

Untold Italy Episode 43 - Palermo excursions

[00:00:57.380] - Katy

Ciao a tutti, hello, friends, and welcome to another episode of the Untold Italy Travel podcast, where we aim to uncover everything you need to know about planning your trip to Italy. Right now, many of us don't know when we can return or even go to Italy. But I find planning my trips and discovering new places and experiences to add to my future itineraries is the perfect antidote to these pretty crazy times.

[00:01:23.660] - Katy

Now, did you love last week's episode about magical Capri? I sure did. What an amazing story Holly has. And it's all in such a stunning setting. I really just can't wait to get back there. If you loved hearing this and all our guest stories, please make sure to leave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app so we can reach more people and brighten their days with a little Italian sunshine. Grazie! On this week's episode, I am joined once again by my friend and Sicily expert Karen La Rosa from La Rosa Works a small group tour company specializing in Sicily.

[00:01:59.210] - Katy

I learn so much from Karen and I realized that we had some unfinished business talking about Palermo because apart from being an amazing city to visit, it's also a useful base to see more of Sicily, particularly the northwest corner. If you haven't already gathered, Sicily is one of my favorite places to explore in Italy as well as Karen's. And it's clear you're going to need much more than a week to explore this island properly. But what Karen does brilliantly is give you some amazing ideas on how to make the most of your time, no matter how much you have.

[00:02:32.930] - Katy

So without further ado, I'll welcome her back onto the show to tell us about possible day trips from Palermo, including beach towns, ancient ruins and master suite makers. Oh, my! Ciao. Karen, welcome back once again to the Untold Italy podcast.

[00:02:49.640] - Karen La Rosa

Oh, thanks. So happy to be back. It's so much fun to talk with you about Sicily and all sorts of other things.

[00:02:56.820] - Katy

Oh, Karen grazie. Yeah, I love our chats about Sicily too. I almost feel like I'm there eating my cannoli and sipping my wine. Now a few episodes ago we chatted about Palermo and we realized that we could have talked a little bit more. And there are so many things to do, not just in Palermo,

but outside and in the surrounding areas. And I'm excited to talk to you about those today on the show.

[00:03:22.430] - Karen La Rosa

Yeah, well, we did have a lot. I mean, there was so much to say, just about Palermo. But again, referencing the comment that somebody had said, well, you know, do I bother going to Palermo? Do I need to spend the time there? I would say people are always surprised to learn how much there is to see and do in Sicily. And the other day I saw a travel piece where the author said, yeah, you only need a week in Sicily. And my eyebrows raised, and the hair went up on the back of my neck. I said you could spend a week just in Palermo or Catania, Siracusa, Agrigento, any of these places, because there are so many things you can do using a base and doing day trips. So I mean, there are different types of travelers for sure, and some are bucket list, you know, frame of mind kind of people, and that's fine.

[00:04:14.840] - Karen La Rosa

So they want to go, they want to touch a few bases and see the region and then and they're satisfied. But for people who really want depth, a little bit more, they want to absorb and learn and experience. You know, Sicily represents a classic case of doing less, is doing more. You want to really immerse yourself in the way they live and the history, which is so deep and fascinating. So Palermo is a good place to center yourself.

[00:04:51.200] - Karen La Rosa

And once you arrive and get yourself acquainted to the time and everything and you could find a stay in Palermo and make that your base stay for a couple of days and visit the markets for sure, like we talked about and go to Monreale like we talked about, even visit the catacombs, even though they don't appeal to you.

[00:05:18.110] - Karen La Rosa

But then by that time, maybe you want a change of scenery. So Cefalù is one of my favorite towns and it's only about an hour to the east of Palermo. You can get there by train, you can get there by bus or you can get there by private driver. It's not hard to reach and it's right on the coast. So it's a lovely, lovely day trip. The stazione centrale is in Palermo and all the buses and the trains go from there. So that's an easy place to find. It's right at the bottom of Via Roma and you can take off from there, like I said, by either train or bus. First thing when get to Cefalù is find out what the return times are for the bus or the train because they don't run every five minutes. So you need to make sure that you're going to catch it on the way back.

[00:06:22.820] - Karen La Rosa

And then you will find yourself just a couple of blocks from the lungomare. That's the long walk along the sea. And many of the hotels are there facing the sea. And once you get there, you will have this vista, you will have this view of the wonderful beach, which is sandy in Cefalù and the water. And then as you look to the right, you will see the town, which has two dominant features,

just staring you in the face. One is a huge hill that borders the edge of town known as La Rocca, and the other is the cathedral, with its towering spires rising, rising above everything.

[00:07:14.560] - Karen La Rosa

It's a very clear message to everyone. So La Rocca is a rocky outpost on which you can climb and you pay just a little fee. You get to the path right from the center of town and you can pay a small fee and you follow the path to reach the top. But it's not a hard hike. You just need sneakers. And along the way you find little bits and pieces of ruins from past peoples. There's the remains of a castle up there, maybe a goat or two, some flowers. And then all of a sudden you're at the top like a fortress wall and you have the view of the century. This just magnificent view overlooks the waters, the coastline with the little embedded towns or villages. And when you look down on the town of Cefalù, you see the cathedral from the top with the cloister. And it's just very stunning. It's a very medieval look. The cathedral itself was built by Roger the Second after he shipwrecked there one time.

[00:08:32.920] - Karen La Rosa

And he felt that that was a fitting thing to do to build a church in gratitude for his saved life. So it is very much like Monreale in the interior, the Duomo. It has Byzantine mosaics, you know, that make your jaw drop. But it was never finished. So so it's not quite the extent that you will see in Monreale or the Palatina in Palermo, but still absolutely worth going into. The other thing that you will find in Cefalù that I think is terrific is a small museum called the Mandralisca Museum. And it was the collection of a baron who left it to the town. And it has all kinds of things in it. Decorative arts and stuffed animals, shells, antiquities, all kinds of things. But the highlight is a painting by Antonello de Massina called The Portrait of an Unknown Man. And it's a really stunning painting. It's smaller than I imagined actually, but stunning nonetheless with a with an interesting history that's all detailed in the signage.

[00:09:58.540] - Karen La Rosa

So those are two wonderful things, three wonderful things to do, on a day trip to Cefalù. And of course, of course, you will want to eat. So yes, there are restaurants all over. But if you walk to the edge of the town where you can't go any further, there is a street called Via Bordonaro. And on that street, it's just one restaurant after another. They're all mostly good and the same.

[00:10:31.720] - Karen La Rosa

Basically, they all serve seafood. Wonderful. The way I choose them is I like the ones that have the terrace outside. So you go into the restaurant generally down some steps and you can sit on a big patio covered terrace where you're right on the water. And there's just something so magical about sitting there with the water lapping up on the rocks and you're drinking your wine. And having pasta or seafood, it's really, really lovely. If you do want to drink, there's a little little place that's kind of hard to get a reservation at, but it's an enoteca where you can taste wines called La Petite Tonneau, it's actually a French name and it has a very little tiny terrace overlooking the other side, like the beach side of the sea. And you can sit there and taste wine and have wonderful

nibbles like salamis and things. And I put all of this in the notes to you so you can put it on your page.

[00:11:43.700] - Karen La Rosa

And then after you eat and you want to relax before you go back to the train or bus or get in your car to go back to Palermo, you'll want to sit in the Piazza Duomo because that is a beautiful, beautiful spot. The cathedral with its spires staring at you. You have great places for gelato on the left and on the right and people just sitting around enjoying a coffee, people watching, just strolling. All the men, of course, on the benches. It's a lovely, lovely place. And then if you wanted to use the beach, you have the beach there so you can easily spend an afternoon, a day in Cefalù. I've actually had people stay there and groups that have stayed there for several days because even from there you can do day trips. So that's one of the things I would suggest.

[00:12:47.170] - Katy

Well, I have to tell you, Karen, that I had seen photos of Cefalù and it's absolutely enchanting. And I knew all about the seaside seafront, which is very beautiful, but I didn't know about these little nooks and crannies. I always appreciate you sharing those and obviously sitting in the piazza and near the Duomo, is there anything better? I don't think there's anything better. I would love to be there right now.

[00:13:11.890] - Karen La Rosa

Absolutely. Yes, yes, yes, yes. It's the only you know, it's kind of like a little resort area, although very, very low key. And really lots of locals. They're way more than you would find in Taormina. I mean, there's locals in Taormina, but Taormina seems much more international and very touristied, whereas Cefalù is quieter and it seems less international. But it's one of my favorite places to just stroll around the little narrow streets.

[00:13:47.680] - Karen La Rosa

So back in Palermo, you would rest and have dinner and then go the other direction the following day. So now you've been in Palermo and you've seen Norman and Arab architecture and sites. Now you've gone to Cefalù, where again you have an Arab Norman structure of the cathedral is on that list, but you also have the beach and sort of a low key. This day I suggest going to Segesta. And if at this point, if you don't have a car, it's a great idea to take a driver with you and a guide, but otherwise there are buses that will take you out there.

[00:14:34.690] - Karen La Rosa

It's a little more complicated once you get out of the city and you start going to a lot of these different sites. It's really smart to have car - that makes your life much easier. And there is a car rental, a couple of car rental places. Right. in Palermo. So it's not hard to just pick one up. Segesta is about an hour away and I've been there numerous times on a bicycle, in a van and a car. And it's just always thrilling to see the way it rises out of the landscape.

[00:15:10.420] - Karen La Rosa

It's the best preserved Doric temple anywhere. And it belonged to the Elymian populations - very early indigenous people. And they settled in this northwest area. So they were the Elymian's in the northwest and the Siculi. And the Sicani and the Sicani were in the mid area and the Siculi on the east. We don't know a lot about them, but this temple dates from four hundred and thirty B.C. and it is really impressive. It's just, you know, as I said, it just kind of rises out of the landscape in the middle of pretty much nowhere. And in the springtime it's got carpets of yellow flowers all around it - it's just beautiful. So when you get there, you'll be outside a lot, climbing steps, there's some gravel. So wear comfortable shoes and you have free rein. You pay a ticket to get in. You have free rein to walk around. And I had a drawing group there. We sat on the hill and they drew the landscape with the temple in it, which was quite special.

[00:16:24.750] - Karen La Rosa

But when you buy your ticket, you'll want to purchase the combo, which includes the little bus that takes you up to the amphitheater because the amphitheater is a good hike, steep hike if you want to walk it. And then they have a bus that leaves every 30 minutes. So you get on that and you go after seeing the temple, you go to see this amphitheater, which is in really good shape and with a view that is incredible, plus perfect acoustics.

[00:16:59.490] - Karen La Rosa

I mean, it's just amazing how they knew how to do this back then. So, again, in this particular case, for this visiting this ancient ruin, I really think you benefit by having a guide. They have audio guides, I believe. I've never used them. In other places I have but I haven't used it here. But there's so much history here. There's still digs ongoing so it really behooves you to have somebody who can explain all of that to you.

[00:17:37.080] - Katy

Can you arrange that when you're there Karen? Or do you need to do that in advance?

[00:17:42.050] - Karen La Rosa

In advance. I mean, you know, it's what I do. People tell me, OK, I'm going to Segesta and I would arrange a driver and a guide for them. But there are local places and your hotel can advise you how to do that. If you didn't want to go through a tour operator to get you there and get you back. But it's again, you know, everything is so much more enriching when somebody can really tell you what you're looking at, whether it's a painting or an old Doric temple.

[00:18:13.620] - Katy

I agree. Absolutely. I think if it's something that you're really interested in, especially just having those local insights and that deep knowledge, and when they tell the stories of these places, it really just brings them alive.

[00:18:27.570] - Karen La Rosa

Yeah, yeah. And of course, after that, you'll be hungry. So you're in a very good area because Segesta is in near Alcamo. And Alcamo is its own DOC region, which is a wine region. There are twenty three in Sicily. And what that means is there is a particular kind of flavor type, kind of wine that comes from that area. And you can go to visit a winery for lunch and taste some of that wine. I think you've heard me speak enough now that, you know, Nero D'Avola doesn't taste the same in Alcamo as it does in Noto or as it does in, you know, in Menfi.

[00:19:13.050] - Karen La Rosa

So when you go to a winery here, you'll be tasting the wine that reflects the region where the grapes are grown. And it's so much fun to go meet the winery people. They're all different and they all have a story to tell. There's a few that I like to go to in that area. One is a very old family vineyard. It's actually in Camporeale. It's not in Alcamo proper. And they are a very traditional family. Great wines, actually. We can get them here, which is nice. And then there's another place that grows grapes and makes what they call now natural wines. So very little intervention with the wines and they are very different in flavor and still following the same DOC regulations if the wines are called DOC wines. But they're all very, very interesting. So, you know, just depends on what you are interested in, something young and hip or something traditional and more authentic. And you can pick that out and make an appointment and go and have a really nice lunch, really good food and and you get to taste these wines.

[00:20:45.600] - Katy

Sounds like a pretty good day to me. Yeah, I like to go do that a few times actually.

[00:20:50.760] - Karen La Rosa

You can try all the different wineries. And, you know, I always suggest don't pack the days full, because if you go to Segesta in the morning and then you go for lunch, you'll be done by 2:00, 3:00 in the afternoon. You're going to have wine. You have to go into the food coma after you eat. You don't really want to say, oh, my God, I have to go to another site. That ruins the day. So at that point, you take the nice, leisurely ride back. You maybe stop for cannoli or gelato on the way, and then you arrive in Palermo with a little time to rest or just wander around before it's dinnertime.

[00:21:35.470] - Katy

I just totally love how you think, Karen. It's just the way I think.

[00:21:40.780] - Karen La Rosa

Well, you remember when we were eating one meal. We're always talking about the next one or the past ones.

[00:21:46.830] - Katy

Absolutely. So I'm hungry now.

[00:21:54.220] - Karen La Rosa

Sometimes, let's say if you do have a car at that point, you might not even want to go back to Palermo. You know, you could just take the car and say, all right, I'm in this area. I'm going to go a little further west and stay in that area. So my day trips will be less driving. Or you could go back to Palermo with a car. Your accommodations can tell you where to park it and then do another day trip. You know, that's up to you. What kind of thing you like to do personally. As much as I love driving and, you know, I would like to drive a little less. So I might suggest that after the Segesta day and the winery, that maybe you had a little bit further to the west and there are many places to stay.

[00:22:55.260] - Karen La Rosa

I like to stay in these old barrio's, which are farms one time farms that were kind of self-contained. And there are some beautiful ones. Again, I've given you the names. Baglio Oneto is a five star place and they actually make wine and have their cave for tastings. And it's a lovely, lovely place. And then Baglio Soria is the Firriato Winery. That's their place, which is also lovely. If you take their little golf cart and go to the top of the hill there, it's just, oh my gosh, the views and do it at sunset or early in the morning. Just stunning. So there are several places like that. They're not that expensive. And again, you have this great experience of being in a rural, relaxed place. Usually they have a pool or something like that. And so then you'll be closer to the following day, which I would suggest you visit Erice and Trapani.

[00:24:07.800] - Karen La Rosa

So Erice was also an Olympian settlement, so called Erics back then. And it's really high on a hill near the western coast. I know it's really high on a hill because I rode my bicycle up. The next time I drove up that hill, I just laughed the whole way. I could not believe I made it up this hill. But now everybody's lived there. You know this after the Elymians, there were other populations. The Normans came and they were known for building walls everywhere. So they built a big castle there called the Castello di Venere because it was dedicated to Venus', there had been a temple dedicated to Venus prior.

[00:25:01.290] - Karen La Rosa

So that's one of the big things in Erice. But they gave the town a real cobblestoned medieval charm, and it still has that today. If you're walking down those streets and close your eyes. And if it doesn't have a lot of tourists, you could really imagine yourself back in the twelve hundreds, eleven hundreds. And because you're so high, the views from this hilltop are stunning. You've got the sea, the coastline. You've got Trapani, which is a big big city right below, and the Egadi islands in the distance.

[00:25:35.910] - Karen La Rosa

It's really, really nice. And they have a lot of shops, some that sell typical products of the area. I know you love ceramics and there is a typical ceramics style that comes from Erice. I have them hanging in the bathroom. And they also are known for their sweets and there is a woman in Erice. Her name is Maria Grammatico and her pastry shop is very famous. When she was a little girl, her

mother, they had six kids in the family and her mother couldn't afford to keep all of them. So she was sent to a local convent. And in this convent, the nuns back then made the sweets and all the girls had to help make these sweets. So they learned by default how to make these really, really fine sweets. And there's a book that is written partly by her and partly by Mary Taylor Simeti about her story. And it's not a long book, but it's a really wonderful read. And the recipes are included in there.

[00:26:53.450] - Karen La Rosa

So everybody flocks to Maria Grammatico to have some of her, you know, her wonderful confections and she's still there in the back every day making her pastries. I've met her a few times, so I would recommend that. If it happens to be crowded, there's other girls who went to that same convent who own a place down the road and you can go there and have wonderful sweets, too. And I gave you the name of that place as well.

[00:27:27.020] - Katy

So Karen, they all left the convent and didn't become nuns. They decided to become, you know, dedicated to sweets instead, is that right?

[00:27:35.980] - Karen La Rosa

Well, yeah, they weren't sent to the convent for a religious vocation or anything like that. That wasn't the intent. The intent was we can't afford you. The nuns can use you. So in exchange for them raising you and keeping you, you work for them. So that's how that worked. And when Maria left the convent, you know, she was one of the ones who had the, you know, whatever it took the wherewithal, the smarts, the ambition, whatever to do something like this. And she really made something of herself. I mean, she is probably the top pastry shop now in Sicily.

[00:28:18.030] - Karen La Rosa

And not to plug myself, but on my YouTube channel, there is a video about this history of the sweets and how the nuns made them. And we talk about Maria Gramaticco. There are some photographs of her in that video I've seen.

[00:28:34.680] - Katy

It's a really lovely video. Yeah. And she's quite a lady, isn't she?

[00:28:39.440] - Karen La Rosa

Yeah. I mean, just kind of amazing. So you can spend the morning whatever. Looking around the town, wandering around the town, there are a couple of restaurants you could eat out for lunch if you wanted to, but I would actually suggest going down to Trapani right below and enjoying lunch there. Trapani is, as I said, it's a large city. It's kind of a functioning city, but it has a historic center. And the historic center contains the old Jewish quarter. So this was a very active port city at one time, you know, obviously back before the late fourteens and the Jews were big merchants. So there are a lot of Palazzi there, you know, interesting buildings to look at.

[00:29:30.160] - Karen La Rosa

And in this old Jewish quarter, this one of my favorite restaurants, Cantina Siciliana, run by Chef Maggiore. And in that restaurant, which is a lovely restaurant, it's not fancy or anything like that, but it's just lovely. You can try his fish couscous, the seafood couscous, and that's a local specialty on the West Coast. The couscous obviously comes from the Tunisian, you know, the Moroccan, African, Arab influence and many places all along the West Coast make couscous. And the Arabs didn't you know, they usually made it with meat. But Sicily, after all, is an island and they have fish galore. So they make it with fish. And it's really, really delicious. You have that with a little bit of a white wine. It doesn't get better.

[00:30:32.630] - Katy

Oh, that sounds like the perfect afternoon to me. I love seafood and I love couscous. And I'm sure the juices that they cook the seafood in just soaks into the couscous and it just tastes amazing and delicious.

[00:30:45.140] - Karen La Rosa

It's got all that Moroccan flavoring going on. And with the seafood, it's just it's a lovely, lovely combination.

[00:30:53.060] - Katy

Do they use saffron at all?

[00:30:55.990] - Karen La Rosa

Yes, it's delicious and, you know, now they cultivate saffron and there's a town on it and called Zaffarana. That means saffron and it's.. Just a sidebar for a minute because I think it's fascinating. Saffron comes from the stamen of a crocus plant. So they have to collect some 40 thousand crocus plants and very gently remove the stamens to get that little bit of saffron. So that's why it's so expensive and takes up so many flowers to give you just the smallest bit of saffron. So when you get the real thing, the real, you know, homegrown saffron, you're getting something very special.

[00:31:47.070] - Katy

Hmm. Seafood and saffron. Delicious.

[00:31:51.070] - Karen La Rosa

Yeah delicious. So one of the reasons people go to Trapani is because they have the ferries that go over to the Egadi Islands and one of them is the island of Levanzo. So that was the first one I went to. And it is stunning. It's very rustic. And it's a lot of hiking around some kind of seashore port and then hiking around. There's some cave drawings there, prehistoric cave drawings that you can hike to and then kind of crawl in and look at, which is very cool. But the other island, the main island, Favignana, is more populous. And on it there is the museum that's dedicated to the ancient tuna fishing ritual called the mattanza. So there I won't go on and describe it. You can actually read a

whole book about it by Teresa Maggio called Mattanza. But there was this ritual whereby they would go out into these boats and they would be chanting and they would lay this series of nets from the largest net down to the smallest net, and they would cajole these giant tuna into the small net, harpooning them all the way.

[00:33:18.110] - Karen La Rosa

It's really not pleasant to think about, but that's how they did it. And then they would bring these giant tuna to the shore. And this museum is where the tonnara was. Tonnara is where they used to process the tuna fish. So you can go into this museum and learn all about the Mattanza and the whole processing plant is still preserved there. So you can actually see how they did all this with these giant giant fish. And today, obviously, they don't do that anymore. I can't imagine anybody doing that anymore. We don't even want to kill a bug. But but it's still fascinating to learn about. And tuna is still one of the big fish that you eat in Sicily. Tuna and swordfish are the two, you know, giant steak like fish that you get in Sicily, along with a million others, many of whose names I couldn't even repeat. So just fish of whatever they caught that day.

[00:34:26.840] - Katy

Now you've got me thinking about tuna and caponata combinations. So, yes, just gently seared, not cooked too much, but yeah. Oh delicious.

[00:34:41.510] - Karen La Rosa

Yeah. No, it's all, it's all really good. And on that island they have little restaurants too where you can have the seafood. It is just so special there. I mean when you get prawns they are red and fresh and I mean everything is so fresh. It's, it's really wonderful.

[00:35:00.320] - Katy

It doesn't get much better than that I think. Fresh prawns. I'll tell you a secret, Karen. I wanted to when I was a little girl, I wanted to own a prawn farm.

[00:35:14.960] - Karen La Rosa

I guess I haven't met anybody who wanted to that,

[00:35:17.950] - Katy

But I also wanted to own an avocado farm. This is a passion of mine, the seafood. And I just love hearing you talk about the bounty from the sea that you get in Sicily. It's amazing.

[00:35:33.380] - Karen La Rosa

Well, it's amazing to me because as a kid, I never really enjoyed eating seafood that much. And even here in New York City, you know, it's just not the same when you're in, you know, at the fish market in Catania and you see and then you go to a restaurant and you eat something that was there 10 minutes ago. It just tastes different. Just the whole thing is different. So when I'm there I eat a ton of seafood; when I'm here, much less so.

[00:36:06.470] - Katy

Hmm. You know, we're quite lucky here. We get some good stuff, but it still doesn't quite taste the same somehow unless you're sitting right by the sea and you've got that salty air

[00:36:16.480] - Karen La Rosa

and the right kinds of lemons to squeeze on it. And the fish and the seafood. Oh, it's great. It really is. Yeah. So all right. So from there, I think I would suggest a trip to Marsala because Marsala is just a little bit further down the coast. And you could still do this as a day trip from Palermo. Many people do. But again, you don't want to spend so much of your time traveling. You want to spend the time exploring. So that's why I would suggest maybe moving accommodations for a couple of nights just so you can see this little bit and not have to be in the car or the bus for as long.

[00:37:04.940] - Karen La Rosa

And there are a few, again, really fabulous things that make that area special. The history of Marsala wine, for starters, dates back to the late seventeen hundreds and Englishmen. Actually, John Woodhouse discovered that it lasted on long journeys, so they started producing this fortified wine. And today it's made in, if I remember correctly, from my wine study, twenty nine different iterations. So based on color, sweetness and age, it's way more serious a drink than what's used for dousing chicken this much I know. And it can be really, really delicious. So one of the things you want to do is visit one of these wineries that makes Marsala. Florio is the big name. I mean, everybody's heard of Florio and the was involved in so many things. Their barrel rooms are amazing - huge, huge barrels that have been aging for years. And they have a wine that Garibaldi used to drink. So it's named for him.

[00:38:28.670] - Karen La Rosa

It's a tour that attracts a lot of visitors and visits are at set times. And also it's it's pretty much organised for groups. You'll be part of a bigger group if you're not a group. But if you want something a little deeper, there's Marco de Bartoli, which is like the complete other extreme. It's very small. And you would be with the, you know, one of the family or one of their people to just sit with you and talk to you about the wine and take you into their barrel room. They're making some things in Amphora now, which is very interesting. A lot of places are experimenting with these different things. So that's interesting. All of them, again, require an appointment so you can't just show up.

[00:39:19.690] - Karen La Rosa

There's one other place, one other interesting winery that I really enjoyed visiting, and it's Alagna di Vini. And they make a huge range of wines, including church wine, which is interesting, and they have family vineyard dating back ages. So the first time I visited this very erudite owner, Ercole, somebody had said you need to go see Ercole. So I went and we spent hours together. He was so much fun. Every wine was laid out on the table with a nibble pared to it, like a marriage. And we

went deep into the cellar to see the barrels. We drove around the vineyards and his family's historic baglio. We sang opera together with the windows rolled down.

[00:40:09.650] - Karen La Rosa

I learned so much from him and we've been friends ever since. In fact, one day he called me and he said, I'm here with nine of my family. And so they had dinner and I was like, You couldn't have given me advance notice. And each year he holds this huge celebration after the vendemia to thank all his workers for the harvest. And one year I was really touched to be an honored guest at that. They're wonderful people. And that's a very you know, there's so many different wineries. And as I keep saying, each visit is unique. So every place you go, you're going to have something different. So vary them, you know. And this one was a real fun one for me.

[00:41:01.060] - Karen La Rosa

So while you're there, you have to go to Mozia and to see the salt pans that are just about 10 minutes out of town. The salt pans are this large area where salt is collected because the water is there and it dries in the sun. There are old windmills that show up. And if you've seen any photo of the area's landscape, that's what you see at sunset. At sunrise, you know, all day, in a storm, you see these iconic windmills that are very pretty. And with the salt in these conical piles, white salt and the blue sea, it's really very beautiful. Of course, there's more to salt than meets the eye, just like everything else. And there's a little museum that will describe how they collect it and all the different types. And it's amazing that salt really does taste different. So you can taste the different types that they have and then the different levels of salinity. And, you know, until you look into something, you never realize the depth of what it is.

[00:42:14.950] - Katy

No, you never do. And these people have been harvesting or producing the salt for centuries. And so they probably have this amazing insight into the different types of salt. And we just think I'll just, you know, take a pinch of salt. But it's really something that's developed over many, many years. And, yeah, it's got the different salinities and it's so fascinating.

[00:42:37.380] - Karen La Rosa

Yeah, it really is. I mean, people think, oh, I'm not going to go see salt, but you go there and you think, wow, this is pretty, pretty cool when you're there. There's a little boat that you take a five minute boat ride and it'll take you across the lagoon to the island of Mozia. Mozia was an early Phoenician settlement. So the Phoenicians were great traders and they had this outpost in a perfect location to come and go. And if you go there, there are archaeological remains on the island. There's some ongoing digs. But if you walk around the area, the perimeter where you're allowed to go, you can see different houses and different things, nothing grand or huge. But, you know, it gives you the idea.

[00:43:30.390] - Karen La Rosa

And then there's a museum, the Whittaker Museum. And in that museum is, you know, what I call one of the highlights in Sicily. It is a statue called the Charioteer. And I could tell you a long story about the first time I saw it, but I won't right now. Suffice it to say that when I finally saw it, it was like a Stendhal moment - was just a jaw dropper. It's just this beautiful, beautiful statue that was very advanced in the way it was sculpted for its time. It's a Greek statue and it's it's just stunning to look at. It's in this little museum on this little island off the coast of Marsala. And it's just a shame that so few people actually see it. Oh, every time I think about it, it just kills me.

[00:44:27.700] - Katy

Well, at least it's where it belongs and it hasn't been, you know, secreted abroad. So it's in its natural environment.

[00:44:35.260] - Karen La Rosa

Well, part of the story, the first time I saw it was not there. The first time, it was not in Mozia, nor the second time. I finally ended up seeing it in Cleveland, think at the Cleveland Museum of Art. They did with the Getty Museum, a big exhibit about the statue and Sicily. And so I ended up going to Cleveland. I said, darn it, I'm going to see the statue. And my sister and I spent the best weekend and we spent five hours at that exhibit reading everything that they had there. It was wonderful. So that's when I first saw that statue. And I've been back since. And they actually in the Whittaker Museum, took a page from the exhibit and exhibit it now in situ in a much nicer way so than they had. So that that's kind of great.

[00:45:30.880] - Karen La Rosa

And so where do we go from there? Well, you could go back to Palermo at that point. That's sort of a week, you know. A week's time that's already past. If you have an extra couple of days, you might want to go into the interior a little bit to the towns of Salemi, Gibellina, Corleone. These are all smaller towns, you drive from one to the next and you spend half the day there. each of them has things to recommend them.

[00:46:07.900] - Karen La Rosa

There's a contemporary art museum associated with the Tenuta, with the winery. Oristiadi in Gibellina, which is pretty great. Salemi has the the bread museum and other things, among other things, some Norman buildings, castles and stuff. But the bread museum is interesting because it's the traditional bread that is made for many holidays, but mostly St. Joseph's Day and highly decorated altars and loaves. And they all mean something and it's a little museum but so worthwhile.

[00:46:49.120] - Karen La Rosa

And again, hiking paths, history, wine traditions, every little town has something. So once you're in a car, you could really go all over the place. But this was a week and I think covered a lot of different things from ancient stuff to medieval to wine, to art to nature.

[00:47:19.540] - Katy

That's only a quarter of the island. Like, it's ridiculous

[00:47:22.570] - Karen La Rosa

Not even I mean, it's like this little area, you know, in the northwest. And again, as I said, there's so much more. Plus, you need the time to just decompress at the end of the day, digest the things that you've seen and you have a lovely meal with wonderful wine and be ready for the next day. If you jam too much in the day, then it all becomes a blur.

[00:47:51.160] - Katy

Yeah. You want to savor the moments? Definitely. And the wine.

[00:47:56.330] - Karen La Rosa

Yes, all of all of it. But it's an area that is very under visited, I would say, by tourists. And I think I mentioned to you before my I planned a new tour for for May, and I'm just keeping my fingers crossed. There is a new path. It's not a new path. It was a Roman path that connected the cities of Palermo and Agrigento. And recently they kind of put it back in good shape and you can walk one hundred and seventy kilometers or a part of it. So it takes you to a lot of the natural outposts there, beautiful sights, waterfalls and certain things. There are small towns that you can see along the way that, again, always have a historic church or some monument or something. And this is what I've decided to do with my first tour next year. And I think people are just going to love being outdoors in the springtime, you know, taking life slow and just appreciating nature because of what we've been through - it's such a slog.

[00:49:13.450] - Katy

We have and look and then you finish the day with a lovely seafood dinner and a beautiful glass of wine and the year will be a bad dream.

[00:49:23.740] - Karen La Rosa

Actually, it's called a restorative walk.

[00:49:28.150] - Katy

Absolutely. Oh, Karen, thank you so much. Every time we talk about Sicily, I have about 20 new places to my list of places to go to. And that's already absolutely massive. You really help bring the dream alive. Can you please remind our listeners how they can stay in touch with you and learn more about the sights, culture, history, food and people of Sicily?

[00:49:51.610] - Karen La Rosa

Certainly, I like most people, I have many ways. The website is La Rosa Works dot com and on there is a lot of different things to read articles and histories and things I've written. In addition to all my tour information, I am on Instagram and on Facebook at La Rosa Works Sicily and I have a

YouTube channel that I started during this crisis that I'm having so much fun with and people are loving and that is La Rosa work Sicily presents on YouTube.

[00:50:33.820] - Karen La Rosa

And there are all these very short videos that give you a small window into real life and Sicilian traditions and the way people live. So I'm proud of it and I'm having fun with that.

[00:50:48.010] - Katy

Oh, Karen should be so proud of it. Everyone, if you want to see Sicily with your own eyes without leaving your home, Karen is actually becoming quite the film maker. She's being quite modest. So you hop on YouTube and you can check out her short films about Sicily. And did you know, I'm not too shy to tell everyone, that Karen's gorgeous piece on breadmaking has been selected for the Palermo short film festival. So congratulations, Karen.

[00:51:16.110] - Karen La Rosa

Thank you. Thank you. I have a wonderful editor named John.

[00:51:19.950] - Katy

I know but it's all in the inspiration as well. So congratulations. It's really well deserved. And grazie, thank you as always for joining us.

[00:51:31.260] - Karen La Rosa

I really enjoyed doing this with you.

[00:51:33.980] - Katy

So there you have it. There is so much of Sicily to explore and I cannot recommend it highly enough. As Karen said, don't try to rush it. Sicily is worth savoring and investing quite some time. Now, as always, Karen has generously shared so many of her favorite addresses, which are, of course, captured in the show notes for this episode at Episode forty three. Just go to UntoldItaly.Com/43 for all the details and information on how you can go to any of these restaurants or visit these places.

[00:52:06.420] - Katy

And also how you can join one of Karen's fascinating tours in Sicily. I just know anyone would have an incredible time exploring the island with her. That's all for this week. Grazie, thank you for joining us. And stay happy, safe and well and dreaming of Sicily and Italy. Ciao for now.