



Cheap wine and sunshine

Daily gelato, huge plates of pasta, dips in the sea and wine-fuelled heart-to hearts, a first holiday with a best friend creates memories that bond you for life

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Before my best friend Maddi and I had set off on our two-week Italian adventure, we'd set a rule that every meal, including breakfast, must be finished with gelato - to make every day feel like our birthdays.

At the time, I was writing my dissertation, utterly uninspired by life; Maddi, an actress, was just finishing a run on the West End - we were both so unsure of everything. All that we knew is that we both needed to get out of London for a bit. And it was Cinque Terre's five little towns scattered on the Ligurian coast that were the thing of dreams for us.

We'd booked a bedroom that looked okay enough on the internet, it was cheap, and well it was cheap, and that was our priority. What we didn't factor in was where it was - precariously balanced on the side of a cliff face, which meant a steep hike up. The view - the stuff of poems and sonnets - and the room that awaited us was worth every 'please Maddi I can't do this, leave me here to die' comment I cried out.

Our days for the next week had a real schedule: swim, breakfast, gelato, read, swim, lunch, gelato, read, swim, snack, swim, spritz, dinner, gelato, sleep and repeat. We'd wake up and stumble down the thousand steps on the cliff face to the shore to swim, then to the bakery for coffee and a pastry, then an obligatory gelato (we favoured fruit flavours in the morning), before packing a bag and jumping on the train to the next town in

Cinque Terre to explore. We followed that order each day, first getting the train to Manarola, where we found our favourite swimming spot. While I curled up on a hot rock that fitted the curve of my back, Maddi climbed the high rocks and jumped off with Italian teenage boys cheering her on. When we felt hungry we'd throw on something over our swimsuits and choose a trattoria to lunch in. Always a huge plate of pasta and always accompanied by a very cold bottle of cheap white wine. In between meals we'd snack on paper cones of fried seafood. Our fingers would get greasy with oil and lemon until we jumped back in the ocean to wash it all off and start again.

To end our days, Maddi would braid my hair before we went to sleep (long and brown, back then) and we would talk about how we'd like to live our lives. We were just twenty then. But we felt so much older, spending our own money, planning our own days and not having to check in with anyone else but each other. It was the trip I think we really fell in love as friends. I realised that this is a person I can never live without. Travelling with someone lets you really see them, and all the rhythms of who they are.

We'd left London stressed and unsure but in the warm light of those Italian afternoons, all we could imagine of our future lives was perfection. We really had no idea what was to come and the things we'd both go through together and apart.

At twenty, I don't think we grasped what it meant to grow up. The ways in which you have to actually work and fight to keep the good people in your life around. Looking at these photos now, I wish I could whisper some wisdom into our ears to help protect us from the heartbreaks, hardships and generally difficult days yet to come. We've both lost loved ones, lost love, lost jobs, homes and countries, but we've been there together by every means of communication. But this trip was before it all, just at the start of our friendship, a little bit of blissful naivety. We were giddy with the excitement of getting to start every day just how we wanted.

It's the same feeling we both still have even now on the days when we eat ice cream, kiss the men we love and giggle down the phone to each other. It's about trusting that despite hard days, good things aren't far away. Now that Maddi lives in Brooklyn and I'm in London when we chat and are in need of a bit of cheering up - we think of our Italian adventure and our final day, deep in conversation accompanied by negronis and pesto made from basil and thick olive oil, sitting on our balcony. It really was as perfect as it seems. Now, whenever I need a comforting thought, I'll always have the pasta, the sea and Maddi with me. ♦

You can read more about Bre's Italian adventure on our blog, ohcomely.co.uk/stories/italy