

Jane Flanagan's story of how she challenged cancer through adventure

A bit about myself...

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in May 2009 at the age of 56 following a routine mammogram. After a lumpectomy and then a mastectomy with lymph node removal, I underwent chemotherapy and radiotherapy, finishing these treatments in February 2010. Now I am taking Arimidex, participating in a two-year clinical trial run by Imperial College, and feeling fine.



Jane Flanagan

I live in the Derbyshire Dales with my husband, Gerard, and 18-year-old twin sons.

My introduction to **Challenge Cancer through Adventure**

One positive aspect of my breast cancer diagnosis was getting to know other women in the same boat and hearing their stories.

One of the women I met was Emma, a keen cyclist who lives just a few minutes walk from my house but whom I got to know only because we had cancer in common. We shared a great deal during the hard months of treatment and became friends. One day, in the car on our way to a radiotherapy session, Emma mentioned a local charity called Challenge Cancer through Adventure and gave me a leaflet. The pictures of people cycling, canoeing, parachuting etc. stirred a desire in me to have a go at something physical too. After seven months of cancer treatment I really was ready for a different type of challenge.

Deciding on my challenge

How could I challenge cancer through adventure?

I am not a sporty person, but, like many people, have good intentions about getting fit which never quite translate into action. Living in the Peak District, I have always enjoyed walking, but gentle rambles along river valleys are more my style than assaults on peaks.

Getting diagnosed with cancer accelerated my desire to do all the things I had been putting off until tomorrow. I don't believe this is an unusual response to what at first can appear to be a devastating diagnosis. This feeling of needing to get moving with life helped me formulate an idea for the challenge which I would set myself and present to Challenge Cancer.

I wanted to get fit. I wanted to be in the open air. I wanted to walk. I wanted a break from all the daily routines and demands of normal family life. I wanted to revisit Italy, a country where I had lived for several years in the 1980s as a foreign correspondent for Reuters and grown to love.

A walking adventure in Italy clearly was on the agenda. But where in Italy and what exactly would be the nature of the challenge I was setting myself?

Decision made—hill-walking in the Cinque Terre!

After poring over maps of Italy and spending many hours researching online, I decided (much to the amazement of my husband, Gerard), to challenge myself through hill-walking. After years of trying to encourage me up steep slopes, Gerard couldn't quite believe I was serious! He was equally astonished when I said I hoped he would be able to accompany me. I put my idea to **Challenge Cancer through Adventure**, and was encouraged to send in an outline of my proposed trip. Challenge Cancer liked the idea, so my adventure was set to begin...

The Cinque Terre

The area of Italy I had chosen for my hill-walking challenge seemed perfect – the Cinque Terre (Five Lands), a stunning, verdant, steep coastal national park in north-west Italy. The area forms part of the so-called Italian Riviera. It is so special and so beautiful is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Cinque Terre comprises five villages: Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore. All five are linked by pathways and it would be my challenge to walk, over the course of five days, from village to village. The coastal paths linking the five villages are each only a few kilometres long, but they are exceedingly steep, rough and rocky in many parts. Together they make up the trail known as “Sentiero 2”.

The Cinque Terre also appealed because, as well as the paths linking the villages, there is a coastal railway which stops at all five places and would provide me with a back-up form of transport if I got too tired. At some points this one-track railway appears to almost touch the sea, it is so close, before disappearing into one of many long mountain tunnels. There are also boats connecting four of the five villages – the odd one out being Corniglia, which is perched too high above the sea to have a boat service.



View towards Corniglia

The weather is subject to the usual coastal variables, and the paths can be very tricky in wet weather because of the danger of rock falls and landslides. However, we hoped that in the first week of September, our chosen period for the walk, the weather would be reasonable, if perhaps a little hot.

We spent several months planning the trip. We looked at maps, read travellers' blogs and searched for accommodation. Finally, having booked a small apartment in Manarola and sketched out a rough idea of how we might spend each day, we were ready.



View from trail in the Cinque Terre

Off we go! Tuesday 31st August 2010

Suitcases stuffed with hiking boots, collapsible walking poles, blister packs, sun lotion and an Italian dictionary, we left home early in the morning of 31st August 2010 to arrive at Manchester airport for our early morning flight to Milan. The flight went smoothly and before we knew it we were boarding a train in Milan bound for the Cinque Terre. It was around 8pm when we arrived at our destination, the picturesque village of Manarola and were shown into our small, perfectly-equipped apartment by its owner, Maurizio. From the west-facing balcony we watched the sun sink in spectacular shades of pink over the just-discernible south coast of France while Maurizio spread out a trail map and made recommendations about walks we could do in the area.

That evening we ate at “Billy’s Trattoria” just a few paces away from our apartment. The food – comprising various local fish and seafood delicacies – was exquisite. We returned to the apartment satiated but exhausted and were asleep well before midnight. We needed a good night’s sleep to prepare us for phase one of our challenge the following day.



Sunset from the terrace of our apartment

Wednesday 1st September 2010—Manarola

As a warm-up exercise and as a way of getting our bearings, we took a short pre-breakfast walk skirting the edge of Manarola – the so-called “Vineyard Walk”. This path meandered through a fertile terraced hillside and gave us wonderful views of both the village and the sea. The terraces themselves were sheer artistry – each one laboriously cut into the hillside and supported by a dry stone wall. Everywhere we looked there were bunches of luscious grapes, ripe tomatoes, peaches and lemons. The scent of lemon and wild thyme filled the air.

Across a ravine dividing Manarola into two, we got a superb view of our apartment. Down the middle of the ravine, way below us was Manarola’s main street, underneath which runs a river. Later, our landlord’s mother, who liked to chat to us from her balcony above our apartment, told us she remembered the day the river was concreted over. Apparently all the inhabitants of the village were delighted as finally they could use motor vehicles instead of mules! The ground floors of the houses along the main street still open directly onto the river, and the inhabitants have to climb steps to reach road level.



The Vineyard Walk



View over the Manarola ravine towards our apartment, taken along the Vineyard Walk

And on to the next village—Corniglia



View from the staircase at Corniglia, looking along railway line towards Manarola

During the Vineyard Walk we had spotted another village further up the coast, perched on a hill high above the sea – this was Corniglia, our planned destination that day. Corniglia, being so far above sea level, does not have a harbour or boat service like the other four Cinque Terre villages.

The track we took hugged the coastline and, though exposed to the elements in many parts, also took us through leafy green bowers which hummed to the sound of crickets and gave welcome relief from the hot sun. The temperature was rising and the sky cloudless, but luckily we had hats for our heads and fresh water to quench our thirst. We picked and ate some blackberries, which tasted delicious.

The walking poles came in handy as the track was very steep and rocky. Foolishly, perhaps, I had left my hiking boots back at the apartment, as a heel callus and a blackened big toe nail (the latter a side effect of chemotherapy) were giving me trouble, and my cushioned open-toed sandals were the only footwear I could tolerate. Needless to say that when I arrived in Corniglia, my feet were black with dust!

The track took us to a spot way below the actual village of Corniglia, but the locals, ingeniously, have built a staircase (382 steps) from the track up to the village.



On my way up the staircase at Corniglia

Corniglia, like Manarola, is very picturesque, full of narrow little streets (vicoli), all on different levels and interlinked by ancient stone stairwells wedged in between the buildings. The village is brimming with small “artigiani” shops selling anything from local cheeses to swimming costumes. We bought some bread, olives, ham and cheese for an impromptu picnic lunch which we ate in a shady corner of the main piazza.

Invigorated by having completed the first part of the challenge, I felt I could continue further. After some discussion, we decided to carry on immediately to the next village – Vernazza. The decision was helped by the fact that we knew that we would not have to return on foot to Manarola but could catch a train. We had already bought a weekly Cinque Terre travel card allowing us to jump on any train (or local bus) in the area.



I made it! 382 steps!

The path between Corniglia and Vernazza



Huge boulders provide evidence of previous heavy rockfalls

The views looking back on Corniglia were fantastic. Sea and sky were turquoise, the sun was beating down. We were thankful for the pockets of shade we came across (as were the various friendly cats we met on route!).

There were some tricky parts to this path, which was very steep. In the photograph to the left, the structure on my right is a wall built of loose rocks and contained in steel mesh to give protection against landslides.

Vernazza is another very picturesque village, busier than both Manarola and Corniglia, with more shops and a small beach. The village is the only one in the Cinque Terre with a natural harbour. In stormier weather, waves crash over the breakwater onto the waterfront piazza.



Taking a break with a feline friend!



Looking back towards Corniglia



Approaching Vernazza

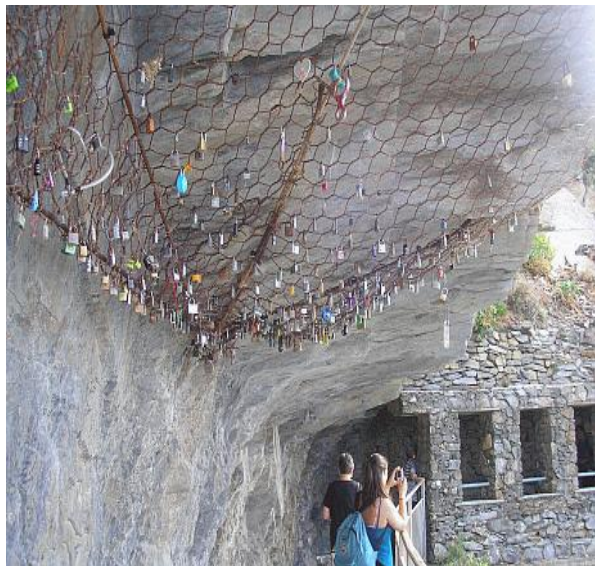
When we arrived in Vernazza, the sea was calm and gently lapping. It was hard to imagine how the scene might look on a rough winter's day. Many of the rooftops, here and in Manarola, had rocks placed on top of them to prevent tiles from lifting off during stormy weather, but today there was not even the whisper of a breeze.

Later, thoroughly exhausted but very pleased with the day's achievements, we took the train back to Manarola. Watching the sun set from our terrace that evening, we heard a voice from above—Maurizio's mamma—shouting down "Un po' di relax?" Yes, that's right, we were relaxing a little after our very successful but tiring first day of hiking in the Cinque Terre!



Sea view towards Vernazza

Via dell'Amore—Manarola to Riomaggiore—Thursday 2nd September 2010



Just a few of the thousands of padlocks along the path

After the previous day's exertions, I was feeling quite tired so we decided to take it easier with a more straightforward walk—the so-called Via dell'Amore (Path of Love) between Manarola and the most southerly of the five Cinque Terre villages, Riomaggiore. The path proved to be very different from those rugged ones we had negotiated so far—though high above the sea, it was flat, paved and teeming with tourists. We learned that tourists arrive at Riomaggiore by the coach load in order to do this walk, which, as is evident in its name, has romantic connotations.

The path has its origins in the building of the Genoa-La Spezia railway line in the early 20th Century, when a tunnel needed to be built between Riomaggiore and Manarola, requiring incredible engineering skills and the construction of two paths, one from each of the two villages. Once the tunnel was complete, local inhabitants modified the two paths to make them more accessible and to link Manarola and Riomaggiore. The rocky terrain made the project an arduous one, but the end result was welcomed. Until this point in time, these two remote villages had no direct link between them. The new path opened up new romantic possibilities for the young people of the two villages, who, according to local folklore, used the path to meet up for romantic trysts — hence its name.

Today couples leave personalised padlocks hanging along the path to symbolise their love for each other. There are thousands of these padlocks!



Beyond Riomaggiore—a collapsed barrier can be seen

The Via dell'Amore, subject to erosion from the sea and landslides from above, was closed at the end of the 1980s, but reopened in 1995 after renovation work financed by the European Union.

In the picture on the left you can just make out a collapsed barrier along a section of a path leading south from Riomaggiore. This path is currently closed so we were unable to explore further in that direction.



Prisoner of love!



View towards Riomaggiore from Via dell'Amore



Riomaggiore—looking up main street, where the boats are parked!

Riomaggiore

Riomaggiore climbs so steeply from its tiny harbour to its hill-top castle that the locals have installed lifts up through the mountain! Luckily, temptation to take the easy route was removed as neither of the lifts we came across were in operation! One was closed for repairs, the other seemingly not yet completed. The town is a charming muddle of pastel-coloured houses.



Lift through the mountain

As in other Cinque Terre villages, the main street runs directly over a rushing river—which can be both heard and, though metal gratings, seen below the tarmac. The name “Riomaggiore” actually means “major river. In the small museum in Riomaggiore there are old photographs showing Manarola before the road was built, with a series of small bridges arched over the river to enable villagers to cross from one side of the gorge to the other. Even today, motor traffic is limited to small delivery vehicles and buses—local residents park their cars outside the village centres, along the exit roads into the mountains.

In the Riomaggiore museum we also absorbed a lot of information about the turbulent history of the Cinque Terre, particularly the region’s vulnerability to Arab (Saracen) pirates attacking from the colonised south coast of France. The area suffered raid after raid. The tenacity and industriousness of the local people was also much in evidence in the museum, where we learned how over a period of 1,000 years terraces, each retained by a dry stone wall to prevent land slippage, were dug out of the hillsides so that crops such as vines and olives could be grown. The region, despite its geographical challenges remains heavily dependent on agriculture but much of the work has to be done by hand. The terrain is not suitable for much modern machinery.



Steps everywhere!

Monterosso to Vernazza—Friday 3rd September 2010



Yet more steps!

We were up by 7am in time to catch an early train to Monterosso, the most northerly of the five Cinque Terre villages. Today we were going to tackle the final—and toughest—leg of the coastal path, the section between Monterosso and Vernazza.

Monterosso is the busiest of the five villages, possibly because it has two small beaches. It felt less quaint than the other four villages, but was clearly a popular haunt for the younger generation.

Our walk started unpromisingly up an overgrown path signposted “Vernazza”. The path climbed steeply and we forced our way through long grasses and brambles to emerge eventually onto a clearer trail.

The walk was characterised by flight after flight of dauntingly steep stone staircases built into the mountainside. We would arrive victorious at the top of one flight, only to turn a corner and find yet another one ahead of us! Who built all these steps, I wondered? Quite an extraordinary feat.

The views on this walk—both of the sea and of Vernazza—were stupendous. The hillsides were verdant and there were many shady spots, some with fresh streams, where we found respite from the increasingly fiery sun. Scents of lemons and thyme surrounded us, and occasionally we could hear the whirr of machinery unseen among the vines. We came across a small vehicle attached to a monorail which dipped precariously around the hillside and was clearly used to transport olives and other fruit.

The descent into Vernazza—down yet more stone stairs—was very steep indeed.

This was the most difficult walk we had done so far, but perhaps the most rewarding. Tired but satisfied, we returned to Manarola by train.



A shady spot



Monorail with small train transport crops



Vernazza in the distance



View over Vernazza, approached from the north

A Day in Monterosso—Saturday 4th September



Piazza in Monterosso

The plan today was to return to Monterosso by train and explore the town further, rather than embark on another long walk. The exercise of the past few days was taking its toll, and I was feeling somewhat exhausted, not helped by continuing problems with my right foot. The callus on my heel and my blackened big toe nail were causing me to limp slightly, especially on hard or rocky surfaces.

It proved to be the right day to spend in Monterosso. To our delight, we discovered a local festival celebrating the anchovy, a mainstay of the local cuisine. There were tables set out under the railway viaduct and local families were tucking in to a feast of seafood and wonderful pies and pastries. It was all remarkably good value, so we sat down and had our lunch here.



Festival of the Anchovies—locals tucking in.



View from Monterosso



Cooking the seafood in an anchovy-shaped deep-fryer positioned under the railway viaduct

Colle del Telegrafo to Riomaggiore—Sunday 5th September—an additional challenge!



The Sanctuary Path

Having now completed the challenge I had set for myself—to walk the trails which make up the coastal path Sentiero Due, I wanted to stretch myself a little further. Today's plan was to walk from Manarola to Riomaggiore, catch the local bus up to the heady heights of Colle del Telegrafo in the mountainous hinterland immediately east of Riomaggiore and then hike back down to the coast. In length and steepness, this walk promised to be one of the most challenging yet. It was also one recommended by our landlord, Maurizio, for its views and its romantic nature! The bus ride from Riomaggiore to the Colle del Telegrafo took us up a winding mountain road with precipitous drops and fantastic views. Everywhere was green and fertile and, always visible in the distance, was the tranquil, turquoise Ligurian Sea.

The walk down was steep, the path rough and rocky. In parts the edges of the path had eroded, and at one point the ground gave way underfoot and I fell into a hollow. Although shocked, I suffered only a grazed knee. Along this path we heard birdsong—something rare here as in many parts of Italy, as bird-shooting to supply fare for the dinner table has been a popular sport. We met few people on this walk and for most of the time it felt like we had the place to ourselves. The views

were spectacular. About half way down the mountainside the path took us into the grounds of the Montenegro sanctuary, beautifully positioned high above Riomaggiore with sweeping views along the coast. Having rested here for a while, we continued on, down the Sanctuary Path. Again, stone steps were in abundance! We reached Riomaggiore later than envisaged and made the train back to Manarola with only seconds to spare.

Post-script

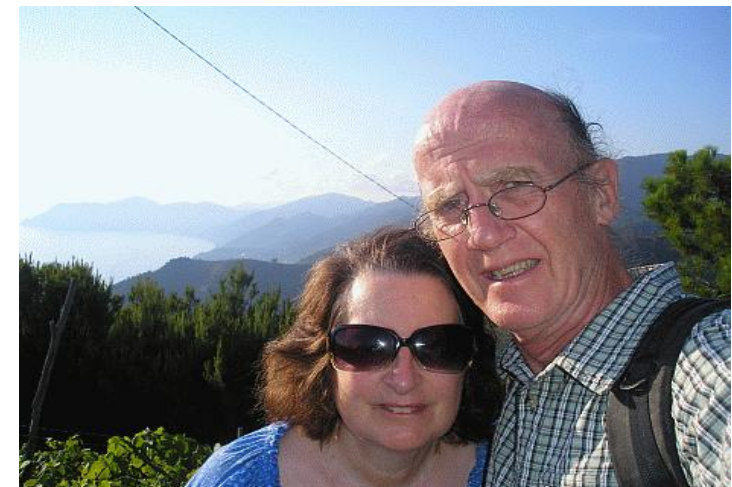
This last walk, and the ones before it, whetted our appetite to return to do more walking at some point in the future. The Cinque Terre national park is a web of trails, long and short, some more well trodden than others. It's hard to imagine ever exhausting all of the possibilities!

I'd like to say a big thank you to **Challenge Cancer Through Adventure** for supporting me in this challenge and opening up the door to new ones.

I have continued walking since my return home. Recently, Gerry and I, together with our two sons, completed a sponsored walk in the grounds of the Chatsworth Estate (lots of stone steps here too!) and raised more than £600 for breast cancer research.



That's our destination—Riomaggiore—below



On top of the world!