

Save Vernazza, voluntourism and love for the territory

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Together we can make a difference is the motto of Save Vernazza, a non-profit association founded with the aim to rebuild, restore and preserve Vernazza after the tragic flood that hit the Cinque Terre on 25 October 2011. There were thirteen victims, of whom three in Vernazza. Save Vernazza Onlus is among the stakeholders who actively support Stonewallsforlife.

by Ludovica Schiaroli

«Vernazza was literally buried. In those days, there was a feeling of helplessness caused by this event that felt like something out of a science fiction film. We felt compelled to do something for this place that is unique, magical and with which we are madly in love». Ruth Manfredi, together with Michelle Lilley and Michelle Sherman, founded the non-profit organization Save Vernazza in 2011 and, over the past ten years, Save Vernazza has raised over 250 thousand euros in donations towards projects to help rebuild the village and restore its beautiful, fragile territory.

Appealing to Americans

«We wanted to find a way to convey the enormous need for help that those who lived here needed in those days», says Ruth, «and so we thought that there was nothing more natural than for three American women to ask their fellow Americans for assistance».

Save Vernazza's appeals were successfully answered, thanks to the support of the American media, New York Times, CBS and, above all, Rick Steves, a real influencer in terms of tourism and a strong supporter who widely shared Save Vernazza's story and call for help.

Raising awareness about the territory's fragility

«Among the objectives we set for ourselves from the beginning – continues Ruth – was to make it clear that, beyond the great beauty of this land, it takes enormous effort to cultivate

the land, with the necessity to build the dry stone walls and maintain them. The Cinque Terre is a UNESCO World Heritage site because those who live and work here do so in symbiosis with the territory».

Save Vernazza immediately found strong support from Vernazza's residents and town administrators and this meant that many projects could be realized thanks to the funds raised.

Combining volunteer work and tourism

The non-profit Save Vernazza has implemented many projects since 2011, including the reconstruction of Piazza Marconi, thanks to help from the architect Richard Rogers and the Carispezia Foundation, the restoration of the chapel of Santa Marta, rebuilding one bridge in Fontanavecchia and the reconstruction of many stone walls on the hillsides above the town.

The longest lasting project is the **“Turisti nei Cian” voluntourism project**, which from 2013 to 2018 brought 1090 tourists from all over the world to work with local farmers in 135 excursions. Ruth calls it “voluntourism” and today could be called “experiential tourism”. **The tourist spends a morning doing activities with a farmer such as working in the vineyards or fixing a dry stone wall...and then everyone has lunch together in the cian**, which in the local dialect are the strips of arable land supported by dry stone walls for which the Cinque Terre are famous.

«What we have always ensured is contact with the local person, with the aim of facilitating cultural exchanges, and making the everyday life of those who live here better understood, to make the tourist aware that the Cinque Terre are not just a beautiful postcard». Due to the emergency due to Covid19, the project has stopped and Ruth still does not know when new excursions can be rescheduled.

Stonewallsforlife a project for the future of the Cinque Terre

«We decided to be an active part of the project because Stonewallsforlife has the same objectives as our association and because it helps communicate the importance of our territory».

Ruth Manfredi is convinced of the need to make the project known to as many people as possible, above all she believes it is essential to involve tourists and take them to visit the places where the project develops.

«It would be a way to make them live an experience and at the same time understand the importance of having a well-maintained territory. But there are many types of tourists, the one who likes to walk and the one who perhaps prefers to read and get information traditionally, so I would like every information point to also have material that would tell the story of a project like this».

After Manarola, Vernazza

Ruth's dream is to see the works start also in Vernazza. The difficulties are many. «The first to be addressed is the fragmentation of the territory – she admits – for this reason we

should start from what has been learned by the Manarola Foundation, which with their work have made Stonewallsforlife possible».

In Vernazza there are many who are watching with interest what is happening in Manarola. The urgent need to find a way to mitigate the threats from increasingly intense atmospheric events due to climate change could play in favor of the community of Vernazza.

