

Untold Italy Episode 88 - The Grand Tour

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 88.

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

Buon giorno! Ciao! Hi everyone,

It's Katy here and today I am wondering whether you've ever done a Grand Tour of Italy? If you're not sure what I am talking about then today's episode will reveal all as we dive into another trip report from one of our listeners.

So what is a Grand Tour of Italy? Well this is a tradition that dates back hundreds of years to the 17th century when well to do English gentlemen and later American men and women would travel to Europe as a rite of passage on becoming an adult.

While their trips took them to France and Greece they would spend most of their time exploring Italy - in particular Rome, Florence and Venice. Back in those days the trips would last months and involve deep exploration of the cities as part of a rounded education for the elite classes.

As steam trains arrived in Europe in the 19th century, this opportunity opened up to the middle classes and is best described in EM Forster's beautiful novel *A Room with A View* which just happens to be one of my favorite books of all time.

Later Thomas Cook took the concept and converted it into some of the world's first tour packages which many tour companies like Trafalgar, Perillo and others copy to this day. And many of us start our adventures in Italy on a tour like this.

Today we're sharing a way to do this grand tour that you may not have thought of. I certainly hadn't considered it myself but only because I didn't know it was possible or maybe thought it was too expensive. I'm a dedicated independent traveler and usually like to do things all by myself but you know, there's something to be said for getting expert assistance when you're planning the trip of a lifetime.

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Our guest today is Kathleen Guglielmo, a resident of New York and former president of the National Organization of Italian American Women who is going to tell us all about a private tour of Italy that she organized for her and her cousins with Joe Banana Limos. Kathleen has traveled to Italy many many times to visit family and friends so I was intrigued about this trip and how it compared to other trips she's taken in Italy. So without further ado I'll welcome her onto the show.

Katy

Benvenuta, Kathy. Ciao, and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Kathleen

Thank you, Katy. And thank you for inviting me to join you and talk about Joe Banana Limos Grand Tour of Italy.

Katy

Oh, it's exciting, and it's so great to have you on the show today. But before we get started talking about your amazing trip, I know our listeners would love to know a little bit more about you, and I suspect you've got some Italian heritage. Will you tell us a little bit about it?

Kathleen

Yes, I'm happy to. I'm a United States citizen, and I was born and raised, actually, in a very famous section of the Bronx, New York, called Arthur Avenue. My family, my grandparents came from Campania, the south of Italy, where Giovanni's company is. And I'm also an Italian citizen.

Katy

And no doubt you've been drawn to Italy so many times, and you must have done many, many trips. How many trips have you done over the years? Can you even recall?

Kathleen

I took my first trip to Italy in the year 2000. It was after my father had suddenly passed away. And so I had a real interest in learning where my grandparents came from. So since the year 2000, I've been to Italy two or three times a year, visiting family and different friends throughout the country. I also do a lot of volunteer work for the Italian American community in New York. I was a past President for the National Organization of Italian American Women for New York. I was the President for New York, and I've been on their board since 2005. I was part of their pilot program when they began a cultural exchange program with the Italian Ministry. So every year, Italy would send over maybe eight to ten young ladies who would come here to New York. They would visit our universities, they would visit with different women in their occupations. So we had some judges who invited the young ladies into the

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courtroom. We had some ladies in fashion. And then on the opposite year, we would send our US citizens, young ladies there to Italy, and they would be guests of the Italian Ministry. So that's been very fulfilling for me.

Katy

Oh, yeah, sounds amazing. I think keeping those connections alive across the generations, even after people have immigrated and settled in another country, is so special. It really is lovely. Now, I know that you've been to Italy many times, like two to three times a year. That's amazing. But what sort of trips have you done there? Have you done, like, group tours/traveled independently? What's the main style of trips that you've done?

Kathleen

Well, of course, I've done a lot of trips where I've traveled individually to visit families and also the families of our students who came from Italy when they came from Italy in the cultural exchange, they actually lived with us. So we really had an attachment. And throughout the years, I visited with them with their families. And then, of course, my main trip was with Giovanni with his company, Joe Banana Limos, the Grand Tour of Italy. Other trips that I took would be with my family and friends, and we would visit different cities throughout Italy and do excursions from those cities, take train travel throughout the cities, where in this tour that I took with Giovanni's folks was very different in that we had a private driver throughout the trip who was with us for 18 days.

Katy

Wow. Before we get into the trip, details, have you ever been on group tours? Because I'm really interested to sort of tease out what's the difference when we get later down the track and what's the difference between a group tour, like a bus tour that you would do and like in a private tour? So have you been on many of those group tours?

Kathleen

Yes, I have. When I began traveling to Italy, I started traveling with the tour companies on a group trip. So I have traveled with Central Holidays. I have traveled with Gate One Travel. I have traveled with Collette Tours. I have traveled with Perillo tours, so that's very different in that you would travel on a large bus. You would have a tour director throughout the trip with your driver, whereas this trip was very different. And so another reason that I decided to take this trip was because I recently retired from a financial career and my goal in retirement was to enhance a family boutique Italian travel company called Ease into Italy and Beyond and planning for that, my son Matthew and I discussed my traveling with tour companies based in Italy. Our goal was to compare the tours offered by the Italian tour companies versus the US tour companies, which I had previously traveled with.

Katy

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I like this contrast. It's really interesting. Kathleen and I were talking offline before, and I think it's really interesting to know that, yeah, you can do all these different styles of travel in Italy and one is to travel independently, which I know a lot of our listeners like to do. And some people like to go on a group tour because they might feel more comfortable if they haven't done much traveling before. But really why I wanted to invite Kathleen on this show today to talk about this concept of a private tour, which is with a driver, which is something that I had not actually even I had not considered myself, but I think it's a really interesting and unique way to travel because you can have really the best of both worlds. You can have the independence of that independent travel, and then you can have the structure and the knowledge, really, and the deep, deep local knowledge of a local that can get you around from A to B. So, Kathleen, you decided to do this tour so you could do some research. But who was on the tour? Tell us a little bit about that.

Kathleen

The tour was just myself and three of my cousins. But the way that I found the tour was that I have a very close friend in the town of Treviso in Italy, and she recommended that I try the Grand Tour offered by Joe Banana Limos. My friend Martha was born in Sorrento, and she knew the owner, Giovanni, quite well - they grew up together. So hence I contacted Giovanni and myself and my three cousins joined the tour.

Katy

That sounds like fun. I'd love to go on a trip with my cousins.

Kathleen

You know, as we were talking about the difference between the group tour and the private tour, I chose the private tour because I've traveled, as I said, on the larger tours that require often a very stringent daily schedule. And I wanted to compare the flexibility of traveling with a private driver.

Katy

Yeah, it's really interesting. What about the cost? I mean, I know people would think, well, private driver, that's gonna be really expensive. But actually, when I started looking into it, I was really surprised because I was looking at it. And I was thinking, wow, just for the convenience and I guess their local knowledge, it wasn't as expensive as what I thought. In fact, it was very good value.

Kathleen

Well, actually, with respect to the value, I'm a financial person. So I felt for the number of days I broke it down to a daily cost, the trip was 7400 Euro per person, which was a fair price. I broke it down to 411 Euro per day for 18 days, which included the private driver, luxury

accommodations, entrance fees, private guides and lunches. I really did think it was a good deal for what we received for 18 days.

Katy

Yeah, it does sound like it. So let's go into the trip and maybe you can tell us a little bit about the tript. It was an 18 day treat. That sounds like a complete adventure. And it was called the Grand Tour. So what does that actually mean?

Kathleen

It's called the Grand Tour because it took in many important cities in Italy. And so for us, it all begin on September 30th 2019. We were met by Antonio of Giovanni's staff at the Rome Airport. The vehicle that was used throughout the trip was a Mercedes minivan. It was quite plush, with a beautiful white leather interior, so we had to be very careful, but it was very comfortable. So Antonio picked us up in Rome and transported us to the Montebello Splendid Hotel in Florence, where we stayed for three nights. The Montebello Hotel is a 19th century Villa, and it was situated on the outskirts of Florence in a very quiet area. It was quite beautiful, but it was in a location where you can walk to all of the attractions. In Florence, we visited the following highlights with a very knowledgeable guide, Chiara. We visited Michelangelo's David at the Academia, which is my favorite. The Duomo, Piazza Santa Croce, the Ponte Vecchio - the famous Ponte Vecchio with all of the jewelry stores. So of course, there were many purchases made. We visited the Uffizi gallery. And the thing that was wonderful was that for any of the museums that we visited throughout the trip, we never had to wait in line because all of the tickets were purchased ahead of time in advance.

Katy

So you didn't have to do any of that organizing yourself. And you didn't organize any of the local guides that were all handled for you.

Kathleen

So each day cwe woke up, we had breakfast and we just followed the program, and we followed Antonio.

Katy

It sounds very relaxing.

Kathleen

It's very relaxing. And then from Florence, we had another full day excursion to Pisa, and Lucca. And Lucca is actually one of my favorite places in Italy. And we had a wonderful stop in a town called Forte dei Marmi, you know, Forte dei Marmi?

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Katy

I do, it's a lovely beach resort.

Kathleen

Lovely. So we stop there for lunch. So this area near the sea is a hidden treasure. It's where the Italian people vacation. It was a lovely, upscale area near the sea with wonderful shopping. Forte dei Marmi has an expansive seafront with a beautiful pontile that juts out into the sea where one can walk, one can gaze, one can relax.

Katy

It's very elegant, too, isn't it?

Kathleen

Very, very elegant.

Katy

Very. A lot of well heeled Florentines and Luccese go there, don't they?

Kathleen

Yeah. It's interesting because my Italian family lives in the neighboring town of Lido di Camaiore. So I've been there many times. I love Forte dei Marmi, and I ride my bicycle along ? each day to Forte dei Marmi, and often in hopes that maybe I would meet Andrea Bocelli because he has a private beach.

Kathleen

Yeah. I thought that was very nice. - it was just a very nice change to visiting cities to see the local seaside.

Katy

Yeah. That is something that's really, I think, really special. And I think there is this concept of the grand tour, which people have been doing for centuries, right. The whole - Rome, Florence, Venice and the main cities. But I think that if you can get a little bit off the beaten path and just seek out some of these lesser known places, you're going to have a really very enriched trip, and you will have those memories. I'm sure this is one of the memories that you have that sticks with you, actually.

Kathleen

Yeah. Absolutely. And what you just described is a lot of what was included in this trip. For instance, the next day, we transfer to Venice, but we had to stop in Modena on the way where we visited a balsamic vinegar farm. We enjoyed a light lunch and tasting. But the beauty of the private tour was that we were given as much time as we wanted to explore and try the different products.

Katy

Yeah. That's in my dream, a lot of people who've been listening know that I had this trip canceled in 2020, where we had exactly that plan. So I look forward to recreating that. But, yeah, I think these, like being able to stop and enjoy it is so special. Yeah. Did you do anything else in Modena? Did you see the Ferraris?

Kathleen

No, we didn't. And that's another thing I haven't seen.

Katy

Next time!

Kathleen

So when we reached Venice, we checked into the Monaco and Grand Canal Hotel, which is situated right on the Grand Canal with gorgeous views of St Mark Square. We were there for two nights. It was a luxury hotel in a prime location. It was very pleasant, and it was a good spot in the evenings when you like to go out and just take a stroll. Another nice feature was that they actually had an outdoor restaurant overlooking the canal.

Kathleen

It was really a treat.

Katy

That sounds beautiful.

Kathleen

So in Venice, we enjoyed a four hour walking tour that included St Mark Square, the Basilica, the Doges Palace, the Rialto Bridge, and so so much more. We toured with Igor, one of the top guides in the Veneto region. And actually, Igor is a good friend of mine. So it was a very small world. The next day, Igor took us by boat for a full day, and we stopped at Burano, where I had never been before. And we went to Murano, where I had been previously but I love the Murano glass. I think it's so beautiful. And then that day we ended our evening with, of course, the gondola ride. It's a must in Venice.

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Katy

I think so. Every time I go there, I say, oh, I don't think I'll do a gondola ride this time, but I always do.

Kathleen

I do, too.

Katy

It's so special. It really is. I like this idea of the day on the water because I think obviously Venice is - it's a city built on water. and if you have your own boat or disposal, that's exciting. I like that idea.

Kathleen

It's exciting. And it was actually very convenient because I had been to Venice before, and you always have to plan. Well, should I take the vaporetto? Which one do I take? And it's a little confusing then it can be confusing with the bridges and everything. So this made that so easy to just get into the boat and listen and learn. And it was really very comfortable. It was really great.

Katy

Yeah. I think the other thing about the vaporettos is, you know, in normal times, that Vaporetto can be very busy. So the last time that I went there, we had to wait for two vaporettos. And I think if you're on a tight schedule, that might be a little bit of a problem, too. So I would love to go on my own little boat. Sounds amazing.

Kathleen

Oh, it is. It really is wonderful. It was just another great feature of the tour. And so then after Venice, we transferred to the countryside in Tuscany, the Val d'Orcia region. And we stayed at the Borgo Di Cortefreda for three nights. The rooms were large, with beautiful views of the Tuscan hillside. It's what you imagine when you think of Tuscany. Their restaurant offered different varieties of dinner, but also with a choice of wine tastings or olive oil tastings, which I thought was very nice. It was very relaxing stop after visiting Florence and Venice.

Kathleen

They also had a lovely pool overlooking the Tuscan countryside.

Katy

Gorgeous. And I think it's really good because if you were to try and do that on your own, you would have to have a car and you wouldn't be able to do that very easily by public transport, because that area is actually not very well served by public transport at all.

Kathleen

No.

Katy

You do actually need a car. And then did you have the driver at your disposal during the days there when you were in Tuscany?

Kathleen

Yes, that's what was really nice. And although the days were planned, but if we wanted to do something else or stop somewhere else, as I mentioned to you, Antonio was very amenable to all of that, which was wonderful.

Katy

Fantastic. So what did you do in Tuscany?

Kathleen

Okay, so what we did in Tuscany one day we visited my favorite hill top town of Pienza, which is the UNESCO World Heritage Site and the home of the delicious pecorino cheese. I don't know if you've been to Pienza, but I love Pienza. It's a quaint, very small town, but it has a wonderful walkway along the side of the town that overlooks the Tuscan landscape. It's just absolutely magnificent.

Katy

Kathleen, we have a lot in common Pienza and Lucca are two of my favorite towns.

Kathleen

So on that day, we also stopped in Montepulciano and Montalcino, both famous for their wines. They produce Brunello, Chianti Classico and the famous Montepulciano wines. We stopped at La Crociana, which is a local vineyard estate owned by my friends. So again, that was the beauty of the private tour, because we were in the region of Montalcino. And I had asked Antonio if we would be able to visit with them because we all knew them and he was fine with it. And it was wonderful. It was really great.

Katy

There's nothing better than catching up with friends in Tuscany?

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Kathleen

No. And having a taste of their Brunello.

Katy

That sounds magnificent.

Kathleen

So then we had another full day tour after that - an excursion to the historical town of Siena. I particularly love the Museum there, as I admire the work of the painter Duccio. We also visited San Gimignano with its many towers and the medieval walled town of Montepulciano.

Katy

Beautiful.

Kathleen

Yeah. We enjoyed stopping along the way to do some local wine tasting in small family owned vineyards, which I thought was very nice also. It wasn't on the formal tour, but if we saw something of interest, we stopped in.

Katy

And of course, I guess Antonio is fluent in Italian, but I'm sure you have a pretty good Italian, too, but it does make a big difference to doing all that stopping if you've got someone who can speak the language fluently and can chat with people on your behalf.

Kathleen

Oh, yes, it really does, because some of these places are off the beaten path where, you know, maybe they don't speak English as well as in the bigger cities. So it is really a very advantageous to have a driver with you who does speak English. Some of the drivers who I've been with in the past did not speak English, so it could be difficult. I do have a handle on the Italian language - I'm not fluent, I would say I'm an intermediate but it was very helpful to have him with us.

Katy

Okay. So where did you go after Tuscany?

Kathleen

So after Tuscany, our trip continued with a leisurely drive from Tuscany to Sorrento on the Amalfi Coast, with a special stop to taste the Pizza of Naples - the best ever.

Katy

We've had Pierpaolo on the show to talk about pizza. And I know you've met with Pierpaolo. Did you go with him on that trip?

Kathleen

Yes. Yes, I did go with him. I'm going to talk about him. But I wanted to add that the region of Campania is the home of the San Marzano tomatoes, which I love. I don't know. Do you love them also?

Katy

Of course.

Kathleen

I feel a little bit like Stanley Tucci. So in Sorrento, we checked into the quaint Regina Hotel, which overlooks the Bay of Naples in the center of Sorrento. From there, we were able to walk to everything. They had a very relaxing rooftop bar, which in the evenings was really nice.

Kathleen

When we came home, we could sit up there and relax. And this was a nice place to call home for five nights.

Katy

Five nights in Sorrento. What a treat.

Kathleen

Five nights in Sorrento. So our days were filled with many wonderful local experiences along the Amalfi Coast. We had a full day drive to explore the town of Positano, Ravello and Amalfi. All gems. I'm sure most folks have heard of them. We took a private boat tour one day to the island of Capri, where we swam and we snorkeled and we visited the white and the green grottos. You did have a choice if you wanted to visit the famous Blue Grotto, but if you did, you were dropped in that area. You were left there because that's a private business. So Giovanni's boat did not go through there, but we didn't need to because we actually loved the white and the green grottos.

Katy

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They're really beautiful, aren't they? This is actually one of my favorite experiences of my life so far - was the day that we spent going around the water on a boat in Capri? Honestly, if anyone has a chance to do it, you absolutely must do it. It's just one of those experiences that will stay with you forever. I guarantee it.

Kathleen

I agree. So another highlight for us was a day for food lovers. We visited a family owned mozzarella farm and olive mill. We also learned how to prepare a real pizza, and then we enjoyed it together as a family.

Katy

That's a special memory too.

Kathleen

The we thought, coming from the Arthur Avenue section of the Bronx, that we knew the real pizza.

Katy

What did you learn?

Kathleen

Well, you know, at home, our moms always prepared homemade pizza. I think for me - it was the products that they use. They use the San Marzano tomatoes for pizza. Everything was fresh, the mozzarella, it just melts in your mouth. The process itself wasn't as new to me because my mom everything was homemade, but it was just fun to kind of roll in there. And I do love farm to table types of food, so I really enjoyed that very much.

Katy

That sounds like a really special experience. And, you know, I have this thing that I always say is that mozzarella is life changing. It's actually, you can't even describe it. It's so good.

Kathleen

It is so good.

Katy

We all have to go back there and just sit there and just shoving in our mouths.

Kathleen

So during our days in Sorrento, we also had ample time to scroll through the town and do some shopping in the wonderful stores owned by the local folks. My cousins and I treated ourselves to lovely leather purses, hand made wooden pieces and ceramic items, which are all produced locally. And we tasted all the flavors of Limoncello along the way, which I'm sure Paulo described to you in his podcast.

Katy

He did, hid did! I'm hearing - you did a lot of shopping, so most have been handy to have a driver there as well, to pick up all the shopping, bits for you as well - so you didn't have to carry everything with you all the way.

Kathleen

Well, it did. But the only thing is that a lot of the shops in Sorrento are in the pedestrian area. But our hotel was so situated in a prime location that we were able to go back and forth.

Katy

And did you have to ship much back, or did you have space in your luggage?

Kathleen

No. The only things that we shipped back were the wines and the olive oil. And we save some space for the other things.

Katy

Just out of interest, because like you were in the Mercedes van, which with the white seats, which does sound rather lovely. What size cases did you have?

Kathleen

So I use a 25 inch. It's a duffel, and I use that because it has separate compartments. I would say no more than a 25 inch piece of luggage. And then I also carry a backpack. And one of my cousins carries, like, almost like a mini suitcase that can go under the seat in front of you. So we both had two pieces of luggage.

Katy

Okay. It's good to know, because I think - also, if you're traveling independently, then you may be a little bit restricted by luggage, but if you're traveling with a driver, then you're probably not as restricted in that regard.

Kathleen

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Well, the only thing you have to consider that you have to get it back home on the plane.

Katy

That's true.

Kathleen

We've run into that problem before.

Katy

I usually end up buying another bag.

Katy

I mean, it's pretty embarrassing, but sometimes it's something you have to do because you see so many things that you love and they're things that you can't buy at home, they're really special, unique pieces and hand crafted. And you think, well, when am I going to be Italy again. Especially now. And I'm so glad that I did invest in those pieces that I bought. So I bought last time I was there in 2019. I bought a lovely leather jacket in Florence.

Kathleen

Oh that's nice. My daughter bought one when we went. I bought one too.

Katy

I know it's hard to stop yourself at one sometimes, but we did manage it. And did you finish the tripping? Sorrento? Is that where it finished?

Kathleen

No. No. So we were sad to leave Sorrento, but we were all excited to head to Rome.

Katy

Oh Rome!

Kathleen

However, the highlight was stopping in Naples to have a tour with Paolo - who you know very well. So Paolo is very knowledgeable. He makes the tour very enjoyable. We saw many historic and Holy sites with him. We were particularly excited as many of the stores along the patho, so the traditional Rum Baba pastry, which was our grandfathers favorite pastry. Our grandfather was born in Campania, so it was exciting for us. And then Paolo top the tour off with a visit to a very local place for the best, Neapolitan Pizza.

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Kathleen

So that was the story of a really great day.

Katy

I can imagine. And if our listeners haven't heard this episode about the pizza, which he goes into a lot of detail about the best places to go for the pizza in Naples, and a lot of detail about how it's made. And it's really a fun, fun podcast. And I really encourage you to listen to it because he's a really - he eats five pizzas a week, he told us so - he probably knows. So then from Naples, he went on to Rome.

Kathleen

To Rome, yes so we arrived in the Eternal City and checked into the Veneto Palace Hotel for three nights. So this was a boutique hotel, was in a lovely location. It was not far from the Villa Borghese and the Via Veneto, and it had a nice feature that was a spa - where we were able to relax and enjoy massages on our leisure day.

Katy

Very nice.

Kathleen

But before that we had a wonderful walking tour of Rome with our guide, Max, which included visits to the Janiculum Hill, Piazza Navona, Fontana Di Trevi, the Trevi Fountain, Piazza di Spania, the Spanish Steps. We also enjoyed a three hour guided tour of the Vatican, the Sistine Chapel and St Peter's Basilica. There's just so much history in Rome, but it was truly, very special.

Katy

Yeah. I think you really need a guide for some of those areas, especially the Vatican, because if you go in there and it's not very well marked and the guide can really help you understand the significance of the pieces, because even if you can see that they're incredibly beautiful, there are stories and history behind them that you just don't get unless you're hearing them from someone who knows. Really.

Kathleen

I agree 100% because another day we enjoyed a tour of ancient Rome. We visited the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, topped off by a visit to the Catacombs. So they're all very interesting historical sites. They were very busy days. But I agree 100% - these are places where you will learn the most if you have a guide, because you can walk through the Roman

Forum on your own, but you really wouldn't know what went on there unless you had a guide. And for so many of these other places.

Katy

Yeah. I think it's really it's an investment worth making, because otherwise what's going to happen and this is what happened to me - I originally went to Rome as a student, and I didn't have that much money and I was wandering around and I was a little bit frustrated because they didn't understand what was happening. And so then when I went back, I just wanted to know more and more and more. And so you get a guide - they can really help with that. But I think choosing the guide is really important because actually in Italy and you probably know this, Kathleen, is all the guides for each city need to be licensed for the city. So they have to sit all these exams so they fully know the region and the area that they're talking about inside out. So if you're guiding Venice, you need to know everything about the history. So it really comes down to the style of guide that you choose because you don't want it to be dry. You want it to be fun and engaging, I think. And I think that's where having local knowledge to be able to pick the right guide for your tour is very important.

Kathleen

Well, they were all excellent, very knowledgeable. They were professional. They were just really wonderful. We learned so much from them.

Katy

Fantastic. It's really special. And I think those memories that come back, you'll remember little stories. You might not remember what the thing looks like, specifically or the piece of art that you saw, but you remember the stories that you were told I think.

Kathleen

You do. You do. On our last day, we had a day of leisure. So our day of leisure began, as I said, with the massages. But we also enjoyed spending extended time in Trastevere, which is a very local, trendy neighborhood where our relatives had lived. And we enjoyed some wonderful food. There's a place there called Grazia & Graziella, which is the best pizza I thought that I ate in Italy. Don't let...

Katy

Don't let Pierpaolo know.

Kathleen

if not, it was equally as good. And this area of Trastevere, is really one of my favorite areas of Rome, because in the past, I had visited my son, Matthew, who lived there while attending the University of Rome.

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Kathleen

So together we walked through the narrow streets. We enjoyed our meals, and we made great family memories with my daughter there. And it's just a wonderful place. My cousins live there and they went to school there. My cousin was employed by a major US company and was transferred there for a number of years with his family. It's a special place.

Katy

It is because you've got all those vines hanging down and the cobbled streets.

Kathleen

It's beautiful.

Katy

It's a typical Roman neighborhood, isn't it?

Kathleen

It is definitely, definately.

Katy

And how did you get around Rome? Were you able to use the driver in Rome?

Kathleen

Yes.

Katy

Because to get from Villa Borghese area over to Trastevere is actually a little bit of a hike, isn't it?

Kathleen

It's a hike. But Antonio took us and he dropped us off. So wherever it was a little difficult after the tours, he just would tell us where he would be waiting for us.

Katy

I think this is an extra added bonus of this style of tour, because in the big cities. Okay. You can walk. Definitely. You're going to be doing a lot of steps a day. I'm sure you covered thousands and thousands.

Kathleen

Yeah. And I'm a walker. But it was nice after a long day, you know 4 hours of touring, 3 hours walking. It was really nice to have him waiting there for us.

Katy

Yeah. And you don't have to worry about getting a taxi or any of that or paying for it or any of that. It's just everything's there done. I love it. And did they find you at some other nice restaurants in room to eat at?

Kathleen

Actually, the hotel gave us suggestions. But we also knew restaurants locally from our families. And then also, Antonio had given us recommendations that Giovanni had given to him. In each place they gave us recommendations. The tour itself. Well, I'll go into it that at the end. But the thing that was nice was that we were at leisure in the evening for dinner, which I thought was very nice. I like that. You need a little downtime. And it's nice to have it in the evening, where in Italy we sit. First we have an appetivo, and then we site, we have our dinner and we don't rush things like they tend to do here in the United Statesn, in the restaurants.

Katy

Yeah. Just take your time. Enjoy. Relax. Soak up the atmosphere beautiful. And that was your trip. And then what happened? Did you cry?

Kathleen

Well, since we had to say goodbye to Antonio. But I wanted to talk a little bit about Antonio because 18 days is a long time to travel together. So it's the trip of a lifetime for many. And I felt that Giovanni made an excellent choice in assigning Antonio to this tour. He was respectful, professional, fluent in English, as I said, and very knowledgeable. He was enjoyable to drive with and we learned a lot from him about the Italian culture along the journey. He was punctual, he was patient and he was flexible as we talked about with respect to our interest and our needs.

Kathleen

And I thought that he was an excellent driver and an excellent choice.

Katy

He sounds wonderful. I think if you've got someone like that at your disposal, it's almost golden. It's almost priceless.

Kathleen

I agree.

Katy

Well, bless him, Antonio. And it must have been hard to say goodbye to him at the airport. Was it?

Kathleen

Oh, very hard because you just - first of all, 18 days. You know, I was with my cousins. We were hoping that we were going to get along really well for 18 days, but he was such a pleasure. You feel like you leave family when you say goodbye? You really do.

Katy

Yeah. It sounds like a really wonderful trip. Would you travel this way again, like with a private driver over several days? Is that something you'd do again?

Kathleen

I would definitely travel this way again. I think anyone would enjoy traveling this way, perhaps for some people, the deciding factor could be cost. However, as I stated post COVID, I would forego something else on the trip for a private driver, perhaps a different hotel, lower cost hotels. And I'm sure that Giovanni would work with the clients. He was very responsive to all of our questions while we were deciding about the tour and answer questions in a timely and professional manner. And I could tell that he was very knowledgeable.

Kathleen

It was a well thought out tour, and having traveled to Italy many times in the past, I truly felt that he covered all aspects of the tour quite well. I thought he did a fantastic job. It was really well thought out, and he's probably done it in practice himself. It was such a nice blend of the big cities and then being in the countryside and off the beaten path, I thought it was really wonderful.

Katy

It does sound really lovely. And there's some groups of people that this would really appeal to think - I anyone would but I think if someone's got some mobility issues, this could be a really great way to get around because Italy, it's not very well known for being easy on the feet or anything like that. But if you had a driver that can help you out within the cities, as well as getting from point A to B, I think it'll be like a real asset to your trip.

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Kathleen

I agree with you. I mean, for some people who have special needs, it would be advantageous because they wouldn't have to be with a large group. And I'm not sure - I think that the private cars maybe you could handle better the special needs of certain people.

Katy

Yeah, I agree. And even just from a family perspective, we did a trip a few years ago with my parents, actually, who were in their 70s at the time and with the kids. And while my husband really enjoyed driving the van himself, he actually wants to get one just for our family. I'm like "we're not getting a van, all right!" But I think it'd be really great because our kids were pretty little then and, you know, like little legs getting around. I'm looking at that sort of idea now. I'm thinking, wow, if we go back with my parents would definitely consider that type of trip because it'll just make things so much easier for getting around from point A to point B and just enjoying everything as much as possible without putting too much strain on people's energy and legs and all of that sort of stuff.

Kathleen

Oh I agree with you. And also we had a minivan, but when we were planning the trip, there were other people in our family who were thinking of joining us, and at one point we would need a larger vehicle. And he Giovanni seemed to have the larger vehicles as well. If we were eight, if we were 16, if we were 24, he said that he was able to accommodate any number of us. Which was great.

Katy

Amazing, amazing. I think that sounds like an amazing trip, especially not just for all of those reasons, but also just for the way that you were able to see so many different parts of Italy and just all the little towns and villages and special experiences. It does sound really super special. And were there any disadvantages that you can see of this type of trip?

Kathleen

I would have to say no.

Katy

I can't either.

Kathleen

I don't see any disadvantages, honestly. Like I said, everything was well thought out. It couldn't have been better planned. I could tell that his company really paid attention to detail. And before we left, I had conversations with him, so he was even interested to know

about us - what our interests were. So for myself and for my cousins, I don't see any disadvantages.

Katy

I also can see another one. This is just off the side. And I think it's very important that people pay attention to people's interest because someone's Borghese Gallery with all its beautiful pictures and statues, if that may not be what you're interested in. And I really feel very passionate that people should indulge their interest if they're doing this kind of trip of a lifetime. If you love mountains and scenery, go to the mountains and scenery - don't go into the galleries just because you think that what you need to do, just really indulge your passions and tap into the knowledge of people that know how to access these. One more thought about this, though, parking if you're driving yourself is actually a bit of a pain. And expensive. And also driving through these ZTLs or historic areas, you need to know exactly what you're doing, or you can really get big fines. So I think that's another amazing advantage of a driver that knows what they're doing is that they can just to organize that for you.

Kathleen

Absolutely.

Katy

Wow Kathy, we all can't wait to get back to Italy. And I know you're heading off fairly soon.

Kathleen

So hopefully, I hope to see my family in September, it's been too long.

Katy

It has been too long. Thank you so much for sharing your special trip with us today. It's given us all the really great insight into a different way of traveling that maybe some people haven't considered. And I know that Giovanni, who is a mutual friend of both of ours, would be happy to help anyone who is interested in traveling this way to build their very own dream trip. So Buon Viaggio and have a wonderful trip. And hopefully you come back and tell us all about it.

Kathleen

Buona sera!

Katy

Grazie Thank you to Kathy for sharing her Grand Tour experiences in Italy. I really love this way of combining the classic highlights of the traditional Grand Tour with off the beaten track treasures that really speak to your interests.

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As Kathy mentioned, while it was a thrill to see all the sights in the major cities, it was those special moments spent in smaller towns and villages together with her cousins that she'll cherish forever. And, if the past 18 months have taught us anything, it is that the time we spend with those we love, creating shared memories is the most precious.

Hearing about this trip made me take a step back and realise that I too need to keep an open mind about travel options when in Italy. Sometimes we can get into a rut and not realise the possibilities or options you have to experience all the amazing things about this country. I certainly look forward to giving my husband a break from driving and parking, and me from navigating, next time we go to Italy and just sit back and enjoy the ride while we leave it to the experts to share their secrets.

If you'd like more information and details of Kathy's trip and how you can contact her plus details of how you can organise your very own Joe Banana limos 'Grand Tour' you can find them in the show notes at untolditaly.com/88

We've got some great listener trip stories coming up on Untold Italy but as always, we're always keen to hear from you, especially if you've taken a special or unique trip or even planned a special event there, maybe a wedding? Or even a proposal? that you'd be happy to share with our audience. 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.

That's all for this week, next week we're going to find out what it's like to visit Tuscany in the fall or autumn. But until then it's "ciao for now"