

Untold Italy Episode 61 - New Discoveries in Ancient Pompeii

[00:00:00.090] - Katy

This is the Untold Italy travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 61.

[00:00:12.130] - Josie

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

[00:00:15.250] - Katy

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

[00:00:19.090] - 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.

[00:00:27.140] - 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.

[00:00:35.980] - Josie

We'll have interviews from experts and focus on local destinations and frequently asked questions about travel in Italy.

[00:00:43.060] - Katy

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

[00:00:46.150] - Josie

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

[00:01:00.250] - Katy

Hi, everyone. Ciao Amici, this is Katy here with another exciting week of Untold Italy. Today we are taking a trip to a place that has captured the imagination of so many people over the centuries. It's the lost city of Pompeii, destroyed by Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. Many of us have visited this site or definitely plan to. But what you may not know is that the area Vesuvius destroyed extended many kilometers down the Amalfi Coast and the surrounding area. And now this is the scene of new and exciting developments and discoveries that really appeal to me as a bona fide history nerd. And I'm sure many of you, our listeners, who have asked for an episode on Pompeii. What's happening in this area is that technology and history

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

and now combining to help expand our understanding of how people lived in the first century A.D. and what happened when Vesuvius exploded. So I asked my friend Danielle Oteri from Feast on History back onto the show to tell us about the new exhibits and sites you can visit if you're in the Campania region, Naples or the Amalfi Coast.

[00:02:10.070] - Katy

If you've been listening to Untold Italy for a while, you may remember Danielle from previous episodes about Naples and the Cilento coast. Danielle is an art historian with so much incredible knowledge and insight, and she has a unique ability to make history, come alive and just be so much more accessible. I know you were just going to love this conversation about the new discoveries in ancient Pompeii.

[00:02:34.450] - Katy

Benvenuto, welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast, Danielle

[00:02:38.920] - Danielle

Katy, great to be here.

[00:02:40.780] - Katy

Danielle, many of our listeners no doubt know you from previous recordings about Naples and the Cilento Coast, but perhaps you could let our listeners know a little bit about you and your background before we get started talking about Pompeii.

[00:02:53.980] - Danielle

Sure. I'm an art historian and I'm the founder of Feast on History. We do food and wine tours based in Cilento. So I split my time in regular normal days between New York City and the Cilento, where I have part of my family roots. Buffalo mozzarella, the ruins of Paestum, the Cilento national park or my usual areas, but I also spend quite a bit of time in Naples where we do and Elena Ferrante based tours and all around the Amalfi Coast and the area we'll be talking about today.

[00:03:23.690] - Katy

Oh, thank you, Danielle, it's always such a pleasure to have you here on the podcast and also in our special group Untold Italy Insiders. I really appreciate the way you bring historical places and sights alive by sharing the stories of how people really live their lives. So should we go to Pompeii now?

[00:03:42.410] - Danielle

Yes, absolutely.

[00:03:44.060] - Katy

OK, let's paint a picture, because people may have visited Pompeii a while ago or they may have never been. So what's the story behind this city and the nearby sites that were also impacted by the explosion of Vesuvius?

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

[00:03:57.950] - Danielle

So let's go back to the first century A.D. Anno domini, or sometimes it's written as C.E Common Era. And in seventy nine, there was a massive explosion of Mount Vesuvius, which remains today one of the world's super volcanoes. And its blast was said to be estimated to be twice as powerful as the nuclear bomb at Hiroshima. And it destroyed a good portion of the Vesuvius coast. It stretched from the edge of Naples all the way to the end of the Amalfi Coast and notably all of the towns that were directly below the volcano, which today are towns that include places where San Marzano tomatoes come from. Those grow in the volcanic soil of Mount Vesuvius, famous for wine, growing a lot of towns that are famous for pasta. This is some of Italy's most lush land. These were all completely destroyed in seventy nine. Also, the reason these places are some of the most fertile and lush lands for agriculture is because of the volcanic soil. So Vesuvius is something that both gives and takes away. And it's really interesting to visit it because in one sense, it's, of course, a disaster site, and very sad if you think about it in that way. But what it did was really preserve everyday Roman life. And we know a lot about the Romans because they were incredible chroniclers. They wrote down everything. And there's long been a history of an interest in Roman history - if you think of Shakespeare and Julius Caesar, for example, you know, for a long time people have been fascinated by Pompeii. But when Julius Caesar was written by Shakespeare, Pompeii had not yet even been discovered, had not been excavated. So when Pompeii was discovered, we began to learn the intimate details of everyday life from what people ate to the clothing they wore, the jewelry they wore. It's a complete view into everyday life in Rome, and it's the most important and information rich site in the world about Roman history.

[00:06:05.720] - Katy

It's so fascinating and I just love all the little details and the way that people really didn't live so much differently to the way we do today, minus the technologies, you know, they have their recreational activities and feasting houses and all of that type of thing. You can really see all of that come to light, in Pompeii can't you?

[00:06:25.550] - Danielle

It's kind of difficult to look at Pompeii and not compare it to our lives today. I mean, yeah, they didn't have electricity and the Internet, but they had sliding glass doors and plumbing and infinity pools and fast food restaurants. And there was a lot of their culture that ours mirrors today. So it's really hard not to get contemplative about life in Pompeii as compared to ours now.

[00:06:48.470] - Katy

I know I saw that recent discovery they had of this sort of fast food restaurant, which I liked cool Pompeii fried chicken. But I don't think it was that actually.

[00:06:59.090] - Danielle

Yeah it was!

[00:07:02.090] - Katy

It has the roost on the front of the picture, and I was like, oh, you know, so much has changed, but so little really. It's amazing. In two thousand years.

[00:07:12.620] - Danielle

The lower classes ate mostly at those at those bars. And it was a lot of food on the go, a lot of street food to just grab something quick. And the rich ate actually many of the same foods. The diet, the quality of their diet actually wasn't vastly different. But rich people ate at home and they had servants presenting beautiful things to them and feeding them at home. But again, just the way our culture today is, a lot of really on the go eating and a lot of takeout, especially in covid days, not that different from Pompeii.

[00:07:44.630] - Katy

It's just amazing. I love it. And it's such a big site, when you go to actually go to Pompeii, there is so, so much to see. It's one of those places where I think you really have to have a plan of attack or you've got to go for the things that really interest you to make the most of your time there, because like we were just talking before, you could really go back again and again to discover that city and you would just find new things every single time. And that's just one site of, as you described a whole area of the impact of Vesuvius.

[00:08:16.130] - Danielle

Yeah, Pompeii was just one city. It was the largest of all the nearby areas. And so as a tourist today, it's going to be the biggest site and kind of the one that's the most well set up for tourism in terms of parking lot, bathroom places to get lunch, all those sort of practicalities for modern tourism. However, there are lots of other smaller sites which are better for more quiet or concentrated visits. Some of those places require a car or some of them require hiring a private tour guide. So you understand what's going on. There's a real range of experiences. And I really think that this is such a fascinating way to time travel, because our culture today and certainly the culture of Campania is so greatly affected by the Roman world. And even if you're not that interested in history, there are so many different ways to sort of talk into Pompeii and explore it that I really think it offers something for everyone.

[00:09:11.810] - Katy

How would you go about it? Because you've been there a few times. So I'm very interested to know how you would go about it. Maybe as a first time visitor or someone who hasn't been there for a while.

[00:09:22.490] - Danielle

So first thing to know about Pompeii and the Vesuvius coast - Campania of the region that we call today, Campania, that was the name in the Roman world as well. It essentially means countryside. And they referred to it as Campania Felix, which means happy or fertile countryside. And it was where elite Romans went to go have fun. So in Rome, in the capital, you were supposed to act in a way that was very conservative, not flashy, not gaudy, and then they would go down to the Vesuvius coast to have a really good time. And the culture in

Campania was Greek. So Roman theater for those who know/may know a little bit about that or interested in that - really is Greek theater and also involves contributions from the Oscans who were the the native people of that land. So going down to Campania for the Romans meant fun, it meant good food, it meant beautiful weather. And there was a movement in the late.. in the prior century of sort of a return to the countryside, get out of the city. Many of the people that lived in Rome and were of the wealthier classes actually had been born in Campania and had moved to the capital city. So there becomes this moment to return to the countryside. Usually have a second home there, maybe a beach house, maybe a house in the woods. Start a little farm, raise some chickens, grow some olives. There were not yet tomatoes in Europe. Those were brought in the sixteen hundreds by the Spanish via Mexico. And sort of resort to this more pastoral life - as one that was more authentic and industrious, and with that becomes this huge building of luxury villas all around the coast from Naples all the way to the end of the Amalfi Coast. So Pompeii is one city and it was a city with wealthy people and poor people and slaves and actually a pretty international culture for the Roman world. There were Oscan people that live there, there were people from Africa. There was about half and half of free people and enslaved people. But it was one city in a larger culture. And so I think when you visit Campania, when you go to Naples, when you go to the Amalfi Coast, you really have to... or one way to approach it is to think of it as the playground of hardworking Romans.

[00:11:45.400] - Katy

Well, it's kind of like the playground of hardworking international people. Well, it has been, right now. So, yeah, again, nothing much has really changed, has it? So yeah. There's so many bits to explore, like, I mean, I don't know, where do you start. I don't know.

[00:12:00.700] - Danielle

One place I like to start is.. well the first place we should start is in the city of Naples itself. So Pompeii was destroyed the first century in seventy nine. It is not until the 1730s when it is rediscovered. Now, local people knew it was there. There were stories, there were rumors. There were people who were building wells or trying to dig out a garden who were finding the ruins. And there had been actually centuries of what you might call grave robbers of people who had dug into the ruins, that were completely covered in volcanic material and had taken valuables. But in the 1730s, the Bourbon Kings of Naples decided to begin a formal excavation project. And as they did, they began to move the treasures that they were finding to the archeological museum in Naples. And it was originally a military barracks that got so full with treasures that it turned into the archeological museum. It also really had a tremendous influence because it kicked off this whole interest in antiquities. And we have the neo classical period that we study in art. If you think of a lot of important buildings that were built in the, especially here in the United States, in the 1800s, in the 1900s, they have this classical appearance. So much of this was instigated by the discovery of Pompeii. And so the Naples Archeological Museum is the place to start. And if you are just doing a quick trip through it, you can visit the museum. And what has just opened is something called the Antiquarium. It was originally designed, as they say at the museum, to narrate the history of Pompeii. So the idea is you go into this exhibition and through objects and paintings, you sort

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

of learn the entire history of the city within a set of galleries. And this was first opened, I believe it was in the late 1800s, but in 1943 it was, not completely destroyed, but greatly damaged by bombings during World War Two. And then it was reopened in 1948 and then severely damaged in 1980 with the Irpinia earthquake. And it has been since then that it has been closed. But they decided to take on this project a while ago and it was accelerated during covid with the museum being closed. And the museum director has specifically said that we feel that this is an inspiring project to take on during a difficult time and represent, you know, to museum visitors. So just last week, the Antiquarium at Pompeii is open again. And so you have no other opportunity to explore Pompeii. Start with the museum.

[00:14:44.500] - Katy

Oh, how exciting. Has anyone snuck in and taken any video of the interiors.

[00:14:51.400] - Danielle

They did a pretty good PR effort. I've seen lots of photographs and they hired a well-known photographer in Italy who does museum exhibitions to document it. And one really great thing that's happened during covid is that a lot of Italian museums, especially in Campania, have really started to think about their social media presence and the Pompeii Archeological Authority and the museum at Naples posts on Facebook and Instagram every day with a lot of really interesting information. Often it's only in Italian, but, you know, you can hit that translate feature if you're on Facebook. And sometimes they will do an English translation as well. But really fascinating, interesting behind the scenes photos from the people who are interpreting the history and displaying, you know, actually cleaning the objects. They've had lots of images from their restoration labs, which I always think are fascinating.

[00:15:42.580] - Katy

Absolutely. Yeah. There's nothing quite like, well, I don't know about you, but I've actually been on an archeological dig and it was really thrilling just to find these ancient objects from the past. And I did one here in Melbourne, which the objects weren't particularly old, let's just say. But I can imagine just finding something that's two thousand years old and just making sure that it doesn't crumble and all of those things. I don't know if you've actually watched this latest TV show called The Dig. I think it's a Netflix movie and it's based on the discoveries that Sutton Hoo in the UK. And it's just, I think they did a really good job of building up that anticipation about what's going to happen when they finally reveal what's in the ground. It's amazing. But at Pompeii, you've got it's not just one burial ship - you've got this whole city. I mean, it's just incredible, really. Yeah. It's centuries of work, not just, you know, a decade even. It's like hundreds of people to be working on it. Really.

[00:16:43.300] - Danielle

Yeah. It's been ongoing for a long time. And then also a very fun little sort of side note to a visit to the Archeological Museum is a room called the Secret Cabinet, and that is where they put all the pornographic art that was found at Pompeii. Now, it wasn't necessarily made for pornographic purposes. A lot of things were sort of fertility symbols, but they did in the 1800s, put it in a separate room and ladies were not allowed to visit. But a lot of the grand

tour writers and poets would get a special ticket to go see it. And it is now fully on public display. But like women were not fully allowed in there, I want to say until the 1980s, something kind of crazy like that. But that's also just a fun little punctuation to a more serious look at the artefacts at Pompeii and of course the mosaics from Pompeii that are the most beautiful are also at the archeological museum, most notably the Alexander Mosaic. I believe that actually that has just the left or is leaving soon to go into the conservation lab. But it should be fun to see them continue to document that process on social media.

[00:17:48.540] - Katy

Yeah, wow, what a thrill to actually do that, I think. I can't imagine a bigger thrill actually, just to see them gently, gently remove the traces of history. Amazing. Yeah. We'll have to put a link to all those social media accounts into the show notes, because I think people will really be fascinated to watch that and especially if you've got kids as well. It's just an amazing way to get them interested in history because it's really how it's coming to life.

[00:18:15.060] - Danielle

Absolutely. And what's also especially fascinating about archeology right now is that there's never been more technology and more science applied to it. In the past archeology like the movie *The Dig* on Netflix, was really about digging and just removing dirt and removing anything that was on the surface that didn't belong there. Whereas now, for example, this is kind of disgusting, but it's fascinating. They can test... biologists can test what's inside the Roman sewers. And from there they are learning a ton about what Romans ate and two thousand years ago, the run off of what was in those sewers is actually still there. So there's marine archeology that's going on. There's all sorts of osteo archeology going on, which is the study of the bones. And there are the bones of, I want to say, almost two hundred people that are still, that they can test. And plantlife too. I mean, there's - I'm not sure the exact term for this, if boteno-archeology is a term. But, you know, discovering what people were growing, what kind of grapes they were growing for wine, for example, has been a huge field of study. And they've actually been able to recreate those environments and are growing wine there once again.

[00:19:27.570] - Katy

Oh, that's my favorite part of Pompeii. There's that little - it's the Osteria of the gladiator or something like that - Osteria of the gladiator I think.

[00:19:36.720] - Danielle

Yeah. Yeah, there is.

[00:19:38.440] - Katy

And they've got that vineyard where they re propagating the vines that went through there. And if you're going to Pompeii, you've got to go there because this is a stunning view back towards Vesuvius with the I guess, the ancient walls in the foreground and then you've got the vines and then you've got Vesuvius looming in the background. It's a really cool shot. Actually, it's one of my favorites.

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

[00:20:01.770] - Danielle

Yeah. Yeah. And every town around Vesuvius that was destroyed in that eruption has a different set of circumstances, depending on how specifically they were destroyed. So for example, at Herculaneum, that was much closer to Vesuvius. So that was destroyed much more quickly. And there was just so much pumice that fell on the town immediately and snuffed out life very, very quickly and really encased and preserved it. This is where you have like, you know, wooden doorframes that are still intact and fruit in the bowl on the table intact at Pompeii, which is a little farther away. That's where they sort of had first a hail first. They started with a fine mist of ashy rain and then pumice that grew larger and larger and then finally deadly gas. So there was actually more destruction of the physical buildings during the course of that day. And each town has these different conditions that destroyed it, which also lead to different conditions for the objects that are there and continue to add more and more and more to our story of understanding what happened. And scientists have been able to add probably if we knew 50 percent of the history of Pompeii, scientists have added another 40 percent to that and will continue to accelerate what we can all understand about it.

[00:21:19.920] - Katy

Amazing. What do you think are some of the most important discoveries or interesting discoveries that they've made?

[00:21:26.010] - Danielle

Oh, so many. I think the sewer stuff that I was mentioning is actually pretty fascinating. But because we're in Naples, I'm going to sort of take you through the different places you should see in a geographical order. And this is a really fascinating place that continues to be explored. So just outside of Naples, really, before we hit the coastline and get close to Pompeii, there is another place, a town called Bacoli. And this is where Misenum was. Misenum was where the Roman writer Pliny actually observed Vesuvius erupting. And he described the plume of smoke coming from the volcano, saying that it looks like a pine tree. And for centuries, people thought that this was maybe poetic. But it turns out that he was describing very accurately a type of volcanic eruption. And from Misenum, he commanded a naval ship that went to go try to rescue the people at Pompeii, and he wound up dying at Stabiae. So both Misenum and what is now the modern day area of Bacoli and Stabiae, you have ruins, but the one at Bacoli is probably my favorite. There are two villas and then another port which are all completely submerged underwater. And so you visit them either as a scuba diver or on a glass bottomed boat, which I think is the coolest thing. So when I said before, like, even if history is not your thing, exploring Pompeii can be fascinating. So if you're into scuba diving or you just like being out on the water, you can go to the area that's called the submerged archeological park at Baia.

[00:22:58.770] - Katy

Wow. That might be a reason to get out my Padi license, actually.

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

[00:23:03.330] - Danielle

Oh, yeah.

[00:23:04.140] - Katy

Which I do have. Have you dived there or have you been on the boat?

[00:23:09.990] - Danielle

No, I've been on the boat. I'm not a very good swimmer, actually. I've taken swimming lessons. I didn't learn how to swim as a kid. I learned to swim as an adult, which means I'll never be a great swimmer. But I have taken lessons specifically because I want to go diving here so badly. There's a few different sites that you can see, but the ones that are the most interesting are these two villas. So as I said before, this is where wealthy Romans went to go play. So there were villas, hundreds of villas that dotted the coast from Naples out across the Gulf Coast. And there are two - one which has still a series like you can sort of walk down the street or swim down the street now in your scuba gear. And there are taverns and homes in a fairly sizable private villa that you can see. There's also mosaic floors that are visible. And then there is another villa that belonged to a family that actually tried to overthrow the Emperor Nero. And their plot was discovered by Nero. And so their villa was taken from them. And there there is still visible the remains of a large garden, a spa complex. And then there were also large tanks for breeding fish because Romans had fish farms.

[00:24:22.860] - Katy

Course they did!

[00:24:23.850] - Danielle

Why not? So I think going to this - it's a little difficult to navigate as a tourist because there's not a lot of information in English online. But if you look at the submerged archeological park of Baia, that's where you will see - at least get to see pictures of it. And then the best way to visit it is to talk to your hotel concierge or book a local guide who can go there with you. And then if you book an appointment at one of the the dive schools there, the people who lead the tours are both expert divers as well as historians who will lead you on a tour, an underwater tour of the villas.

[00:25:02.760] - Katy

Wow. I wonder how deep it is, actually, how far you need to go down, because actually, I think that's quite - depending on how deep it is, is depending on how challenging it is.

[00:25:13.050] - Danielle

They're not that deep. And this is what I will more likely do the next time I go is you can go snorkeling.

[00:25:20.580] - Katy

Oh right, yeah, perfect.

[00:25:21.980] - Danielle

You won't see as much detail. You'll see the mosaic floors from a distance rather than actually being able to swim down and run your hands across their surface. But you can see them as a snorkeler as well. So it's not terribly deep.

[00:25:34.950] - Katy

That's incredible. I need to see this for myself.

[00:25:38.350] - Danielle

It is really magical. It really scratches that Indiana Jones itch.

[00:25:43.010] - Katy

I definitely have one of those.

[00:25:47.330] - Danielle

Yeah me too.

[00:25:47.330] - Katy

Oh, that's amazing. What other delights have you got there for us you there Danielle? You always come up with some amazing, unique things that no-one's ever heard of.

[00:25:57.090] - Danielle

There are.. so there's two more luxury villas (well there's actually many more, but two in particular that I find really fascinating) - one is at the Villa Oplontis, and this was a villa that is the largest of all that have been discovered. There were probably about a dozen that are known in some form of excavation. There were probably hundreds. And so there's so much left to excavate and explore. So at Villa Oplontis, it's in the town of Torre Annunziata, which is not the sexiest town in the area. And you get there on the same train that you would take to get to Pompeii. You take the Circumvesuviana, which is essentially a commuter rail around Vesuvius, and it's about two stops before Pompeii. And it's a town that was at one time actually very famous for pasta. The reason is the environment there. The weather is spectacular. The way the volcano is positioned in relation to the town and the sea front, it just keeps this perfect temperature, keeps away the humidity and you get cool breezes. So in the 1800s, when pasta was dried outside instead of inside of a factory, the cool breezes in this town were ideal for making the very best pasta. And there is still one famous pasta producer that's still there. But unfortunately, as a result of mafia, that industry sort of fell apart, especially as industrialized pasta, things like Barilla in the north overtook them. But that is to say that in the Roman world, this was also an ideal situation in terms of its geography and its weather. And the Villa Oplontis is this incredibly large villa. And if you want to have like a mini Pompeii experience, you want to visit Pompeii, but you've only got two hours or your feet hurt. Or you just want to do a mini version. Definitely go to Oplontis. And you can walk around these corridors that are all marked by the zebra patterns and these were the corridors where the servants would walk. You can walk right into what was once their infinity pool that had a sheer drop off into the sea. Now the land has changed because of the

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

volcanic eruptions, so the villa is no longer right on the shore. But it was at that time and so there would have been a waterfall at the end of the infinity pool. Now the pool is just filled with wildflowers. You can see the little steps that go down and you can use your imagination to imagine rich Romans hanging out there. And then right next to it is another villa which is not open to the public. It is still being excavated actually by a team at the University of Texas at Austin. And it was a warehouse for shipping wine. And it was loaded up at the time of the eruption with amphorae - which are those wine shipping vessels that were filled with wine. And what makes this really interesting, even though this was clearly an industrial place, is that the discovery of newly bottled wine and then also the discovery of hundreds of pomegranates means that the date that we've always assigned to the eruption of Pompeii, August 24th, can't be correct because there's the wine and the pomegranates wouldn't have been harvested at that time. It was most likely in October. And this is something that was long suspected. But the discoveries of what's in this second villa, which have really only begun since about 2005 and really accelerated in the past five years, give us tangible proof that the date we've accepted for centuries is wrong.

[00:29:32.750] - Katy

Those pomegranates! Danielle and I both have a love of pomegranates. But, yeah, like I think the secret of the pomegranates, that detective work, you know, just to get to those little details that is so important about the story. Like, if I was in my teens and studying, I would be definitely going down that path to be a detective of history.

[00:29:55.320] - Danielle

Absolutely. And it's such a small crew of people that work on it. And they weren't able to go this past summer, which was really heartbreaking to them. And it's a lot of patient work and a lot of waiting and a lot of grant writing. And they do work with local Italian archeologists. And what's really interesting, too, is that the team there, the American team, all say how the locals and just sort of the local folklore, so to speak, their stories have actually lent them so much insight to the archeology itself. And so, like the interaction with the modern world is still so important. I always say to people, when you're traveling in Italy, you can look for what I call shadow ruins, which are places where there's a particular custom or ritual that is a shadow of a practice of something that has happened there for centuries. And maybe the ruins are no longer there. Maybe the ruins are underneath a church or something else. But the practice and the customs or a shadow of what has been there for centuries.

[00:30:52.460] - Katy

It's truly amazing. Here in Australia, our indigenous population have been here for many tens of thousands of years and a lot of their culture still remains and has that essence from way back then as well. And I think we just need to just really understand it and respect it a lot more, because, like I tell my kids, you don't know everything and certainly none of us knows everything. You know, I just think, you know, we're learning and understanding more and more about our ancestors who could probably teach us a few things even today.

[00:31:26.190] - Danielle

Yeah, not everybody agrees. This is a controversial statement as somebody from - formerly of the world of academia. But I really think that cross disciplinary studies are crucial because there are things that art historians just don't even think to question, that a scientist would, of course, question and we have to have those conversations and what we categorize as folklore, which can sometimes be considered sort of a soft history, a less serious history, can sometimes bring about really spectacular revelations. I won't digress too much because there's more sites I want to tell you about. But nearby, near Pompeii, but in the mountains and about four thousand feet above sea level, there is a church devoted to the Virgin of Montevergine. And it's an important site, a pilgrimage site for Catholics, but it's also specifically sacred to transgender people. And every February 3rd, transgender people make a pilgrimage and they consider the black Madonna of Montevergine to be their protector. They even call her the Madonna of transformation. Now, this is a good example of a shadow ruin, because what was there in the Roman world, even though there aren't ruins to visit, was a temple of Cybele, the Roman earth goddess. And the priests of Cybele actually used to castrate themselves in order to devote their entire lives to their worship of the goddess. And this was all about sort of removing gender to achieve a higher spiritual experience. So it's such an unusual place in our contemporary world. This is like southern Italy can be fairly conservative in some ways. It's a deeply Catholic site. And yet this anomaly is the result of this ancient ritual and practice which has been there for centuries.

[00:33:14.890] - Katy

Amazing. I love these stories.

[00:33:17.500] - Danielle

Another very recent discovery is in Positano on the Amalfi Coast. So Positano is probably one name that people will light up when they hear, oh, I've heard of Positano. It's the splashiest town on the Amalfi Coast or the most luxurious. That's where the Sirenuse hotel is. It's where all the best shopping is. You know, because of my.. because I get cranky about tourism, it's probably my least favorite town on the Amalfi Coast, but I certainly understand why people want to visit it. It's glamorous. It makes you feel like you're Sophia Loren. And now I do want to go to Positano because as of August of 2018, they have opened a Roman villa that is directly underneath the main church, Santa Maria Assunta, the Virgin of the assumption. And so it has actually been known to be underneath the church since the seventeen hundreds. And a local priest did his own amateur excavation and sold a bunch of the treasures that he found to a convent, a wealthy convent in Naples, the convent of Santa Teresa. But then it finally became formally and properly excavated in the last ten years and just formally opened up in 2018. So because it's still, I forget exactly how many meters underground it is, I think it's 11 meters underground. It's pretty deep. The frescoes, the paintings there are really vivid and beautiful. The frescoes that you see at Pompeii, they seem vivid when you consider there are two thousand years old. But the second they were unearthed after being protected and airtight for centuries, their colors began to degrade. But underneath the church at Positano, they're still pretty vibrant. You got to bring a sweater because it's cold down there, even in the heat of summer. But I think it's a really interesting sort of break from the tourism of

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

Positano to just go underneath the church and see this villa in particular. And you can only go in 30 minute guided visit. So you do need to make an appointment. And there are only ten people at a time that are allowed, which is great. They're controlling it exactly as they should. It is completely closed now because being an underground space, certainly not covid safe, but that is probably number one on my list for when I get to go back to Italy.

[00:35:40.450] - Katy

Oh, absolutely. Like, how amazing to think that I don't know about anyone else, but I always thought the frescoes were kind of muted pastel until I started looking at some of the ones that coming out of Pompeii, because obviously over the course of, passage of time they will sort of degraded, as you said. But to see them as they were in all the glory. Must be so incredible.

[00:36:05.410] - Danielle

And the colors, the paints themselves were part of the luxury. I mean, all of our clothes are fairly brightly colored and you buy a cheap T-shirt and it can be all sorts of bright colors. We don't think of color as an expensive thing, but they are using ground, lapis lazuli and in all sorts of pigments that come from the natural world, they're all sourced in places that were not there. So it was a show of luxury and a show of sort of your international prowess to have these really brightly painted frescoes, which represented materials that came from all corners of the Roman Empire.

[00:36:42.390] - Katy

Getting shivers! Now I do you have a question about this priest? Don't they have laws in Italy where you can't just dig stuff up and then sell it?

[00:36:50.430] - Danielle

Oh, this was in the 1700s.

[00:36:52.530] - Katy

Oh right. So they fixed that now.

[00:36:55.560] - Danielle

Well you know, that's still happened in the 1960s, that was happening quite a bit. And yeah, there definitely are laws and a lot of museums, especially here in the United States, have gotten in trouble and had to return things. The Getty - the Getty Museum in Los Angeles is the most famous for that, but certainly the Metropolitan Museum of Art and others. But there was definitely a huge black market of antiquities that was rampant in the 1960s.

[00:37:21.000] - Katy

Have they been sending them back just out of interest?

[00:37:23.880] - Danielle

Some have been sent back and then some of them have negotiated what they call permanent loans because, you know, sometimes these come from small towns or they were excavated from sites where they don't necessarily even have a proper space to display them. I mean, every loan has its own unique conditions. But I think in some cases, like the museum is essentially paying rent for the object. And so it can become a revenue source in some instances.

[00:37:49.500] - Katy

Well, that's good. But I do think I mean I mean, it's very controversial, but I think it's nice that there are small objects around the world, hopefully not the most important pieces, but that people - so people can start to connect with Pompeii and places of antiquity around the world before they see them in real life and really get that wow factor of what you do see when you get to Italy.

[00:38:12.360] - Danielle

Yeah, there's actually - a perfect segway into the next place on the list that you can go visit. And this is a place you have to go by car. It's called Boscoreale. And there's several, well, there are two rooms and then many other frescoes from this site, which are at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Now, those came to New York in the early 1900s, but it was all above board. Probably not something that would happen today because the laws have changed. But at that time it was kosher and it was because the Met had actually sponsored the excavation. And in those days, often when a big institution, a university or a museum sponsored an excavation, it also meant that they were going to bring a bunch of stuff back home to display. But Boscoreale was an area in the forest Boscoe means forest. And so in addition to all these luxury villas that you had along the coast, like the one outside of Naples that you visit as a diver or the Villa Oplontis, the ones that were in the forest, included some more rustic homes as well. And the villa that has its frescoes in New York was not one of the rustic ones. It was one of the nice ones. But it's an interesting way to see just again, kind of the diversity of tastes which reflect our own, which is - there are some people that like to be on the beach and then other people that wanted to go into the forest and grow olives and grains and really live a quiet, idyllic farm life. And they had a lot of the same splashy frescoes in their house that we do see on the coast, which means which tells us we actually see the hand of some of the same painters, but went around to all of these villas that was obviously patronized by the wealthy people of that of the first century, who did their decorations. So I imagine this was like a vanity like, oh, I had this guy give him a name with a Roman name. He did my interiors. Oh, I wish I could get on his calendar.

[00:40:05.760] - Katy

Yeah it's so true. Nothing much has changed. Yeah, I've actually been asking similar questions myself lately.

[00:40:11.610] - Danielle

I've been saying I'm going to do a House Hunters International episode where we go to all the old Roman villas and we see who they were hiring to do their painting and at Boscoreale and at Villa Oplontis as well. And then in one other villa to mention in a few moments, these were also all under renovation when Vesuvius erupted, which is actually another clue to say that the eruption happened in October. So it was probably after the summer season. And so this is a good time to do renovations. But it's also to tell us that like wealthy people who have fancy homes today, renovation projects were frequent and common in order to to keep up with the styles and to continue to have amenities to impress your guests.

[00:40:57.370] - Katy

I love it. It's so cool. I love it. And I do think you should pitch that show? Because I'd be watching.

[00:41:04.240] - Danielle

Oh man, that'd be amazing. I'd be so happy to do that.

[00:41:08.870] - Katy

We should find a way to make it happen. Crowd source it!

[00:41:14.800] - Danielle

So there's one other place that you can visit now at Boscoreale, I should say. This is a very difficult place to visit without a car and without without a guide. I mean, you can do it, of course, especially if you speak Italian. If you speak Italian, all of these/none of these things are difficult. If you don't speak Italian, hiring a local guide is so important. And I just do want to emphasize that for your listeners, the local guides in Campania must be licensed and they really enforce it in Campania. In Rome and in Florence - because there's just so much tourism, it's much more difficult to enforce. But it's a very difficult license to get. Most of the guides are PhD's. The average price to hire a guide for the day - for the full day is about 160 Euros. And I mean, you're talking about just incredibly knowledgeable, smart, passionate people who will open up the world for you and have lunch with you very often for not a lot of money. It is so worth it. And especially if you're going to go to some of these more, you know, irregular places and places that require a car, they'll meet you in some central place and just go in the car with you. And, you know, they know where to eat lunch. They know which roads are under construction. It's just like hanging out with a friend. And all the local guides are all required to speak several languages. Some are better with German and French, and they will work with those tourists, but plenty of them speak English. And Neapolitans love Americans and Australians, because we just tend to be very informal as compared to other European tourists who really want them to be professorial. And Americans and Australians will always be like, so how many brothers and sisters do you have? And Neapolitans being very open, people appreciate that.

[00:42:55.900] - Katy

Yeah, right. So the question is then, how do you find these guides? Because it's not that easy. That's - it's not very well advertised. I have to say.

[00:43:05.590] - Danielle

There's a few people that I work with regularly who I always refer others to because they're so wonderful, but they don't have great websites. That's Italy. That is changing with a covid. A lot of people are getting their social media and their web presence together. But one website I would refer you to is one called the Vesuvius Versus Pompeii, and it's run by a wonderful guide named Fiorella, and she has sort of a consortium of guides that are her friends and her most trusted colleagues. And it's a wonderful group of people, almost all women, I believe. You're not going to find smarter and more passionate guides in all of Campania. And if they are busy, she will send you to somebody else.

[00:43:48.640] - Katy

What a fantastic piece of information. You are like delivering gold.

[00:43:55.060] - Danielle

And I know that they are so heartbroken to not have tourists. I mean, yeah, of course there's the income, which is, you know, not to be diminished, but in the few conversations I've had with them, they all say how depressed they are to not be meeting new people and to be sharing everything that they know and love.

[00:44:11.020] - Katy

Yeah, because there's so many amazing stories. You know, we just talk about this for hours and hours and hours. I think really, it's just one of those places that just has so many stories that need to be told.

[00:44:23.010] - Danielle

Well, you know - think about it this way. These people are descendants of the original inhabitants of Pompeii. I mean, I think about that for myself, my family the Clientos - my mom's side of my family, but my dad's side, my last name, Oteri, is from Sarno. And Sarno was the town that everybody who escaped Pompeii went to. It was in the morning in Pompeii that their first began a rain of very fine ash. And most people didn't know what was happening because they didn't understand what a volcano was. But many people did escape and those that left in the morning made it to Sarno and then probably as many as ten thousand others died traveling along the Sarno river. And their bodies remain in those fields where San Marzano tomatoes grow un-excavated. And I realized that when I was sort of looking at my own history, I'm like, I may have had an ancestor who survived Pompeii. It seems far fetched, but actually it's not because I've done my 23 and me and my family has been in Campania - 3 out of 4 grandparents from Campania for thousands of years before they came to New York City. So it's actually really possible. And the people that you're going to meet there are their ancestors as well.

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

[00:45:40.450] - Katy

Wow. That gives me shivers. It's one of those, you know, it's such a strong connection. And I don't think you can really underestimate that. I know a lot of people who have left, or whose parents left Italy do you feel that strong connection? And, you know, to think that it goes back so many thousands of years, and you can still feel it sort of pull. It's just incredible, actually.

[00:46:03.660] - Danielle

Yeah, you know, this is my totally unscientific wondering, but that Sarno River Valley, too, also, in addition to being very lush and having a lot of beautiful farmland, also has a lot of pollution and is one of the more polluted areas in Europe. And I sometimes wonder, like, you know, is it that the torment of all those people who are in that ground contributes to that as well. There's a really dark side to that as well. You know, an entire culture of people who have been living over a hotbed of swirling magma. It's definitely got to inform your character.

[00:46:40.290] - Katy

I think so. I think so. When you speak to people from that area, there will definitely always mention that, actually. And I think it's a really poignant conversation that you have with them is that we do live in the shadow of this volcano that could erupt at any time. Oh, wow. This has been such an amazing chat, Danielle, as always.

[00:47:01.420] - Danielle

I've got one more for you if you've got another couple minutes.

[00:47:05.150] - Katy

For you? Always.

[00:47:07.410] - Danielle

The last place is the town of Castellammare di Stabia. And I end here because we started in Misenum where Pliny saw the plume of smoke coming out of Vesuvius that looked like a pine tree and then commanded the boat to go try to rescue people by the sea. And he died in this town because of a tsunami. The earthquake that resulted from the volcanic eruption, of course, then caused a tsunami. And there were many people in their bones have actually been found waiting at the ports at Herculaneum and at Oplontis for rescue by boat, which never came. But Stabia itself was yet another town that was vibrant, like Pompeii, that was almost completely destroyed. There is a Roman, like a Colosseum that was there were gladiators would have fought. There's actually a little gladiator museum there. And there are two more villas. There's a Villa San Marco and the Villa Arianna. And if you want to see some of the most beautiful frescoes of all, you go to the Villa Arianna and there are like no tourists there. Like nobody there, except maybe like Italian kids on a field trip. But it's such an important site and again, doesn't have the tourist infrastructure around it. But, you know, any one of these sites, if you're looking to go a little off the beaten path, you want to have a condensed experience, are going to be so rich and offer you so much and tell you so much.

And you really I don't think you're cheated by choosing one of the smaller sites versus going to Pompeii itself, because the whole region is what tells the story. It's not just that one site.

[00:48:41.250] - Katy

Yeah, it's amazing. I really think that when I get back, I'm heading straight there. I want to go diving. I want to go up in the hills. I want to find out about all those frescoes. Ah so exciting. It just - it's just such an amazingly rich area full of wonder, really amazing.

[00:49:01.620] - Danielle

And these are just the things that have been found. I mean, there's so much more to discover. Hopefully we can do it before Vesuvius explodes.

[00:49:12.000] - Katy

Yes. Let's find out maybe some a little bit more about when that thing is getting angry so we can make sure we know what's happening.

[00:49:19.670] - Danielle

They do monitor the volcano very closely. And, you know, people always ask, like Will Vesuvius, if it explodes, will it destroy Pompeii again? And the answer is yes, absolutely. But they do monitor it very closely. There is very sophisticated monitoring technology. They say that they will have at least two weeks to notify people and they don't think that a major explosion like what happened in Pompeii would happen in our lifetimes. So I like that. That makes me happy.

[00:49:45.720] - Katy

Good to know. We can still enjoy it.

[00:49:47.970] - Danielle

Yes.

[00:49:49.480] - Katy

Danielle, can you please remind us how people can stay in touch with you and just get to know more from you, because it's just so interesting?

[00:49:57.460] - Danielle

Yeah, well, my website is feastonhistory.com. And Instagram is the best place to kind of keep up with what I'm studying about Pompeii. And hopefully I'll be there very soon. And I plan on doing quite a bit on Pompeii as there's been a lot of interest and my Instagram handle is at [@feastonhistory](https://www.instagram.com/feastonhistory).

[00:50:16.890] - Katy

Grazie Danielle, thank you so much. This has been absolutely fascinating learning about all these different sites around Pompeii. And I think the key thing that I've taken away is i- yeah if you're interested in this history and depending on how much time you've got and what your

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

level of interest is and all of those different things that make up your trip, not anywhere else's trip. You don't have to just do the main things just because it's got the right tourist infrastructure for you. There's plenty of other options to go and immerse yourself in this culture and these Roman ruins in this area. Thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:50:51.340] - Danielle

Thanks so much. It was a lot of fun.

[00:50:55.770] - Katy

Wow listeners, I hope you enjoyed that. Pompeii is on so many bucket lists and must see list for Italy and I think Danielle has really shown why that is the case. As she said, I feel like releasing my inner Indiana Jones to go exploring around Campania in search of frescos, ruins and mosaics. Maybe I can convince one of my children to become a forensic archeologist too. I find this detective work so exciting. And I can't wait to hear what else has been uncovered as excavations and studies continue. Now, Danielle mentioned that if you want to see the artefacts removed from the sites around Pompeii, it's a good idea to plan some visits to the archeological museum in Naples, where they showcase a lot of the findings on their Instagram account. I put all these details as well as Daniele's and the places that she mentioned into the show notes, so you can easily access them for your trip planning at untolditaly.com/61 for episode sixty one. Thank you so much for listening to Untold Italy. We're so excited to bring you the stories and places like this one to help take you to Italy when you can't go and also to help you build trips that really appeal to your interests. If there is a place or experience you'd like us to cover. Be sure to let us know. And don't forget to subscribe. So you're notified of all the latest episodes? That's all from us today, though. Have a beautiful weekend, Ciao for now.

[00:52:23.570] - Katy

If you're loving what we share on the podcast, then you must come check out Untold Italy Insiders. Untold Italy Insiders is our private online community for all things related to travel in Italy. It's where you can get personalized help for planning your trip to Italy, as well as access to Italy travel experts, most of whom have appeared on the show. We learn new recipes, discover places to visit and unique travel experiences not mentioned on the podcast. We also have regular Q&A sessions where we answer all your travel questions, and it's also where you can hang out and connect with fellow travelers and Italy lovers just like you and me. I like to think of it as an online piazza, and it's one of my favorite places outside of Italy. Come and join us at untolditaly.com/insiders. Andiamo! We can't wait to see there.