

KAYAKING THE ITALIAN RIVIERA



MEDIEVAL MONASTERIES.
CHARMING CLIFFTOP VILLAGES.
RENAISSANCE PALACES.
TERRACED VINEYARDS.
HOMESTYLE ITALIAN CUISINE.
PERHAPS NOT THE FIRST
IMAGES THAT COME TO MIND
WHEN YOU CONSIDER A
SEA-KAYAKING EXPEDITION.

EDITORIAL AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MARK SISSONS**

Yet all that and more awaited me on an amazing paddling adventure along the Italian Riviera, the spectacularly photogenic region nestled along the Ligurian coast between the French Riviera, Monaco and Tuscany.

My first multi-day kayaking adventure also involved two days of hiking in Cinque Terre (Five Lands), which comprises the five villages of Riomaggiore, Manarola, Corniglia, Vernazza and Monterosso al Mar on the northwest coast of Italy. Paths, trains and boats connect the villages, however cars can only reach them once a week from the outside. And although they still collectively attract 850,000 tourists each year, these timeless enclaves remain largely unspoilt, enjoying 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 UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Exploring this section of the Italian Riviera by kayak and on foot is a unique way to experience the picturesque jumble of colourful fishing villages, vine-terraced cliffs and stunning sea vistas often not accessible by vehicle. And the leisurely, self-directed pace provides ample time to truly appreciate *la dolce vita* at a relatively quiet time of year when the summer tourist hordes have mostly departed.

PREPARATION PAYS OFF

Our group of 11 kayakers set off—or put in, in kayaking terminology—on a beach south of the city 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, some-

TOP: Travelling the Ligurian coast by kayak and foot is a fantastic way to explore this picturesque region.

OPPOSITE TOP: Paddling days were matched perfectly with winding walks through vineyards perched high above the sea cliffs.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Our nine-day sea kayaking and hiking adventure began in the historic seaport of Genoa, home of Christopher Columbus.

thing I had never done before. However, 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 paddling trip along the Italian Riviera offered by global sea-kayaking outfitter Southern Sea Ventures, I had signed up for a two-day introduction to sea-kayaking course offered by Ecomarine in Vancouver. It covered such basics as proper paddling strokes, stable upper body positioning, assisted and self-rescue procedures and more. It was enough to instill self-confidence so 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 one I would recommend to anyone contemplating a sea-kayaking adventure. As with any sport that involves some element of potential risk, the more knowledge you have on safety techniques, the safer everyone is on the water and the more enjoyable your experience will be.

NOT YOUR AVERAGE VACATION

Once everyone was safely afloat and stable in their kayaks on our first morning, we set off on a meandering journey along the Italian Riviera, taking it all in from the unique vantage point of the sea. Paddling an average of 15 kilometres per day, we took time to explore this majestic coastline, stopping to enjoy leisurely picnic lunches



of local focaccia. Each evening we rested in small family-run hotels or country villas, delighting in hearty dinners at local restaurants, sampling regional wines, reliving each day's aquatic adventures and soaking up the local flavour 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 wonderful guide, Enrico Carrossino, as we came ashore on our first morning at the Abbey of San Fruttuoso, a medieval monastery built by the Benedictines of Monte Cassino overlooking a tiny fishing village.

Enrico was right. Each day I grew stronger and more confident. True, mastering the strokes and required navigational tech-

niques to rise above the novice sea kayaker level would take many more trips. However, even during our roughest passage—a stomach-knotting paddle around Punta Mesco Cape from Levanto to the Cinque Terre village of Vernazza through one-and-a-half-metre swells—it was immensely reassuring to know help would arrive rapidly if I capsized. We quickly gelled as a team, each member looking out for the others.

RELAXED PACE

A typical day began with a hearty breakfast together at our hotel and a route briefing. We then loaded our luggage into support vans and headed down to the village harbour where our kayaks waited to be launched into the warm Mediterranean waters. A couple of paddling hours before lunch and another couple in the afternoon became the norm. This relaxed pace allowed plenty of time to admire the breathtaking coastal vistas, explore the shorelines, enjoy our daily picnic lunches, and savour a beer or gelato as the sun dipped into the azure Mediterranean Sea.

When rough seas precluded paddling we hiked the famous network of trails in Cinque Terre, many of which have been



THE ONLY
Super-Inclusive®
 RESORT IN THE BAHAMAS



BOOK BY NOV 30, 2015 AND
SAVE UP TO 30%



SuperClubs
Breezes®
 RESORT & SPA
 BAHAMAS

Visit breezes.com for information and reservations.
 Or contact your preferred travel professional.



Unlike most travellers, kayakers have the added pleasure of viewing the Cinque Terre villages from the sea.

restored after devastating floods ravaged much of this coastline in 2011. Long trails of steep steps snaked up mountainsides that rose almost vertically above pastel-hued villages toward lush olive groves and vineyards. Hundreds of terraces run along the route, supported by 2,012 kilometres of dry stone walls built without cement by artisans over many centuries. This remarkable feat of stonework measures longer than China's Great Wall.

MAGICAL SETTING

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

Rounding the cape on our final day at sea, we spotted San Pietro Church perched at the edge of the rocky promontory at the entrance to the harbour of Porto Venere. Over nine days our group had come together as a team, some of us 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 posh Portofino to spend the night at the fabulous Hotel Splendido, thrilled to have discovered a glorious new mode of travel through the ancient waters of the Ligurian Sea. **DS**

TRAVEL PLANNER

Regular flights from London, European capitals and Italian cities service Genoa, a hub for trains serving the Italian Riviera. Southern Sea Ventures offers multi-day sea-kayaking adventures in the Mediterranean, the South Pacific, Asia, the Caribbean and the Arctic. This trip is designed for people with some previous paddling experience and an interest in walking. For destinations and itineraries, visit southernseaventures.com.