

Last weekend, I found myself in Ticino, an Italian-speaking region believed to be the Mediterranean soul of Switzerland, to dabble in a pretty dangerous but exhilarating sport called canyoning. With palm-fringed lakes and soaring alpine peaks, the stunning Ticino is home to more than 100 canyoning routes and is a well-known destination for European and international adrenaline junkies. Some compare it to white water rafting without the boat, or an extravagant hybrid of scrambling, abseiling, cliff jumping and swimming. Whatever you want to call it, canyoning is in a realm of its own and offers a unique way to exert yourself mentally and physically, while discovering the intense beauty of untouched nature.

On Saturday morning, we met our guide Clement outside of a restaurant called Grotto Al Bivio in Corippo, a municipality in the Verzasca Valley. Clement was tall and slender, with dark, wispy hair and an angular face. When we met, he leaned in for the French cheek kiss, and I stuck out my right hand for a handshake; we laughed nervously at the familiar clash of cultural norms. His smile reached the tips of his earlobes. I told him it looked like a banana. Clement has been a canyoning guide for over fifteen years and has known and guided over a dozen trips for friends of mine over the last five years. I knew I was in good hands.

After a brief introduction and overview, Clement handed each of us a tote bag with all of the required gear. We each had a helmet, a harness, canyoning shoes, and a neoprene wetsuit, which not only kept us warm but acted as a buoyancy aid as well. I was still yawning from the fragmented sleep I got the night before at our Tamaro campsite, but as soon as I wriggled into my wetsuit and secured my harness and helmet, I was ready to go.

We had a twenty-minute trek to reach the canyon entrance, which required walking through the village of Corippo, nestled into the face of a mountain. Corippo is a heap village, known for its irregular grounds and unplanned foundation. Most, if not all, of the buildings, have significantly aged and are made

of stone. Displays of fresco paintings near the cemetery and church steeple are chipped and faded. As of 2016, the village population is only fourteen, and it sits pretty at 563 meters above sea level.

I went to Ticino with six others, and we broke up into two separate canyoning groups. My group that morning included Clement, Yann, Diane, and Grace. Yann was the most experienced and knew Clement well, so he operated as our anchor and would disassemble the ropes as needed. Diane and Grace had one canyoning trip under their belt, so they hung out in the middle of the pack with me, the first-timer. Clement often went first and assembled the ropes at each abseiling point. Our first two obstacles were a short abseil and a natural rock slide, or toboggan.

Clement asked if I had experience abseiling before, and I responded 'no,' because to my knowledge at the time, I hadn't. I soon realized that abseiling is just another term for rappelling, and rappelling is something I've been familiar with since YMCA sleep away camp in the fifth grade. I was nervous at first, but more so toward the entire endeavor than just the act of our first rappel. After I secured the rope to my harness through the friction device, I leaned back over the drop and slowly began lowering myself down. So far so good.

As we swam toward our first toboggan, my nerves picked up momentum. I peered over the edge and saw mother nature's version of a slick and curvy slide. Surrounding the narrow chute were jagged rock edges and a rapid waterfall. If we veered off track, we could easily hit the protruding rocks to our left or find ourselves trapped in the less-than-friendly waterfall with a more daunting drop to our right. My mind started to race. What if my leg kinks out and I hit a rock and flip over? What if I instinctually grab for something and swing into the spiked waterfall? I knew if I didn't go right then, my thoughts would only continue to fester. I volunteered to go first.

Without thinking, I held my body in a tight, solid bind and allowed Clement to give me a push over the edge. In a matter of seconds, I slipped down the silky chute and dropped feet first into the water.

As I came up for air, I let out a sigh of relief and knocked twice on my helmet, a sign to Clement that I was OK. I swam out of the way and watched Diane follow suit.

Once the five of us were down the first toboggan, we continued on into the canyon with eyes that held burgeoning anticipation. We were an efficient group and moved swiftly through the swimming pools and boulders. We didn't let our anticipation turn into apprehension, even when some of the toboggans or taller rappels made us look at each other and nervously laugh. It was always about moving forward and making it through the course, and that sort of energy is wildly contagious.

Corippo is a scenic and lively course in Ticino. Suitable for beginners, it's often deemed 'playful' by the more experienced canyoneers, for its friendly demeanor and relatively encouraging course. In other words, you won't find yourself muttering 'I could definitely die doing this' very often. The toboggans are ample, which is quite rare in most canyons, and the more you slide, the more comfortable you become. In the interim between course rappels and slides, I found myself blissfully lost in the rich green ferns and mosses that sparkled the canyon walls. It felt like I had entered a fairy's world, waiting for them to fly around my head and land on the big, looming leaves or across the sun-kissed pools, waving and laughing and welcoming us in. It was a magical place.

The end of the course in Corippo brings you to Lago di Vogorno, a vast reservoir used for electricity generation in Ticino, which flows downstream into Lake Maggiore. To get down into the lake and end the course, there is one final, windy toboggan. The reservoir was inviting, despite its silver and deep grey coloring. I couldn't wait to get down there and complete my first canyoning experience.



We slid down in sweet succession. Cheer and relief and excitement filled the air around us. The reservoir was warmer than the canyon pools, so we swam for some time before finally getting out and trekking back to the Grotto Al Bivio. I basked in the water, letting the buoyancy of the neoprene wetsuit keep me afloat on my back. Clement swam over to me.

‘You have a banana!’ he said.

‘I have what?’ I opened one eye and looked over at him.

‘Your smile. It is like a big banana.’

I laughed.

Yeah, it was. One giant, ripe banana.

*To book a canyoning experience with Clement, you can visit his website at <http://estcalade-canyon.fr/>*