

Untold Italy Episode 120 - Mistakes to avoid when planning your trip to Italy

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 120.

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, how's your week been? Mine's been amazing as we've actually been celebrating a podcast milestone. Can you believe episodes of Untold Italy have been listened to over half a million times! That's so mind-boggling! Amazing. Thank you one and all for tuning in every week and your ongoing messages of support and encouragement. We've got listeners from all over the world - from New York City to Delhi and Sydney to Seattle. And I just love how our passion for Italy connects us all.

So apart from celebrating, I'm currently trying to put the finishing touches on our family trip to Italy coming up in June and I have to say, I am a little rusty!! Not surprising really all things considered and after the past 2 years but I am finding I have to check myself a few times and dust off some dormant skills.

So it got me thinking, and I thought today I would share with you some common mistakes people make - me included - when planning their trips to Italy. Now none of these mistakes can't be overcome by a positive attitude and a few quick checks. And if I'm honest, we've had some fun and memorable times overcoming planning mistakes I've made in the past, I just thought I'd highlight them so you can be aware and double-check your itineraries - especially those who are departing fairly soon

OK so let's get started with one that tripped me up with some plans I had for meetings in Rome in a few weeks. Whoops! I've managed to arrive in Rome on an extra-long weekend and not much is happening and some of the people I want to meet with will be out of town.

So the first mistake is

- 1. Not checking your dates and plans against local holidays and closures is the first mistake to avoid.**

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I wish I could tell you there were hard and fast rules for closures and holidays in Italy but unfortunately, there are not, especially as we ease out of the pandemic, museums, galleries and tour companies have different schedules. So what you have to do is check the opening hours and tour departure dates and times well in advance to make sure you know how to structure your itinerary.

Some of the more famous closures are in Florence where the Uffizi Gallery and other major museums including the Pitti Palace are closed on Mondays. This is the time to head out on a day trip or visit one of the smaller museums. The Vatican Museums are closed most Sundays and St Peters is closed on Wednesday morning for the Papal Mass.

But the point here is that you do need to check your plans against local holidays and closures to avoid disappointment. In some cases you may need to adjust your itinerary or expectations. That's ok, there are always lots of fun things to do in Italy

2. Not checking your timing and logistics thoroughly.

You know how it is. You do a quick google maps or rome2rio check and jot down that it's 1.5 hours by train from Rome to Florence and then you book your tickets choosing the cheapest fare. Uh oh.. The cheapest fare was not a fast-speed train linking the two cities but the regional stop at every station along the way service taking almost 4 hours.

Want to travel on a weekend? Don't assume the same number and type of train services will be operating as during the week.

The same goes for transit times by car. I always need to double check timings when doing my research because usually it's 2am in the morning in Italy when I'm doing that and therefore Google isn't picking up the usual traffic chaos that inevitably slows down your movements. You can adjust the timing in Google maps or add a buffer in but just make sure you check

Of course, I am assuming that you have limited time and don't want to be stuck on a train for 4 hours unnecessarily but regardless You can never plan too much when it comes to logistics - check and check again and add in buffers for parking, transit from train station to accommodation and navigating your way around a new environment

Which brings me to the next mistake that people make when planning their Italy trips

3. Trying to fit too much in

We do not judge here on Untold Italy - everyone travels their own way, at their own pace, and for different reasons. BUT whichever way you travel, you do need to plan realistically and build in buffer time for checking in and out of hotels/accommodation, getting to and from the train station, and having time to work things out. I usually add at least an hour either side of travel for mishaps, finding parking etc

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That's why I am very skeptical of online itineraries that do not include timings because when you've got a bit of experience it is quite clear that some of them leave you with very little time to explore anything at all. I recently talked about this on a recent live I did on Facebook which is now available on our new YouTube channel. If you're going to copy an itinerary you found online please make sure the person who wrote it has some reasonable experience (ie more than one trip) traveling in Italy and more importantly, travels the way you want to.

Here's an example: A one and half hour train trip from Rome to Florence is simply the platform to platform time and does not include getting to and from the station to your hotel, time at the station, and checking into and out of the hotels. This is more like a 3 and a half hour exercise. So you see, your exploring or relaxing time as you prefer is being chewed up by the minute

4. Not making reservations in advance in the major tourist areas particularly in peak season.

I'm here to break it to you friends, Italy is going to be busy this year and even busier in 2023. Unless you're the super free and easy type who is happy to wander around or stand in line for hours waiting for a table at a restaurant or won't be devastated to miss out on visiting the Colosseum you need to hop to it and get those reservations made as soon as you can.

Back in November 2019 I was a bit free and easy with my bookings thinking it was off-season and not busy at all but we missed out on some favorite hotels due to my tardiness. Luckily I was on the ball for the restaurant reservations as I would have been weeping had I not been able to dine at Roscioli in Rome.

If you have special or specific requirements then this is doubly important. For our trip we are traveling as a family - me, my husband and primary or elementary school-aged kids. Now family rooms that are suitable for our family are pretty scarce at the best of times in Italy. Often it's a double bed plus a sofa bed which doesn't really work for us - We'll be needing a double plus two singles and ideally in the same room or apartment as the kids are way too young to be in a separate room and we prefer to all be together anyway. This past weekend I have been scouring places in Tuscany looking for something that meets this brief, has a pool plus air conditioning and meets my standards and budget in the specific area that I want. There are not too many options.

Another example is car rental. Can you drive manual or stick shift? This is the standard transmission in Italy and in general, you need to book well in advance in the major tourist areas to secure an automatic vehicle

So, if you're traveling between May and October, Italy's busiest times and you're visiting the major tourist areas - Rome, Venice, Florence, and parts of Tuscany close to Florence, Venice, Amalfi Coast, the Italian lakes, and the Cinque Terre - make sure you do your bookings early if you don't want to make some serious compromises

And while you're at it, make a good note of what's included in the price, any cancellation clauses/timing you need to be aware of and addresses and meeting points.

While we're on the topic of hotels and accommodation, the next issue to avoid is to pick a poor location for your stay

5. Choosing your accommodation based mainly on budget or room price or not paying close attention to the location of your accommodation

Low prices generally come with big compromises. It's true that you can find budget accommodation in the outer suburbs or cities and very close to train stations but you will be making concessions. In the case of the outer suburbs, and especially if it's your first visit, you're simply going to pay more for local transportation which can be slow and also have the added hassle of navigation to contend with. Plus you won't be part of the atmosphere that I'm betting you've traveled all that way to be a part of.

The areas around train stations in any major city around the world including usually aren't the most charming. It is tempting to stay there for budget or logistics reasons but every time I've done this I've always regretted it

Instead, if you're looking for budget accommodation choose a district just out of the main central historic zone and hit the sweet spot of budget and location. Usually, it's a short but scenic walk to the heart of the action

For our next mistake, it's something less logistics focused and that's

6. Not brushing up on local customs and culture

Italy is a modern western country just like our own but it's fair to say that they have their own quirks and curiosities just as we have in our own countries. I'm always surprised at the different ways of doing things between English-speaking countries like Australia, the US, Canada and the UK but here we're adding language to the mix and it's bound to get interesting. If you don't make some time to learn a little of the language and culture not only can you come off as being a little rude but more importantly you won't be enjoying one of the greatest things about travel which is learning and enjoying different ways of doing things.

Rule numero uno friends is to always greet people when you encounter them in a shop, restaurant or other service situation. The correct way to do this is by saying "Buon Giorno" or "Buona Sera". Do this as soon as you enter a shop or cafe. It's the polite thing to do.

Moving beyond the polite into the area of respect, please make sure you are suitably attired to enter a church in Italy. That means covering your shoulders and knees for everyone. It never ceases to amaze me in our Italy Travel Planning Community when people try to find ways around what they think is a rule but it is actually a mark of respect. And we should always respect the rules, traditions, and customs of places where we are guests don't you think?

One of the more surprising, and actually one of my favorite examples of local culture is at local markets in Italy. Here you shouldn't touch the produce you want to buy, instead you ask the vendor to choose for you otherwise they can get quite cross which actually happened to Stanley Tucci in his series Searching for Italy. Happens to the best of us my friends but as long as we learn from our and others mistakes it's ok!

There are a lot of cultural faux pas to learn about Italy, way too many for this podcast so I'll probably do another one just for that in fact. Stay tuned

But one set of rules I did want to mention that you absolutely must be aware of are driving rules. So our next mistake to avoid when planning your trip to Italy is.

7. Not reading up on driving and road rules and costs

In theory, it would be nice to think that we could just turn up to the airport car rental, pick up our car, plug in the GPS and speed away to our destination but please, do pay attention to some Italian rules you need to know

Firstly, make sure you have your full drivers licence plus your International Drivers Permit with you. This is a legal requirement that your car rental company may not check but if you are in an accident or are pulled over by police and don't have this documentation, hefty fines apply - up to €300 I believe. You can easily pick up your IDP from your local automobile association for \$40 to \$50

Speaking of fines, if you're caught driving through a ZTL or historic zone, you'll also be liable for fines that can appear up to 18 months later via the car rental agency. Please make some time to understand what a ZTL is, how to check for and avoid them and you'll avoid nasty financial surprises you weren't expecting. We covered this in our article about driving in Italy which we'll link to in the show notes.

Did you find a great car rental deal? Another mistake people make is thinking driving in Italy is cheap. It really isn't when you take into account the cost of fuel, tolls, and parking which can be astronomical in the major cities - just like our own

So do yourself a favor and study up on the details of driving in Italy if you plan to rent a car.

The next mistake I see people making when planning their Italy trips is ..

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8. Not having a plan to manage their money

And not knowing how to avoid large transaction and exchange costs. While cash is still very much king in Italy in certain scenarios, it is not your friend for most things. We carry minimal cash and use it for parking, local transportation, bathrooms and small cafes. It's always handy to have around €100 in cash in small notes on you in small notes (less than €50 bills) for these situations.

Otherwise, use your travel-appropriate Visa or Mastercard debit or credit card that does not charge transaction fees and accesses the best exchange rates. I use Wise and Revolut for this purpose. They are international cards where you can transfer, hold and access funds in Euro and other currencies. They have excellent exchange rates but if you're not comfortable with them do some research on the best travel cards in your country. As an aside, American Express and Diners Club cards are not widely accepted and usually incur an additional fee.

I always take a back up card in case I lose one and for emergencies that is usually a credit card because debit cards often don't work with the toll machines on the roads - I'm not sure why.

Anyway, No one wants to be stuck abroad cashless. It's happened to me in the days of travelers cheques and it was simply awful

So have a plan for your money so you know how to access funds if you need to and make sure you don't pay above the odds for your purchases by choosing the right card

Which brings me to the second last mistake people make when planning their trip to Italy and that's

9. Not purchasing travel insurance

Insurance of any kind is a contentious topic but I would never travel without it and it's not for the reasons you might think. These post-pandemic days, booking and cancelation clauses are quite flexible and I always choose them anyway so I don't buy travel insurance to cover that or to cover loss or theft of items. No, we always buy travel insurance to cover hospitalization, and repatriation should we fall ill and this was the case prior to covid and will continue to be the case. Italy has an excellent hospital system and will offer care however if you fall seriously ill or are incapacitated in a major way then you'll need to halt your trip, get treatment and get home. If you need a nurse to assist you it starts to become very expensive.

This can happen due to a simple trip on a cobblestone or a nasty bout of flu that turns into pneumonia - speaking from family experience here.. And it can get very expensive - to the 10s of thousands of dollars and beyond. So can quarantine arrangements if you test positive

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for covid in Italy. That's at your own cost so do yourself a favor, get the travel insurance and let them handle it if something like that was to occur

So now we're onto the very last mistake to avoid when planning your trip to Italy is, and I think the most important and that's

10. Following others plans and not traveling the way you want to

Traveling is a joy and it should tap into your sense of adventure and fun. Planning can it's true get a bit overwhelming and after all, Italy offers so many incredible options for every kind of interest but if you're feeling that way, stop, take a minute and tap into why you want to go to Italy. What's driving the passion and drive to get on that plane. Is it the landscapes, the people, the food, the culture - maybe like me it's all of the above. At that point, it's time to take stock and wonder what it is that will make your trip truly memorable or amazing.

For example, If you want to do a cooking class - is there a dish you want to learn how to make that means something special to you? Because you can learn a basic pasta dish with ragu pretty much anywhere you go in Italy but if you'd like to learn carbonara or cacio e pepe best do that in Rome and surrounds where they have the ingredients. Or if you want to learn some amazing vegetarian dishes to add to your repertoire, Our friends Holly and Gianluca in Capri teach the best.

If you want to go wine tasting. Well, what type of wine do you like? Italy has so many varieties and most people just head to Chianti which while fabulous may not be your favorite. If you love sparkling wine like me then you'll want to head to Prosecco country in the north or for something very special Franciacorta on the banks of Lake Garda

Do you want to go hiking along the Amalfi Coast. The Path of the Gods is crowded and not your only option and you'll feel more about that in an upcoming episode

What I am saying is look to your heart, follow your own path and travel the way you want to. Yes, listen and be open to new ideas and suggestions but one person's incredible travel plan may not be your own. Travel your way and find the people that like to travel your way because they will have the best suggestions.

So for what it's worth, traveling the Untold Italy way is soaking up every last minute, exploring the many different regions and subcultures of Italy. When you're in the big cities it's looking for those unique curiosities you can only find there or chasing after a unique experience that speaks to your passions - whether that be history, food or creating art. Our style of travel includes getting to grips with a myriad of pasta shapes and unique tastes that draw on seasonal local ingredients because pasta in Italy is not just pasta al pomodoro. We're about meeting local artisans and discovering the passion and dedication behind their

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creations. But above all we believe in having time to explore and time to relax. And to enjoy long leisurely aperitivo and meals with great wine and even better company.

So if this sounds like the way you'd like to travel in Italy, why not join us on tour. We have departures to Sicily, Puglia, Piedmont and Umbria in 2022 and 2023 plus a very special experience in Capri and on the Cilento Coast in 2023. We can't wait to have you join us to discover our Untold Italy.

Of course, I'll put links to the tours up on our website at untolditaly.com/120 for this episode - number 120, as well as the details of mistakes people, make when planning their Italy trips. I hope you found those useful, I always think a little forward planning and preparedness goes a long way.

Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did then it would be amazing if you gave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. If you're using apple podcasts then you need to go to the show page for Untold Italy - not the episode page - and scroll down until you see "ratings and reviews" You can leave your 5 star review and message there.

Next week we're taking a trip back to beautiful Venice to discover the islands beyond the city on the lagoon but until then it's "ciao for now"