

Untold Italy Episode 40 - Small cities in Italy

Ciao everyone. Katy here and welcome to episode 40! Wow. I have to admit, the world and this podcast has changed a lot since we started it back in January. Who would have thought our episodes about travel to Italy, in a time when it is impossible for most of us to go, would have been downloaded well over 40,000 times. Grazie, thank you so much for listening. It really brings so much joy that we are helping people and bringing a bit of bella Italia into your lives.

One thing that has surprised me a lot is how much recording these episodes and talking about Italy has helped me grieve for my family's trip planned for March this year. When I recorded episode 12 back in March when the pandemic first hit Italy, you can hear my voice breaking as I was on the verge of tears. But now, honestly I am more determined than ever to get back to Italy, begin my adventures anew and revisit some favorite places that my heart aches for.

And I also can't wait to meet some of the wonderful new friends I have met through interviewing them on the show. The world is an amazing place and there's nothing like connecting with friends old and new that are many thousands of miles away to talk about a place that we love, to build hope and our dreams for the future.

Last week's Q&A episode was so much fun. I loved answering your questions so we'll do another one in a couple of months. We actually have a full schedule planned for the rest of the year with lots of fun guests - some who you've already met and others come from places I know you want to hear about. Spoiler alert... We'll be going to the gorgeous island of Capri very soon!

But today I promised to cover off a question I missed last week and that was from Sofija and Lesley. They wanted to know about the smaller, lesser known cities we recommend visiting. And asked for a top 5. I have to say this is an almost impossible task. And I'm going to say, that with one exception, I cheated a bit and chose cities that are easily accessible from major stopping points between Rome, Florence, Milan and Venice. But I will record another episode I promise about the real off the beaten path treasures off that main traveling route because they are incredible too.

So let's get started with a highly underrated city in Tuscany - lovely Lucca!

Lucca

Tuscany is a huge region of Italy and you could easily spend a month or two - or who am I kidding... a lifetime! - exploring its hills and valleys, cities and coastline.

Now while some Tuscan cities - Florence, Pisa and Siena - are major stops for many visitors, Lucca somehow flies under the radar.

We were lucky enough to spend a week in the area several years ago and fell in love with this small city. So if you get out a map of Italy and find Florence, Lucca is to the west and closer to the coast, north east of Pisa. It's a small city of around 90,000 people and it is also where my dear friend Luana's family comes from.

Lucca was first founded by Etruscans in the 3rd century bc and later developed by the Romans - you can still see evidence of their settlement in the city today. But interestingly, Lucca was one of the world's oldest republics - founded in 1160. This political structure lasted for 500 years and is second only to Venice in terms of size. Over the centuries the Lucchesi fended off and sometimes succumbed to invasions and bartering from various city states including Pisa and Genoa. But in 1805 the city surrendered to Napoleon who made his sister Elisa the princess of Lucca.

Now with all this attacking and invading you won't be surprised to learn that the people of Lucca invested in some pretty robust city walls. And indeed these walls are among the defining features of the city. In fact Lucca's walls are almost perfectly preserved, unlike in Florence where the city expanded and bulldozed its ramparts. Thankfully no one is invading Lucca these days so the enterprising people of the city converted the city walls into a green park and pedestrian promenade. You can stroll or rent bikes to go around the walls and because you are elevated above street level you get beautiful views of the city and hills beyond. It's about 4 kilometers long and there are entry points throughout the city.

Now if you are traveling as a family, this is actually brilliant because many Italian cities don't have such readily available parkland for that all important outdoors activity. We always recommend families consider Lucca as a base over Florence for that reason.

So, getting back to the architecture and features of the city. Inside the walls you'll also notice several towers rising towards the sky. The most famous tower is Torre Guinigi and you can easily recognize it as there is a garden on top with trees that poke up over the parapets. Lucca has only a handful of towers remaining when it once boasted over 130. They were important look out points to spot potential invaders.

Lucca also has some pretty magnificent churches and piazzas as you'd expect. My favorite is the Romanesque San Michele in Foro that looms over a piazza of the same name. It's wonderfully

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ornate and looks a bit like a tiered wedding cake but instead of a bride and groom there is a 4 meter high statue of the Archangel Michael on the roof!

The Piazza dell'Anfiteatro is another charming place to visit. The square is an oval shape that mimics the seating of the Roman amphitheater that once stood there. All the buildings are those yellow and orange Tuscan hues and cafe seating spills onto the piazza. So lovely!

As for things to do, there is a lot of wandering and eating involved if that's your kind of thing... and it is mine. The pace of life is slower in Lucca but it's quite a wealthy city so you'll see lots of lovely boutiques and artisan crafts, cafes and restaurants. If you like opera (and even if you don't actually!) Lucca was the home of one of the greatest opera composers of all time - Puccini. He created Madam Butterfly, and La Boheme among others. There is a museum in Lucca dedicated to him and his works but also a fun thing to do is go to a concert. Now don't wrinkle your nose up and say I don't like opera.. Give it a go! The concert only goes for an hour and it is perfectly timed for between aperitivo and dinner. They choose popular arias or well known songs and the venue is a gorgeous church which is the perfect backdrop for the evening. Honestly, it is highly recommended.

You can easily fill 2 days in Lucca with wandering and sightseeing but it's also worth noting that there are lots of fun day trips from the city. You can take the train to Florence in an hour and 20 minutes and Pisa in half an hour. Viareggio, a popular beach town on the Tuscan coast is also only 30 minutes by train. And if you have a car you can explore the stunning Garfagnana Hills close by. Lucca has so many options.

If you're staying overnight the accommodation choices in Lucca offer much more value than Florence or Siena. I can highly recommend La Romea which is a lovely B&B in a 14th century palazzo run by my friend Luana's cousin.. Who happens to look just like her! They have a 5 star rating on TripAdvisor so I know they extend the same hospitality that we received to all their guests. I'll put a link to them into the show notes of course..

And that my friends is just a little taster of why I love Lucca. It is simply a charming city with many fewer travelers than other parts of Tuscany and perfectly placed to see the surrounds.

Next up we head to northern Italy, to a small city near Venice which also is quite special.

Treviso

Now, as we all know, Venice is famous for canals but so is the ever so pretty city of Treviso just 40 minutes north by train from the lagoon city. In fact Treviso has quite a large airport and many lower cost airlines fly in there for Venice. And most people skip past it. Big. Mistake.

Treviso, like Lucca, is a walled medieval city though they are not quite as well preserved as their Tuscan cousins. What they do have though are some impressive city gates emblazoned with the Venetian lion of St Marks. The Venetian Republic ruled Treviso for around 400 years and you can see evidence of this all over the city. Not only can you see the glorious winged lions but in Treviso, narrow cobbled laneways lined with red brick palazzi adorned with frescoes lead to impossibly pretty canals. You won't find gondolas on the canals of Treviso, instead there are families of ducks and swans gliding along the water. Above them, vines drip down into the water and patrons at elegant cafes gaze wistfully on the scene.

Yes Treviso is quite the unexpected surprise and to top it all off it's right in the heart of prosecco country. How wonderful is that? Italy's favorite sparkling wine is right on your doorstep in all its bubbly refreshing goodness. So you can find a romantic cafe for lunch and sip local prosecco to your heart's content. Sounds pretty perfect doesn't it. Especially when your dessert course is likely to be a decadent tiramisu, invented right here in Treviso!

The thing to do in Treviso is wander around its pretty streets and over bridges and under the colonnades and arches which are a feature of the city's architecture. Keep an eye out for the waterwheels that make sure the canals move gracefully along. In the center of town you'll find the Loggia dei Cavalieri a beautiful structure with huge arches that houses a lovely cafe. It's near the main piazza - Piazza dei Signori - which is also very pretty. You can also visit the Isola della Pescheria fish market which is very lively. Lots of restaurants and cafes around there too..

But one of the city's most famous attractions is the Fontana Delle Tette. It is the naked torso of a woman and water spouts from her breasts. This is a reproduction of the original fountain destroyed by the, I would say destructive!, troops of Napoleon. The original, built in the 16th century, flowed wine for 3 days whenever a new Podesta or mayor was elected. That was once a year so yes, the people of Treviso know how to have a good time. You could even choose between white and red wine.

The city also has its fair share of lovely churches and impressive art - including a Titian in the city's cathedral.

As I mentioned before, Treviso is also in the heart of prosecco country so you can easily visit the surrounding vineyards and sample the wine. If you have a little time then a short drive out of town takes you to the Valdobbiadene area where you can walk a 15km trail known as L'Anello del

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Prosecco which combines beautiful scenery, art installations and of course great food and wine. If you want to just duck into Venice, it's a useful base for that too.

So I think Treviso makes an excellent city break if you're coming from within Europe on a long weekend or a nice stopover en route to the Dolomites from Venice. It's an elegant town and I really enjoyed the time we spent there.

Como

OK so now I am going to take you back towards Milan to a city that is sometimes used as a transit point but I think it's worthy of a mention. Como is a city and not a town or village - there are plenty of lovely towns in the region too - Varenna, Lecca, Bellagio for example. But the main city of lake Como is wonderful too and it's a great place for adventures on the lake, trips into Milan and also into Switzerland.

We were lucky enough to spend a week in Como a few years ago and I found much to love about the place. Within the old city gates you'll find cobbled streets and cute piazzas. There's quite a big marina where ferries and boats come in and you have sweeping views of the lake with the Alps in the background.

Como has a magnificent cathedral and you'll want to step inside to see the stunning cupola or dome and blue and gold ceiling and admire the stained glass windows. And of course outside the piazza is buzzing with restaurants and cafes. There are some particularly good cake shops in Como if you like that kind of thing - of course you do!

Our favorite piazza was Piazza Alessandro Volta closer to the lake which has an amazing atmosphere, especially at aperitivo hour where kids run about in the square while parents sip their wine. The city market is held regularly close to the 800 year old Porta Torre city gate and while it does see it's fair share of tourist traffic, it's also the type of place where you see Italians living and conducting business. We even stumbled upon a local food festival or sagra which was about as much fun as you can have standing up. So many delicious local dishes to try plus music and dancing. What's not to love.

You can wander along the lake front at any hour of the day and stop for a rest at one of the many strategically placed benches and admire the magnificent villas, lake traffic and art installations. They have some very cool looking wooden speedboats that are so elegant and obviously worthy of local residents George and Amal Clooney. I like to think I soaked up some of that dolce vita when I was there.

Another lovely thing to do is stroll along the waterfront and take the funicular up to the hillside town of Brunate. It's a great place for walks and views of the lake and the city. Time it right and

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you can have worked up an appetite to have a delicious lunch with views to die for at Locanda del Dolce Basilico

Of course the whole of lake Como is there at your doorstep for excursions and it's a quick ride into Milan. And while I know this podcast is about Italy, you might also like to know that it is very easy to do a day trip to Switzerland from there. It's just 30 minutes by train or car and you're in a whole other country. Just don't forget your passports! I actually forgot ours that day but luckily we didn't get stopped at the border. It was a rookie error that I am a bit embarrassed about but worth mentioning so you don't do the same!

So yes, Como is a charming city in its own right but with all these activities close by it is worthwhile considering if you are in the area for a few days. Ok it doesn't have the romantic allure of Bellagio or Varenna but you have a broader choice of restaurants and lots more activities to try.

Ortigia / Siracusa

OK now I am taking you to Sicily to one of the places I have mentioned a few times on this podcast and mainly because it is a place that had me smitten at first look. And that's the city of Ortigia, the old town of Siracusa or Syracuse close to Catania. Facing out over the Mediterranean sea, people have settled in Siracusa for 3,000 years. In fact, the city was once the biggest city in the ancient world. Even bigger than Athens! It's now where you'll find the Parco Archeologico della Neapolis, one of Sicily's greatest archaeological sites.

The island of Ortigia is the old town of Siracusa and it's one of the most beautifully atmospheric places I have ever laid my eyes on. It's a heady combination of ancient ruins, narrow streets, Baroque churches and elegant piazzas. There's a vibrant street market bursting with local characters, food smells and sounds and fishing boats bob in the waters beyond.

You can wander the streets for hours and spot reclaimed buildings and ruins, evidence of the city's ancient past. Part of the former temple of Athena is incorporated into the walls of the Duomo or Cathedral. There is an ancient natural spring known as the Fountain of Arethusa over which vines hang and flowers drape.

The ruins of one of the most ancient temples in Sicily, the Temple of Apollo, are laid bare among the city's houses, restaurants and shops. Around every corner you see a glimpse of citrus grove, a small gallery full of art or a cafe brimming with pastries. It is actually here in Ortigia where my life was changed by a bite of cannoli. Until that time I cannot say I had ever had a true cannoli. And there it was, the ricotta piped fresh into the crunchy casing and it's fair to say, my mind was blown!

If you like art, just step inside the baroque cathedral or you can admire the Caravaggio at the Chiesa Santa Lucia la Badia. Visit the elegant palazzi too. History lovers can also visit the museum at Maniace Castle and check out the artifacts before admiring the sea views from the ramparts.

And that's just Ortigia! Of course in Siracusa there is an amphitheatre and archaeological site I mentioned before. I could happily spend a week exploring Ortigia's nooks and crannies! But it's also close to Catania and Mount Etna and a short drive to Noto and the beginnings of the Val di Noto I discussed with Karen La Rosa on episode 31. Or you know, if that's too much activity there are beaches and boat trips. Ahhhh Ortigia. I really hope I see you soon!

Orvieto

So for our last pick I'm taking you back over to the mainland to a very small city near Rome which ticks all the boxes of amazing views, culture, history and of course food and wine. And that is of course Orvieto, in the region of Umbria

Whether you approach this city by road or by train you can't really miss it as it is built on top of a huge craggy outcrop of volcanic tufa and presides over the countryside below. Orvieto is a medieval city with city walls and cobbled streets and a quiet air about it that makes you feel relaxed as soon as you arrive inside the city gates.

But the city's origins date way back to Etruscan times and you can explore this heritage today through a series of over 1200 underground cisterns, passageways and caves that formed part of an elaborate underground city. This ancient complex was built between 2500 and 3000 years ago. It is really quite fascinating and a guided tour is recommended.

Back above ground you follow the cobbled streets covered in vines to the top of the hill where you'll find the city's magnificent duomo or cathedral. Some say it is one of the most beautiful in Italy which is quite an accolade. The Cathedral was built in gothic style back in the 13th century and has a distinctive black and white marble exterior apart from its stunning ornate facade. Inside it is packed full of art and treasures as you'd expect and the odd relic. It's definitely worth a visit and worthy of the accolades.

You can also visit the Pozzo di San Patrizio or St Patrick's well. If you're interested in architecture this is actually a must see as it is a great example of a double helix staircase. That means that the steps up and down never meet. It's pretty cool. The well was built in the 16th century to ensure a water supply should the city be attacked.

Eating in Orvieto is also a delight - especially in truffle season. You can enjoy a hearty plate of pasta with shaved local truffle with a glass of the Orvieto wine. Honestly there is nothing better.

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After your meal you can take a walk to the city walls where miles upon miles of vineyards are spread below you.

Orvieto can be visited as a day trip from Rome. There's a train that takes a little under 2 hours... But if you'd like to stay and relax into your time there - highly recommended - then there are wineries, Lakes Bolsena and Corbara close by as well as the spectacular hilltop village of Civita di Bagnoregio. It's a very beautiful part of the world and if you want to know more you can listen to Episode 19 when I talked to Alex Trembath about exploring Umbria.

Orvieto is a delightful city. I was only there last November and there were chestnut sellers roasting nuts as we stepped into the town and a lovely harvest vibe.. I'll definitely be heading back there soon.

Wow, 5 very different cities and all so charming in their own way. Italy is full of places like these and as I said I kind of cheated a bit and chose places that are accessible from the major cities and entry points into Italy. And even then I missed out some beauties - Parma, Modena, Siena, Arezzo... the list goes on and on..

Of course, take a trip around the lesser known regions and you'll find even more amazing cities and towns you'll want to explore - Lecce, Ascoli Piceno, Perugia, Ragusa, Ravenna, Bolzano...

So I hope I answered your questions Sofija and Lesley. I love talking about these places and remembering the fun times we had there. These are the places where we stopped to check out the real estate and apartments for sale, wondering, dreaming if an extended stay in Italy was possible. I am very sure you would do the same if you managed to visit them yourself. Thanks again for such a great question.

Of course we have added all the places we have recommended into the show notes which you can find at untolditaly.com/40 for episode 40. If you were not already aware, we provide a full transcript of each episode so you can read if you prefer and see how some of the tricky Italian words are spelt. Plus, you know, sometimes this Australian accent can be a bit challenging.

We've been quite busy over the last week planning out the remaining episodes for 2020. I won't give too much away but I am so excited to be talking to experts and fellow travelers about some amazing places in Italy including Florence, Bergamo, Naples and of course wonderful Capri! We've also scheduled in another Q&A episode for November so either send in your questions now or save them up for then and we'll answer them on the podcast. As always, the best way to stay up to

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date with the latest episodes is to hit subscribe. So do that right now if you haven't already and it's safe to do so.

Also coming soon - We'll be announcing another way to stay connected to Italy and plan your trips there. It's a bit under wraps at the moment but it is going to be amazing! I can't wait to share it with you.

Thank YOU all for your ongoing support. Can I ask a favor? If you enjoy the show it would be wonderful if you could leave a rating or review on your favorite podcast app. That tells Apple, Spotify, Stitcher etc that this is content that is worth listening to. And the more Italy lovers in this community the better! Grazie, thank you for listening, Have a wonderful week and Ciao for now!

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