

Untold Italy Episode 45 - Listener Q&A vol 2

Buon giorno, Ciao to all our wonderful listeners. It's Katy hosting the show today and I am so happy to have you here. We appreciate you taking some time out of your day to hear our chats about beautiful Italy. And I know our guests do too. We had some amazing comments recently and I wanted to share them with you.

love Capri!!!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

thank you Ladies it was very informative and fun! I love Capri and cant wait to go back ❤️😊

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Best Italy travel podcast!!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Fabulous tips and wonderful guests! Has helped me plan my trip.

GeorgiaKnittingLady via Apple Podcasts · United States of America · 10/08/20

Thank you.. Grazie to all of you and especially to those of you who leave ratings and reviews. It brings such a big smile to our faces.

On this week's episode of Untold Italy we are answering some of your questions about travel in Italy. But before we get started I wanted to let you know about an announcement we'll be making later this week.

As you know recording the podcast has brought us a lot of joy in this crazy year. We've met and made amazing new friends in Italy and around the world and have loved bringing their stories to you. I had a bit of a brainwave a few weeks ago and our announcement is about how we're going to help bring Italy to you and help you keep planning your trips. For most of us a trip to Italy is not as easy or as frequent as traveling in our home country, regardless of the season or global situation. If you want help planning your dream trip in 2021, 2022, 2023 and beyond like I know a lot of you are doing, this announcement is going to help you do that and build your excitement and knowledge about Italy at the same time. So stay tuned!

So now onto your questions. Thanks to everyone who sent them in. We had such a great response that we had to pick the top 4 to answer. Some of the questions actually deserve an entire episode to themselves so we'll do that too - stay tuned on episodes about Puglia, the Dolomites and at least one dedicated to solo travel particularly for women.

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Driving in Italy

Our first question is from Kirsty Fantini (who always has great questions!) Kirsty wrote..

Love the podcasts... always take something away from them to add to my itinerary! We are heading to Italy next year on a self drive. My question is ... are GPS "maps" accurate in terms of drive time? Or will there be barriers (I'm now aware of ZTLs) that slow us down that we didn't consider... making time between destination muuuuch longer than anticipated? Thanks

Such a great question Kirsty. GPS and Google Maps are great tools to help with trip planning and navigation. These days you can get a pretty good idea of how long things take but there are a few things to consider:

- It's important to realise that not being 100% familiar with the surroundings, driving conditions and the language will have an impact on your response times etc. I always build in an extra 30 minutes for minor mistakes
- And these mistakes might not be your own. You might get stuck behind someone who for a number of reasons cant make the toll machines work for example
- Speaking of tolls.. You can pay by cash at auto teller machines on the highway but it's a lot easier to use your credit card. And it must be a credit card - Visa or Mastercard - because often debit cards wont work. You also might have trouble with Amex or Diners There are sometimes booths that have people to help but more often than not it's just a machine and there is usually an option to choose the instructions in English
- On the smaller roads cash is probably better because then you only pay a few euros and you just throw the coins in a little basket in the machine
- My favorite tip for driving is to research where you want to park before you set out. We generally use a paid undercover option and will find one just outside the historic zone and pop it in the GPS. This saves lots of time trying to avoid the ZTLs and navigating one way streets
- Also in small towns and villages Google Maps / GPS can often show streets when in fact they are laneways.. We found this out the hard way in Sicily when we got wedged between 2 walls. It's funny to think of that now but at the time it was a bit intense shall we say

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Tori Mitchell also had some questions about driving

You have touched on driving in Italy in past episodes, but I have some more specific questions. What is parking like in Italy? We will have a car to drive around Tuscany, so I want to know where to park in advance in these small towns. Is it street parking? Do they have meters/need cash? Also, when driving I heard they have tolls, do they have toll booths where you can pay with cash? If so do you need coins?

Tori I do plan to do a whole episode on driving at some point and you have raised some great questions - some of which on tolls I answered earlier. But with respect to finding where to park in small towns in Tuscany I'll delve into it a bit further.

As I mentioned, it's best to research your parking before you set out for the day so you're already on the right track. How I do this is pop the town say its Volterra and parking into google maps - so Volterra parking. Then good old google will tell you some options. If you read the reviews (they translate them) you'll soon get a good idea of which of the parking options are best as well as useful information about opening times and how big the spaces are etc. I always look at the ones closer to the center of town,

Most towns will have an open air carpark just outside the town walls or historic center - this was certainly the case in San Gimignano and Pienza. You'll generally need cash to put into the meter. So it's a good idea to hang onto your spare Euros. Bigger places will have an underground carpark and sometimes you can pay with card. Some places like Montichiello the only option is really street parking and so you just follow the lead of what others are doing and keep an eye out for parking signs. They are a blue square with a white P on them. The no parking sign is a blue circle inside a red circle with a red diagonal line through it. It's best to know that one! So I hope that helps. Google maps is certainly the best starting point I have found for parking but do work out where you want to park before you set out. And also, getting there earlyish is a good idea. And by that I mean before 10 as after that things tend to get a little crowded.

Bistecca alla Fiorentina and specialty foods to try in each city

Ok our next question is from Amy and it's a food question - you know how much I love those Amy!

In Florence, I always hear about people eating the Florentine steak. I worry with so many places pushing it that we will end up someplace touristy and overpaying for lower quality. Where should we go for an authentic experience? And, is it worth it? We only have a certain number of meals there. Should we skip this for something else?

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Great question Amy and my response is - how much do you love steak? If it is your thing and you absolutely love steak then you must have the Florentine version. But, I'll tell you a bit more about it and you'll get the idea of what to expect.

Bistecca alla Fiorentina traditionally comes from a Tuscan breed of cattle called the Chianina and it's a cut of meat from the loin, just below the rib cage and above the rump. There are actually 2 cuts of this dish bistecca nel filetto and bistecca nella costola..The nel filetto includes the fillet which many people prefer. Steaks of this kind generally weigh between 800 and 1.2 kg,so up to 2.6 pounds which is a lot of meat - even if you do love your steak. It's ok to share the dish and restaurants expect it.

Now when it comes to preparation the important thing is that the meat is dry aged for 2 to 3 weeks. During this time, moisture is removed and the beef becomes more flavorful and tender. And lastly, to preserve this flavor the steak is cooked very quickly over a high heat on a wood fire - just a few minutes each side. So it is served pretty much rare and restaurants wont really appreciate a request for medium or well done steak

So that's what it is and if you're a meat lover it really is exquisite.. The meat is melt in the mouth and so flavorful. You can try it at Alla Vecchia Bettola or for something a bit more fancy Buca Lapi - I'll put both those addresses in the show notes. Expect to pay up to €90 for a steak for two. Which I appreciate is a considerable outlay if you're not that keen on steak.

But really don't feel like you have to try it. There are plenty of dishes in Florence to try that are equally as delicious. My friend Jax had to go back to a restaurant called Coquinarius last year to have their pear and cheese raviolini and I have to admit I would go back again for that too. Wild Boar ragu is another popular dish. And one of my favorite meals there last year were the antipasti we had to accompany a wine tasting. So it really depends on what you like but it is worth noting the different cooking styles because as I mentioned, if you do like your steak well done then the true authentic Bistecca alla Fiorentina may not be for you.

Must try dishes and where to taste them

So that leads me on to a question both Lesley and Tori wanted the answer to.

What are the food items you MUST try in each city? (Obviously you can stick to the main ones.) Bonus if you share the best place to get it as well.

Well that is a question! And in fact we do plan to address this in a lot more detail for each of the major places people visit in Italy. But a quick run down for you:

In Florence you'll want to try the dishes mentioned earlier so Bistecca alla Fiorentina, and wild boar ragu with parpadelle pasta. Vegetarians may prefer a hearty soup called ribollita

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made with bread and cannellini beans but do check whether any meat stock has been used in the preparation.. You'll find these dishes in the traditional restaurants I mentioned earlier and which I'll put in the show notes

If you like cake then make sure to try Schiacciata Fiorentina which is a yeast cake flavored with orange that you can find at the pasticcerie all over town.

For Rome you can check out episode 29 [Rome's must try dishes and where to eat them](#) where I dished the dirt on the best pasta - Cacio e Pepe, Alla Gricia and Carbonara are the main sauces in Rome. I always mention Roscioli Salumeria because you can try good versions there but in episode 17 local Erica Firpo shared [Luciano Cucina Italiana](#) and the chef there is known as the King of Carbonara. You must try Roman pizza because it is very different to the pizza in Naples for example. And a great place to do that is Pizzarium near the Vatican. If you have a sweet tooth then the maritozzo is a sweet bun filled with cream. It's decadent but of course delicious.

In Venice the cuisine is very much centered around the sea so you'll want to try fish and seafood dishes as well as the bar snacks known as cicchetti which are actually some of my favorites. Just little bites, each bacaro or bar has their own selection which usually include crostini or bread toasts with toppings. It's definitely the done thing to go from bar to bar having a sip and a nibble. One of my favorite stops is the Osteria Al Squero which not only has tasty and very reasonably priced cicchetti but you can eat outside with your spritz and observe the goings on in the gondola workshop across the way.

When it comes time for dessert then you'll be wanting to try the tiramisu in Venice. This delicious cakey creamy dessert is actually quite a modern dish that originated in this region. You can try a few different versions if you're keen at I Tre Mercanti.

So that was a super quick run down for the top 3 cities. You may have noticed that I always ask my guests about the local cuisine so if you check out the episodes of places you want to go we always include a food and wine section. To be honest, it is one of my major motivations for travel so I endeavour to only find and share the best!

The key is though, do your research and be open minded but don't feel like you have to have the Florentine steak or a white truffle dish just because it's written about as a must try. If it's not your thing, move onto something else. Food in Italy is incredible, the challenge is really fitting it all in. But like I said, each of these cities and indeed all of the areas in Italy deserve their own food episode because they are so unique and reliant on local produce. So don't worry, it will be my absolute pleasure to cover all that off for you!

OK the next couple of questions were about the style of travel people are wanting to undertake in Italy and they are all great questions

Travel with kids in Italy

Ashley asked

Which is the most kid friendly city in Italy and why?

And I will give you a definitive answer, or maybe 2 - haha - but overall, I have to say that Italy is a very kid friendly place to travel. Our twins are now 7 and have been on the road for most of their lives all around the world - well over 20 countries - and I can honestly say that Italy is one of the easiest places to travel as a family. That's because Italians love kids and will help you at restaurants, on trains ... everywhere. I discussed this with my friend Marta who is originally from Rome but now lives in Ireland on episode 25 - How to travel in Italy with kids - so there's lots of tips there..

But in answer to your question, I believe from the top 3 cities in Italy that Venice takes the cake when it comes to travel with kids - with the caveat that it applies when they are out of the toddler phase. Venice is full of wonder and it is car free. It is safe to roam and enjoy its incredible beauty on foot.. Traipsing from one campo or piazza to the next, stopping for gelato, having a gondola ride, riding vaporetto 1 up and down the grand canal, or just playing in a square. You can visit the fish market and check out the produce.

You can head out to the outer lagoon and visit colorful Burano where there is even a playground or rent an electric boat and enjoy the peace and quiet of the shallows where there are flocks of flamingoes! If you have teenagers or tweens they might enjoy kayaking back in Venice. Even the food - the cicchetti I mentioned earlier is bite sized and great for children. Have you noticed I have not mentioned a single museum or church! Well obviously Venice has them in abundance and we always try to include some of those activities in our itineraries but there are so many things to do in Venice apart from the cultural aspects which is why it is my favorite city in Italy for kids.

If you are not heading up to Venice then Lucca in Tuscany is also amazing. This walled city has turned its battlements into a lovely park. You can rent bikes and ride around the wall or walk and it's just lovely. And Lucca also has excellent connections to Florence and Pisa.. I cannot recommend it highly enough and would choose to stay there over Florence if we were going as a family because Florence has quite a bit of traffic and not so much green space in the central historic district.

So they are my two picks for kid friendly cities and I'll also have a think about other family friendly information we can talk about on the show as this question comes up a bit. But really, if you are thinking about going as a family, don't hesitate. Italy really is one of the world's most family friendly destinations

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Solo travel in Italy

Another type of traveller that we'll be sharing more information for are our solo female travelers.

Hillary asked

What is it like to travel solo as a single girl in Italy? I'll be visiting alone and I've heard it can get a little iffy for people like me.

Now it's been a while since we've traveled solo anywhere actually so I do feel like we need to bring some women in who have recent experience of solo travel in Italy. And we will do that. But what I will say is that when I have traveled solo in Italy I have felt the same, if not safer, than London, Melbourne or other places I have lived or visited.

As a solo traveler you're on a heightened state of awareness usually and are careful not to go out alone at night in areas that aren't well lit or populated. Which no doubt is how you would behave at home. If you stick by those rules then Italy is fun and a great place to travel on your own. In the big cities there are the usual annoyances you find in cities all over the world so just make sure you do your research on where to stay and keep away from the seedier parts of towns.

These days there are some incredible and creative hostels with private rooms so you can have your privacy but still enjoy company in the evenings if that interests you. A popular one is the Beehive in Rome and I believe they organise tours and excursions in the city. Speaking of tours, one of my best solo travel tips is to take a food tour. If you want an evening with some non committal conversation over dinner with fellow travelers then this is a great way to get out and about at night safely. Often I've met great friends this way and it's lots of fun.

Or, you could go to dinner on your own and be swept off your feet like my friend Holly did when she arrived in Capri on her own.. Magic like that just seems to happen in Italy for some reason

Anyway Hillary, I want to get you a more in depth answer on this so stay tuned for a future episode on this topic featuring someone who has done this more recently.

Wow they were some great questions and I haven't managed to answer all of them or do them all the justice they need unfortunately. But what it has done is given us a lot of great ideas for future episodes and things to plan for in the coming months. So grazie, thank you all for your wonderful questions and keep them coming.

Situation in Italy

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Before I sign off, I wanted to give a quick update on the situation in Italy. As you may be aware cases of covid are increasing rapidly across the country and special measures are in place to try to curb the spread. Mask wearing is mandatory in all public spaces both inside and outside, curfews are in place and restaurants are required to close after 6pm.

So I guess the situation there right now is not great for travel even if we could get there. We're sending all our thoughts to everyone over there and lots of love and best wishes. This is not an easy time at all. But one thing I do know is that all your kind words and support lifts their spirits and if I'm honest when I focus on being positive it lifts mine too. This situation is not forever. We don't know when we will be able to realise our dream trips to Italy but it will happen. I am sure of it.

Don't forget to watch out for our special announcement here on the podcast in the coming days, in the Italy Travel Planning community on Facebook and also on email. If you're a subscriber to the podcast on Apple or Stitcher or Spotify you'll be alerted of the special episode on Sunday. I am so excited about this as I know it will help keep your dreams of Italy soaring no matter the season.

In the meantime, stay safe and positive, ciao for now!