

Untold Italy Episode 86 - 10 Things to love about an Italian summer

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 86.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Buongiorno! Ciao everyone! Katy here with a big welcome to another episode of Untold Italy and one where we're going to celebrate all things summer in Italy. I'm recording this just before the summer celebrations known as Ferragosto which is an important holiday in Italy. I'll tell you a little more about its origins in a moment. But as you know, it's mid summer in the northern hemisphere currently and very hot.

In fact Sicily just recorded its hottest day on record at 48 degrees centigrade or 120 in Fahrenheit. Ouch that is very hot and quite out of the ordinary - well let's hope so. Temperatures are definitely rising around the world.

Anyway, because of this heat, many people choose to avoid traveling to Italy in mid summer. July to August. In fact you'll hear people speak very passionately about why it should be avoided, but today I wanted to share with you some of my favorite reasons why Italy is an amazing place to visit in summer and some tips for your trips at this time of year

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But first, What is Ferragosto?

Well, traditionally, Ferragosto is an Italian national holiday celebrated on 15th August. We can trace these mid summer festivities back to Ancient Rome and the rule of Emperor Augustus. He established the Feriae Augusti as a set of feasts aiming to provide the citizens of Rome a time of rest after the harvest. With the coming of Christianity the celebrations were converted into a religious festival that commemorated the Assunzione or the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven. These days it signifies the middle of the summer break for Italians and they head in droves to the beaches and hills to spend time with family and friends.

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Our family in Milan makes the journey down south to Calabria where there are stunning beaches, while friends in Le Marche head to the Dolomites for the fresh mountain air. On the day itself there are usually fireworks displays and parties. If you like fireworks then there are some amazing displays on the Amalfi Coast in Positano and Maiori on the Tyrrhenian Sea and Rimini on the Adriatic Coast. Rome usually throws a big party called the Gran Ballo di Ferragosto which is a big street dance party across the city for all of the residents who have stayed in town

Basically Ferragosto is a celebration of summer Italian style and wherever you are it's lots of fun

So what can you, the visitor, expect in the summer if you choose to visit at that time? And what should you do? Here are my top 10 summer activities in Italy, in no particular order

1. Head to the beach! Yes they will be busy and full of Italians but I reckon that's half the fun. Italy is really a peninsula with a couple of fabulous big islands and lots of smaller ones so there are miles and miles of coastline to enjoy. Just make sure you prebook your spot at the lido or beach club in advance or tap into some local knowledge to find smaller coves and inlets where you may not find a beach club but you'll likely have fewer crowds to deal with. One of my guilty pleasures is blissing out on my friend Holly's stories on Instagram. She lives on the island of Capri where summer looks to be at its magical best - that clear blue sea and those stripey umbrellas! If you want to see what it's like for yourself head on over to @michelangelo_capri on Instagram
2. Cities are quieter but the main sights are still open - that's right, you might get the impression that the whole place shuts down but it really doesn't. Rome, Florence and Venice are international cities and rely on tourism so the main sights and many restaurants and bars are still open. If you go early in the day to avoid the midday heat then places like the Colosseum are not as busy as they will be in September when the main tourist crowds return. There are also night openings at many places including the Vatican Museums which is another way to experience them relatively crowd free. Sometimes that does involve joining a tour like at the Colosseum but having done that myself it is quite a wonderful experience and so atmospheric. I'd definitely do it again

Which brings us to reason number 3 why visiting Italy in summer is a great idea

3. Longer days! = at this time of year the sun sets around 8.30pm which means more time sitting in the piazza in the golden light of dusk and epic dinners in the fading light.

Or you could attend a beautiful dinner in a vineyard in Tuscany lit up with fairy lights. My friend Olivia was lucky enough to do just this recently and I have to say this experience rocketed straight to the top of my must dos for our next trip to Italy when

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she described it for us in our Untold Italy Insiders group. This gourmet dinner with matching organic wines from the vineyard sounded like perfection to me.

And while we're on the subject of dusk, one of my favorite memories from a summer we spent in Tuscany was wandering back to our villa along a country path and noticing fireflies twinkling all around us. We don't have fireflies in Australia and I didn't know what they were at first - I actually thought they were fairy lights.. But you know, fireflies are nature's perfect version of fairy lights and there was nothing more magical than that moment in Tuscany

But if you are going to stay up a little later than you usually do, you may like to enjoy doing something Italians have been doing for centuries

4. And that's our fourth reason to enjoy an Italian summer - riposo! This afternoon break which the Spanish call a siesta often extends for several hours and usually involves a restorative nap. So you eat your lunch, have a swim and a nap and get yourself ready for the cooler evenings and you avoid too much rushing about in the heat of the day. Sounds like the perfect plan to me!
5. Touring the sights is one thing to do on a warm Italian summer night but another favorite activity for Italians are outdoor concerts and they come in at number 5 on . Up and down the country there are special events outdoors where you can enjoy music in the balmy night air.

Possibly the most famous of these is the opera season in Verona. Held in the ancient Roman amphitheatre, the performances in the arena are spectacular for their setting and set design and some of the most coveted tickets in Europe. This year's opera was Aida and judging by footage I've seen it was absolutely incredible in the moonlight. Other popular evening performances take place in the ancient Greek theater in Taormina Sicily and at Villa Rufolo overlooking the Amalfi Coast in Ravello. In Lucca there's a pop festival and Jazz lovers should head to the region of Umbria. And, if you're a fan of Andrea Bocelli he has a concert series at his property in Tuscany which sounds bucket list worthy to me.

6. Another strategy for avoiding the heat altogether is at number 6 on our list of reasons to love an Italian summer which is to Head to the mountains. As we heard on last week's episode with Kate and Vin, spending time in the Alpine regions opens up a whole other Italian experience beyond its famous cities, art and culture. Italy has 3 major mountain ranges - the Alps and Dolomites in the north and the Apennines that are like the spine of the country. So you're never too far away from cooler temperatures, fresh mountain air and walks in pastures filled with flowers and incredible views like the ones we heard about last week.

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7. At number 7 we have another favorite destination for Italians in summer - their beautiful lakes. While many of you know Lake Como close to Milan, snuggled in the Alpine foothills and known for its glamorous villas and pretty towns, Italy actually has well over 1000 lakes, perfect for a mid summer dip. We've talked about a few of them on the podcast, including my favorite Lago di Orta and we'll definitely talk about them some more in future episodes as they are very special places to visit. Often there'll be castle overlooking the waters and you'll always find a small town or two full to the brim with cobbled streets and shuttered windows to stroll around and of course refre
8. Of course all that walking and swimming is going to build up an appetite and it wouldn't be a podcast about Italy if we didn't talk about ..

The food! - Which is the eighth item on our list. Some of Italy's most famous and important ingredients are in abundance in summer - tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, basil, peppers and figs. So it's at this time when you'll taste them at their freshest and most delicious. If you haven't eaten a fresh Italian sun ripened tomato, you need to fix that straight away because it is a next level tomato experience that will have you wondering what you actually got sold at home.

The taste is so much more intense and the fruit so juicy. You don't even mind if you get a little dribble of juice on your chin. I could eat them on their own with a drizzle of olive oil and salt and pepper but you know, a caprese salad with mozzarella cheese is about as summary as it gets when it comes to Italian dish

9. Another thing that is special about Italy in summer are the local festivals and they are number 9 on our list of things to love about Italy in Summer. All across the country there are historical pageants and reenactments in cities and towns, recalling centuries old traditions and customs that are very local and unique to the region you find them. In early August there's La Quintana, an historic jousting event in costume held in Ascoli Piceno in Le Marche which has been taking place for hundreds of years. The second of Siena's famous horse races known as the Palio happens in mid August, when the citizens of the city crowd into Piazza del Campo to cheer on the rider representing their district. And in the first week of September there's the Regata Storica - an historical parade on water and series of boat races. All these festivities are very special and unique and things you'll only see and experience in Italy in summer

Which brings us to our very last reason why we love an italian summer

10. Gelato! - and I know this is a food but I actually consider it a separate food group to what I mentioned before. Now gelato can be and is obviously consumed throughout the year but in summer I think you get a special pass to try an extra scoop or two. In Sicily the gelato is called granita and it's served in warm brioche for breakfast. Yep. Breakfast. What better way to start your day than with a scoop of gelato! It's really

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very delicious and you can taste interesting seasonal flavors too like gelsi which is mulberry. Further north in Liguria they make a delicious basil flavored gelato which is very refreshing as well as tasty. And, of course, there are the traditional fruit and creamy based flavors too. There is absolutely nothing better than a scoop or two of gelato in an Italian summer!

So there you see, while we understand why many people choose not to visit Italy in summer there are plenty of reasons why you should. And here are some specific tips for summer to help you manage the trip so it's full of wonderful memories

Tips

- Book yourself a villa, Hotel or agriturismo with a pool so you can cool off in the heat of the day if you're not going to be close to any water like the beach or a lake. Usually the best properties are booked up well in advance - 6-12 months, so if you're planning a trip then, make sure to get in early
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- If you're in the cities, use the Mornings to go sightseeing, relax in the afternoon and take a little riposo nap so you're ready to enjoy the evenings. It's also important to book timed entry tickets for the attractions so you're not standing outside in the sun too long.
- Make sure you have the right clothing and sun protection - light loose clothing, a wide brim sun hat (I like the ones that say Ciao Bella on them - so cute) and plenty of sunscreen
- Plus a water bottle that you can fill up at the nasoni or free water fountains

Europeans know that an Italian summer is something special. They flock to Italian beaches, lakes and mountains in droves. And while it can be quite busy, it's also a lot of fun to share a summer vacation experience with so many different cultures. Because everyone loves a summer vacation and like many things, arguably Italians do it better!

So why not consider an Italian summer vacation next year and see how many of things I mentioned on this list of experiences you can check off your list - well, at least gelato for breakfast - you have to try that!

I'm wrapping up the show today with a big shout out to you all for listening and supporting the show. I just found out that Untold Italy is now in the top 1.5% of all podcasts around the world which kind of blew my mind. Here I am sitting in my home in Melbourne Australia, talking to people in Italy and other parts of the world about Italy with people listening in from places like Portland Oregon, to the Philippines, Ireland, Cameroon and Peru! Basically every continent is covered and what's so special is that we're all united by a love of traveling in Italy and all things Italian. So Grazie Mille, thank you for listening. It's such a joy to be part of a happy global community at a time when things continue to be difficult for many

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That's all for today If you're listening in the northern hemisphere, enjoy the last few weeks of summer while those of us down south look forward to the end of winter and the start of sunnier days. We'll be back next week with a special episode all about `` one of Italy's most enduring cultural icons but until then it's "ciao for now"