



**FEBRUARY**

Planning spring break

**TODAY:** An East Texas road trip

**Feb 22:** Sarasota

**March:** Fabulous resorts

## Paddle your own *kayak*

Kayaking gives you the freedom to stop almost anywhere you like along the Italian coastline.

Paddle in for a picnic lunch on the pier of the Italian fishing village of Portofino.



Multiday trip offers adventure with a splash of the good life

Story and Photos by MARK SISSONS  
Special Contributor

**M**edieval monasteries. Charming cliff-top villages. Renaissance palaces. Terraced vineyards. Homestyle Italian cuisine. Perhaps not the first images that come to mind when you consider a sea kayaking expedition. Yet all that and more awaited me on an amazing paddling adventure last fall along the Italian Riviera, the spectacularly photogenic region nestled between the French Riviera, Monaco and Tuscany on the Ligurian coast.

See **KAYAKING** Page 6K



# Kayaking the Italian Riviera is magical

Continued from Page 1K

The trip — my first multi-day kayaking adventure — also included two days of hiking in Cinque Terre (Five Lands), which refers to the five villages of Riomaggiore, Manarola, Corniglia, Vernazza and Monterosso al Mar on the northwest coast of Italy.

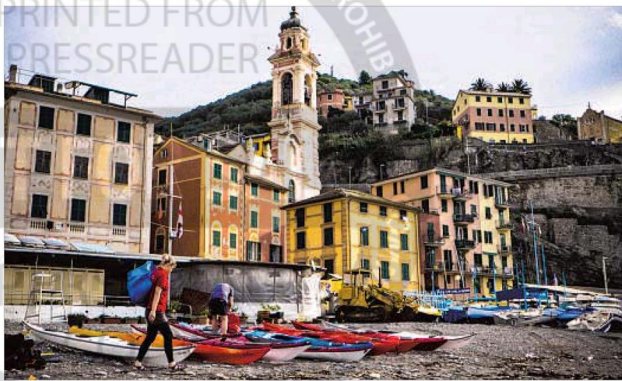
Only paths, trains and boats connect the villages; cars are restricted to the town outside. Although the collectively attract 850,000 tourists each year, these timeless enclaves remain largely unspoiled, continuing a lifestyle that goes back many generations.

The entire Cinque Terre coastline, its five villages and the surrounding hillsides make up part of the Cinque Terre National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Exploring this section of the Italian Riviera by kayak and on foot is an unusual way to experience the picturesque jumble of colorful fishing villages, vine-terraced cliffs and stunning sea vistas often not accessible by vehicle. Our leisurely, self-directed pace left sufficient time to truly appreciate the quiet time of year when the summer tourist hordes had mostly departed.

## Preparation pays off

Our group of 11 kayakers set off — or put in, in kayaking terminology — on a beach south of Genoa, famous as the birthplace of Christopher Columbus and regarded as a dominant sea power in its Renaissance heyday. Relatively rough seas meant launching into heavy surf, something I had never done before. With the encouragement of my companions, most of whom were seasoned ocean kayakers, I was able to avoid capsizing on my first plunge into the Ligurian Sea.

Prior to signing on for this adventure — the first paddling trip along the Italian Riviera offered by global sea kayaking



Kayakers prepare for another day of paddling on the Ligurian Sea with Southern Sea Ventures.

Photos by Mark Sissons/Special Contributor

outfitter Southern Sea Ventures — I had signed up for a two-day introduction to sea kayaking offered at home in Vancouver. It covered the basics, such as proper paddling strokes, stable upper body positioning, assisted- and self-rescue procedures and more — just enough to make me feel confident that if I did run into trouble on the high seas I wouldn't be completely lost.

This preparation turned out to be a wise decision, and I would recommend anyone contemplating a sea kayaking adventure to do likewise.

## Not just a vacation

Once everyone was safely afloat and stable in our kayaks on that first morning, we set off on a meandering journey along the Italian Riviera from the vantage point of the sea. Paddling an average of 10 miles per day, we took time out to explore this majestic coastline, stopping to enjoy leisurely picnic lunches of local focaccia. Each evening we stayed in

small family-run hotels or country villas, enjoying hearty dinners in local restaurants, sampling regional wines, reliving each day's aquatic adventures and soaking up the local flavor of rural Italian life.

"This isn't just a vacation. It's also an opportunity to challenge yourself and improve your kayaking technique," said our guide, Enrico Carrossino, as we came ashore on our first morning at the Abbey of San Prutusso, a medieval monastery, built by the Benedictines of Monte Cassino, that overlooks a tiny fishing village.

Enrico was right. Each day on the water I felt myself growing stronger and more confident. True, mastering the strokes and navigational techniques required to rise above the level of novice sea kayaker would take many more trips. But even during our roughest passage — a stomach-knotting paddle around Punta Mesco Cape from Levanto to the Cinque Terre village of Vernazza in 5-foot-high swells — the knowledge that if I capsized

help would rapidly arrive was immensely reassuring. We quickly fell out as a team, each member looking out for the others.

## Relaxed pace

A typical day on the water began with a hearty breakfast at our hotel and a route briefing. We then loaded our baggage into the support vans and headed down to whatever Cinque Terre village harbor we had stowed our kayaks at to launch them again into the lush Mediterranean waters. A couple of hours paddling before lunch and a couple in the afternoon were the norm — a relaxed pace that set aside plenty of time for enjoying the breathtaking coastal vistas, exploring the shorelines, enjoying that daily highlight, our picnic lunch, and savoring a beer or gelato as the sun began to dip toward the azure Mediterranean.

On days when rough seas precluded paddling, we hiked the Cinque Terre's famous network of trails, many of

which have been restored after devastating flooding that ravaged sections of this coastline in 2011. Long trails of steep steps snaked up mountainsides that rose almost vertically above each pastel-hued village toward lush olive groves and vineyards.

Hundreds of terraces run along the route, supported by 1250 miles of dry stone walls, built without cement by artisans over many centuries. This remarkable feat of stonework — longer than China's Great Wall — is why Cinque Terre was awarded UNESCO status in 1997.

## Magical setting

The hiking was a perfect complement to the paddling, offering us two dramatically different perspectives on these labyrinthine villages, with their sinuous cobblestone streets, crumbling castles and tiny harbors where flat-capped fishermen ply the waters much like they have since medieval times.

Rounding the cape on our

## When you go

**Getting there:** Regular flights from London, European capitals and Italian cities serve Genoa, a hub for trains serving the Italian Riviera.

**Recommended outfitters:** Southern Sea Ventures offers multiday sea kayaking adventures everywhere — from the Mediterranean, the South Pacific and Asia to the Arctic and Antarctica. This trip is intended for people with some previous paddling experience and an interest in hiking. For latest destinations and itineraries, visit [southernseaventures.com](http://southernseaventures.com). Red Savannah also offers this writer's private four-day extension, with stays at the Hotel Splendido in Portofino and at the Grand Hotel Tremezzo on the shores of Lake Como, along with cycling and hiking excursions. [redsavannah.com](http://redsavannah.com).

final day at sea, we could spot San Pietro Church, perched at the edge of the rocky promontory at the entrance to the harbor of Porto Venere. Over the past nine days our group had come together as a team, some of us, like me, pushing past our initial fears and seizing the challenge of sea kayaking for the first time in this most magical of settings.

I would return the next day on my own to push Portofino, which we had visited on our first afternoon, to spend the night at the fabulous Hotel Splendido, perched like a pink jewel above its glittering bay.

Then it was on to Lake Como for a couple of days of cycling in the verdant hills overlooking its gorgeous shores before reaching Milan and my homeward flight. I'm already contemplating where to paddle next, thrilled to have discovered a glorious new mode of travel on the paddle of a lifetime through the ancient waters of the Ligurian Sea.

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The Grand Hotel Tremezzo, an art nouveau palace, is one of the oldest and loveliest luxury hotels on Lake Como.



Anyone contemplating a multiday sea kayaking adventure should first be familiar with basic safety and rescue procedures.