

# Untold Italy Episode 51 - Christmas in Rome and Italy

[00:00:00.060] - Katy

You are listening to the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and this is episode number 51.

[00:00:13.110] - Josie

Ciao and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, I'm Josie.

[00:00:16.230] - Katy

And I'm Katy, and we're here to help you plan your trip to Italy.

[00:00:20.040] - Josie

Between us, we have many years of travel experience and we want to help you uncover your own as yet untold stories and adventures in Italy.

[00:00:28.110] - Katy

Each episode, you'll hear practical advice, tips and ideas to help you plan your own trips to the magical land of history, stunning landscapes and a whole lot of pasta. We'll have interviews from experts and focus on local destinations and frequently asked questions about travel in Italy.

[00:00:44.070] - Katy

Thanks for listening and make sure to subscribe to our show.

[00:00:47.160] - Josie

Now let's get started on your regular dose of Bella Italia.

[00:01:04.910] - Katy

Ciao Untold amici! Ciao friends! Are you starting to feel a little bit Christmassy? It's Katy here with our Christmas episode that will hopefully start getting those festive feelings happening, if you're not quite in the mood already.

[00:01:16.790] - Katy

Before we get started on that, I wanted to make sure you heard all about our give away to celebrate 50 episodes of the Untold Italy podcast. We partnered up with some of our favorite people in Italy and around the world to offer you over 20 prizes worth more than two thousand dollars. You can win a gorgeous print of the Island of Burano, a Sorrento food tour for two, and a travel consult with our Sicily expert, Karen La Rosa. Plus much more.

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[00:01:45.080] - Katy

The giveaway is open to people from around the world. So you can enter if you're in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. Oslo, in Norway and Parramatta in New South Wales. Australia. The give away closes on the 17th of December and will make the draw before Christmas parade. Hoorah! Gifting is one of my favorite things and that's why I wanted to talk about it on this week's episode. I love Christmas or Natale as it is known in Italy. Christmas is my favorite holiday of the year and of course it is a very important holiday in Italy being a Catholic country and the seat of the church in Rome. Today, I've invited writer Maria Pasquale onto the show to tell us about how Christmas is celebrated in Italy. Maria is a fellow Australian who usually spends most of the year in Rome. She's in Melbourne at the moment, but she's lived in Rome for almost 10 years and writes a wonderful blog called Heart Room, where she shares stories of the Eternal City.

[00:02:42.830] - Katy

I Heart Rome is also the name of her first book, which shares her favorite recipes and stories from the city she loves the most. So let's welcome Maria onto the show to tell us all about Christmas traditions in Rome and Italy, we may be able to enjoy ourselves in the future. I hope so. Ciao, Benvenuto Maria, and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

[00:03:03.580] - Maria

Thank you so much, Katy. Thanks for having me.

[00:03:05.900] - Katy

Oh, I'm very excited to have you here Maria. I mentioned to our listeners that you're an author who up until very recently lived in Rome and still wants to live there. Can you tell us what brought you there and why you're so passionate about Rome and Italy in general?

[00:03:20.680] - Maria

It's always so hard to say in a few words, but I've lived in Rome, like you said, for the last nine years. I moved there in 2011 and it's been said on the record probably a million times. I'd say now but my parents were born in Italy, so I'm born to two Italian parents in Melbourne and my grandparents, my paternal grandparents never emigrated. So we as kids in Australia had a very strong connection, you know, perhaps a little stronger than those whose entire families had had come over.

[00:03:53.020] - Maria

I remember recording videos of Merry Christmas and in Italian and being forced to speak Italian on on video - VHS in the 80s. I won't give away my age, but we had very strong ties to Italy because my dad's parents were always there. So we traveled there as kids a few times. And then I think when I was about 16, I was at such an impressionable age. And, you know, you're starting to navigate your way through the world. And one of those trips to Italy was one where I fell in love with the place. And I mean, I literally became infatuated with the culture, the people, the language, you know, how different it was to Australia. And I always thought,

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I'm going to live here one day. And it took me quite a few years. But I moved there in 2011 and I love Rome for many reasons. And so it is super hard not being there at the moment.

[00:04:45.050] - Katy

It's your one true love, isn't it - Rome? I read that somewhere.

[00:04:48.500] - Maria

It is. It is. I do. I say, you know, Rome - it has this unique ability to make you fall in love with it and then be completely frustrated and infuriated with her and then fall in love all again. And that can happen in the space of a minute. So it is very unique. But I do. It is. It's like a love affair I think. Like I said, you know, sometimes you want to call it quits, sometimes it's forever. And then, you know, it has its ups and downs. I always do use that that metaphor. I guess that it really is. But for me, it has been it's been the one truly great love of my life. And it is an unconditional love. You kind of you don't accept the bad, but you take the good with the bad and you just go with it.

[00:05:31.400] - Katy

Wonderful. And now I know that you love the city in any season. But as it's December, I wanted to ask you what Rome is like at Christmas time.

[00:05:41.510] - Maria

Oh, it's wonderful. I mean, as an Australian like you, you know, we've grown up with it. You know, I often my Northern Hemisphere friends often ask me what Christmas is like in Australia when I'm in Italy because even my American friends I mean, it's like, you know, people kind of can't believe that we almost spray fake snow on things. I mean, you know, here in Melbourne today, it's like almost 30 degrees. We have very strange weather in summer, very inconsistent. But, you know, it's often so hot. So for me, December is it's always a switch in the brain to, you know, oh, it's getting towards Christmas, but, you know, it's starting to get colder. Rome is you know, it doesn't snow in Rome at Christmas or anything like that. So we don't usually experience a white Christmas. It snowed there a few years ago for the first time in, like, you know, 40 or 50 years. So it's quite mild in that we're just quite fortunate. You still kind of get some really beautiful days. You know, it obviously gets busy. This year will be very different. 2020 is not a great year to kind of look at what Christmas is going to be like in Rome, because it's obviously not going to be what it usually is.

[00:06:45.410] - Maria

But, you know, like any big city in the world, it's busy. There's that that thrill of Christmas shopping streets, lights come on down all the major streets. Via del Corso, Via dei Condotti - they put up a big tree in Piazza Venezia, which has been controversial over the past few years because they've had a tree that kind of put up and then it died and then they had to put a new one. There's always something typically Roman going on at Christmas.

[00:07:12.830] - Katy

Aww. I think the decorations and the care and attention they put into all the shops is just lovely. We've been several times in November, but we haven't actually been there for Christmas. But they start those decorations really early, don't they?

[00:07:26.280] - Maria

They do, and that's been, I think, I'd have to say that's been a thing of the past few years because historically they didn't. You know, I remember like in Australia, I've got, again, friends in the U.K. or in America. I mean, you know, you say Christmas things here in October or November. And that has never been the case up until recently because of that infiltration of American and foreign culture, which has happened all around the world, because traditionally in Italy, the Christmas decorations and you at home put your Christmas tree up on the 8th of December.

[00:07:56.440] - Katy

Right.

[00:07:57.690] - Maria

A little later than what we're used to, perhaps, like I said, in Australia or America. But this year, again, anything goes. And I've seen and over the past few years, the lights in Via dei Condotti, for instance, in Rome are already up. And I'll unveil the tree in Piazza Venezia or the one in Piazza San Pietro in front of the Vatican that I haven't heard different for this year, but usually that's unveiled on the 8th of December. So the fiesta de la Inmaculada.

[00:08:23.610] - Katy

Oh, OK. And is there anything else that goes along with that fiesta? Or is that is that literally the festival of putting up the Christmas tree?

[00:08:31.360] - Maria

It's the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. So, again, we know, while not everybody's practicing Catholic, you know, it's a relatively Catholic country. It's the seat of the Catholic Church. So, you know, these feast days are always historically and also culturally important, even if you're not that religious yourself. The nativity scene as well that comes up in St. Peter's Square. So each year the tree and the Nativity scene is donated by a parish from another region. I think it was Alto-Adige last year from memory. But don't quote me on that, even though we are recording. And the past couple of years, the tree, in Piazza Venezia has been sponsored by Netflix. So Netflix Italia have paid for that. So what else happens on that day? I mean, it is a national holiday and it's a day for family and friends, like I said, usually family to be at home and to put the tree up together.

[00:09:27.970] - Katy

Oh, lovely. I'll bet there's some yummy treats that they eat as well are their particular foods I like to eat of that time of year?

[00:09:34.960] - Maria

They do. I mean, in Rome, you know, the traditional Christmas treats are the Pangiallo, which, you know, again, they've got all these 'Pan' words, right? So it's panettone, which, you know, most people know about. But Panettone is from Milan, even though nowadays I mean, not only is it eaten across Italy, it's across eaten across the world. You also have Panforte, which is from Siena traditionally, but again, found all over Italy. And Panforte is that, you know, listeners that might not know it's, you know, this like round cake filled with fruit and nuts and some spices. The traditional Roman one dates back to Roman times is the Panpepato, which translates literally to spiced bread. Pepato is obviously pepper. So and it does have pepper in it, even though it is a sweet dish or delicacy. I mean, it's a cake. Again, it's similar, very similar to the Panforte it's filled with fruits and nuts and spices, but it's quite heavily spiced. So that's kind of very popular in central Italy as the Pangiallo sorry is. So the Panpepato and Pangiallo are the more central regions, traditional Christmas cakes. So what we would consider perhaps in Australia or the UK as a Christmas pudding. That's what you have in Italy at this time of year.

[00:10:52.870] - Katy

And would you buy them at the Forno at the bakery, or is that something you'd make at home?

[00:10:57.430] - Maria

You can I mean, look, I'm sure people do make it at home, but nowadays, I mean, it is something that you can, look you can buy these obviously you can buy commercially produced ones at supermarkets. They're easy to find all over Italy. The bakery, which I love and the pasticceria, especially around the seasons, things like Easter or, you know, now we're talking about Christmas, but those sorts of festivities are just really beautiful in Italy because you start noticing in the weeks leading up to these festivities, you know, you recognize those smells and aromas from the Forno and the Pasticceria.

[00:11:30.910] - Maria

I confess, I'm no, well, I never grew up as a Panettone lover. We always had Panettone at Christmas in our Italian household here in Australia. But I never loved it. I mean, it was always that commercially packaged Panettone. Often that would be the ones imported from Italy. They were great, but I was just 'eh' - a bit dry. I'm not a huge lover of that kind of - I'm a huge sweet tooth, but I love cream and custard and chocolate, so Panettone was never my favorite thing. But living in Italy and having tasted those Panettone that come fresh out of the oven at a bakery, which you can't find here in Australia, you don't really walk into a bakery and find a Panettone coming out of the oven. But in Italy, you do they're home made, you know, with age old recipes. And that, I have to say, has been a bit of a different experience. So I'm like I can actually say that I do like Panettonne now.

[00:12:18.280] - Katy

Oh, and is there a special bakery or Fono or Pasticceria that you recommend in Rome that makes a really good one or has a good experience for Christmas?

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[00:12:29.230] - Maria

My yeah, my favorite pasticceria. I mean it's going to be a very biased answer. I live in Trastevere on the left bank of the river in Rome. And so the bakeries that I usually head to are in that area. So there is Pasticceria Valzani in Trastevere, which is a pasticceria that's been there, I think, since the 1920s.

[00:12:49.870] - Maria

They've very well known for their chocolate handmade chocolates on site. So all of their chocolate creations. And again, we're talking about Christmas, but at Easter, it's also not to be missed because of those Italian Easter egg creations. And you can go in and even, you know, mothers go in and leave gifts for the chocolate makers to fill their eggs for their children with, which is a gorgeous tradition that they make the Panpepato and Pangiallo which you can purchase that there. You can taste it there. I also love their, and do a shout out to Biscottificio Innocenti, which is in Trastevere. And this is a, you know, the kind of in English it's so referenced as a cookie house. We don't use the word cookie in Australia, but it's more than biscotti. And some other sweets as well said they make, Stefania makes a wonderful Panettone each year and then my pasticceria, which is on Via Del Natale del Grande in Trastevere and her name is Signora Vera. And I can't even think of the name of the Pasticceria because we just it doesn't even almost have a name, I think it's Pasticceria Mater, but these are all probably on my blog or somewhere like that. Most people that follow me know the places I go to. Rome is full of these family, you know, some of them are dying unfortunately, these family run Bottega or, you know, food stores. But there is still - a lot of these gems are still there. You just have to look a little harder for them.

[00:14:14.250] - Katy

Yeah, that's the sad thing, isn't it? And I hope especially during 2020, I think it's going to be especially hard for them. So when we all managed to go back there, we really need to support these businesses. Very much so.

[00:14:25.950] - Maria

Especially like the ones, you know, the small ones that have been there forever. I think that these Romans, especially in my neighborhood who worked tirelessly to kind of protect and hold on to these traditions quite fiercely, and they do need our support. So on a good day, let alone at the moment.

[00:14:42.450] - Katy

Yeah, right. I know a lot of our listeners do love to stay Trastevere. So I'm sure they would just need to take notes and we'll definitely share Maria's blog and all and her wonderful book that I mentioned in the introduction. So Maria, so after the 8th what happens then. So you have 8th December - you have Immacolata then what happens in the build up to Christmas?

[00:15:05.790] - Maria

In the build up to Christmas. Not not much. I think you know, you say nativity scenes and lights just start to come on in each of the neighborhoods in Rome. So each quartiere will usually have some sort of display across the streets. Some shops will privately do their own decorations and garlands and all those sorts of things. You have some areas of the city. So around the Trident luxury shopping district of the center, you've had a number of the streets there that have street trade associations who work together to come up with a theme and put up lights. So a lot of the big designer fashion houses are the ones that people wait for, you know, like Fendi, Valentino each year obviously, they have this spectacular choreographed set of lights and a light show that comes up. I just saw the Fendi lights yesterday. So the Fendi store, which is in Largo Carlo Goldoni. which is the intersection of Via del Condotti and Via del Corso. So, you know, the building is so beautiful that they use that as - they've often dressed it up as a gift. So has a big digital light ribbon wrapped around it and all those sorts of things. The entire street, of Via del Corso lights up. And so again, 2020, I'm sure is going to be different. There are a number of restrictions in place. The country is in a form of it's not a national lockdown, but at least in Lazio, there is a 10 - all across the country. There's a 10:00 p.m. curfew at the moment. So I know that people are not going to be able to enjoy the evening stroll of looking at the Christmas lights this year. But, you know, they'll be shopping, obviously, in some of the areas that there are less stringent restrictions for covid at the moment. Some shops are still open. So there'll be some of that going on. And then obviously it leads to the 24th, which is Vigilia di Natale - Christmas Eve, which is important, and Christmas Day and Christmas, I have to say, in Italy it really is, as it is everywhere, but I think I don't know, I found in Australia that even our Christmases as an Italian Australian family, the stress and the pressure of the the cooking and the shopping and making sure everything's perfect and having sometimes, you know, some households, here will have 10 people or twenty or fifty people over Christmas, extended family. I find that it's a much more intimate affair in Italy and perhaps even, it's cold everyone's kind o- f families are usually in their own homes. They've sort of moved a little towards, you know, a number of restaurants in Rome will be open - well they have been in the past, but again, this year is different.

[00:17:42.150] - Maria

I might maybe mention some of the accounts to follow in Rome over this period. You know, like Rome wise, my friend Elyssa Bernard, who does a great job of keeping everyone updated on what's going on on the ground. Gillian's list is Gillian McGuire and Natalie Kennedy at an American in Rome who are currently in Rome. I'm not there myself at the moment, unfortunately. So, you know, they do a wonderful job at keeping people updated as to what's going on. Elyssa at Romewise really does a great seasonal update on her blog each year. So you could have a look there and it's usually what's going on at Christmas, what's going on at Easter, what's going on for the fall and spring, you know, so this year will be a little different. But I think Christmas is it really is so much more about family midnight mass, unfortunately, this year, again, something that I believe I haven't read what's going on - I follow the Italian news every day, there have been no announcements, as I understand it, about curfews being lifted. So I believe that midnight mass is going to look a little different and perhaps be, you know, take place at a different time. I don't know what's going to happen next though. 2020!

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[00:18:47.730] - Katy

It is, everything's up for grabs.

[00:18:50.350] - Maria

Exactly right.

[00:18:51.730] - Katy

But is it a very special thing to go to midnight mass even if you are not particularly religious?

[00:18:58.380] - Maria

It is and especially away from the big city. That's not to say that people don't go to midnight mass in the city, but in the regional towns and the villages, you know, church and community have such a strong tie. And it really is like I said, the church is such an integral part of so many of these towns, and it's super important for people to have that connection to their faith. And like I said, even if it's not because you're a practicing Catholic in Italy, it's so embedded in the culture.

[00:19:31.590] - Katy

Absolutely. Christmas is very special in Italy because, as you say, the customs and traditions and also the type of gifts you can buy, because I found some very beautiful things actually in Naples. But I was wondering, like I'm sure of this, some beautiful artisan made goods that you can find in Rome, that it makes perfect gifts. There are. And I think, you know, last Christmas I brought home especially and they were food gifts. And I think the food gifts are always lovely gifts.

[00:20:00.770] - Maria

So the Pangiallo and the Panpepato, I mean, that's something that's really typically Roman. There are a number of stores where you can get ornaments that, you know, the depictions of, whether it be the Colosseum or Saint Peter's, which is a little bit of a tourist gift, those sorts of things. But I think the nativity scene you mentioned Naples and this sort of stuff can be bought across Italy. But Naples in particular is really renowned for being that nativity scene, the city of Italy people. And like I said, on a normal year, people will travel Naples right from the end of November. I mean, these sorts of Christmas activities, pieces can be bought in Naples all year round. There are a number of streets in the center that have, you know, they displays right through the year, but especially at this time of year. It's such a popular spot for Christmas lovers and the north part of Italy where all the Christmas markets, the closer you get to Switzerland and Germany, you know, the north part of Italy has this wonderful tradition of Christmas markets and drinking mulled wine and walking through with all the beautiful lights and usually a bit of snow as well. The further north up you go.

[00:21:09.540] - Katy

It's so pretty, isn't it? I think everyone sort of expects those markets to happen in Switzerland or Germany or but they also happen in the north of Italy, which is very, very beautiful. Up in those Dolomites mountains.

[00:21:23.430] - Maria

Yeah, they do, especially around that area. And it is, it's just such a charming part of Italy. And you have all those chalets and, you know, the snowcapped roofs. And it's it's beautiful. Especially for us. Like I said, we're so used to a hot and hot Australian Christmas - so the dream of the white Christmas is always something magical.

[00:21:43.110] - Katy

It really is. It's it's it's hard to explain to people that have never been through a hot Christmas. But for me as well, I'm sure it's kind of weird. It is an adjustment because Christmas to us is warm. But then you still want magic. Absolutely. I always say Italians kind of laugh when I say to them, because Italy, you know, the pressure that you might feel is usually the August because that in Italy kind of represents almost the end of a year in the beginning of a new one. Right. So, you know, the lead up to the August holidays is like, OK, well, we haven't had time to catch up. We'll see you in September. OK, we'll see you in September. That's like that's our we'll catch up in January because we've got.. And now I say to them, imagine you've got the heat of August and add Christmas to it. And I kind of look at me and say, OK, well, now I get it, because it is I think that's why we have this. Christmas is always such a, in a beautiful way, but it's always kind of so stressful because it's the end of the year and it's Christmas and it's also usually stinking hot. So you're kind of doing this, you know, everything and all this running around with the sun and it's a bit crazy. So I think I'd prefer a Christmas, to be honest.

[00:22:53.600] - Katy

Yeah I know. I think it is beautiful. And yeah, it's definitely something to experience at least once in your lifetime if you haven't haven't done that before. Now, I know that generally speaking, in normal times, as you mentioned, there's a lot of restaurants are closed because it is such a big family time. So I know I've had a few readers ask me, is it worth going at Christmas time? And I would say, yes, absolutely, because of all the beautiful lights you've mentioned and all of those things. But there are restaurants that are open up there and they're not necessarily - but it's not maybe not what you'd expect.

[00:23:29.010] - Maria

Yeah, absolutely, I mean, you know, looking at a large number of Romans you can speak mainly to Rome is that they will go out for Christmas lunch, you know, not so much for dinner. I mean, it's you know, lunch is more the important part of the of that festive, festive day. And there are, you know, and like I said, you know, one only needs to look at some of the local bloggers and websites that talk about what's on in the city to to see what. I mean there are a couple of places I know - Flavio al Velavevodetto - restaurant in Testaccio, which is another wonderful trattoria that serves, you know, real classic Roman cuisine. I mean, they

are open 365 days a year. So even on all the national holidays, they are open. And I think my suggestion would be for anyone that's going over at Christmas, perhaps next year or the year later is to, just plan a little in advance, keep an eye on some local sites and local journalists or bloggers in the city who are usually doing those sorts of posts at this time of year. Like I said, on a normal year, you know, they're probably doing a little bit more of that and indicating what's on/what's open. But I think it's a wonderful time of year. I definitely wouldn't avoid it. The monuments, it's wonderful to be walking around without the beating heat of July and August. I think that Christmas is a wonderful time to travel through Rome. You still get really nice weather. You know, it does rain quite a lot in the city over winter. But, you know, sometimes we're blessed with really blue skies and gorgeous days. And it's just it's a perfect time of year to see all the lights, exhibitions and usually on. And the museums and Rome, I think is a wonderful destination at any time of year. And that's not just because I love the city. I'm sure most people would agree.

[00:25:10.800] - Katy

Absolutely. But it's also not so busy is it? So you've got a more of a local feel rather than.

[00:25:17.460] - Maria

Yeah, I think so. I mean, look, it does it does get busy with a lot of European and domestic travel. And so, you know, Italians move a lot usually, like I said, on a usual year, Italians travel from north to south, south to north. People are going home to family. People are taking that weekend off or whatever days they fall on, because you do get the Christmas Day in Santo Stefano, which is Boxing Day in Italy.

[00:25:44.970]

And so it's often make a weekend of it. So it is busy, but it's not. Yeah, I mean, it's not July, but I think that Christmas is still a relatively, you know, the holidays usually. And any time there's a national holiday, even if it's a religious feast day throughout the year, is often a busy time of year, especially in the cities.

[00:26:02.250] - Katy

And also some of the places are closed aren't they? So you've got - apart from the restaurants - that many of them closed. But you also the Colosseum is definitely closed on Christmas Day, I believe, and also the Vatican museums, obviously, because it's the very the most important day.

[00:26:18.900] - Maria

That's right. And again, I would guess that would be my any other recommendation is just to check those opening hours and, you know, opening and closing times, because there are some things that will be closed just over that period, you know, those public holidays. So it'd be Christmas and Boxing Day, but everything else, you know, everything else is relatively open. And then the other national holiday that is relevant to the Christmas and holiday period is the 6th of January, which is the epiphany - and where Italians celebrate the Befana, which is the friendly Italian witch who brings gifts to all the children who have behaved well and coal. And

you I mean, she's the female Italian equivalent to Santa Claus and coal for the children that haven't behaved well and presents, like I said, for those who have. And so a lot of Italians will also meet and lunch together on the 6th of January. It's usually the day. I mean, it's traditionally and historically the day that you exchange gifts. Nowadays, you know, kids will get given their gifts on Christmas Day in the twenty fifth. But that doesn't mean that they don't receive anything on the six. That is traditionally the day. Look, my dad, when he was growing up in Italy, you didn't receive your gifts on the twenty fifth. You had to wait until the sixth of January.

[00:27:34.380] - Katy

OK, good to know. If you're going over there you may need to bring two sets of gifts.

[00:27:40.860] - Maria

That's correct. That's right. Double the fun and double the expense. But also a day to note, that it's another national public holiday. So it's just a reminder that if you're there over that period, just to get informed online/through your contacts about what's open and what's not.

[00:27:59.460] - Katy

Totally. But I think, you know, the beauty about Rome is that so much of it is just about walking around and enjoying the city that's been there for so many years, like thousands and thousands of years.

[00:28:10.830] - Maria

It's so cliché or been said so many times, but it really is an open air museum. And so especially now where people that live in the city are suffering because of that, losing that creative vein almost. You know, where the cinemas are closed, the museums, exhibitions are off, all of that sort of stuff is closed at the moment, but thankfully, just a walk around Rome can kind of fill you with that, you know, artistic inspiration and, you know, it's such a beautiful, architecturally diverse city. From the ruins to the monuments to the squares and the piazza. And there really is something to look at from every angle and every corner you turn.

[00:28:50.830] - Katy

Do you have a particular walk that you like to do that just makes you feel like you're in Rome. Your special part of Rome?

[00:28:58.030] - Maria

Yeah, I do. Look, Trastevere, if I may, is it's an area of the city I didn't want to live in initially when I moved to Rome because I wanted to live in, the center - Trastevere is the center of Rome but I wanted to live like in the historical center. There are a couple of other neighborhoods that I preferred at the time, but an apartment came up there and the rest is history, as they say. And I really would recommend a walk around Trastevere, especially during the day, because it has this beautiful spirit and sense of community and it's - any kind of postcard you look up of Rome or cobblestone streets and narrow alleyways. I mean, that's

Travestere it's one of the most picturesque and charming parts of the city. You'll find a Fiat 500 parked on the street somewhere or a vespa and it's you know, at night, it kind of comes alive with Romans and tourists coming and finding places to eat and drink and kind of spend the Roman nights. But like I said during the day, you know, you'd often forget that you're in a big city in some of those streets and little nooks around the neighborhood, which I just love, you know, for the hanging ivy when the weather is when the weather's good.

[00:30:04.870]

And also, I think for me, when I've come home from a trip and I don't feel like I'm in Rome unless I've driven through Piazza Venezia. You pass the big white monument to Victor Emmanuel II. A lot of people know it is the wedding cake or the big white typewriter but I just I kind of drive through that - i will be in a taxi or car and you just drive through and I think, OK, I know I'm home because it's you know, it's so imposing and big. It kind of polarizes Romans because some love it and some hate it. But it just doesn't feel like I'm in Rome until I've driven through that piazza. And it's crazy - there's traffic and the, you know, the Vigile who's with his whistle blowing, you know, like letting cars through and letting it's a bit crazy. It's chaotic and beautiful, just like Rome.

[00:30:47.260] - Katy

I love it! I've never actually heard someone say that about it. You're unique - it's awesome. Yeah, it's really different. I mean, I really like it, too, because, of course, when you go up the top, you've got that spectacular view as well of, you know, the old and the new city all around you. It's a really. Yeah, it's an iconic place. But a lot of people will gravitate more towards more classic things like the Colosseum or the Pantheon or something or St. Peter's. What !! love it.

[00:31:17.170] - Maria

Well, in terms of monuments, the pantheon for me is just, you know, that's probably my favorite, I think, you know, for me Piazza Venezia is - i actually quite like it, but it's not so much because of the beauty, I think it's the feeling that you have when you drive through, because it's just this hub of where everything comes together. So you've got the buses, the, you know, the cars, the Vesper's driving past, you've got peopl trying to cross the street. It's just this chaotic, beautiful mess that, you know, like I said for me, represents Rome. And it's like OK I'm home now. I'm back.!!!

[00:31:51.520] - Katy

Oh, wow. And what about the Pantheon? Because it's my favorite building as well, but around that area. Do they do anything? Do they decorate the piazza just in front of the pantheon at all?

[00:32:01.880] - Maria

Oh, look, other than the shops that are in that, you know, there's like that little Salumeria. There's a few little places in the Via Della Rotonda, which is the square where the pantheon sits. I mean, you know, some of those restaurants and bars, so many of those in the center

will put up garlands and lights, you know, all those fairy lights. So at night, it kind of comes alive and it feels a bit Christmassy. But no, there's nothing in particular, like I said, other than Piazza Venezia. Where else in Rome? Piazza Venezia, Piazza San Pietro, like I said, the Vatican, I mean, all the streets in Trastevere around where I live. I mean, all of those streets come alive and every year it's different. So one year it's stars and one year it's angels on Via de Condotti, the past couple of years, I think - is it Warner Brothers? I was going to say Disney. So I won't do any brand promotion for them. They won't be impressed, but it was one of them. I think it was just Looney Tunes. I think it's Warner Brothers. I had like Daffy Duck and all of that. So, you know, which was great for families because you kind of wait until the lights come up to see what display is on this year. But around the monuments, no, there aren't any not around the Pantheon. Not that I can think.

[00:33:09.220] - Katy

Well, they probably don't really need it. It's so atmospheric anyway, isn't it?

[00:33:12.880] - Maria

Absolutely. Yeah, that's what they are. I'm sure that's what I when I did, I would say, no, we don't need that. The Pantheon stands alone and it does it doesn't need any extra bells and whistles.

[00:33:23.020] - Katy

Oh, that sounds amazing. Now, I do have a question? So if you were round there, just before Christmas Eve, because, you know, people like to go and see these Christmas lights, I know I do. I'm a big fan and let's face it, usually they do them very well. If you have one perfect day to spend just before Christmas to do your Christmas shopping and get everything organized. How would you spend that day in Rome?

[00:33:46.590] - Maria

How would I spend it? So breakfast may be at Roscioli Caffè, on Via dei Giubbonari not far from Campo de' Fiori. So I love maritozzo, which is the Roman sponge. Sorry, sponge with cream filled, I should say. So I can't get my words out. I would start off with that. I'm not a coffee drinker, so everyone always freaks out when I say I don't drink coffee but go and grab a coffee because I'm sure that's what everybody else in the world does. So I would start off there and walk through perhaps some of those, you know, like Campo de' Fiori and get that it's kind of changed in that it's not just the locals shopping at Campo de' Fiori. I mean, historically, it's one of the biggest and oldest markets in the center. But I think a walk around there and just really getting lost in those streets because you will find, not only the Christmas lights, but the shop displays. And it's a really beautiful feeling walking through the city.

[00:34:44.550] - Maria

Some of my favorite monuments. If you wanted to stay away from the bigger monuments, I think Janiculum hill, which is not far from Trastevere, is probably a great vantage point to look down at the city. And I think I always say that from there you could forgive all of Rome's flaws, because when you see the beauty and magnificence of it from up high, you really kind

of forget what the question is, because the domes of Rome and all of the colors, the light my favorite thing about Rome, the light! I think that getting to one of those vantage points and looking at the city gives you a bit of perspective and not just on the city, but on life. You know, it just makes you stop for a minute and and take it all in, because Rome is just, you know, this most beautiful place where the past and the present coexist. And when you have that feeling, it really is indescribable. So that's how I would spend a day in Rome, really just getting lost. And then, you know, again, like you said, you know, the the big piazzas with the magnificent monuments are not to be missed, I don't think, and especially at this time of year where.. Piazza Navona (is another one I should have mentioned earlier) where - and look this changes every year - but historically there has been a market there. So that usually starts from the 8th of December and it goes right through to the Befana, which is when they take down most of the Christmas decorations. So that's on the 6th of January. It was on last year. So there's usually a carousel and a little merry go round and you can get fairy floss for the kids and all that sort of stuff. So that's another one. But again, you have to kind of check all the local ads to see whether things are on or off. But, you know, a walk through the market. The Christmas markets through the city is another beautiful thing to do at this time of year. That's what I would do.

[00:36:33.180] - Katy

And where would you go for dinner?

[00:36:35.460] - Maria

Where would I go for dinner? So if I wanted to have just classic Roman cuisine, my favorite trattoria in Rome is Da Enzo in Trastevere. Alternatively, for fine dining, I love Glass Hostaria in Trastevere for something that's really contemporary. I love Retrobottega - the guys there are doing a wonderful job at bringing new flavors and some ingredients that people don't often see on Roman menus together. And I should say that Glass and Retrobottega - like many restaurants in the city and like restaurants around the world who have had to pivot this year are doing wonderful things online in terms of delivery, dine at home and all of that sort of. I just saw an ad this morning for Glass, which is a one Michelin star restaurant, and they will be doing dine at home for Christmas. So they like leave it to us and we'll prepare your Christmas lunch so people could check that out for more information. If people are in Rome and staying in apartments. But I know that there is not going to be a huge number of foreign tourists in the city this year. But you never know.

[00:37:41.460] - Katy

Yeah, we don't know yeah. So hopefully next year! Maria, thank you for sharing your love of Rome and especially for this coming year.

[00:37:49.830] - Maria

You're welcome!

[00:37:49.830] - Katy

I know your descriptions will give our listeners some hope and inspiration. So perhaps they can visit next year and experience all those twinkling lights and the magic of the Eternal City at Christmas time. How can they all stay in touch with you in the meantime?

[00:38:03.990] - Maria

They can stay in touch via social media. I'm at Heart Rome on Instagram, Twitter and Heart Room Blog on Facebook, and my website is Heart Room Dot Com.

[00:38:13.530] - Katy

And I know you've got a new book coming out. So you want to tell us a little bit about that? Yes, I'm just a couple of weeks away from deadline for submitting the manuscript, so depending on when this goes to air. But the book is due out in October 2021. The book is called How to Be Italian, and it will be published by Smith Street Books. And for American followers or listeners. It will be distributed in the state by Rizzoli.

[00:38:38.910] - Maria

I believe my last book was Penguin in Canada. Anyway, you'll be able to find it in bookshops around the world. So How to Be Italian is a lifestyle book. My first book, I Heart Room, was just based on food, so it was about Roman food culture and Roman food recipes. And this book is a delve into the Italian psyche and character and identity. So it takes a look at how Italians live and how they eat, how they drink, how they dress, how they love, how they have fun and all of those other concepts that are so quintessentially Italian, you know, the aperitivo, the passeggiata, the dolce far niente. It's, you know, it's a beautiful celebration of what it means to be, again, for me, and especially at the moment, like we said, I think, you know, these beacons of hope are something that we're all drawn to. So I really hope that it's well received. And I know that there are so many lovers of Italy out there. So I've been receiving so many messages of support. And so it's just been very humbling.

[00:39:42.380] - Katy

Well, I think it's long overdue that book, because, you know, there's a lot of people celebrating everything that's good about being French. I know this because I like to read those, too. But everyone here knows that my heart is with Italians, but no, yeah, you're right. There is there is no book about that. And I'm very glad just celebrating. Wonderful!

[00:40:01.370] - Maria

And I always say - the Italian lifestyle is so -people are so enamored with it, you know, and it always seems like that the Italians are having this wonderful, cool, elusive party that only certain people get the invite to. And it's like everybody wants in, it's this untouchable kind of feeling. And so also very hard to put into words. But that's what I'm doing at the moment, drowning in words. And so it'll go to print in the next few months and will be out worldwide in October 2021. So I'm very happy to be able to write about the things that I love because I'm always just very grateful to be able to do that and share your love with people.

*Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes*

[00:40:42.020] - Katy

Well, that one's going to be just in time for Christmas next year, which is great.

[00:40:45.770] - Maria

That's right. The book cycle is always kind of focused towards American Thanksgiving and Christmas. So it is great. So hopefully this time next year when people don't know what to buy, they'll have something for their Italian friends and family and people that love Italy.

[00:41:02.930] - Katy

Yeah, and if you are looking for something this year, Maria's book room might also be the perfect gift that, as you mentioned, it's full of recipes and stories about the eternal city that will transport you there in a heartbeat. Maria Grazia, thank you so much for our chat today. We loved having you on the show. And we can't wait to get our hands on your new book and when it's released. Thank you.

[00:41:25.140] - Maria

Thank you so much, Katy. And Merry Christmas to you and your family.

[00:41:27.560] - Katy

Oh Buon Natale!

[00:41:30.050] - Maria

Thank you. Hope to see you in Italy soon too. Hopefully we can have a drink there or something.

[00:41:36.340] - Katy

One day I'll visit Rome at Christmas time. I absolutely adore the idea of the sparkling lights, colder days and nights and special baked goods from the pasticceria. Wouldn't it be magical? And while I think this Christmas is going to be different for many of us around the world, and especially in Italy, where the restrictions are going to be quite strict, there is always a message of hope at this time of year, and we can already see glimmers of a more positive change despite the dark days. My Christmas wish for 2020 is that we put this difficult year behind us and look boldly to the future with more compassion for each other and our planet. And of course, to be able to visit Italy. That's always on my Christmas list. We hope you enjoyed this week's episode. If you did, it would be great if you could leave us a rating or review so we can bring Italy to more people around the world.

[00:42:27.940] - Katy

Next week, we'll be wrapping up the year and looking forward to 2021. But for now, it's Ciao and Buon Natale. And don't forget to enter the giveaway!

[00:42:37.240] - Katy

Ciao!