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A Cinque Terre adventure

By: Jaime Ferris

As the mercury hovers in the lower digits, hiking the trails of the Connecticut countryside is a distant goal for most people. Such excursions are always on the mind of adventure traveler, tour leader and photographer Deborah Lewis, however. The founder of Bredeson Outdoor Adventures, she has 30 years experience in planning and leading treks throughout Europe and the United States, traversing the world's most beautiful mountain ranges and historical sites, from the Alps to the Spanish Pyrenees.

The Connecticut-based tour leader will boost hikers and non-hikers alike out of the winter doldrums when she presents "Hiking Between Sea and Sky in Cinque Terre, Italy," an audio-visual presentation about her adventures during a recent trek to Cinque Terre, Italy, highlighting the region's spectacular vistas, its colorful culture and its remarkable history. The program, sponsored by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), of which Ms. Lewis is a 25-year member, will be held Feb. 12 at 7:30 p.m. at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Bethel. The evening will begin at 6:30 p.m. with wine, cheese, appetizers coffee and dessert, and is open to the public.

"[Cinque Terre] is one of the Mediterranean's most beautiful coastlines with sheer cliffs, spectacular historical villages clinging to the rocky coasts, miles of ancient walls and beautiful terraced vineyards. Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore are the pastel towns that make up Cinque Terre, or five lands," AMC literature states. "They are vintage settlements, where life moves slowly, each clinging to the rocky coast, defying gravity and time. All the villages share unique characteristics; all are set on a beautiful coast hidden away in small, natural coastal inlets, built into the rocks and suspended above the sea between the beach and the hills."

According to AMC member Tom Carruthers, who runs many of the Fairfield County chapter's events, Ms. Lewis' presentation "... will describe hiking along ancient pathways, including the spectacular Blue Path, exploring ancient villages while enjoying unique coastal scenery."

"It should be a great program and a wonderful evening," Mr. Carruthers said, noting that the AMC is the oldest environmental and conservation club in the county. "The AMC is not just about hiking, but cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, climbing, and so much more. The Fairfield County chapter branches out by holding other events, such as small dinners and talks like Deborah's throughout the year. It's a great way to reach out to the community."

Ms. Lewis will take attendees to the Bethel talk with her to Cinque Terre, which, she said, maintains the charm and character of Italian villages of the past.

Leading and guiding hikes was once a part-time endeavor for Ms. Lewis, who said she could always be found out in the woods hiking and climbing trees during her youth. Yet, she said it was while living in Germany and Switzerland for five years while in her 20s, that she truly fell in love with hiking and the outdoors.

"I've always loved the outdoors ... but when I lived in southern Germany and Switzerland when I was in my early 20s, I was living very close to the Alps," she recalled. "Germans are great walkers-it's ingrained in the culture-and the friends I made while I was there were avid hikers and skiers, so I had the great fortune of spending much of my time in the mountains.

"I had always wanted to start my own business, guiding and leading hikes," she continued. "When I moved back to the states, I started leading hikes, and then I became a guide."

Over the past 30 years, she broadened her experience, earning a master's degree in physical and health education, becoming fluent in German and French-she's currently learning Spanish and Italian-and planning and leading hikes. Her knowledge about planning and leading expeditions includes backpacking, skiing, bicycling and sea kayaking. In her spare time, she has worked as a trail construction volunteer for the Connecticut Forest and Parks Association. Ms. Lewis then founded the tour company, Bredeson Outdoor Adventures, for which she is a professional guide and which led to her nomination as one of REI's "Top Guides."

Destinations planned for the coming year include snowshoeing and cross-country skiing in Vermont and Connecticut, and treks through the Alps in Switzerland, the French and Spanish Pyrenees, England's lake district, a "Tour du Mont Blanc" in France, Italy and Switzerland, a June trip to Austria and Bavaria, and yet another trip to Cinque Terre this May.

"A hiking trip in Italy is a wonderful combination of living the 'la dolce vida,' with great food, history and a beautiful countryside," Ms. Lewis said from her Norwalk home. "Cinque Terre itself is a stunning combination of interesting history, beautiful trails and wonderful people. The trip I will be discussing was taken this past October, and I plan on talking about the culture of the region and weave in some history of the area that is particularly fascinating. I cannot tell you how it feels when you stop and think about the people who lived there and walked on the very trails you are on 200 or 300 years ago."

According to Ms. Lewis' Web site, the Cinque Terre region in Italy "consists of 18 kilometers of sheer rocky coastline with terraced hills and vineyards sloping steeply down to the sea. Since 1926, the Cinque Terre towns have been part of the province of La Spezia. Just south of Portofino on the eastern coast of Liguria, the Riviera di Levante, five towns on the Ligurian Sea, maintain the charm and character of Italian villages of the past."

The five towns of Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore, she said, make up Cinque Terre, also known

as five lands, and they maintain their stature as traditional settlements where life moves at a slower pace. Each of these villages, she says, is "... clinging to the rocky coast, defying gravity and time," as each is "... set on a beautiful coast hidden away in small, natural coastal inlets, built into the rocks and suspended above the sea between the beach and the hills." "It's such a beautiful area, and when I was there in October, we were blessed with extraordinary weather," she recalled. "It was beautiful every day-sunny and just gorgeous, perfect weather for frolicking on the beach. We couldn't have asked for better weather."

What is perhaps most interesting about the region, however, is its preserved culture, according to Ms. Lewis, who said Cinque Terre is one of the best preserved natural and semi-natural areas of the Mediterranean, which is due to its history and topography.

"It's only recently that there are roadways for travel, which are still not the greatest for driving; only within the last 30 or 40 years. Prior to that, you got from one point to another by train or by boat, so the area is relatively isolated," she said. The region, connected by a network of ancient footpaths, is also limited in housing development. This isolation, she said, has allowed "... the villages [to remain] virtually unchanged for centuries, and upon viewing them from the sea in the ferry, one can appreciate their ruggedness."

"Cinque Terre means five lands, or five villages, and you're hiking on ancient trails to get from one place to another; otherwise, you're locked away from society," she said, noting that there are continuous efforts to preserve the region. It is a UNESCO world heritage site that has been UNESCO-protected since 1997 as an area of environmental interest. It was dubbed a national park in 1999. "It is often compared to the Great Wall of China. There are thousands of miles of stone walls to help build up the land, particularly for farming," she said.

"It is a very popular location for tourists, but the villages themselves have been passed over by time and you catch glimpses of the rhythms of daily life," she continued. "If you look beyond the tourism, you can see everyday life and culture."

Preparing for one of these trips requires more than daily power walking, however.

"It's hard to prepare for altitude. Someone having a problem adjusting [to the change in altitude] is hard to predict. When you plan a trip [like this], you really need to be in shape-that's the best advantage you can give yourself," Ms. Lewis said. "The idea of walking or hiking vacations is catching on and people say, 'Oh! I walk four miles a day. I'm in great shape!' If you haven't been hiking through the woods or on varied terrain, you'll be surprised how quickly you will tire. ... And the hardest areas [for people] aren't going uphill, but downhill if you're not in shape-it's really rough on the knees."

In Cinque Terre, for example, she said the terrain is not up and down as it is in the Alps, "but the trails can be quite rough at times. The trails are naturally rocky and aren't well maintained-especially when you get out of the national park," she said.

"There are also some pretty dramatic drop-offs. ... The only way to prepare for a trip like this is to hike or to take small treks on trails in varied terrain."

Ms. Lewis said she does not have a favorite destination, as each has its own charm and allure, but the Alps, where she lived for five years, are close to her heart, as is the historic, cultural and scenic beauty of Cinque Terre.

"What's so beautiful about Cinque Terre is there are very few condo complexes, and few atrocious hotels or resorts," she said.

"It provides a nice balance between the old and the new. It's a chance to enjoy the beauty and culture of Italy, the adventure of hiking, and a chance to kick back and relax."

"Hiking Between Sea and Sky in Cinque Terre, Italy," presented by adventure traveler and photographer Deborah Lewis, will be held Feb. 12 at 7:30 p.m. at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, located at 95 Greenwood Ave. in Bethel. The program, hosted by the Appalachian Mountain Club, will begin with appetizers and coffee at 6:30 p.m., and is open to members and non-members. The non-member fee is \$6; the members' fee is \$5. For details, visit the organization's Web site at www.ct-amc.org.



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