

Untold Italy Episode 110 - Italy's Most Romantic Places

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 110.

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

Ciao Everyone, hello and welcome to another episode of Untold Italy, one that's a little tribute to San Valentino or Saint Valentine as his special day is just around the corner and it's also a celebration of the beauty and romance that is found all over Italy from north to south, east to west and coast to coast.

I have to say I had fun creating this episode because, well I get to talk about how beautiful Italy is and that's something I could talk about for hours. And, truth be told, the trouble was choosing just a few Italian places to share with you that I think are incredibly romantic

Because the thing is, beauty and romance mean so many things to each of us. One person's swoon worthy view from the incredibly gorgeous and fancy Terrazza Danieli in Venice is another's sweeping vistas from a hike between the villages of the Cinque Terre.

So what I'm trying to say is that you'll find your preferred version of romantic experiences in Italy. As always, we encourage you to travel your way and look for those experiences and places that speak to you and your interests the most. There are endless lists of things to do and see, just like this one. Take them as a starting point and go and do some more research about those places that you think will make YOUR heart skip a beat and make them a focal point of your Italian itinerary

San Valentino

OK before we get started on our list of romantic places, let's take a step back and learn about San Valentino or St Valentine. To be honest, I'm not really into this commercial occasion but, as usual, behind the hype is actually a pretty interesting story that's worth telling..

So San Valentino - We know him as Saint Valentine and I think for a long time I actually thought he was French! Mamma mia, what was I thinking? Of course the patron saint of lovers is Italian! Anyway, San Valentino lived in the 3rd century AD and there are lots of myths and

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legends that surround him. Valentino (meaning valor) was a pretty popular name at the time so historians aren't really sure whether they can attribute the stories to just one person or several.

Some say he was a priest in Rome and others say he was a bishop for the Umbrian town of Terni but they all agree he was martyred on the 14th February at the order of Emperor Claudius at the Flaminian Gates. This is now the site of the Porta del Popolo in Rome leading to the expansive piazza of the same name so you can go there if you'd like to follow in his footsteps!.

So What was his crime or why was he martyred?

One account says that he restored the sight of the blind daughter of a judge called Asterius. Overwhelmed with gratitude, this inspired Asterius to convert his entire family to Christianity and as a result Valentino gained some notoriety and the attention of Claudius.

The Emperor was evidently quite intrigued by the priest but didn't really appreciate it when the conversion activities were then focused on himself and sent Valentino off to the gallows! Legend has it that the saint said a note to the girl whose sight he restored signed "from your Valentine" which is where the tradition of sending romantic missives is said to have evolved.

Another story has St Valentine marrying scores of couples which allowed the husbands to escape conscription into the Roman army. This enraged the Emperor who believed that married soldiers were less focused and pined for home more than their unmarried counterparts.

He was no doubt furious at the loss of his steady supply of recruits. Apart from sweetly arranging this evasion and probably certain death for these young men, San Valentino is said to have cut hearts from parchment "to remind these men of their vows and God's love"

Whatever the truth is, the legends have endured and strengthened and as we know the 14th of February is celebrated around the world as a day of lovers despite this being the rather ghoulish occasion of the saint's death. And this tradition has been going on for some time - almost 1500 years!.

In the 16th century, 1200 years after the Saint's death, Shakespeare mentioned St Valentine in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and also *Hamlet*.

Perhaps it's because relics of the saint were revered and celebrated. To this day you can visit his skull, crowned with flowers at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Cosmedin in Rome and other relics can be found around Europe - even as far as Dublin.

So there you have it. The stories of San Valentino. I love a bit of mystery and intrigue and stories like this. And no matter how it's evolved, there is no doubt that today we associate

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Valentine's day with romance. SO let's now take a look at some of the most romantic places in Italy.

Verona

Let's start with a place that Shakespeare immortalised as the home of his star crossed lovers, and possibly the world's most famous couple - Romeo and Juliet. And that is the city of fair Verona!

Verona is a gorgeous small city in northern Italy between Venice and Milan. The river Adige flows through this Medieval town known for its Roman amphitheater, beautiful wide piazzas and elegant streets. It's the type of place that is just lovely to wander around and soak up the atmosphere. It was one of the first Italian cities I ever saw and I was smitten at first sight.

Now many people visit Verona simply to pay their respects to tragic Juliet at a house once owned by the de Cappello family. A Very enterprising individual noted this name and similarity to Capulet and the rather charming balcony of the palazzo - from which she must have called out to Romeo - and decided it was a great place for a museum dedicated to Juliet. There's even a bronze statue of her below the balcony where, if you rub its right breast you're sure to be lucky in love. The whole thing is a work of fiction, just like Shakespeare's play, but it is a very popular place to visit and as I said the balcony is charming

So please don't go to Verona just to visit the house of Capulet, because you could do all sorts of romantic things like attend an opera in the open air roman amphitheater as people have done for centuries, or take the funicular to Colle San Pietro for sweeping views of the city and its belltowers and terracotta roofs.

Make sure to stroll over the beautiful re brick Castelvecchio Bridge or Scaliger bridge and admire its elaborate turret like features and magnificent arch. Though largely destroyed by bombing in 1945 it was lovingly rebuilt to identically match the 14th century original. And if you love manicured gardens adorned with statues then Giardino Giusti is the perfect place to while away a few hours.

Sirmione

From Verona we head to nearby Sirmione where the Scaliger family - whom the bridge in Verona was named for, also left their mark. Obviously big lovers of turrets and all things fairytale, the Scaliger family built Sirmione into perhaps the most beautiful fortified town in all of Italy. To give you an idea, it sits on a peninsula that juts out into Lake Garda. You approach the little hamlet via a drawbridge that spans the castle moat where swans bob up and down on turquoise waters. And it really is as picturesque as it sounds. Once you admire

the cobbled streets and houses draped in vines and flowers it's time to climb the castle tower for breathtaking views of Lake Garda and the mountains beyond.

Once you've wandered the town and maybe stopped for a glass of wine or gelato, you can head out on the peninsula to visit the Grotte di Catullo - ruins of a Roman villa that you may have seen in the movie *Call Me By Your Name*. On a sunny day this is a popular swimming spot so bring your costume for the truly unique experience of swimming beneath the ruins.

You can also take a little boat ride around the peninsula if swimming isn't your thing. It's such a beautiful experience with the alps in the background and castle in view. Your boat captain will likely point out little bubbles rising from the lake waters. This is thermal water that Sirmione is also known for. You can experience it au naturel in the lake but there's also a gorgeous thermal spa where you can relax and soak it all up.

Now it is a very popular town for all these reasons but I do think Sirmione is worth a visit, especially at sunset when the day trippers have disappeared. We'll be there this June for exactly this reason. And also because it is in the very heart of the Franciacorta wine region which is the equivalent of champagne in Italy. It's a bit more complex than prosecco due to the double fermentation method and it's delicious. But I digress - Sirmione - castle with moat, vineyards, ancient ruins and thermal baths - super romantic don't you think?

Pienza

Ok for our next romantic destination we're heading south to Tuscany and the tiny town of Pienza. I first heard about this from a tour guide I met in Sirmione actually. I always make it a point to ask the local tour guides about their favorite places in Italy and this lovely lady sighed and said "Pienza" and with a sigh like that I just had to know more.

Pienza is the Val d'Orcia region of Tuscany near Montepulciano and Montalcino. It's a glorious wine region and you'll definitely know the scenery from many pictures you've seen of Tuscany. But why is this place so romantic? Well, apart from being impossibly pretty and perched on a hill overlooking the valley, the town is one straight out of your Tuscan dreams - think ochre colored buildings and cobbled streets, a cute little piazza and a palace and flower pots bursting with blooms on every doorstep.

It was built to an exacting design by a Renaissance pope who wanted to build the perfect town. Popes, of course, were loaded with cash in those days and no expense was spared in the construction of Pienza which unsurprisingly has stood the test of time and endured over many centuries and is now a UNESCO listed heritage sight. Don't miss visiting the palace - the pope's former home - from where you get the most outstanding views - he really did look after himself and was probably conducting a few romances despite his office as pope!

After visiting the palazzo it's time to wander the streets that have been named just for lovers. You'll find Via del bacio (street of the kiss) and Via dell'Amore (street of love) with glimpses of the valley beyond and perfect for strolling hand in hand

But if your idea of romance extends to a shared love of cheese like mine does, you won't be disappointed in Pienza. The town is full of small shops selling local pecorino sheep's milk cheese in many varieties - you definitely must try the aged variety! Which of course matches perfectly with a glass of montalcino wine. Perfetto!

Now for those of you who love small towns and villages but are more enamored with the white washed variety (and why not!) - let's head further south again to Puglia and the trulli towns of the Valle D'Itria

Alberobello, Locorotondo and the trulli towns of the Valle D'Itria in Puglia

No doubt you may have seen these trullo - gorgeous round dwellings topped with conical stone roofs all over Instagram and travel blogs. They are completely unique to this region and add a magical quality to the surrounding red earth and ancient olive groves landscape.

A trullo is a white dry stone wall hut with a grey stone cone shaped roof that is often topped with the shape of a disk, stone, crescent, star or ball on its pinnacle which are the mark of the builders that made them

Once very humble dwellings, many of the trulli have been converted into airbnb style accommodation, so you can spend the night in them. Some are still quite rustic but you can also rent some really fancy luxury trulli if that's the kind of experience you find romantic

Alberobello and Locorotondo are some of the well known towns to find the trulli houses. These are lovely places to visit year round to wander and enjoy the scenery and unique architecture.

But I particularly like the scenes at Christmastime in Locorotondo. Honestly I think they win Christmas every year because the locals dress up their trulli houses and surrounding cobbled streets with red and green decorations and sparkly lights which looks so magical against the white washed trulli. I feel Christmas is a wonderful and magical time that oozes romance so no wonder I fell for this tiny village decked out for the season.

Now while the trulli towns offer a rustic and rural experience, you cannot go past the glamor of the next romantic Italian place we're visiting

Positano

Positano is one of the world's most coveted honeymoon destinations and it's an absolute dream. Colorful houses seem to tumble into the Tyrrhenian Sea - so blue you wonder where the sky ends. Cobbled streets wind up the cliff the town is built on, wisteria and vines swaying in the breeze overhead.

If gazing out to sea, lounging at a beach club and enjoying the southern Italian sun and hospitality sounds like your idea of heaven then Positano should be added to your dream places to visit.

It is a place of luxury and beauty and one where you're going to want to splurge by staying somewhere like the iconic Le Sirenuse or Il San Pietro. When in Positano.. I say! There's no point looking wistfully up at those balconies from a humbler abode especially if you like a bit of glitz and glamour. Of course there are several charming hotels in town but a stay at either of these two properties will undoubtedly be one of the romantic highlights of your life.

Some people prefer a more casual low key romantic experience and in this case honeymooners, I recommend neighboring Praiano. Here the beaches and town are quieter and the sunset is incredible - the best on the Amalfi Coast. We don't think of this often but position is everything when it comes to sunsets and little Praiano is in exactly the right spot for watching the sun dip below the horizon.

Of course, while you're in the area, perhaps consider staying on magical, mythical Capri - the most beautiful island in the Tyrrhenian Sea. The most romantic story ever told on this podcast can be heard on episode 42 where my friend Holly tells how she met her now husband Gianluca and ended up living on the island. Holly is the absolute expert on romantic things to do in Capri including organising picnics with epic views and not another traveler in sight, small gozzo boat trips around the island and the secluded spots only locals know about.

Capri has been a destination for lovers for centuries and who could blame them but if you're serious about falling in love with the place, an overnight stay is the only option. I cannot wait for our 4 days there later this year and finding out own favorite viewpoints, beaches and walks.

Now another island that is seriously swoon worthy is Sicily and honestly while I find the whole island incredible there's one place that just seeps into my dreams over and over again

Ortigia

The old town of Siracuse or Syracuse seems like it's straight out of a movie from the 1950s to me. Found on a tiny island jutting out into the Mediterranean It's a Baroque town with narrow car-free streets - balconies overhead, and charming curiosities around every corner. I half

expected to see Sophia Loren leaning from one of those balconies, observing the goings on below.

Life goes on in Ortigia unlike many of the towns transformed by tourism. From its bustling produce market, to the extravagant duomo and piazza where locals carry out their business, there's a realness to the town that makes you want to explore more

If you want to win my heart then feel free to feed me a cannolo from a particular cafe in Ortigia. I don't know its name but I know where to find it from the market place and I could probably sit there for hours. From there I know to wander to the ruins of an Ancient Greek temple and to admire an ornate fountain and walk along the sea front.

Honestly it's hard to put your finger on any particular feature that makes Ortigia special. It's the whole package or perhaps it's the thought, that maybe, just maybe you could be as elegantly cool and irresistible as Sophia Loren leaning from a balcony.

Now while Ortigia is bustling and busy, another island which I find enchanting is completely silent.

Isola San Giulio

Sits in quiet contemplation in the middle of lake Orta in Italy's northern Piedmont region. In fact, if you take the ferry across the water to the island you're asked to visit in silence with respect to the resident nuns who occupy its medieval monastery.

Imagine this island and its ancient towers rising from the water surrounded by the changing colors of the leaves in vibrant yellows, reds and oranges in the autumn or fall. It's a truly beautiful experience.

In summer you can admire the island from the tiny town of Orta San Giulio and explore its pretty vine covered streets slowly - piano, piano. There's no rushing here.

This is not a vibrant place, instead it's got that soft romantic feel that comes from knowing you've found the person or place that makes you feel right at home. It's a whole world away from the excitement of say Positano but you know what? I actually think I find it a little more alluring.

Venice

Our journey around just some of Italy's most romantic places ends close to where we began in Italy's north east corner - in Venice. Regular listeners know that this is my favorite Italian city and it's probably because it simply exudes such mystery and romance, no matter the season.

In summer you can disappear down a quiet laneway and enjoy the view of a side canal with shutters of ancient palazzi open overhead. Perhaps you'll catch a glimpse of shiny gondola out of the corner of your eye as it glides past an adjacent waterway. You may have been alerted to its presence by the gentle slap of an oar on water or the song of the gondolier.

Winter brings fog in Venice and the city shrouded in mist takes on an almost ethereal quality that never fails to charm. The city is quieter then and you can feel like it's almost your own if you stick to the outer canals and small laneways. Imagine have Venice to yourself! I like to do this sometimes and think of the decorations and furnishings I'd deck out my palazzo in. But that's an ongoing dream which I hope comes true one day.

In the meantime, Every year I get a thrill when people post their proposal shots from a gondola in Venice on our Italy Travel Planning community. They look so happy and I can't think of a better way to start a lifetime of adventures together than on one of those incredible vessels with the majesty of Venice all around you - can you?

This is an obvious and popular choice for proposals but if you've listened to our episode about gondolas - number 87, you'll understand why. They are symbol of craftsmanship, beauty and generations of tradition.

But Venice also offers lower key experiences too. If you ask me, there's nothing quite as romantic as a stroll back to your charming hotel over tiny bridges bathed in lamplight after a seafood dinner for the ages.

Ahhh venice, no wonder you're known as a city of love

So today we've taken a look at some of the places I think are the most romantic in Italy but really, you'll find romance or that quality or feeling of mystery, excitement, and remoteness from everyday life wherever you care to look in Italy. And I think that's why we've all fallen so in love with this country.

I know that some of you have not been able to travel to Italy yet but still you feel its pull. This country somehow captures so many hearts and imaginations just in a photo and believe me that's just one sense that's going to be activated when you're finally there . So If you're a first time traveler to Italy, be prepared to swoon and fall head over heels in love with Italy.

As this is Valentine's week, I'd love to hear from you about your romantic stories in Italy, your favorite places and moments that made your heart skip a beat. Head on over to our Instagram

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at @untold.italy and let me know. You can also use the hashtag #untolditaly to share your favorite photos and I can't wait to get some inspiration for myself!

Grazie, thanks for listening to our podcast and sharing our love of beautiful Italy. If you wouldn't mind, we would love it if you gave us a 5 star rating or review on your favorite podcast app. We'd so appreciate it and your reviews and messages of support brighten our day and spur us on to create more Italy flavored content for you.

That's all for this episode so I am signing off with our regular.. "ciao for now"