

# Untold Italy Episode 97 - Magical Matera with Danielle Oteri

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 97.

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

Benvenuti! Ciao! Hi everyone. I hope you've had a beautiful week and are looking forward to another virtual trip to Italy. This time we are heading south to the pocket region of Basilicata where we're going to visit a truly unique city that has had a troubled past but that is bursting with newfound optimism thanks to its incredible history and architecture. And that of course is Matera.

But first I wanted to do a big shout out to one of our listeners - Kim Krankin from the Unity States - who left us a 5 star review

Listen for travel ideas, but get so much more!

☆☆☆☆☆

I originally wanted to listen to the podcast to help plan a trip I am hoping to take end of 2022. It has been excellent for that. I was able to narrow down my itinerary based on what I heard about. But also, I've begun organizing what to consider doing or seeing in each location. Besides the obvious itinerary and excursions and budget-related information, after listening to this podcast, I have even motivated to learn Italian ( at least basic phrases) . Beyond the areas I plan to visit, I am enjoying these podcasts as a virtual tour there. I love listening to these while driving or even on my walks and I feel transferred to Italy. Just love. These ladies have pleasant voices and their casual laid back style conversations really appeals to me. At this point, I believe I have listened to each episode and look forward to a new one each week.

Grazie Kim, thank you so much for your kind words and brava for taking on the challenge of learning Italian. We are so happy that we're part of your day.

OK Kim and listeners, now it's time to add another place to your Italy itinerary - Matera!

Our guest today is one of our favorite regulars on Untold Italy - Danielle Oteri. Danielle is an art historian and tour operator who has an unquenchable passion for southern Italy. If you recall our previous episodes with her on the treasures of Pompeii, the hidden Cilento Coast,

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and the highlights of Naples, you'll know that this is going to be a fascinating trip discovering the city of Matera.

**Katy**

Benvenuta Danielle. Ciao and welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

**Danielle**

Thank you, Katy. It's great to be here.

**Katy**

It is always great to have you on the show. And I know I'm very excited today to hear what you've got to say about beautiful Matera in the Basilicata region. But first, I want to know, were you able to visit Italy this summer?

**Danielle**

I spent two months there this summer.

**Katy**

You're so lucky. Did you find everything as it usually is, or were there a few changes?

**Danielle**

I was shocked at how unchanged it was. My first stop was Naples, which is not a city that you ever expect to be well organized. It was exactly as I left it two years ago. And I'm coming from New York, where the scars of covid are very, very obvious. And I expected Naples as another big city to show similar scars, and I didn't see them at all. And it was amazing that everybody was as resilient as they were. And as I talked about it, everyone sort of said the same thing like, oh, we fought the war and we're almost through. And certainly there's lots of different opinions about vaccines in Italy as there are everywhere in the world. But overall, the sense of unity that I encountered personally was really inspiring, and it let me relax and I had such a good time.

**Katy**

That is wonderful, wonderful to hear. Okay, so before we go exploring beautiful Matera and understanding what makes it so unique and special, even by Italian standards, can you remind our listeners about who you are and your background?

## Danielle

I am the founder of Feast On History and Arthur Avenue Food Tours. So Arthur Avenue Food Tours is in the Bronx, and that is New York's real Little Italy. And Feast O History does tours based in the Cilento region in South Italy. It's a family business. I work in collaboration with my Italian cousins, who own a country in the town of Capaccio Paestum, and we run primarily food and wine tours. But we also do tours of Naples based on the books of Ellena Ferrante. And we're working on a bunch of new stuff for next year as well.

## Katy

That sounds really exciting. And you also have a background in art history. So that is always very exciting for me, because you've got such a great perspective on all the different aspects of art and culture when we get into different places in Italy, and I can't think of a better person to explore Matera with. So let's get started. Perhaps we should begin about Matera. Some geographical context.

## Danielle

Matera is in the middle of South Italy. In what I would describe as the in-step of the boot in the region of Basilicata, and it's actually Italy's poorest region. So you can imagine there's not a lot of tourism there, and a lot of the terrain is very difficult, very arid. And Matera is a place that has always been remote, and that's what has made it such a unique place. But despite the fact that it seems really out of the way to us today is also one of the longest continuously inhabited cities on Earth. There are some cities in the Middle East that are older, but they are no longer inhabited. And there's so much archaeology that's going on to show that there are human settlements there that go back to the Paleolithic and the Neolithic periods. It's in a mountainous area. It's carved out of rocks. It feels very Indiana Jones-y. I know that you and I share a love for those Indiana Jones moments, and if you're one of these people, you have to go to Matera.

## Katy

You have to take your hat and your whip as well, I guess. Wow. So how would you get there? It sounds like it's in the middle. Do you need a car to get there?

## Danielle

Yeah, the best way to get there is by a car. And I've got a funny story about that. A lot of people - the way most people visit Matera now is as a day trip from Puglia, and it's often mistakenly said to be in the region of Puglia because it's very close to the border, but it's definitely in Basilicata. So yeah, if you can do a day trip, there's lots of excursions. If you're staying in a place like Polignano a Mare or Monopoli. But I was coming from Campania. It's about two and a half-hour drive from Cilento, and it's not a crowded road, but they are steep mountain roads. So the drive - while you won't be dealing with traffic - also is not necessarily for the faint of heart. Now when you get there though - this is the thing about

driving. If you're staying in Matera, you're going to stay in one of these cave hotels, which we'll talk about in a bit - and they will tell you that they have a deal with a parking garage that's nearby. They give you the GPS address for this garage, but it's maybe three or 4 km outside of the city. Or you could try to park on the street just outside the periphery of the hotel. Well, I'm like a New Yorker who can parallel park extremely well. And I'm like, "eh - I'll park by the hotel". Do not do that because GPS does not work when you get inside Matera, it's the ultimate, ultimate indicator that you are in an ancient city. It's that the satellites have no idea how to navigate Matera either. So I made the horrible mistake of driving through the centro storico of Matera, which is completely pedestrianized. Completely pedestrianized. But I was like a moron following the GPS. Amazed I didn't get a ticket because they have these cameras set up that will take a picture of your license plate and then send you a pretty expensive ticket. It might still arrive. Who knows? You drive to Matera, take the advice of the hotel. Park outside the city and let them pick you up.

**Katy**

Yes. How long have you been going to Italy, Danielle?

**Danielle**

For 25 years.

**Katy**

I mean, the same with me. Why do we make this same mistake? And we're here to tell all the listeners - I made this mistake in Sicily by following the Google maps and not listening to the hotel. And we wedged our car in between two walls, which is one of my favorite stories in Sicily. Exactly the same reason. And you know what? I'm probably going to do it again, but please don't do that, if you're listening.

**Danielle**

When you're in more remote areas, you're going to small towns, a paper map and directions from a human being are really a lot better. You're not on a nice wide American or Australian roads. You're in the old world. The satellites are not as efficient as you think they will be. They're just not.

**Katy**

Oh, my goodness. Did the people from your hotel yell at you like they did yell at us?

**Danielle**

No, they didn't know anything about it, actually. We wound up after driving through the centro storico - managing to get back onto the main road and then follow the directions. And the garage was like a Hertz parking lot. It was a very modern rental place and told the

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guy at the rental spot what had happened and he sort of laughed and was extremely nice and immediately called the hotel, and they had a shuttle and it's very well organized, even when you drive up and it looks like, "Where am I? This doesn't look like an ancient city. This looks like the New Jersey Turnpike". Trust them, they will pick you up.

### **Katy**

Yes, they've been doing it before. Funnily enough. Have a day. Probably hundreds of times. All right, well, let's talk about Matera. So you said it's got this amazing Centro Historica and it's really beautiful. And so let's just delve into the history of it because it goes back thousands of years even. And it's really evolved into a special city that is really incomparable anywhere in the world.

### **Danielle**

Yeah. Like I said, I've been traveling to Italy for 25 years, and I had never seen anything like this in Italy. I've never been anywhere in any country that was like Matera. It felt like I had gone to another planet, and the planet was very, very ancient. It's really a fascinating place. So it's really very famous for being called officially at one time, the Shame of Italy. So the book *Christ Stopped At Eboli* by Carlo Levi, was published in 1945, and it described the absolutely tragic conditions of poverty that existed in Matera and in Basilicata. He was exiled for his strong stance against fascism to this region, which is pretty astounding. He's Italian. He's living, I believe. I guess he was originally from Piemonte, but he gets exiled for his political activity in his own country because Basilicata was like another world apart at that time, and the poverty was extremely intense. So this book, I just actually started rereading it. And it's beautiful. A lot of the antifascist literature from this time is really, really beautiful and inspiring. And as a political work of art, it did its job in that it brought attention to the conditions in Matera, which led to government intervention. And for the Sassi at that time, these cave homes to be cleaned out and this poverty brought to a halt. At the same time, it has cast a really long shadow, so that people only think of Matera as this once squalid place. And it was a disaster for about 100 years. But for 9000 years prior, it was spectacular and that history is actually much harder to access in English. I realized, as I was doing my own research, there's lots of information about Levi and the book and very little about what came before and when I started to dig in - it's fascinating. There's so much.

### **Katy**

Tell us more. Tell us more.

### **Danielle**

There's an archaeologist that began doing a lot of work, actually in the 1800s who studied the Paleolithic and the Neolithic homes. And these are all sort of on the Ridge of Matera. Let me actually describe what the city looks like. It's all built on essentially like a ravine. So if you think of Florence, you know how the Arno runs down the center or the Tiber runs down the

center of Rome, Matera is like that. Except it's not a river - it's a ravine. And this ravine has all of these little caves that are carved out. And so the city of Matera is comprised of really two parts. There are the Sassi, and then there are two districts of Sassi (and the Sassi referred to these caves). And then there's the Civita, which is the city that is built on the top. Now, when the Civita was built, what it did was actually impose structures on top of what had been this really ingenious system of cisterns and forests that kept the clay (because the ground is essentially a lot of clay, which easily leads to mudslides) intact. And they disturbed the natural environment that was engineered. And it worked beautifully for thousands of years. And it wound up reaping misery for the people that lived inside the Sassi. The other reason that Matera fell into such squalid conditions is actually the fault of Australia.

**Katy**

Don't blame us for something. What did we do?

**Danielle**

I'm exaggerating it's in a sort of a roundabout way. Matera is such an ancient city because it has always been a place where there's a passageway for sheep-herders and really the history of Italy, like the history of Florence and all of the glory of the Medici and Duomo is all built on wool. And there was a huge industry of shepherds that would traverse from Tuscany, Abruzzo, and then in the winter pass to the south through Basilicata and Puglia. This is a tradition called the Transumanza, and it's now a UNESCO world (I forget exactly what it is) intangible culture. But when England took control of the wool industry, Australia became the place where they outsourced all of the wool production, all the sheep herding. And so no longer in Southern Italy. And so all of this money disappeared from central and Southern Italy and went abroad. The communities, the towns, the villages that depended on all the traffic of all the people passing through with their herds of sheep on the Transumanza. That all disappeared. And that's really when the economy slid and continued to slide for a very, very long time for about 200 years really - leading to the disastrous conditions that Carlo Levi found.

**Katy**

That's so fascinating. In fact, I actually know quite a bit about the Australian wool industry myself, but that's the first step towards globalism, isn't it? And people can see now how the impact of these changes of the way humanity is spreading out across the world and technology and all of those things hasn't impacted such a micro-level almost of this city that's being built on the ravine. It's fascinating. Ok, tell us more.

**Danielle**

And because of that, they missed the Industrial Revolution entirely. It just didn't touch Matera at all. And Matera has always been a place that was a city but pastoral. So they didn't have like a giant glory period like the Renaissance in Florence, for example, or the Baroque period in Naples. It was always a quiet place. But it was a city that really worked so beautifully in

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harmony with nature. And I think today, facing climate change, thinking how to integrate our human needs with nature, Matera is a really fascinating example. We have really beautiful records from the 1100s. There is a famous book written by an Arab geographer named Idrisi. And he worked on behalf of the Sicilian King Roger. This was during the Norman Arab period or the reign of the Normans in Sicily, from Palermo. And on behalf of Roger, he wrote this book of the world and was a cartographer and made this whole map of the world. And he described Matera and he described how the Sassi, the caves all had beautiful wells in front of them and terraced gardens so that the water from the top of the hill would flow through these ingenious channels that fed individual cisterns. There were special wells for the animals to drink from and eventually flowed into the ravine, basically so that no water at all would be wasted. And then there's another description from the 1500s, where somebody observes that there was a bell that would ring at night. And then at that point, everybody in the Sassi would put on a lantern and it looked as though the stars were underneath his feet - instead of in the sky. So there are lots of really beautiful descriptions of this being a really ingeniously designed place, carving out the rock in order to make homes, in order to make wells. And I think today when you see the city. That's why it's got that great Indiana Jones appeal because it's all about what's unseen. It's all about secret tunnels. Underground, now, swimming pools that were once cisterns and probably only 30% of the city today is accessible and visible, and the other 70% remains to be discovered. And people are continuing to discover them and really learn more and more about how people, especially in the medieval world and Matera lived in harmony with nature.

### **Katy**

I love this story because we think now that we're so technologically advanced and so clever. But look at this city that has made the most of their environment. Sounds like it must be a bit challenging, to be honest, but they've somehow used the elements around them to make it really habitable. And what a shame that people put it down and made it this center of poverty. It just sounds really sad considering that they had been so ingenious.

### **Danielle**

Yeah, the city really degraded, the lack of money, also, a lot of malaria was in the south before malaria was eradicated. This was a huge problem in Matera, but the conditions that people lived in what happened was after they built the Civita and the Sassi started to fall into ruins. The very poor people started to just inhabit the Sassi that were really just squalid. They were not healthy places to live. And they lived in these caves with their animals. And so the conditions were really the worst of the worst.

### **Danielle**

But they did so out of necessity because so many other economic systems had failed them. And what Carla Levi is writing about is how the government just completely ignored most of South Italy. But this place, in particular, being the most dramatic example. And that's why it was a political rallying cry when it was published. The way I read about - a social scientist, an

Italian social scientist in Palermo who wrote an interesting paper about Matera is that he said it was a city that was designed with and lived by rural values. That's a really interesting concept to me. A city that lives by rural values, which is really like paying close attention to nature. So I think it's just a fascinating place for us to be studying today.

### **Katy**

Absolutely. So what triggered the real renaissance for want of a better word of the city and people wanting to do something more with the Sassi and make something, I guess, rejuvenate them and make them beautiful again.

### **Danielle**

So what happened was after Levi's book came out, the shame of Italy was exposed and the government intervened finally, and they cleared people out of the Sassi. So what they did was actually begin a building program. They worked actually with an American social scientist who had been involved with a rural displacement problem in Tennessee, and they built new homes for them outside of the city. So the Sassi were cleared out. People were moved to these much more modern homes. They had indoor plumbing for the first time in their lives. Most of them had no idea what that even was. And the Sassi were completely abandoned. So essentially the city of Matera died. It completely died. And their children, the people who were displaced were the ones who began to reclaim them. So after the Sassi completely were emptied out, they did still attract a lot of people who were drug addicts and drug dealers and criminals that were in hiding. So they became actually even worse than they were because these places also were just sort of boarded up and all the disgusting elements were left behind. But then there began to be a group of people who were the children of the original descendants of the inhabitants of the Sassi, who formed a club. And they formed it in 1959. And it was called Circolo La Scaletta, meaning the Circle of Stairs. And it was a cultural club designed to salvage the past and what they began to do whenever they had free time and weekends. They were all College students was to explore the abandoned Sassi. And what they began to find were these ancient cave churches, which is another really fascinating piece of Matera I'll tell you more about. These cave churches are called Rupestrian Churches, so that's Rupestrians, a fancy word for stone. And they would systematically go through the caves, and they would explore on either side of the ravine so that the friends on one side could point to a cave and say, look in there. And then the friends would go inside. And they found over 150 of these painted cave churches, which had been all painted in the Byzantine era. So starting really from the 800s very ancient.

### **Danielle**

And then they started to inhabit the Sassi. So they said that really there were only about 35% of the Sassi that had been fully condemned because they were just too dangerous to live in. But the rest could be fixed and inhabited. And so they did. And they also - being all active College students, they began lobbying for conservation funds. One of them, in particular, became a friend of Carlo Levi, who is now a Senator in the Italian government who very much

lent them a hand. And more and more conservation funds began being directed toward Matera.

### **Danielle**

The people in this group in the Circle of Stairs became active in politics, and they entered the political class, and that enabled them to continually (even though they were actually from all different parties - some were very conservative, some were very liberal all over the map), but they were all dedicated - they all shared the goal of restoring the Sassi. They would organize volunteers of garbage collectors who would go in and clear out the disgustingness and the hypodermic needles that were left behind by drug addicts. And by 1993 they had Matera declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, which is an extraordinary transformation.

### **Danielle**

And it's at that point that the hotels started moving in. And what's really actually fantastic about the hotels in Matera, and there are many of them because it is primarily a city now for tourists is that none of the big hotel chains have moved in there. They're all owned by families because in the late 80s and the early 90s, the city was offering leases to people who would restore them for pennies for very little money. So people that were local and had this pride and wanted to honor the legacy of their parents and grandparents, who'd grown up in those horrible conditions that Levi described were the ones who bought these Sassi and actually did the restorations.

### **Katy**

It's a beautiful story. Did you stay in one of the hotels yourself when you were there recently?

### **Danielle**

I did.

### **Katy**

Yeah.

### **Danielle**

The cave hotels are just amazing, and it's such an interesting experience because it's so quiet. And I was a little worried that it was going to feel claustrophobic because I don't like to be in a room without windows. Even in the dead of winter. I always like to have the window open just to crack. I like fresh air, but it really wasn't claustrophobic at all. The way the hotels work in Matera is they're all under the category of what we call Alberghi Diffusi, which I'm sure in some podcasts you've covered. It means diffused hotels. And so there's some sort of central check-in point where there's usually also a spa or restaurant or both. And then you go to your cave, your sassi, your sasso, which is outside and maybe up the street or down one of

these twisting streets where the GPS doesn't work. The caves have all sort of been brushed with limestone to seal them. They're very luxurious, and you have an absolutely fantastic night of sleep. It's so quiet and so still and so peaceful. And a lot of the hotels have spas attached to them, and they have turned the old cisterns into swimming pools. So when you look at the price of a hotel in Matera, they seem a little pricey, but it's worth it because there's almost always a spa experience. That's part of it.

**Katy**

Oh, my goodness. You can't say that very often that you stay in a hotel in a cave that has its own special spa. That's definitely an experience I'd pay for.

**Danielle**

Yeah. And then the hotel where I stayed, the spa was sort of in the main building, and it's very low light and you feel like you're getting into a Roman bath, but it's so peaceful. And then they bring you tea. And the people in Matera and Basilicata are just so nice. They have that characteristic Southern Italian hospitality. It's a beautiful blend of just a very high-end, luxurious experience. And in a four or five-star hotel, it's everything you expect of a hotel at that level, combined with incredibly kind people.

**Katy**

That sounds amazing. And then I can imagine if you go for exploring during the day that it must look incredibly magical at night time when it's all lit up. Yeah.

**Danielle**

What Italians always say about it is that it's a Presepio, which is the Italian Christmas crush. It really does feel like that, and it feels more like the Middle East than anywhere in Italy. There are parts of Puglia that have a similar feel, but Matera seems to be the most dramatic, and as a result, it has been the backdrop for movies the Passion of the Christ by Mel Gibson. It stands in for Jerusalem Pasolini filmed the Gospel According to St. Matthew and Matera actually in the 1960s as part of the revitalization or wanting to contribute in some way to the revitalization of Matera. And then Wonder Woman was filmed partially in Matera before it went to Cilento. And now, most recently, parts of the new James Bond movie were shot there.

**Katy**

Yeah, it looks absolutely spectacular. So apart from exploring the scenery and going to the spa and staying in the cave hotel, what other things can you do in Matera? Is it a place where you can spend a few days there exploring?

**Danielle**

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It's a place where you can, I think you can spend a long time exploring, but you could also kind of nicely do it in a couple of days. There are many walking tours that you'll see as you go through Matera and it almost seems rote, but they are very interesting. And this is one case where I would say you don't even need to have the best, most insightful tour guide - it is just helpful to have somebody walk you through the city and orient you to the various places where the districts of the Sassi, the Civita explain where the cave churches are. It is also (characteristic of Southern Italy), also difficult to find a private guide at times, but because again, there are like no big chain hotels. It's all families that own the hotels. Don't try too hard to arrange your day ahead of time. Just tell the hotel concierge when you get there what you want to do for what you want to see, and they will arrange things. Primarily just walking through the city. Now, one thing, it is a difficult place to walk. So wear your most comfortable shoes? The whole city has made a sort of this kind of slippery white limestone and clay. The most surefooted person in the world is not going to walk around Matera without slipping or twisting an ankle at some point. So take it easy. And if you have mobility issues, you need to just really be extra attentive. Bring a paper map. The GPS does not work. And the other thing that you can do is take a tour of the Rupestrian churches. And there are some which are inside the historic center of Matera, but then there are some others in the ravine or across the ravine. And then there's one really spectacular one that's outside the city called the Cave of the Original Sin. So that's the one that I made a point - this is the whole reason actually wanted to go to Mataro is specifically for this one cave. So it's outside the city, so you do need to drive there, though if you are staying in Matera, you can tell Concierge that you want to see it and they will arrange for a driver to take you there.

## Danielle

It was discovered by the Circle of the Stairs, this little cultural group. They had heard rumors from shepherds for years that there was this really large, spectacular stone church, this underground cave church. They only had heard rumors, though nobody would admit to having seen it or knowing where it was. So one day, while driving, they finally actually followed a road. They followed a farmer. They were on private property of this farm that's still there today. And they noticed a staircase that went down and they thought it was very strange that there would be a staircase carved into the rock. Why would it be there and not be something that the farmer had installed himself? So they followed it. And they wound up discovering (this is in 1963), what's now called the Cave or the Crypt of the Original Sin. And it's covered with paintings of the Virgin Mary, the Apostles and then it gets its name from a scene of Adam and Eve, where Eve is handing Adam, not an Apple, but Southern Italy, a fig. And it's a really dramatic place to visit. So I was very hot on going here. We had actually gone to Matera to celebrate my birthday. We met up with friends who were staying there as well. So we went out. We had a lot to eat. We had a lot to drink. My husband was ready to go back and not drive through a strange wheat field like I made him do. I was very interested in going there. So to get there, like I said, you do need to drive. But once you do get there, you park in this parking lot and then you have to wait for the other ten people on a pre-arranged tour. And they only allow ten people to go at a time. And then the guide will come out and get in his pickup truck and everybody follows him. So my husband's like, I feel like I'm on my way to an

execution or something beautiful, but a very desolate wheat field. And then we come to a vineyard and it's very beautiful and it feels like the Old West. It feels like an old Western movie. We walk down the staircase and then they bring you inside. You sit down on the ground on the rock. And then very slowly they light it up in pieces so that you can see each of the paintings. Now they have a recording. Unfortunately, it's only an Italian, and it explains what you're looking at. They do actually have an earpiece that they will give to English speakers. And I took that and unfortunately, just to be honest, the sound quality is pretty terrible. I had studied a lot about it beforehand, so I did okay with my Italian. I was able to piece everything together. But even without being able to understand what's there the experience of a place like this, which is exactly as it was in the second half of the 8th century. No intervention. It hasn't been - baroque ceilings were never put on top of this. It's exactly as people would have experienced it in the 800s. Talk about a transport of experience. It's mind-blowing. So I highly, highly recommend making the schlep out to the Cave of the Original Sin.

### **Katy**

Yeah, I can see Indiana Jones doing that too, actually, it sounds like definitely an experience he would endorse. But what an amazing longevity like, how did it survive? It blows my mind.

### **Danielle**

It was carved deep in the earth and it wasn't exposed to the elements very much. I guess it was sort of forgotten about. It was abandoned and lost. Shepherds had been using it to shelter their flocks. So when the explorers found it, they said that they were ecstatic and there's a description of them rolling around on the ground until they realized they were rolling around in sheep dung. But they didn't care because it was such an amazing discovery. Now because it's Byzantine art, it still even at that time, and even today just never really fully attracted that much attention from the academic or the art historical community. They felt that they had found one of the treasures of the world and they couldn't get anybody in Rome or Naples at any of the major universities to care at all about it. They wanted Leonardo and Michelangelo. They had no interest in Byzantine rock painting. Now slowly, slowly, there's becoming more interest in this as Southern Italy is gaining more prominence in the world of academia - as it's seen as part of the larger Mediterranean and not just a B list Italian city, which it always had been before. But it's an amazing discovery. And there are very few places in Italy, especially as it comes to churches which have not been adapted, changed, reconstructed many, many times. And this is as it was.

### **Katy**

It sounds very, very special. And is that one of the reasons why the Matera was named the European City of Culture recently?

### **Danielle**

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It was a long process. The European City of Culture is something that started off in 1985 and the first named Cities of Culture. This was created to put more emphasis on culture - because the woman who founded it, who was a politician from Greece, felt that there was just far too much emphasis on economics and politics in Europe and not enough on culture. The first cities were like Florence and Paris and Barcelona, the big cities. And now stepping away further away from 1985, it's smaller cities. The cities themselves have to do a lot. They have to jump through quite a few hoops to prove that they have a certain kind of infrastructure, a large development of a range of different cultural activities that they can host tourism, that they can tell their story effectively. They have to go through quite a bit to get there. So the fact that Matera achieved that and the only city in Southern Italy that's ever done so was really quite a big deal. For us as tourists, it just kind of puts it on the radar like, oh, that's a place I should go. It's received some sort of stamp of approval. But to come from being the shame of Italy to the local people reclaiming the city, building it up and developing it to the point that it could win this honor and recognition was really a huge deal.

### **Katy**

Yeah. Amazing. All right. I want to step you back. You said you had a delicious lunch there. It sounded pretty amazing. And I know that you seek out only the very best. Can you tell us where to go and what to eat in Matera?

### **Danielle**

The food is very simple, very healthy. The most famous thing, I guess, is Matera's bread. They're famous throughout Italy for their bread. There's wheat fields everywhere. And really, it's a wonderful place for if you want organic food, because everything is grown locally. I had the most amazing meal right after visiting the Crypt of the Original Sins, so I mentioned that the crypt is on private property. Where we parked the car was in front of this agriturismo that's called Casal Dragone. We realized they had a restaurant, so we were hungry. We went back and we asked if they were serving lunch for people who are not guests of the inn and they said, yes, of course, I had the best salumi I've ever tasted. And I've had a lot of salumi. It was otherworldly to the point where we called over the server. And we just said, we have to tell you that we've never tasted anything like this. And she sort of put down what she was holding in her hands, and she was like, oh, thank you. Thank you for saying that we don't really even make any profit on this. This is really a labor of love for us. It's our tradition. It's something that my father has always done. So I'm going to tell him that you said that because sometimes we wonder if we should even do this. But it was truly a very simple lunch of salumi and cheese. They use the bread to make this sort of like a bread salad, which mixes in vegetables, tomatoes and cucumbers with the bread. But, man, that salumi, I'll never forget.

### **Danielle**

They're also famous for (which is delicious) are these peppers called cruschi. And they're on everything. And I kind of can't understand why they're not everywhere because they're so delicious. So it's a certain kind of like a long red pepper. But they're sweet. They're not hot.

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They look like what I would assume would be a hot pepper and they harvest them. Then they dry them outside. And then before they serve them, what they actually do is fry them in olive oil. So they sort of plump up a little bit, but they're still crunchy and they will just crumble them up and put them over pasta. But the best is to just get a bowl and you eat them like potato chips. There's a little bit of salt on them. They're a little tiny bit greasy from the olive oil, but just in the right way. They are so delicious. You can buy bags of them like a bag of potato chips everywhere. And I really don't understand why they have not been exported around the world because they're magnificent.

### **Katy**

I think I need to try that. It just sounds like a really unique and interesting experience. Is there anything else that you particularly loved in Matera while you were there?

### **Danielle**

It's a sense of peace that's there when we drove from Campania, it's a dramatic drive. You go from very green Campania to this much, much more arid climate. And you start to really think about how difficult it must be, how it was for people who were living a really agrarian life, even how it is now, it's still a difficult place to live. And so in that process of getting there and seeing the landscape, your mind kind of quiets down and you start to be a little more respectful of your environment and really think about yourself in a different way, I think, and because the city itself is sort of all the same color, it's this sort of beige golden stone and all of it sort of blends together. You really feel transported to another place. So it gives you a sort of receptive experience, which I think is really wonderful as a tourist. It's not a place where you're going to show up and be high maintenance and impose your will on it. You really need to go there and open yourself up to what's there and be willing to get lost and follow the paper map. You can't get too lost. You'll fall into a ravine. I also think the cave churches are just also this spectacular transportive vehicle for people who love history.

### **Danielle**

The reason that these cave churches are there is because this area was a crossroads during the Middle Ages, really, especially during the 7 and the 800s, though it feels in the middle of nowhere today. And it was then it was still how people from Eastern Europe crossed through Italy and especially going to the bigger cities like Salerno and Naples. And Salerno was especially important in this time period. The reason these rock churches were really built is that there were all of these priests who were escaping what was called the first iconoclast period in Greece. Essentially what happened - the short version is there was an underwater volcano that erupted in Greece, and the priest interpreted this as a punishment from God for the making of icons. And there was a lot of political turmoil that followed and violence. And there were many monks who fled the mainland of Greece for Southern Italy at that time. And they passed through this area around Matera, and they found these caves, and they were the ones who created these paintings and began preaching to the local people. And this is an area where people were still worshiping the Greek and Roman pantheon in the 7 and the 800s. And

they carved out these little churches. And these are the things that are still coming to light even today. So a fascinating passage of history that's still just being uncovered and understood. But one that was deeply personal and one that's very accessible as a visitor. It's not a complicated ecclesiastical history. It's a very humble one.

### **Katy**

It's so fascinating. So with its really interesting and detailed past, what do you think the future holds for Matera?

### **Danielle**

I think it's a really interesting model, as I was mentioning before, for climate change, for how to live in a city in harmony with nature. I think that it offers a lot for people who are studying the environment, who are studying social science. And I think the more attention that it gets, the more study it receives, the more it will become relevant as a major important city in Italy, and never in the same way that Florence, Venice and Rome will be. I hope that it will continue to host a more thoughtful kind of tourism.

### **Danielle**

And there are definitely big buses of people that come in - those day-trippers from Puglia. But the environment of the city itself, I think, won't let it be overrun in quite the same way as some of the big destinations are. So I think it has a bright future. And I really especially like the fact that most of the hotels are family owned. Hopefully, it will serve as a model for a more responsible tourism. I mean, that's a big conversation in Italy tourism. It's a very important conversation. And hopefully, Matera, which has been working on this since the 60s, can lead the way.

### **Katy**

Yeah, I think that's really important. And if anyone is listening, that's starting at finishing school or starting their college degree, what an inspiring story. The Circle of the Stairs and just people coming together to make the most of their local environment and bring it to the fore to create this beautiful - well rebuild this beautiful experience, so many people can share it. It's just incredible.

### **Danielle**

And it's amazing to me that this group is still having trouble telling their story. The leader of the group, he's 76, 77 now, maybe he's even close to 80. He was actually the Mayor of Matera for four years. He just ended his term in October of 2020. But they're still having trouble getting their story out in English-speaking media, which makes me crazy. I was rewatching the episode of Anthony Bourdain's Parts Unknown that he filmed. The episode is called Puglia the Heel of the Boot. But they go to Matera and he's there with Asia Argento and everything that

they said about Matera was completely incorrect, just wrong. And I'm screaming at the television and Asia Argento who is from Rome, is talking about how this is a place where there was no Christianity, where there was no God and all these people lived without God. And she says this like four times. And it's so incorrect as one of the most deeply spiritual places in all of Italy. And the title Carlo Levi's Christ Stopped at Eboli, I think has also been really misinterpreted. He says it right in the introduction, when the people at this time would refer to Christians, it was like saying, "Treat me like a Christian" was like saying, "Treat me like a human being". And so the idea was that Christ stopped at Eboli, which was the last train station in the region of Campania. And so that there was basically nobody cared about - the government didn't care about anything past that area. They weren't Christians, they weren't human beings. So it is far from a godless place.

**Katy**

Danielle, you always know how to uncover so many fascinating spots, even within the most classic and popular destinations. And that's why we love you. So how can our listeners stay in touch with you and your adventures and your new, exciting tours and experiences that you're going to offer?

**Danielle**

feastonhistory.com is where you can find the tours and Twitter and Instagram @Feastonhistory are usually where I'm sharing about the new things that I'm working on and thinking about. And definitely now, thanks to you, Katy, and having done all of this research, I've got piles and piles of notes. I'm thinking about doing something much more deep about Matera because The Circle of the Stairs, at the very least, is a fascinating story. And there's much more to tell.

**Katy**

I'm excited to hear more about that. Definitely. Oh, my goodness. Matera was already at the top of my list of places to explore when we get to Italy next year. But now I'm even more excited. Grazie. Thank you, Danielle, for bringing the city and the Sassi alive for us today.

**Danielle**

Thank you.

**Katy**

I hope you are inspired to visit this fascinating city. Matera was one of the stops on our ill-fated trip of 2020 so I'm determined to get there in 2022. I can't wait to sleep in a cave hotel and see the city lit up at night plus go on an adventure to find the beautiful paintings in the Crypt of the Original Sin. And if I'm honest to find that salumi too

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Listening to Danielle talk about and explain the context and significance of the history of Matera reminded me why I love to hire guides when I visit new places and especially those that I have a particular interest in the history. She puts in an incredible amount of detailed research into both Italian and English resources and uncovers stories and information that even a dedicated amateur historian like myself would not be able to complete on my own. Sure you can go and admire the beauty of places like Matera but I strongly believe you'll get so much more from your visit if you understand the context of what you're seeing.

It's worth noting that in Italy, all local guides need to pass a strict exam set by the city to obtain a license to conduct tours. And if you don't have this license you cannot operate. So you can be confident that all guides have an in-depth knowledge of their city.

I'm ever grateful to Danielle for sharing her thoughts with us on places throughout Italy. We've put all the information she mentioned into the show notes for you as well as how to follow her company Feast on History at [untolditaly.com/97](https://untolditaly.com/97)

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all our listeners joining us from around the world. We'd love it if you helped spread the word so we can reach more Italy-loving travelers and the best way you can do this is by leaving us a 5-star rating or review on your favorite podcast app.

That's all for today, next week we're visiting the Vatican Museums in Rome and uncovering some of their many highlights.

But until then it's "ciao for now"