

# Untold Italy Episode 112 - Caserta Palace: A Glittering Jewel Near Naples

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 112.

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! Welcome all my Italy-loving friends! Are you ready to be astounded?

Today I have a story for you that you couldn't make up. It involves an incredible woman from a powerful family that had influence all over Europe and a palace so grand that some say was more dazzling than the Palace of Versailles in Paris, France. And that's a little spoiler of what's to come...

But let's take a step back and take a look at what we know about Italian history. Most of us have a general understanding of Ancient Rome and the Renaissance as it played out in Florence and Venice but perhaps we don't know so much about eras beyond that.

So bear with me as I give you some context - I promise it is extremely brief and there is no test at the end!

If you've been to Italy no doubt you've seen statues of and piazzas named after Garibaldi, Mazzini and Cavour. They were the main protagonists of the risorgimento or the movement to unify the duchies and kingdoms of the Italian peninsula in the 19th century.

Prior to unification in 1861, there was no country known as Italy. Instead, various small kingdoms vied for power and tried not to be overrun by French, Spanish and Austrian forces with varied, ok extremely limited success. In the early 18th century various branches of the Habsburg family tussled over the Italian lands while in nearby France, trouble was brewing of the revolutionary kind.

Joining me today to tell the story of one of the most important figures from this era of Italian history is my friend Danielle Oteri. Danielle is an art historian and runs a tour business Feast Travel specializing in southern Italy with her cousins based in the beautiful Cilento region.

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She's appeared on the podcast many times to talk about Naples, Cilento, and Matera and I'm thrilled to have her share the story of the Palace of Caserta with you today

**Katy**

Bentornato Danielle. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

**Danielle**

Thank you, Katie. I'm so happy to be here.

**Katy**

Oh, it is always a pleasure to chat with you and geek out about some of our favorite topics history, art, and deliciously good stories. But before we dive in, we've had lots of new listeners join us lately who may not know you and your background. So can you tell them your story - and how did you come to fall in love with Italian history?

**Danielle**

My name is Daniela Oteri, and I'm primarily based in New York City. I'm an Italian American, which is how I became interested in Italy. The inside of my grandmother's house, which was right next door to mine, was like her small village in an area of Italy called Cilento. And the food and everything else was exactly that experience. And so when I was a college student, I went to Florence to study for the first time. And then while there, I traveled down to Naples and discovered ah! This is the Italy that I come from. It felt incredibly familiar and comforting and wonderful and I completely fell in love with Southern Italy. I'm an art historian. I wound up specializing in the Renaissance in Naples for my graduate studies, came back to New York and worked for the Metropolitan Museum of Art many years. But I found my way back to Southern Italy with my travel company called Feast Travel, formerly called Feast on History. We just changed our name and we focus on tours and itineraries of Southern Italy because it's filled with wonderful, amazing things, one of which we get to talk about today. And many of these things are considered off the beaten path. And really, they're not at all. It's just that they are not as well known as the sites in Florence and Venice in Rome.

**Katy**

I know. It's so exciting. Over the past several years, I've just been getting more and more excited about some of these finds, and it's kind of shocking to me that we don't know about them. Anyway, so for people who think history is about dry and boring dates, prepare to be surprised. So why I love history is because we get to take a peek into the lives and stories of people, and it has to be said, mostly influential people and the decisions that they made. And like most of us, these people were complex and flawed, which, of course, makes for more interesting stories. And today we're going to explore a place, but there's also amazing stories

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around it. So I'm going to kick it off, Danielle, and you can introduce us to the world of Naples back in the day where the Palace of Caserta was at its heyday.

## Danielle

So if you're interested in the British Royals, if you've gone to Versailles, if you think about Marie Antoinette, and that's the kind of history that interests you, you'll probably be surprised to learn that Southern Italy has the world's largest palace. It's called the Royal Palace at Caserta, or La reggia di Caserta. It's also called and it is about three times the size of Versailles, specifically built to outdo it. The Queen in one period of Caserta's glory days was Queen Maria Carolina, who was, in fact, the sister of Marie Antoinette and she actually steered the Neapolitan revolution in the opposite direction after her sister was killed by the guillotine. So Naples was once rivaled only in sophistication by Paris. It was an incredibly important and international city. And the reason it's really so different, Southern Italy, in general, is so different than the rest of Italy is that south of the papal state, south of Rome and including the island of Sicily, it was a Kingdom. It was called the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. And it was an absolute monarchy. It had in the countryside, really a feudal system that lasted much longer than other feudal systems in Europe. And the capital was in Naples. There's a Royal Palace in Naples itself, which you can go visit as a tourist. There is another palaces, well, there are actually many palaces. The Bourbon dynasty, which was the last Royal dynasty before the unification of Italy in 1861, was a very powerful and very wealthy dynasty. The fact that people don't know about this palace at Caserta is a crime. It's an absolutely jaw-dropping place. So enormous, so important and really so well maintained, too, as a tourist experience - it's a pretty spectacular one.

## Katy

Amazing. I just couldn't believe it. I have studied history quite extensively, and I love French history as well. And I knew I have a very extensive idea about what was happening around the French Revolution, but I had zero idea about what was happening in Italy. And it's just so interesting. And I guess it kind of thrilled me to know that Maria Carolina was Marie Antoinette's sister. It kind of adds like a level of mystery and intrigue. So who was this woman, Danielle, who was Maria Carolina?

## Danielle

Well, Maria Antoinette and Maria Carolina and their other sisters were all daughters of Maria Teresa, the Empress of Austria. And at this time in Europe, of course, strategic marriages and alliances constantly shifted and consolidated power. And their mother was particularly adept at this. And so she very strategically married her daughter off to the Kingdom of Naples, which at that time had been Spanish. So Naples had its real glory period in the early 17 hundreds with a King named King Carlos III. And he actually abdicated the throne of Naples, where he had been raised to return to Spain because his dynastic line came from Spain. And there are things that Carlo III called in Naples began that people today will still praise and say, oh, he was so wonderful. He built this. As though he's somebody that was in power in

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1987, and he ended up going back to Spain and leaving as the heir to the throne of Naples, his son Ferdinand, who was not the brightest guy in the world. When Maria Theresa marries Maria Carolina to Ferdinand, she arrives to find somebody that's completely invested in doing nothing but hunting. Mostly hunting, having a good time. The common people of Naples loved him. They called him King 'Lazzarone' the beggar King in English. He liked to eat spaghetti with his hands while he was in his box seat at the opera. He liked to sell fish at the fish market with all just the regular folks of Naples. And guess who's going to have to rule that Kingdom if he's too busy hunting? The Queen! And so she first met him for the very first time at the palace at Caserta and in history. I mean, she's obviously overshadowed by Marie Antoinette, but she reigned for a long time. And she was very innovative and actually very progressive for a time, which is one of the aspects of the palace that I'll share with you. And I should also note that finally her story is really coming into greater view. A friend of mine, author Diana Giovinazzo, just wrote a book called Antoinette's Sister. It's a novel. It's historical fiction. So if you are interested in learning about Maria Carolina, I definitely recommend picking up Diana's book.

### **Katy**

Absolutely. I'm definitely going to do that because we are definitely going to this Palace. And so let's paint a picture of the Palace. What does it look like? Because I picture a lot of glass, a lot of gold, a lot of chandeliers. What's going on at Caserta?

### **Danielle**

Well, let me take you on the whole journey. So one of the biggest reasons people don't go there is that they say it's hard to get to. It's not so hard to get to, but it's maybe not obvious, but you can just take a train from Naples or you can take a bus from Naples as well. It's probably about 40 minutes outside the city if you're driving, as I was the last two times that I was there. When you come into Caserta, you're like, really, there's a Royal Palace around here. It's pretty busy. It's pretty modern. There's a lot of stores that sell like marble countertops. It's maybe not the most historic place. For those of your listeners who might be from the Northeast of the United States, it kind of looks like New Jersey outside of New York City. Okay, what's going on here? And then quickly, you'll see the first thing you notice are these elaborate gardens. And then there's a huge set of gardens and sort of sculpted shrubs that are almost sort of in the shape of a violin if you're looking at them in an aerial view. And then there is the palace, and it is absolutely massive.

### **Danielle**

When you approach, you walk up this very, very long driveway. When you enter, you're in sort of an open courtyard. And then there are different directions that you can take as a tourist, what you're going to see mostly are the Royal apartments. And that means the residential quarters where people were actually living. And yes, marble floors of all kinds, elaborate baroque paintings on every ceiling in every single room, giant rooms completely encrusted in gold leaf. It is just the most over-the-top palace. I mean, take Buckingham Palace mashed up

with Versailles, and then you get something that you get Caserta. It is really over the top. And it's really interesting, too, because you get the perspective. You begin to realize at that moment, or you finally realize at that moment that Naples was a Kingdom and a very powerful and important one. It was a monarchy, but it was also a very stable Kingdom, a very wealthy Kingdom. And this is how you have to understand the culture of Southern Italy, that these are its roots. And that's very different from Florence and Venice and Rome.

### **Katy**

Yeah, right. So, yeah, it's a totally different era. I guess when we think of Rome, we often think of the ancient past, and then you might have some Renaissance stuff going on there. And then obviously in Florence, you have your Renaissance era, which is the most thing. But I guess then if you move down south 200 years later, you've got this amazing Kingdom that's influencing not only the local area but the world, really. Because I think at that time Rome had declined quite significantly, hadn't it?

### **Danielle**

Oh, yeah, Rome at that time. This is the 1700s we're talking about. Rome was considered like a backwater at that point. Yeah, it was not a great place to be. Naples was by far by far much more elegant and powerful capital city. And when you see all the paintings inside the palace of Caserta, especially as an American, you're going to say these folks look like George Washington. It's the powdered wigs and these sort of like hoop skirts and the silks. And it really all looks like that time period. And yeah, that's the time period that we're talking about. This is the time of the American colonies. We have the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and then there was a Neapolitan revolution against the monarchy in 1799. Naples was a major city of the Enlightenment. And so many of the Enlightenment salons of intellectuals took place at Caserta. And the thing about the palace is it wasn't just a castle for living - it was an entire world. So it had 1200 rooms

### **Katy**

What?

### **Danielle**

1200 rooms, 34 staircases, 1790 windows. And it was a place both for the Royal family to live as well as their entire administration and their cabinet. The University was inside, there was an opera house inside. There was a military barracks that was inside, and then places for all the military generals to live. There was a University, there was a library. So it was an entire Kingdom, the entire administration of the Kingdom within one site so that they wouldn't have to leave. Now they would go to the Royal Palace in Naples, but Naples is right on the sea and that palace is right on the seafront, so it's vulnerable to invasion. And also Neapolitans were famous for breaking out with rebellion every once in a while. Then the Bourbons built another palace at Portici, which is right next to Herculaneum. And actually, as they were building

Portici, that's when they discovered Herculaneum. They were literally starting to build the foundation and start knocking into these Roman ruins and they discover the entire city. And so that palace wound up kind of being a repository for all the artifacts that were discovered at Herculaneum. And then they chose the site inland at Caserta as the perfect place to build just an entire world for the Bourbon dynasty to reign from.

**Katy**

Maria Carolina did have a lot of children, so that's probably why she needed so many rooms.

**Danielle**

Exactly. She had, I think, 13 kids. So 1200 rooms seems about right.

**Katy**

Yeah, 100 each.

**Danielle**

Yeah, totally.

**Katy**

Oh when you were talking about the windows, all I can imagine was like, must have been a constant window washing exercise.

**Danielle**

I can't even imagine how many people they had around just to clean. And then that's just the inside. The grounds themselves are really kind of almost the best part about visiting the architect of this is a famous architect in Italy of the baroque era. His name is Luigi Vanvitelli and he designed what I will call the backyard of the Royal Palace with what's called a telescope design. So what that means is when you go out of the backside of the palace, you look out and you see this fountain that's far off in the distance and there are paths on either side of it. And me and I'm sure every other tourist that goes there, you say, oh, wow, that looks so beautiful. I want to take a walk out there. It doesn't look like it's that far. It looks like you think it's going to take you maybe like 10/20 minutes tops to walk to the other side to see the fountain and then look back toward the palace. And then you start walking and you're walking and you've been walking for 20 minutes and it's like you've not moved an inch and it's because of this telescope effect designed by the architect.

**Danielle**

So that distance out to the edge of the fountain is actually 3 km. And then on either side are these elaborate what they call English gardens. And they were these very important botanical

gardens. So they were definitely pleasure gardens. There were places for King Ferdinand to go hunting, for everybody to just really go outside and enjoy nature. They were definitely pleasure parks and there's tons of fountains and sculptures within those gardens, but they were also important centers of study. And Maria Carolina in particular was an important figure in science at that time and importing different species of plants and actually taking care of and studying better than native plants. There was an elaborate garden for wine that was not too far from there, that was in the shape of a lady's fan that she would use to cool herself. And there was something like 600 priortals of wine that was planted there, maybe even more than that. I think I'm actually underestimating how many there were. But this is all to say that the attention that was paid to nature, there was, yes, for leisure and for pleasure and for grandeur, but also very much in service of science and in study.

### **Danielle**

And that's really also one of the things that makes her a very interesting figure in history, who has been very much overlooked. Having this husband, who was so kind of intellectually useless but beloved and really well liked, it made her the bad cop. Good cop/bad cop, like she was the enforcer. She's the one who makes the rules. She was like the not fun one. And so history has often written her as not quite a villain, but not the compelling, interested, engaged, active, progressive person that she was.

### **Katy**

This is very interesting. I think she must have been a very strong and capable individual, because no doubt Ferdinand had a few advisers that were hoping that we're expecting that they would probably be wielding all the influence. So I'm sure she had to be very deft and very skilled at managing people to wield that influence herself.

### **Danielle**

She did. When she arrived, he had had a tutor that his father had left in charge of him, a man named Tanucci. And he basically encouraged Ferdinand's worst instincts so that he would be not so bright and Tanucci could effectively rule the Kingdom. He was the Regent. And Maria Carolina really had to work hard to push him aside and had to eventually do so with force because he didn't want to step aside. He was essentially ruling the Kingdom. Later on, when the Neapolitan Revolution breaks out and they're actually deposed for a period of time and have to flee to Sicily and for six months, there is what's called the Parthenopean Republic. It was ruled by the French. She then turned around and allied with the British Navy in order to put down the revolution. So she really had to turn against a lot of the ideals that she had been seeking in these intellectual circles and many of these progressive ideas, including this sort of workers utopia that was also at Caserta as a place that you can go visit again as a tourist. In order to restore power. And this especially came about after she saw what happened to her sister during the French Revolution. Having been killed under the guillotine, it really shaped and changed her life in a massive way and changed the course of history as a consequence.

**Katy**

I'm just wondering, did Marie Antoinette ever go to Caserta? Which one was built first? Just to explore this relationship between these two sisters?

**Danielle**

Versailles was there first, but not long before. But Vanvitelli, the architect, was given the order to look at Versailles and do way better, like, really outshine it. And the Boboli Gardens in Florence were also a model. But the Boboli Gardens in Florence are nothing compared to the gardens at Caserta.

**Katy**

Wow. And do you know if either of them visited those palaces?

**Danielle**

Yeah, I don't believe so. I'm not 100% sure, but I'm almost positive that at the very least, Marie Antoinette never did go to Caserta.

**Katy**

That would have been delicious. That would have been a big party. I would have liked to see that. It's just one tiny family. But then they've managed to influence, as you say, the course of history. And Marie Antoinette obviously had a very tragic end, which arguably she brought upon herself. But she was an individual, and there's a whole raft of other things that came behind it, obviously. But what about Maria Carolina? Did she have an untimely end or did she manage to avoid that?

**Danielle**

No, she did. She managed to avoid that. She lived to I think she was in her 60s, but I think in an era before antibiotics, if you make it into your 60s, you're doing pretty well. And before she became Queen, she and her sisters were all waiting out a smallpox plague, and one of her sisters did die from smallpox. So Diana, who wrote the book about it, actually opens the book with a scene of them just being bored out of their minds in quarantine at their palace in Austria. Diana actually started writing the book during the worst of the lockdowns here in the United States. So the story is resonant for us, for sure.

**Katy**

Yeah. But I think I would prefer to be quarantine in a palace.

**Danielle**

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Yeah.

**Katy**

Oh, goodness. And so when we go to Caserta, because obviously - it's obviously very important landmark. And you mentioned we get there by train, then is it easy to get to the palace? How do you do that?

**Danielle**

Yeah. The train stops directly across the street from the front door, so it's super easy to go. And Naples in general, the infrastructure of tourism in Naples has just gotten a lot better about signage and information available in English about how to get to a certain place. But if you just go to the train station, you can find your way to Caserta pretty easily. Now, there are also busses that go from the center of the city. And I did see something. I'm not sure if it's launched yet, but there's a new program to get more people to Caserta with a bus that I think leaves from in front of the Archeological Museum or one of the major sites.

**Katy**

And then what do you do? You just walk up to the main driveway and you're there.

**Danielle**

Exactly. And you buy a ticket and it's inexpensive. I think it's like eight Euro or something like that. And you can spend the entire day there, and there's a little public cafeteria to have lunch there. It's not so great, but there's sort of a little town not far away where there are actually lots of great little local pizzerias. It's such an enormous place, though, that really if you're making it a day trip, it's going to take up your entire day and wear very comfortable shoes because there is a ton of walking. I was actually tracking it on my phone when I walked through all of the Royal apartments. It was close to 15,000 steps.

**Katy**

Wow. And so when you go into the palace, do they send you on a little route around the apartments or how does it work?

**Danielle**

Yeah, it's pretty straightforward. The way that the palace is constructed is on a grid system. So it's just sort of one gallery after the next. And you're walking around in these rooms. Some of them were ballrooms, some of them were meeting rooms. The rooms that were bedrooms are obvious. And in every single one of them, there's artwork, there's furniture, there's fashion to see. There's also a small, very good, actually, contemporary art museum that's on the property as well. And then there's this wonderful visit, especially if people are interested in fashion called the San Leucio Silk Factory. So when you have 1790 windows, you need a lot

of curtains, actually. And this was directly a result of Maria Carolina started a silk factory called the Sun Leucio Factory. It had actually begun by her father in law at first, and then she enhanced it, but Charles had decided to just find young local men who didn't have much going on. So people from the lower classes send them to France to learn the art of silk weaving and then come back. But then they also wound up importing some Masters from France. And in the Caserta region, there actually are people with French last names who trace their lineage back to this period.

## Danielle

There's one wine in particular that's very well known throughout the world called Alois. A-L-O-I-S. And on their wine label, there's sort of an image of a rampant lion. It's a piece of heraldry. And that's because Massimo's ancestors originally came from France's silkweavers. So they set up this entire colony, and they crafted this to be called Ferdinandopoli, so named after Ferdinand because his favorite hunting grounds was on the San Leuccio - so this is an area that's just adjacent, very nearby to the main palace. And they created an entire little city that had quarters for the workers to live and work in the same place. But it was a place where all of their children would have education. Men and women were treated completely equal, which is revolutionary at this time. But they were trying to create a colony that was based on really pure Enlightenment values. It was a social experiment and a very unusual one at the time. And people were only going to have to work an eleven hour workday, which sounds like a lot today, but at that time, the standard work day was 14 hours. So this was a progressive idea. Everybody in the colony would have running water, they would have health services provided to them. There would be no such thing as private property. The workers would own a portion of everything. And the only reason it didn't fully come into being was because of the Neapolitan revolution which broke out. And so the whole project was stalled. But the silk factories had been working, continued to work and are actually still in existence today. And they produce textiles for Buckingham Palace. They've produced textiles for the White House. It's a very small and exclusive production. But you can also go visit there and see the ancient silk mills and see how the weaving techniques are done. And it's such a cool place to go visit.

## Katy

Yeah. I mean, who knew? This is an amazing thing, and this is why we're talking to you about it. It's just fascinating. So it sounds like you can spend a very long time inside the palace. Is there any particular highlights, apart from the silk weaving section that you would recommend people sort of focus on?

## Danielle

The opera house is pretty cool. I feel like the gardens really are the main attraction, because when you're inside the palace, two things I would actually say. If you have a really rainy day and there aren't many rainy days in Naples, the climate is fortunately very temperate. But if there's a total wash out day, Caserta is actually a pretty good visit because you could just

spend all day wandering the palace. But I also find that that can get tiresome after a while. You can only sort of like, let your jaw hang open at the grandeur of things for so long. And so I think exploring the English gardens is really fun. You can rent a little bike to explore them. It's like two or three Euro, and they're like, not the greatest bikes in the world, they're a little bit rusty, but it's fine. It works perfectly. And so you can spend some time getting fresh air. You can explore on foot, of course, but you can really get lost in those gardens and let your imagination roam. Experience the beauty of the climate there. The nature is so beautiful. If you can balance those two things, looking at the apartments, of course, and seeing the palace and then getting some time outside, it's a really perfect day.

**Katy**

Sounds wonderful. I wonder if you could take a picnic there. That sounds like a good place for a picnic.

**Danielle**

Yeah. You can absolutely bring a little food ahead of time with you. Get a frittatina, those little, like, frittatas of pasta, stick it in your bag and bring it to Caserta.

**Katy**

I'm not sure why Maria Carolina was having a picnic of. She was probably having something much more elaborate. I imagine there were some amazing balls and parties that were held there would have been magnificent, I'm sure.

**Danielle**

Well, a lot of the foods of the Royal court are some of our most beloved Italian foods today, especially pastries. Naples has this amazing pastry tradition, Sfogliatella of course, the most famous. Baba. These things remained often by French pastry chefs who were in service of the Bourbon Royals and things like Sfogliatella is not a pastry that anybody ever made at home. Nona never made those. Those are always something that the pastry chefs who served very wealthy people like the Royals and then opened up pastry shops in very fashionable districts of cities would sell. And so, yeah, these things that we enjoy today that are very inexpensive and very normal to find were the foods of the aristocracy. They ate very well at Caserta. Sometimes you look back in history and the food really doesn't seem to match our taste anymore. That's normal. But if you look at some of the menus, which I have from Caserta, I'm like, yeah, that sounds pretty good. They did have a funny idea at the time, which permeated all of Europe and the American colonies as well, which was that colorful food was bad for you. And that food that was very either like beige or white was good for you. So they ate like a lot of mushroom pate in a cream sauce, which I've actually made. You can still find it today in Naples. It's called the Pâté of the Two Sicilies. It's mushrooms and cream, nothing not to like there. It's good. They ate a lot of that. They ate a lot of, like, finger foods. A lot of you like a frittata di pasta or what I call a spaghetti pie. It's basically pasta that's mixed with a

custard of eggs and then baked so that you can then slice it like a piece of cake and eat it that way. Food like that stuffed breads, bread stuffed with cheeses and meats were very common. A lot of the Italian Easter pies that people make. You're married to an Italian, I'm sure you've had the Italian Easter pies. A lot of these things are artifacts of that time period in Naples.

**Katy**

Wow. I'm absolutely fascinated by food history, actually. I find it especially Italian food history. It's so interesting when the tomatoes were introduced and, like, there's a lot of misunderstandings about the cuisine. But, yeah, obviously, it had such a huge influence - the court and how they developed their menus, etc. For and I love how it's been sort of democratized almost that people now can eat the cake that Maria Carolina was eating.

**Danielle**

Yeah.

**Katy**

Are you able to access the kitchen there?

**Danielle**

No, you aren't. That would be a fascinating thing. I'm sure that they - those are probably not so well preserved because that's where the servants worked. What's wonderful about Caserta is that it's in an amazing state of preservation. Versailles was heavily bombed during World War II, and it was largely rebuilt. And a lot of it was with money from philanthropists outside of France. Caserta was - after it ceased being the home of the Royal family was really kind of well kept by the locals. It was always a point of pride. Then it became the Italian Air Force Academy in the 1940s. It became the Allied Force headquarters and the Rest center for the US Fifth Army, which was part of Operation Avalanche to liberate Europe from the Nazis. And it became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997. So with that influx of international money, now it's able to be maintained, but it is a pretty spectacular achievement. I mean, I just thought the first thing I thought when I walked up there was like "who knows all this grass?"

**Katy**

"Who clips all those trees?"

**Danielle**

Who clips all these trees? Yeah. And there's not a lot of tourists there. Italians know it very well. It's very well known in Italy, and you see a lot of Italian schools on field trips there. But non Italian tourists don't really seem to know it very well at all.

## Katy

I just find that incredible, actually, because I am a massive castle, palace, history, nerd. I have been to many, many castles. And the fact that I didn't know about this one until you mentioned it to me, maybe it was 18 months ago. It kind of blows my mind, actually. And I just every time I do these podcasts and this is what I love about you uncover all these little gems that no one tends to know about. And as you said, they're not really even off the beaten path. This is right in Naples. Really?

## Danielle

Yeah. I mean, everybody goes to Sorrento and it's like it's the same distance from Naples. And like I said, you can experience both history and nature and ride a bicycle and all of these wonderful things all within one day. But, yeah, especially for people so many people are interested in the world of the Royals. Bridgerton on Netflix is wildly popular. The Marie Antoinette movie is, of course, very popular. The Royal family in Britain continues to intrigue people and look at Caserta. And there's actually still descendants of that Bourbon family. They live in Switzerland. They supposedly, I think, still actually have a room where they can stay in Caserta if they are in town. They have two young daughters who I believe are in high school now. And one of them is officially has the title, like the Duchess of Capri. And I think the other one is the Duchess of Malta or something like that. I'm not quite sure. But that dynasty is still around.

## Katy

Yeah. I mean, part of me loves the fact that it's there and it's being preserved. And if you want to come, you can come. It's not really being over promoted or anything like that. But the other part of me is like, why don't they do a Versailles, style like, light show? Like, why don't they do that. Why do they get the fountains going to the sound of the music?

## Danielle

Well, they do have fountains, and actually, there are a lot of events. If you're watching Italian television, you're always going to wind up seeing Caserta at some point because they do a lot of big civic events or celebrations, like on the celebration of the Republic of Italy, for example, they will very often do something. They'll do a flyover of the Italian flag over Caserta. But one thing that I forgot to mention before is that Caserta is often used in movie sets. So if you are a Star Wars fan, Caserta is the palace of Naboo, and it was also in Mission Impossible. It was in the movie The Two Popes. It is in the movie Angels and Demons. There's a scene where all the Popes and all the Cardinals are going up the steps, and it's supposed to be the Vatican. It's actually Caserta, and that's because you don't have the same amount of people in it every day that you do at the Vatican. So it's a great stand-in for that. And because it's also in such an amazing state of preservation.

## Katy

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Wow. I find it fascinating. I just think it's really amazing. And just to have that story of Maria Carolina and her obvious curation of the area and to have it preserved so well is just incredible. Is there any other cool little stories that you have around the palace?

**Danielle**

Well, definitely recommend if this is something that intrigues you to read Diana's book or to do other research about Maria Carolina, because when you visit a space like this that's so massive, it can be really overwhelming. And so I think it's really fun to attach to one person in history. And I think that her husband, as the foil for that, too, is the person who is only interested in hunting and eating spaghetti with his hands, in his box seat at the opera house is an interesting character as well. There's another book I highly recommend that was written in the 1980s by the very famous author Susan Sontag. It's called *The Volcano Lover*. Susan Sontag never really wrote about Italy or I don't think she ever wrote historical fiction. She was a huge opera lover, which is why she attached to the story of Naples and the San Carlo Opera house, which is part of the Royal Palace in Naples. But I think her point of entry. But she writes about the Neapolitan revolution and the love affair between Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton, who were in Naples as part of the military effort to put down the revolution. And so it's a big, beautiful historical love story. And that's a really fun book to read before you go to this place, because then you can imagine all of these characters walking around these grand rooms. And I mean, they were real people as well. It just happens to be that the book is fictionalized.

**Katy**

So wait, Lord Nelson was in Caserta.

**Danielle**

Yes.

**Katy**

This is so fascinating. I wonder who else was there. I love this kind of context.

**Danielle**

Mozart.

**Katy**

Oh, Mozart.

**Danielle**

Mozart was there. We actually don't know for sure that he was at Caserta. He was most likely he was definitely in Portici, which is nearby. And Naples was one of his favorite places to play

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because there was such a cultured audience there that had such an appreciation for music. And I may have said this on a past podcast episode before I can't remember, but I always tell people, if you go to Naples, go see an opera, even if opera is not your thing, because when you see it in Naples, everybody sings along. And that's really when you understand opera is not sort of like the snooty artifact of highbrow intellectuals. But when you see an Italian opera in Naples, everybody knows the words. It's like folk music. And to hear them singing along is really moving.

**Katy**

Do they have a favorite one that they really get into?

**Danielle**

Well, I don't know. I mean, the San Carlo Opera House hosts all kinds of operas German, English, all of them. So I think in my experience, it's just been whenever there's an Italian opera.

**Katy**

Puccini

But I would say the opera by Mozart - *Così fan tutte* takes place on the Bay of Naples in a luxury villa that would be right next to the Royal Palace. So if you're an opera fan, that's an opera that you can also imagine taking place in Caserta.

**Katy**

I would pay a lot of money to be in a crowd of people singing like that. I just think that would be amazing.

**Danielle**

You don't even have to pay a lot of money. It's like \$60 or something to go and see an opera in Naples. It's actually not so expensive. And it's right in the sort of main tourist area. It's something that's very easy to do. I always say to people, like, look ahead, you can actually unlike a lot of things in Italy, you think you can buy the tickets online, but you can also just walk up to the box office at the opera house as soon as you arrive in the city and see what's playing and buy a ticket for that week.

**Katy**

Amazing. Well, that's so cool. And then can you pretend you've got the little bit of Maria Carolina in your life?

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## Danielle

Yes. And you have to dress up because everybody dresses up for it in Naples. In New York City, we have the amazing Metropolitan Opera, and you get some people that go in evening gowns, but most people go in jeans. Nobody goes in jeans in Naples, everybody dresses really nice. So it's a lot of fun.

## Katy

Well, I don't know how you were brought up, but I wouldn't go to the opera in jeans. Kind of being offended by - my grandmother was very proper about things like that and how you attended certain functions and what attire you would wear. But I don't know if you know this. Danielle, my aunt my great aunt, which was my grandmother's sister, she actually went to Sicily on a trip, we just recently found out. And she was a musician, and I think she did operas as well. So she was actually we've got written accounts of her doing that. And I think she must have dressed up very nicely as well to go to that. I'm absolutely sure she did. Great Aunt Dorothy.

## Danielle

That generation would just really have a hard time with our athleisure today.

## Katy

Well I would say they should. Come on. I love a big effort and a big feather or plumage and sequins. Let's go maxi. And I think Naples is such a great place for that maximal kind of feeling, isn't it? We have a saying here in Australia, go hard or go home. It's like you've got to make the most of it. And I think, well, this sounds like there's no better place that demonstrates that than the palace Caserta.

## Danielle

Absolutely. It's such a rich history. It's so unknown, and it feels so amazing as a tourist there that you're getting to see and experience all of this history. It costs very little money. It's pretty easy to access. And again, what I'm famous for saying always about Southern Italy, you just don't have the giant crowds, which I think is more important now in the covid worlds to not be packed into someplace. And I'm just an evangelist for this. I mean, I think people feel pressured to see specific sites because they've heard about them so much or they've seen them on Instagram. And I understand that impulse. You want to feel like you're getting the most of your time and your money and you saw the most important things. But those most important things are often an artifice. They're often a product of just the tourism industry. And Italy, in every corner of Italy, North, South, all of it has the world's most important consequential history. So much of it is so beautiful. And you're going to find good food to eat in every corner of Italy as well. So I just really can't encourage people enough to go to the

proverbial off the beaten path where you will find the world's largest palace. Not just Europe's largest palace, the world's largest palace. Amazing treasures abound if you're just sort of willing to look around you at all of the beautiful things to see there.

**Katy**

And I reckon I haven't been there yet, but I'm going in June, and something tells me that even if like, Instagram and getting lots of great photos was you know, I mean, I love taking great photos as well, don't get me wrong - it sounds like this might be photography/Instagram dream.

**Danielle**

I mean, it's kind of selfie heaven, really.

**Katy**

Absolutely. Channel Maria Antoinette.

**Danielle**

Yeah, I'm sure as you see, too, right. I see all of these people that are dressed nicely, that are I don't know if they're influencers or whatever that are posing and taking 50, 60 shots of themselves to get it perfect. Tucking their hair behind their ear. Go to Caserta if that's what you want to do.

**Katy**

Now I'm thinking of another thing - maybe they should rent out dresses like that style and the wigs. Imagine that. I would do that.

**Danielle**

I'd be totally up for that. Totally. Yeah. I actually arranged a tour for a family and there was a few young girls in the family and they actually asked that. They said if there would be any way that we could try on the clothes and I'm like man, that's a good idea.

**Katy**

I would love it. I would absolutely love it. Well, Danielle, thank you so much for sharing a beautiful palace of Caserta today. I know that our listeners would love to hear more from you and about your tours and how they can stay in touch with you. How can they do that?

**Danielle**

You can go to [feasttravel.com](https://feasttravel.com). I have a new website with a new logo that has a little cordoncillo which is a Napoli good luck symbol in it that I'm very happy with and there you

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can find my services for both itinerary consulting, itinerary design as well as our group tours and I'm going to be adding every week more and more pages about the many treasures of Southern Italy so that people can find them because even if you don't go with me I want you to go. So I'm going to make sure that I continue to publicize that and make that information available in English because really that's the biggest barrier is that just not a lot of English information is available about these wonderful places.

**Katy**

Okay. Well. Grazie thank you so much for joining us on Untold Italy today Danielle I can't wait to get to the palace for the first time and wander the gardens and..

**Danielle**

We might be able to go together.

**Katy**

I would love that. Oh my Lord. Best day ever. Thank you, Danielle.

**Danielle**

We'll have mozzarella and we'll go to Caserta!

**Katy**

What an amazing story right? Who knew that Marie Antoinette had such a formidable sister and that there is a palace of such astounding beauty so close to Naples? I only learned about this myself in the last few years and it's quickly gone onto our itinerary for later this year. I do love a palace and what I think is really great is that you can mix up some high culture with outdoor activity like riding bikes and posing in front of fountains.

The area around Caserta is really very fascinating and as it's so near to Naples, worth a closer look. Recently in our Untold Italy Amici friends of the podcast group, our dear friend Pierpaulo shared some really great tips for this region including Ancient Roman sites that are hidden in plain sight and of course an excellent cheese experience.

If you want to hear all about it, come and join us on Untold Italy Amici where you get access to the back catalogue of private podcast episodes, exclusive subscriber resources and a community to chat about your travel plans. On this month's private podcast we're talking to Robbin Gheesling, photographer and author of the Wine Doors of Florence book who we chatted to last year. She's been living in Florence since September and has so many secrets to share. You can check out all the details at [untolditaly.com/amici](https://untolditaly.com/amici)

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We've also put all the details about visiting the Palace at Caserta in our podcast show notes as well as a link to Danielles' company Feast Travel. I also wanted to let you know that Danielle offers custom itinerary planning for those of you who are overwhelmed with your planning or want the assistance of a bonafide and Italian-speaking expert. If you want to put together an itinerary that taps into all your interests and the needs of your travel companions then definitely reach out to her at Feast Travel and let her know that you found her via the Untold Italy podcast. The website is [feasttravel.com](http://feasttravel.com) and of course, we've put a link there into the show notes at [untolditaly.com/112](http://untolditaly.com/112) for episode 112.

Grazie, Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did, we would love it if you made the time to give us a 5 star rating or review in your favorite podcast app. If you're using apple podcasts what you need to do is

1. Click on the SHOW, not the episode.
2. Scroll all the way down to "Ratings and Reviews"
3. Click on "Write a Review"

Thank you and Grazie to those of you who have already done this - it is so appreciated.

That's all for today, next week we're heading back to Tuscany for some seasonal Spring treats!

But until then it's "ciao for now"