

Untold Italy Episode 74 - Trip Report: Top To Toe

Katy

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 74.

Josie

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

Katy

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

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.

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.

Josie

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

Katy

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

Josie

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

Katy

Ciao! Hello everyone, Katy here with another episode Untold Italy, and one where we are sharing stories of travel and heritage. I recently discovered an incredible coincidence or serendipity with one of my ancestors which I am going to share with you in a moment but I we're also going to hear from Michael Smit, one of our listeners, who is sharing his own trip traveling from top to tow in Italy - from Milan to Sicily - in search of his family heritage. Michael has some interesting ideas on travel in Italy and one which I'm particularly glad he's sharing with you as I think it might just be one of those a-ha! moments that could simplify your your trip planning and open up new destinations to you if you're concerned about driving or getting around.

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But first a shout out to Owen Armstrong from Ireland who left us a lovely 5 star review! Grazie mille!

Owen said

[Fun and a release in these tough times](#)



I love listening to these. I have been unable to travel like the rest of you, and I have found these to not only be informative, but a way to travel by proxy. They're fun and engaging too!

Ahh we love getting your reviews on Apple, Spotify and Facebook. It's truly a pleasure recording the podcast but even better when we know you're enjoying it too!

Next up is my story. As many of you know, while I don't have Italian heritage myself, I've always felt connected to the country. It's a strange feeling given all my family comes from the UK or Australia. For some reason, when I'm in Italy I feel relaxed and at home. But recently my mum made a discover that perhaps goes some way to uncover that mystery pull to Italy that I feel so strongly.

Mum has been researching our family history and she's been following the journeys of her aunt Dorothy Penfold who was a musician and singer and quite the adventuress. Dorothy left Australia on somewhat of a grand tour of Europe in the 1930s. I am completely in awe of this woman who boarded a boat solo bound for unknown lands in search of adventure in those times. Anyway, along the way Dorothy ended up in.. you'll never guess where?! Sicily! And she had the most marvellous time. On her return, she was determined to spread the word about what she found in Sicily around her hometown (and now mine) Melbourne.

Dorothy contributed to newspaper articles, attended salons and even went on the radio to tell the people of Melbourne about her amazing finds in Sicily. Here's an excerpt Mum found from an interview she did in a newspaper:

Another night of beauty Miss Penfold recalled was a visit, under a full moon to an old Greek theatre, where today Shakespeare is played under Sicilian skies. The night sky in Sicily, she says, is as light as our Australian sky. Along-side the theatre fruit trees were in blossom, and in the light of the moon, with their scent on the air they were as pink almost, as in the daylight. Della Robbia plaques set in the walls of the theatre were distinctly blue and the blue of the sea and sky was intense. It was easy Miss Penfold suggests, to send one's mind back over the centuries to imagine the classic scene.

Well goodness Great Aunt Dorothy, I cannot believe you were doing the equivalent of blogging and podcasting about Italy almost a century ago. How incredible is that?! I'm not really a believer of too much woo woo but this actually gave me shivers. I'm so very proud to be

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continuing my Great Aunts legacy today and so glad we share this love of Italy and in particular Sicily.

So now onto Michael Smit's story in search of his family heritage in Sicily. Seems like all roads lead to Sicily! The highlight of Michael's trip was standing in the family church yard in Panarea on one of the Aeolian Islands. But he and his wife started their trip in Milan so let's hear from them now

Katy

Benvenuto! Ciao and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast, Michael.

Michael

Thank you. Happy to be here. It's a real pleasure.

Katy

Thank you. Grazie. I'm so happy to have you on the show today to tell your story about your trip from top to toe. Sounds like a really exciting trip, but firstly we'd all love to know a little bit more about you and how this trip all began.

Michael

Okay. I live in Sydney and I have Italian heritage. My grandfather was Italian from Panarea in the Aeolian islands near Sicily, my grandmother's Irish and my father is Dutch. So I'm a bit of a mixture, but I have that Italian heritage, so I've always wanted to go to Italy. I did go in 2009 and we went as part of a broader trip to Europe, we had five days in Rome and then in 2019 we planned to go back. So at this time I thought we would just focus on Italy and go from the top right down to the to the bottom and to Sicily and to try and visit where my grandfather came from as part of the trip.

Katy

So that sounds like a huge trip to organize. And how did you go about doing that? Did you think you wanted to do it all on your own or how did you go about shaping the trip?

Michael

Well, I did a lot of reading initially, bought some travel books, travel guides and, you know, worked out what was of interest. But I know that in the South, you know, you really need to be able to drive around rather than rely on trains. But in the north, things are much better in terms of the trains. And my wife wasn't very keen on us driving. And so, you know, we started to look at tours instead, but we wanted to do as much as we could independently. So we did the North independently. We flew into Milan and then, caught the train from Milan to Florence and Florence to Rome. And it was in Rome we picked up a tour that took us around through the south and down into Sicily. And we tacked onto our trip as well, a couple of days in Malta on the way home because, you know, Sicily or Palermo where the tour finished, the options were either to fly back to Rome and our or we chose instead to fly to Malta and have a bit of a look at that on the way home as well.

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Katy

I think this is really interesting, Michael, because I think sometimes people think they have to do either independent travel or a tour. But I really like the way that you've combined those two aspects because you weren't keen well, your wife wasn't keen on driving. And it's a really valid concern because I think, you know, people do hear these horror stories. But let's take it back to the start. And you arrived in Milan. And how many days did you have there roughly?

Michael

We had two full days in Milan. So there wasn't a lot planned to see. But just to do a bit of a look around and get a bit of shopping, I suppose - for my wife and also to break our journey like so recover from the jet lag because it's a long trip, of course. But we we really liked Milano. I enjoyed one of your recent podcasts, one of the other travelers who'd been to Milan, and her talking about that. But we love that. The cathedral, the Duomo, we loved that. Walked along the the roof like your previous guest.

Katy

Did you did you make it to the Last Supper?

Michael

No, we didn't know. And I guess you had to book that in advance. I really hadn't done that. But we went to Castello Sforzesco.

Katy

Yes. That's wonderful, isn't it?

Michael

Yes. So we went there and and then we did some shopping. And I don't think my wife bought much, but I actually bought a suit.

Katy

Bet you look pretty smart in that suit.

Michael

Yeah nice, nice. Very nice.

Katy

They have some amazing tailoring there in Milan, especially being the fashion capital. And so from there, you managed to get the train down to Florence and on your own and organize that by yourself. So I think you sound like you pretty confident doing all that, right?

Michael

Yeah, we booked our train before we left. That was easy. Just under two hours very easy. Then we got to Florence - we had five full days in Florence, which was good. And a couple of

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those days we spent, we did some day tours from Florence, one trip we went to Cortona and to Assisi and the other trip we went to Monteriggioni, Siena, Chianti and San Gimignano.

Katy

Did you have a favorite out of those? We like Cortona a lot, even though we were there for a very short period of time. Sienna was good though. We did it as a day too, unfortunately, and so we didn't have a lot of time in those places, so.

Katy

Yeah, it's a bit of a trade off, isn't it? Sometimes. And are there any of those places that you'd really love to go back to and explore some more?

Michael

Yeah, I would go back to San Gimignano, would go back to Florence again, probably and Assisi. Cortona - I'd like to stay in Cortona, or a small Tuscan town like that. So we'll definitely do that on their next trip.

Katy

Yeah, there's something quite magical about it. And I was there in November 2019 in San Gimignano and I just remember, the light was something so special about that light. It's just sort of very soft. And it's probably not something that we're used to here in Australia, but it's a very soft, sort of gentle light. And I - it gives it a nice kind of glow, I think. So in Florence, what was your favorite part in Florence? Did you stay somewhere nice, did you stay somewhere central?

Michael

Yeah, we we stayed central Piazza della Repubblica and so fairly centrally located. And yeah, we went to the Uffizi we went to the the Duomo. Climbed the dome of the Duomo. And I also went up the Campanile the Bell Tower as well. So yes -some beautiful views from up there.

Katy

What was your favorite, the Bell Tower or the Dome?

Michael

I enjoyed the views from the bell tower more actually. I thought they were better because you could see the Duomo from the tower. I got some beautiful photos from there.

Katy

Yeah, I think it's interesting, isn't it? Because if you go inside the dome, you're seeing the actual paintings inside the dome. Yes. And you get the sense of, you know, amazing architectural genius that was - that built it. But then you get the other perspective. If you go from the Campanile, it's a really it's hard to choose, I think. And I applaud you for doing both.

Michael

My wife wouldn't do the bell tower. She was a bit tired to walk up the stairs again, but I did it.

Katy

Well I think there's 400 stairs, I don't blame her really.

Michael

Yeah that's right.

Katy

Oh, good for you. And then you headed down to Rome and you'd been to Rome before. So this is why did you revisit any of these sites or did you.

Michael

Yeah, we went back to the Colosseum. I guess in 10 years it hadn't changed much, but I guess they'd opened up some different areas to it, I think, than when we were last there. So had sort of a different look at it. But what we did different this time, which we hadn't done the last time we went to some other places like Trastevere, I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing that correctly, but we loved it there. We had a beautiful afternoon there and beautiful lunch. I think we were there on Mother's Day as well. And yeah, we're in this little Osteria with this beautiful food and it didn't cost us very much either. But they had some entertainment. They had big tables full of families because it was Mother's Day and a guy going around singing and stuff. So it was really beautiful.

Katy

Oh, lovely. Yeah. I think Trastevere everybody is one of those places where you really get a sense of Rome and there's beautiful church there that I love to visit. And it's got some like Roman graffiti on the outside and it's got the mosaics inside. I don't know if you made it to that one.

Michael

I don't think we did, no.

Katy

Oh, well, next time. So Trastevere is a really great area to visit. And did you find any other discoveries there that you hadn't found the first time?

Michael

We also - I think the first time we hadn't been to Piazza Navona or Campo de Fiori and some of those places around that part of Rome.

Katy

There's always something new to discover there isn't there? And that was a bit that you did on your own. And did you feel like it managed that really well on your own? You booked everything easily and you'd got it all under control?

Michael

Yeah, so with Rome we just extended because we picked up the tour in Rome, we just extended the hotel of the tour, so we didn't really pick that one and it wasn't really very centrally or ideally located.

Michael

Did you have any leanings or challenges? No, because nothing really went wrong or badly. And I think the hotels I chose were pretty good and well located.

Katy

What's your criteria for your hotels? I know I have my personal set.

Michael

Well, I guess mostly it is about location. To be sort of located not too far out from anything that above luxury really. Doesn't really matter.

Katy

I think being able to walk everywhere is a big advantage in Italy. I prefer not to rely on public transport myself. Just - I use a combination of walking and taxis - seems to work quite well for me.

Michael

Yeah my wife and I are big walkers, so we're happy to walk everywhere.

Katy

You get a few steps in in Italy. It's like 20,000 steps a day.

Michael

Easily.

Katy

You definitely earn your gelato. Oh, okay. And then you joined the tour and tell us about the tour and why did you choose this particular tour?

Michael

Well, we chose the tour because it went to some of the places we wanted to go to and we went from Rome down to the Amalfi Coast, staying in Sorrento, then went across to Matera and to Alberobello in Puglia and then down from there across and into Sicily. So Sicily was a

key thing for me - I wanted to go there. So I went to a lot of places we wanted to go Matera we were interested in as well.

Katy

And which company did you choose for the tour, Michael?

Michael

It was Insight Vacations.

Katy

They're a great company, actually. Michael and I were just chatting a little bit before we started recording and I was saying that, I think, some people have an idea of some of these tours that, you know, they have maybe an older version of what these tours are. But maybe - can you describe what it was like? Because I think things have changed a little bit and they've had to switch things up. And you mentioned there was some really great experiences that you had on that tour.

Michael

Yeah, the busses were quite good. They had plenty of space on the busses. We weren't cramped in or anything. And in terms of experiences, I had some really good and different food experiences, like, for example, in Puglia we went to a Masseria, one of these fortified villages, and they put on this beautiful spread of food. The food just kept coming and it was all just fabulous. And there was another in Alberobello. We went to a restaurant in a Trulli, the little conical houses there, and there was a lady showing us how to make orecchiette, the little pasta shaped like an ear. And my wife actually was then trying to do some. She's doing it and the Nona's going now. Piano, piano, like do it softly or slowly.

Katy

Has she made them at home since then?

Michael

She hasn't. No, I can't say.

Katy

I know you sort of get a bit like - you try and you try. But these ladies have had years of experience that they've got that sort of - those fingers that just do it by magic I think.

Michael

Yeah

Katy

Well, they aren't really interesting experiences that I think sometimes if you're short on time especially, I think it's hard to have those experience yourself unless you actually do join a tour. I think actually, because, you know, if you were driving around by car, how would you

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know where. You could probably find a message on the Internet somewhere that did a lunch, but maybe not quite at that sort of experience that you had I think.

Yeah, I'd agree. I mean, you'd have to find out about that all beforehand and plan it right out, it's not something you just stumble across.

Katy

Exactly. Oh, so how many people were on the tour, do you remember?

Michael

I think there were less than 30. It wasn't it wasn't a really big group and it was a mix of people from - there were some Australians, but Americans and Canadians as well.

Katy

And did you have a favorite place (before we get to Sicily, before we get to that mainland) - did you have a favorite place on the mainland that you really enjoyed?

Michael

I guess Positano was a favorite.

Katy

What's not to love?

Michael

Yeah, Capri as well. We had a half a day there or something, but we really enjoyed that as well.

Katy

Stunning part of the world, isn't it? I can't wait to get back there. It's one of those places.

Michael

And we'll be going back there as well, so, you know.

Katy

Do you think you'll stay a little longer in that area this time?

Michael

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Katy

So this is the hard thing is a lot of people think, oh should I stay in Positano? But my friend Holly, who lives on Capri, she's Australian, and she's got this great tip that you should stay on Capri and then get the ferry over to Positano.

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Michael

Yeah it's not a bad idea, I guess. We were thinking to stay in Sorrento, but it was worthwhile considering Capri.

Katy

That's why it becomes really hard to choose where to stay, doesn't it? There's so many good options. It's crazy. Oh, wow, so then you headed over to Sicily. And this is like - this was for you an important part of the trip because this is the coming home, right? So almost. The going to see where your family was from. So when you got over to Sicily, where was the first place that you stopped?

Michael

We stopped in Taormina - actually said Giardini Naxos. That's where that's where we stayed - just down the bottom of the hill from Taormina. I think we had three nights there. We got taken around a little bit as part of the tour, but then we had a day off on our own to explore. And on that day off, actually the day off was scheduled in the tour. So I booked us to go to Panarea where my grandfather came from and Stromboli as a day tour, which was really worth it. It was a very long day, I was telling you earlier. But yeah, well and truly worth it just to go and see where I came from and and see the the graves of my great grandparents.

Katy

So was this a tour that was offered by the Inside themselves or was this something that you'd find yourself.

Michael

Something I found myself on a book tour through Viator.

Katy

Ah.

Michael

It was just a day to to go out there. And it's really when I say it was a tour they only really took us out by bus and herded us onto the ferry - once we got to the islands they didn't take us around or they didn't tell us about anything. So it was really just, I guess, helping us get the ferries and get on and off. But other than that, you're on your own to explore as you as you wanted to.

Katy

Did you get straight to Panarea? Was at the first stop.

Michael

Yeah. I think it stopped Vulcano and Lipari on the way. Just short stops to pick up passengers, probably. But the first long stop was in Panarea. So first thing we headed to was the church,

the San Pietro, and that would have been the church where my grandfather was probably baptized and Holy Communion. And we were there. They were painting the church and we were talking to one of the painters there. And I told him that my grandfather had come from (as much as I could in my very poor Italian), that my grandfather had come from Panama and that his name was Tesoriero. And I found out that his name was Tesoriero. Also, he was Vincenzo Tesoriero. Yeah. So I got a photo with him and stuff.

Katy

Oh. What's amazing. He's probably one of your cousins.

Michael

Could be. Could be. Yeah. And he gave some directions to the to the cemetery but we kept getting lost for the cemetery - because the cemetery is surrounded by these big walls and it's just in these walls, it's just a very small doorway and we must have just kept walking past because we walk. And then we'd ask somebody, we'd go back and whatever and we finally we finally worked out, got our way in. And then we found the the graves of my great grandparents - they're in like a vault in the in the wall. That took us a little while. I had instructions from one of my cousins on where to find it, but it wasn't where she'd said, but we managed to find it.

Katy

Wow. That's such a special experience. I just think it's incredible that these people came all this way to Australia. What we're saying to Michael before, like, what would they it was even going through their mind that they would go, right, we're going to get on a boat and go halfway around the world to a country that we don't know anything about and that doesn't speak our language. What amazing people.

Michael

And came and made a success of it, too.

Katy

Absolutely, and we were sort of reflecting on the fact that Panarea has changed quite a little bit since then.

Michael

Yeah a playground for the rich and famous now.

Katy

Oh, well, then you would have fitted right in there, Michael, I think. So, I think this is really interesting because you have the ferries - now this is me - I start to get a little bit anxious when I'm relying on these public transportation options? Were you quite aware of when the next ferry was going to be? Because this was only a day trip, right?

Michael

Yeah, they told us what time the ferry was. So, you know, we had to keep an eye on that and make sure. I'm usually fairly cautious on these things. If they say to get back, we'll get there by that time. Looking at my watch all the time, which takes away the joy of it sometimes. But.

Katy

Yeah, I'm a bit the same, like, you don't want to be kind of stranded. Did you say - how much time did you end up having on Panarea?

Michael

I think it was an hour and a half to two hours. I mean, we had time to have a cannoli and a coffee as well.

Katy

There's always time for that.

Michael

And then we went from there to to Stromboli. And on Stromboli we had another couple of hours to walk around and after that we got on the boat and the boat went around the back of the island to where the volcano is. And we saw the volcano erupt a couple of times, just little shoots of - little shoots of orange. But still, it was exciting.

Katy

Oh, it must have been. How amazing. So was that at nighttime? So you can say it was it sort of like getting to dusk by that stage?

Michael

Yes, it was nighttime by the time that we left there. I think when we first got there, it was just getting dusk. And then it..

Michael

Sounds like a pretty long day.

Michael

It was, yeah.

Katy

That sounds to me like that probably would have been the highlight of my trip. You know, the volcano, the family and all of that.

Michael

Yeah, that was that was the highlight for sure for me anyway. Yeah.

Katy

What an amazing, amazing experience to have. And so was that the end of your trip, what did you carry on from Taormina?

Michael

From Taormina we went to Agrigento to see the the Valley of the Temples, which is quite stunning. And then to Palermo. And we had a couple of nights in Palermo. They took us around to a couple of spots in Palermo as well as an old Norman chapel. And we went to an old palazzo.

Katy

Look, I personally I love Sicily. It's my spirit place. I really, really can't wait to get back. And Agrigento, maybe you can describe the people what Agrigento is because it's just like it's kind of strange that it's just sitting there, isn't it? It's basically - I'll let you tell it in your own words.

Michael

Well, it used to be a Greek settlement or Greek colony as other parts in southern Sicily where like Syracuse and those areas. So there are these big Greek temples that are built up on the top of the hill overlooking the the ocean. Some of them better preserved than others, but just really beautiful to see and to walk around.

Katy

It's a stunning place, 2000 years old, I believe they are - over 2000 years old and they are still standing, some of them, what they were when they were built. It's kind of crazy. Oh, I love that place so much. I can't wait to go back. So tell me, Michael, after that amazing trip and you headed over to Malta as well, you didn't stop there you just kept going.

Michael

Well, yeah, because we knew the trip finished in Palermo. And I guess the options were either to fly, like back to Rome or somewhere else, you know, to pick up a flight. And, you know, I looked at it and we could fly home from Malta and it was only an hour's flight from Palermo to Malta. So we chose to do that. We had three nights in Malta. Two full days. And loved it. It's a beautiful place. So full of history there as well. Like Sicily - sort of a strategic position that been held by quite a number of different empires over the years. Over the centuries. It was a beautiful place.

Katy

Oh, what a trip! Sounds like an epic trip. And do you think it helped build your confidence to go and explore further by doing that tour first?

Michael

Yes, it did. It did. So, look, I'm glad that we did it that way in some ways, like, you know, tours have their pluses and minuses, you get to see a lot of things, but you don't see a lot of

them, but you get a taste. So there were tasters and you get see what areas you'd like to spend a bit more time in. There's no way you'd be able to see as much as if you did it on your own. There's pros and cons of it, but it has given me more confidence and I intend to go and drive next time. But just not in certain areas right?

Michael

So we will probably will probably not drive the Amalfi Coast, for example. So we'll do that first and then pick up a car and drive. I'm keen to explore a bit more of Sicily and Calabria and Basilicata from, you know, a lot of reading I've done recently.

Katy

Well, there's actually - we did that. We did the kind of the reverse way we drove up from Sicily to Amalfi Coast. And there's a really great road. It's a really nice road through Calabria. It's almost like you're in Austria or something. It's a really nice road. But yeah, I think that driving gives you so many options to explore. And it's not - if you stay off, you know, the really busy areas - it's just it's really straightforward. But, you know, my number one tip is get your physical map because Google Maps and the GPS sometimes are not your friend.

Michael

Yes. I've heard people being sent to the wrong - completely the wrong town because there are towns with the same name throughout Italy. So unless you're picking exactly the right one, you could end up somewhere else.

Katy

You probably don't let your wife hear this one. But we did get stuck between two walls.

Michael

Oh, OK.

Katy

So that was a big error. And we got shouted at by the man from our hotel who said, "What are you doing?" But it was a good learning experience. Yeah, it's all part of the experience is all I'm going to say. And I think you'll have a great time exploring. Wow. So like obviously we're both in Australia and we can't leave - we can't go anywhere right now. But when would you plan to go, given everything's under control?

Michael

Well, I mean, tentatively, we're thinking next year, you know, ideally I'd like to go in May - it's a good time of year. It's not too hot, not too cold. It's just about right. But I don't know if things are going to be good by May so, possibly later in the year, maybe Septemberish or something.

Katy

Wonderful. Let's cross fingers. Hope that we can all go. Oh, ok Grazie - thank you, Michael. Thank you for joining us and sharing your wonderful journey throughout Italy, especially the South and your connections with your family and Sicily. I know many, many people would love to follow in your footsteps just as soon as we can. Thank you for joining us.

Michael

Oh, thank you very much. Thanks for having me.

Katy

Thank you to Michael for sharing his story. As I mentioned earlier, combining independent travel and a guided tour is a really smart way of seeing places you might not get to if you're concerned about driving or are short on time. Getting off the beaten path and having those experiences you just can't find on the internet is just one of the advantages of doing a small group tour and that's why we feature many of these small group tour operators on the podcast. They just know so much more than you could possibly find out if you tried to research on your own.

If you'd like more information and details of Michael's trip you can find them in the show notes at untolditaly.com/74 as well as a link to our episode on the Aeolian Islands where Michael's family is from.

We would love to hear from you if you would be happy to share your trip to Italy with your partner, as a family, with girlfriends or however you travel. You don't need any special media training, we literally just have a chat on line and then our wonderful audio team works some magic to create the episode. Reach out to us at ciao@untolditaly.com if you'd like to be a guest on the show. We can't wait to hear from you.