and 50 metal poles that will become the supports for the new vines.

We walked to Manarola on the Via Dell'Amore trail along the coast and then walked uphill through the village to the church piazza where we could see the terraces high above us. Heydi was not able to meet us at the start, but Bala explained where he was, so we attempted to find our way up into the amphitheater. This proved to be a very daunting task given the steep and rugged path before us. We finally reached Bala a bit later than planned and he instructed us on clearing the weeds around the new young plants and stringing wire between new poles to provide future support for the vines. A couple of us cleaned the steps that we had just climbed to make for easier access in the future.



After some time, Heydi joined us. He brought us a sample of a local sparkling wine made with grapes from the Manarola growers and shared his knowledge of wine making and answered questions. As it was the end of their day, Heydi showed us a much easier return route back to the church piazza. We were immensely grateful for this alternative, as this would make his terraces much more accessible for us should we be able to volunteer at that site again on a future trip. It was a BIG day of hiking between two villages and climbing the hills of both to accomplish our tasks. After this, we were very happy to sit down and unwind with a delicious seafood dinner on our last evening in Cinque Terre.

Wednesday, May 20, 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 our van to embark on the journey back to the bustling city of Florence. Along the way, we made a stop at the Tuscan village of Lucca where local guide Linda gave us an educational tour of the walled city, the roman amphitheater and home of the well-known composer Puccini.

The walls that encircle the city 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. We had time before lunch to stroll along the streets visiting the shops while a few people took a bicycle ride along the top of the walls to take in the beautiful panoramic views of Lucca and its surroundings. Our lunch was a delicious assortment of focaccia, pizza and salads.

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.



Restoration Projects Completed:

- 170 hours over 4 days
- Day 1: Heydi's Riomaggiore vineyard
 - Cleared a 68 square foot section of terrace wall (34ft L x 2ft W x 1ft D) of soil, invasive vegetation and rocks using soil knives, small shovels and pick ax.
 - Sorted the removed stones by size for reuse.
 - Cleaned 8 steps between the top and bottom of the terrace for safe transit.
 - Completed about 25% of the surface rebuild, providing buckets of rock for placement.
 - Removed invasive vegetation from the 34 ft L x 9 ft H terrace face using hand clippers, transporting buckets of vegetation to a dump site.
- Day 2: Heydi's Riomaggiore vineyard and Barbara's farm
 - Transported additional larger stones from the monorail conveyor, across a long terrace and via bucket brigade up to the work site.
 - Completed the remaining 75% of surface rebuild.
 - Widened a steep overgrown 175 ft foot path using clippers, hoe, pick ax to remove dense branches, vines and grasses.
 - Cleared side walls and stone steps of storm wash, moss, roots and vines using clippers, pick ax, soil knives and hand broom. The steps are staggered along the 175 ft path representing the gradient between the abandoned terraces (~ 6 terraces).
 - Raked the cut grasses and hoed the dirt path between terrace levels.
- Day 3: Barbara's farm
 - Completed the clearing of the 175 ft path.
 - Refreshed a 204 ft section of the main park trail using soil knives, clippers and broom to clear storm wash and invasives from terraced steps and sidewalls.
- Day 4: Cinque Terre National Park and Heydi's Manarola vineyard
 - Removal of invasive vegetation and overhanging tree branches along the 1.5 km terraced pilgrimage trail.

- 35 steps of secondary trail cleared of storm wash using soil knives, pick ax and broom.
- 100 ft of steep secondary trail clearing of overhanging branches and low vegetation to expose trail surface and steps and widen the sides.
- Strung wire across 2 rows of grape vines on one terrace – 8 poles in total
- Cleaned 55 steps between terraces.

Thank you!

We thank the travelers who participated in this Cinque Terre Volunteer Trip with us. We were a small group, but we managed to accomplish a lot and have plenty of fun and laughter along the way. Thank you for your commitment and dedication to our mission and we hope to see you again on another ConservationVIP® trip.

We would also like to thank Samuele (Heydi) Buonanini 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, Mohammed and Rodrigo, Heydi's workers, who guided us in the work of the vineyards.

Thank you to Barbara Olcese of Le Cesarine and her sous-chef husband Stefano Catani, for their impeccable hosting, educational demonstrations and culinary excellence – we ate so well that we could have rolled back to our hotel. The saying “will work for food” takes on a joyful context when we think on our time spent with you.

A sincere thank you to our host Giulia Bianchi from Cinque Terre National Park and trail crew members Davide and Emiliano 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 continue to expand upon in the future.

And finally, a big thank you to Mandala Tours for continuing to be a trusted ground operator with ConservationVIP® and for arranging for Tancredi Merlo to guide us again in this beautiful region of Italy. Tancredi managed the itinerary with excellence, provided delicious picnic lunches and led us on several hiking adventures which really allowed us to experience the region in depth. His natural curiosity and fondness of the region lends him the ability to curate memorable experiences for us to take back home with us.



Arrivederci!