

Untold Italy Episode 130 - How to spend a week in Calabria

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 130.

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

Buongiorno a tutti, let's head south today to the toe of Italy's boot and the region known as Calabria. Many of our listeners, including me, have strong family connections to this lesser-known part of Italy and it's always a pleasure to explore it

Calabria is well known in Europe for its stunning beaches but somehow the rest of us didn't get the memo. And beaches aren't the only drawcard. Calabria has a rich cultural heritage, gorgeous hilltop towns, and some of the most unique and delicious dishes in Italy.

Many visitors zip through Calabria on their way to Sicily from the Amalfi Coast but it's a bit of a mistake in our opinion. There's so many beautiful off-the-beaten path treasures to be found here. And something tells me they won't be off the beaten path for too much longer.

Our guest today is author Karen Haid who literally wrote the book on Calabria. Her book "Calabria the other Italy" is one of the few English language resources you can find on the region and not only is it unique but it's also extremely well researched and full of funny anecdotes. Karen runs group tours in Calabria each year and has kindly agreed to share with us some ideas on how to spend a week in this lovely region

So, curious travelers, let's jump in and find out how we can build our Calabria itinerary

Katy

Benvenuta Karen, welcome back to the Untold Italy Podcast.

Karen

Grazie Mille. I'm very happy to be back. Thank you very much.

Katy

Karen - I always love chatting with you, and we so appreciate your expert knowledge on Italy's lesser known Southern regions. Can you let our listeners know how you came to spend so much time there in Calabria and also Basilicata?

Karen

Sure. I always had a love for Italy, and I had studied the Italian language quite a bit and had done many intensive language schools in Italy. And I wanted to really perfect (if we can ever use that word with a foreign language) the Italian language. And I thought the best way, of course, would be to spend more time. And so I taught English in Calabria, and after that, I had that experience and Calabria is in the toe of the Italian boot, if you look at the map of Italy. And I was inspired to write a book about the region. So that's sort of my basic outline. And then I started a blog, of course, social media pages and then I have tours. So that's how I came about. Yeah.

Katy

How did you actually get inspired? What drew you to Italy in the first place? Because I always find that question really interesting because everyone has a different story.

Karen

It was through my parents, because they lived in Rome in the 1950s for five years. My father went to La Sapienza in Rome. My mother worked. So even though they didn't have Italian heritage, they were completely taken in by the food and the culture, and they passed that down to us. So we ate a lot of Italian food. Of course, as we know in Italy, often it's about the food. And they both spoke Italian fluently. Of course, they weren't mother tongue, so we only knew a few words, for example, my father, luce - light. As most children know, it's always the father who's telling you to put the lights off. Some important words like that, sometimes some oddball words that you might not expect. But then later on in life, I decided to study the language myself. And one thing led to another, and I ended up in Calabria just by happenstance when I was looking for a job.

Katy

Yeah. And it totally changed the course of your life, hasn't it? It's amazing.

Karen

Yep. I never would have imagined.

Katy

What was it about Calabria that really took you in, that really inspired you to write the book and to continue your journey around there?

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Karen

Well, I think for the book, a lot of it had to do with the fact that there really wasn't anything written in English. And when I got there, of course, you don't know what to expect. A lot of people said, oh, don't go there. There's nothing there because it's not famous. And I was so surprised at how much I did find - that made me then look even more and travel around the region and see what was there. And of course, the food experience there is just incredible. Their agriculture is amazing. Pretty much anything can grow there. Like I said, one thing led to another, and then it sort of become my mission. I started a blog and probably my blog. There's twice as much in the blog as there is in the book.

Katy

It is a very impressive piece of work, in fact, everyone should definitely check it out. Pople - like you said, they don't know about Calabria. They can picture it because they can see the toe of the boot, but maybe - can you paint a picture of this region for us, Karen? How do you describe it to people who have never been there before or who have perhaps never heard of it?

Karen

So as you can see, we talk about the toe, and the toe is in the water. So it is surrounded by coastline, 500 miles of coastline. So everyone probably has seen pictures of spectacular scenery in Calabria. You may have been looking at pictures every once in a while of Calabria. It's not all just the Amalfi Coast. So on the West Coast, the Tyrrhenian Coast, because in Italy they name every couple of feet of coastline. You can't just say it's the Mediterranean because they'll correct you. So on the West Coast, it's the Tyrrhenian sea, and that's rather dramatic for the most part. So cliffs and beautiful blue green water. And then on the East Coast, while there are also some cliffs, etc etc, but it's flatter, so sandier beaches and then running down the whole center of the region are mountains, as in the rest of Italy. And that's probably one of the things that makes Italy so beautiful is, yes, there's mountains and there's sea, but then there are all these villages, whether they be on a mountain in the middle of almost, we can say nowhere, hilltop villages, etc etc, or whether they're on the water and so Calabria has all of that. And, of course, there's a lot of history there because it is the center of the Mediterranean. So back in Greek and Roman times, any maps that they would have had, it would have been smack in the center of their known world. It's right across from Sicily. Many people know Sicily. The Strait of Messina is a small strip of land that separates Calabria from Sicily. So you can see Sicily easily - it's just a couple of miles away from the coastline of Calabria. So it really has a lot of nature and delicious food. And the people are very open because fewer tourists go there. And so they're very thankful for those tourists. And you're going to have a wonderful experience because of it.

Katy

Yeah. I think the European tourists probably know Calabria a little bit more, particularly German speaking ones. They are really tuned into the beaches down there, aren't they?

Karen

The Germans really are tuned in. And there are lots of airlines, those kind of low cost airlines - so you can go from Frankfurt or Munich directly to Lamezia Terme, which is the largest airport in the region. There are two airports. So, yes, there's tons of Germans, some English, but it's mostly Germanic speakers.

Katy

Yeah. But I think it's really fascinating because the Germans, they do love a good beach.

Karen

They love a good beach. They also love nature. And that's another thing about Calabria. There is a lot of nature. So even right near the coast, Tropea is the most famous place. But even right near there, you can hike. So that's also very important to them.

Katy

Yeah. They do know how to pick out a good beach. So if you're a beach loving person, definitely Calabria is a place that you want to be putting on your radar. Now, it's been a long while since we took a trip to Calabria with Karen and (on the podcast) so I wanted to revisit it because we have so many listeners that have Calabrese heritage and others that are curious about what happens between Campania and that's well known for the Amalfi Coast and Sicily. So I know a lot of people like to think, oh, we'll take a drive down to Sicily from the Amalfi Coast, what is there to see in between? And it's like, well, there's actually a lot. And so I think when we talk about some of these regions that people - they might be curious, but then they're challenged how to put it into like an itinerary. So what I did was I threw down the challenge to Karen to create a week long itinerary exploring Calabria that everyone could adopt. So, Karen, should we get started and explain to everyone how you could spend a week in Calabria?

Karen

Yes. First of all, this is a very difficult challenge.

Katy

Sorry.

Karen

No, because there is really so much to see and things are a little bit spread out. It's rather a large region geographically and also because of the mountains. That makes it even more of a challenge to get from one place to the next. But you can, of course, either start from the north or start from the south. I just decided to start from the south.

Katy

Okay.

Karen

You can go in one direction or the other. And then the question is, are you flying or are you going to be driving? So I'm doing a combination. I'm saying let's say you fly in and rent a car.

Katy

Okay.

Karen

Because there's that question of can you see it without a car? Yes, you can see some things without a car, but it is more difficult because you won't be able to see everything without a car. You can't rely on public transportation for many areas.

Katy

It's a bit slow, isn't it?

Karen

Well, not only slow, it just might not arrive. But, you know, the thing is, in the small mountain towns, not that many people go there. You can't expect that many busses a day. And it might be with your schedule. So let's start with Reggio Calabria, because it's the largest city. It's a very beautiful city. It's right on the Strait of Messina that I mentioned before that looks over to Sicily. And on a good day you can see Mount Etna. Often it's in clouds, just because clouds like to hover around the tops of volcanoes. And you have to get up early, by the way, because it could be a beautiful day. And there it is at 08:00 and it might already be gone by 10.00. Yeah. So I would start out with Reggio Calabria and I would say two days in Reggio Calabria. What is there to see? There is a beautiful promenade. Gabriele D'Annunzio, a famous Italian writer, is reported to have said that it is the most beautiful kilometer of Italy. It really is beautiful. There is also a little public park that runs alongside. So there's a beach on one side, public park on the other. So it's really quite lovely. But I guess we could say the jewel in the crown of regular Calabria is the Archeological Museum. And I know there are some people who are going to turn off right now and say, I don't like to go to museums, but there are two ancient Greek statues from about 500 BC - so we're talking really old in this museum and

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people fly in just for these two statues. They really are spectacular. Made out of bronze. They're called the Bronzes of Riace or the Riace bronzes. Bronzi di Riace in Italian. And they are perfect just in every way. They are really something to see. Six foot, six inches tall statues lifelike like you've never seen anywhere else. They were found in 1972 off the coast of Calabria. That is something not to be missed.

Karen

In Reggio also, we had mentioned food, so of course, everywhere you go you want to always have that food experience. And one of them would be the bergamot. It's a citrus plant. A bergamot looks a little bit like across between a sort of grapefruit and a lemon. Very bitter, but the pulp is used in cakes and cookies, that kind of a thing. But more importantly, it's the oil from the skin. You can get bergamot gelato or various licquers. So that would be something that you would definitely want to try while you're there. And then also there's nice shopping and really a beautiful shopping street and of course, churches. Interestingly, the city isn't as old as, even though it was founded many, many years ago, thousands and thousands, even before the Greeks. It looks pretty modern because there have been various earthquakes. So there is early 20th century architecture, but very, very attractive and what we would call Old Town. Old Town for Reggio Calabria. So you can fly into Reggio or if you were coming across the Strait of Messina, let's say you were in Sicily and you were doing a tour there and you can take a ferry to Villa San Giovanni just a little bit north of Reggio and go down to Reggio.

Karen

And then while you're there also to see Scilla, which is a town just north of Reggio, really a gorgeous town. Its old fishing village, which is called Chianalea, is one of the Borghi più belli d'Italia, one of the most beautiful villages. It's a club in Italy and it really is just spectacular to see in the old fishing houses. The water would have gone right into the house when it was high tide. And there's a castle in the middle. There's a beach area on one side. So if someone's in the summer, during summertime there is a beach also Reggio Calabria, there's a beach there, so if you are in warmer weather. The name Scilla comes from Homer. So ancient times. And if anyone has read that, they know about Scylla and Charybdis.. And Scylla was a monster that lived under this outcropping of a rock where there's now a castle and Charybdis was in Sicily on the other side and that was a whirlpool - Charybdis. And these two phenomenon stopped the boats from going through mythological Scylla and Charybdis. And from that there's the name of the town Scilla.

Katy

I've been there, actually, Karen knows that I've have spent a few days in Calabria (not enough) we were visiting family down there. But yes, Scilla, you do get a lot of little fishing villages up further north, but it's not at that same level of... - they're very rustic but also very beautiful. But it's also a lot more I think people still working the fishing boats there. Now

sometimes when you go further up north, that tradition has kind of disappeared and you have more commercial fishing. But down in that area, it's a lot more traditional.

Karen

Yes. And also you will see smaller boats, but you'll also see larger swordfish fishing boats. And you'll see them they're obvious because they have this really tall mast in the middle of the boat that someone stands standing on top of that, looking out over the horizon to see the fish. So historically, even just 100 years ago or even maybe 80 years ago, they used a boat that over only 6ft high the mast and relatively small boat. But these are very large boats. And so that would be another thing to eat. There is sword fish from about May through the summer.

Katy

Yum. And how do they serve that?

Karen

Well, they might serve it grilled, often grilled, often swordfish steak. And then they, of course, put olive oil, lemon juice in various ways, capers. But you'll also see in many forms, like in pasta. So just little pieces in a pasta dish. It could be with a tomato base sauce or often you see Involtini di Pesce Spada - so that would be rolls of the swordfish. So they take it in strips and then put, let's say breadcrumbs and other herbs inside. Roll it up and you have your little pile of rolls on your plate. So it's not just a swordfish steak. So there's other lots of different ways that you could eat the swordfish.

Katy

Oh, delicious. Do you get swordfish in the United States?

Karen

You know, we used to it. It used to be popular, and then I'm not sure maybe it became they were overfishing. I think there was a period where you weren't seeing it at all. I remember you used to see it a lot when I was young. You don't see it that much anymore.

Katy

Yeah. Interesting, because we have it here in Australia, but I think it's been a bit overfished as well. But it's a delicious fish. It's quite meaty, isn't it? When you say steak, it is definitely like a meatier type of fish, but yeah. Well, I'm getting hungry now. I'd love to have a grilled piece of swordfish with lemon juice and capers. Yum.

Karen

But that's why it works very well in pasta also because it sort of stands up. It's not like it just gets lost. And you're like, what's in there?

Katy

Wow. So Reggio with the Riace bronzes and the Lungomare and then a day in Scilla exploring. That sounds beautiful. Okay. Where would we head to next?

Karen

I would say before heading North, I would say to go south and go around the very tip on the Ionian Sea and stop off in a ghost town. There's a ghost town called Pentedattilo, which stands for five fingers. And through earthquakes and everything, they're not quite five anymore, but you can see it from quite far away. And they are on the edge of the Aspromonte mountains. Of course, they're the end of the Apennine chain and there are sort of three major mountain areas in Calabria and National Park. Anyway, just to see this ghost town, Pentedattilo. And it's nice to just walk around amongst the mostly abandoned buildings. Now they are starting to have little gift shops and that kind of thing. If you're there in the middle of the winter on a Tuesday, you really will get the feeling that it's a ghost town. If you're there in the summer, the height of tourist season, then there will be people there selling you things, maybe.

Katy

And ice cream, maybe a granita or something like that. But these ghost towns are really kind of - like they're a little bit eerie but also very beautiful, aren't they, because the forest comes in and sort of overtakes. It very atmospheric.

Karen

And if somebody likes hiking, there's hiking in the area. And so it's just really beautiful, sort of a little bit eerie, a little picturesque. And people left because they were mudslides. That would be, I would say, one stop for a little morning and being out in the country in that area, perhaps an agriturismo farm-to-table type place for lunch. And there are many throughout the area. And then perhaps go to Gerace in the afternoon. Gerace, where you continue around and it's near Locri. Locri happens to be where I taught for a couple of years, and it was an old Greek settlement like 7th century BC. And Gerace is a medieval town up on a hill. It's someplace where people in the summer, for example, lots of people go to the beach along the many of the towns along the beach, and then they go to the villages in the mountains to cool off or to have lunch. So you could also have lunch right in Gerace. Gerace is also one of the Bari Pupali d'Italia, most beautiful villages of Italy. So it's a very nice medieval old town, a beautiful church in the town.

Karen

The Cathedral is a Romanesque Norman Cathedral, but in the basement of the church there was a Byzantine structure that can you still see. So that's really very interesting to see. There's a ruins of a Norman Castle there also. So it's a nice place to spend the afternoon. It's also one of the places that has there's some ceramics there. It used to be a big ceramic center. There are several places that have ceramics in Calabria that really big ceramic centers, and that was one of them. And there still are some people spinning the wheel, turning the wheel.

Katy

Yeah. I love seeing these different ceramics across the country because they are quite unique, aren't they?

Karen

But it looks like Italian ceramics, but not like Sicily is really distinct. Of course, when you see the faces and that kind of thing, it seems more almost exaggerated, almost larger than life sometimes. Yeah, no, there are lots of ceramic places and good prices, and that's another reason. Also German/Europeans, they have long vacations and so they have a lot of time, and so they look for places that aren't that expensive. And Calabria is one of them. So it's not Amalfi Coast with prices.

Katy

Yeah. It's at least half the price of the Amalfi Coast. Would it be at least? It's a big difference. And a lot of the time, the quality of the food is actually going to be a lot better because it's not being mass produced. It's a very beautiful part of the world, but it doesn't have that tourist infrastructure that you're going to expect in the Amalfi Coast. So he needs to try a little bit harder. You may need to brush up on some Italian.

Karen

Yes. Well, in Reggio, they don't speak that much English, really. They don't. In Tropea, which we're heading to now to continue our little trip - in Tropea, they speak a lot more English there because there are a lot more tourists. It is really the only place that has a lot of tourists. Also, there's another area, Soverato gets a lot of particularly Calabrian tourists who go there for the beach in the summer. But a lot of them still speak dialect and still have relatives who go there. So in the province of Reggio Calabria, there is less English spoken than certainly in Rome or any places that are touristy at all. But I mean, people will be nice and you'll make yourself understood and everything would be fine.

Katy

Yeah, they're very friendly down there. They're very friendly. I love to tell this story. When we were visiting the relatives, I think we had 20 cups of coffee one day, just visiting every single person, going from house to house and getting I had so many more kisses in my life. I've never had so many. So we're off to Tropea. And so, Karen, before we go to Tropea can you do all these little trips from a base in Reggio or would you move around?

Karen

Well, what I would do is I would do Reggio two days, stay overnight, let's say two nights, right? Then go to this around the coast there Pentedattilo/Gerace and yes, you could stay overnight there if you want, or at the end of the day you could continue and just arrive in whatever hotel you choose in, let's say Tropea or Pizzo so that you don't have to maybe do too many hotels. You could do Tropea from Reggio in a day.

Katy

But yeah, you want to spend some time there?

Karen

Yeah, it depends once again, how much time you have. If you're only, let's say in Reggio for three days, you might go up there for a day and come back and that might be your whole time that you have.

Katy

So tell us about Tropea.

Karen

I would spend a couple of days in Tropea, also one of the Borghi più belli d'Italia, one of the most beautiful places in Italy.

Katy

There's a lot of the them in Calabria.

Karen

Yeah, there's quite a few. Last year Tropea had the honor of being the Borgo de Borghi, the most beautiful of the villages. The village of the villages, and that is voted by Italians. And yes, it's a visual thing, but also to be eligible for it, you have to have history, which isn't too hard in Italy - everybody sort of has history, but also a culinary history is important that you have something special. And in Tropea they have quite a few culinary specialties. One of them being the Tropea onion, which is a red onion. It's a very sweet onion. It's grown in the area

and they serve in many different ways, like a marmalade, of course, just normally like an onion with meat, etc. But it's a very good onion and they're very proud of the onions. So you'll see them everywhere you go. And then there's the Nduja, which is a very spicy salami. It's a spreadable salami. And that is also from the area of Tropea. There is also the Amaro del Capo which is the name of an Amaro from Capo Vaticano, which is the area of Tropea. And so it's a really very beautiful area. There's the old town, medieval old town, old town, buildings, churches, etc, etc. But what really makes it so beautiful is that the old town comes up to the edge of a cliff. And so when you're on the edge of the cliff, and you look out, you see this beautiful water and a little beach, and then this island with a church on it, a little church on it. It's Santa Maria dell'Isola, St. Mary of the island. And so it's just so picturesque. And you see the photo everywhere. And you might not have realized that that's Tropea that's in Calabria. And also when you're down on the beach and then you look back up, it's very high up, and you see this straight wall of rock and then these buildings on top, it really is something. So there's a reason why people go to Tropea, and it's the most famous spot because it really is a special place. So you could either stay in Tropea itself in a B&B. There aren't really large hotels there, but there are some smaller hotels there or in the countryside or on the beach, there are beach hotels.

Karen

So you could take a boat ride also and, of course, there's swimming. And that's also for someone who's taking a longer period of time. You can take a boat ride for the Aeolian Islands. You can go to Stromboli, which is an Aeolian Island of Sicily, which is straight across. So it's a really beautiful scene. At night. You can see Stromboli.

Katy

How long would that take to get to Stromboli from Tropea?

Karen

Well, it depends on the water, an hour and a half, that kind of thing.

Katy

Oh, okay. So it's a fairly short ride out there. Okay. I mean, like you sort of forget.

Karen

Yeah. Well, because you can see the islands along the coast of Calabria. They're off the coast of Calabria. So some of them are closer to Sicily. And then but as you get further up, Stromboli is out pretty far. It's pretty far north of Sicily. And so, of course, it's off the coast of Calabria. Then at least it looks like it is when you're in Tropea, it's right there.

Katy

Yeah. And it's an active volcano, right?

Karen

Yes. So you can do a night tour where you go and you go around the other side and you can see the fire.

Katy

Yeah. Everything's spurting out the top. But yeah Tropea is so beautiful. And I think the difference is down there is the beach is fairly sandy right? So unlike some of the ones up north.

Karen

Yeah, it's sandy. Right. The bay of Tropea, that is a very sandy beach. As I mentioned, the Ionian side is sandier. There are some places around Capo Vaticano, so the cape area there that are pretty rocky that you do need kind of shoes to where you're not used to the rocks. But north of Tropea, also, there are some sandier beaches as well. Yeah.

Katy

It's just beautiful. And the sea is just a really gorgeous turquoise color.

Karen

And really, the photos are not you don't have to touch up your photo. What hashtag.

Katy

No filters.

Karen

Yeah. No filter needed.

Katy

Karen, why haven't I seen you in your Instagram of you walking along the beach in a flowy dress and a straw hat in Tropea.

Karen

Okay. I'll think about the flowy dress.

Katy

Next time. What I'm saying is if you love that, sort of like, really wow. Photo. This is the place to go because it's really got all of the elements that you're looking for. The sandy beach and the turquoise. Just add flowy dress and hat.

Karen

Okay.

Katy

Would you spend, like, a couple of nights in Tropea, or was that.

Karen

I would spend a couple of nights there, but that is one spot. It's the only spot that you have to worry about driving in the ZTL. It makes sure that you don't drive right in the center so you don't get a ticket. You know that there are tourists there when they put that up. Yes, but the other spot is Pizzo, which is very close. So from Tropea, you could visit Pizzo. It's just to the north of Tropea. It's an historic town, of course, that also has the beach. It has a castle where Murat, was killed, executed, shall we say, Napoleon's brother in law. He was Napoleon's brother in law when he tried to come back on to shore right in that very spot. And he was executed in the castle there. So there's history. There would be 19th century, early 19th century history there. And they also are known for their what's called a tartufo. And it's a special gelato ball. And they come in all different flavors. The classic flavor is chocolate, hazelnut and hazelnut with a center of with also chocolate, but a liquid chocolate in the center. And they're handmade. And when I say handmade, literally, they make them in their hands. They have gloves on. Now, historically, probably not, right. And they do it incredibly quickly. Incredibly quickly. They put them in their hands, the two different kinds of ice cream, and they put the center in, and then they freeze it or chill it again. And it's very popular for Italian tourists and travelers as well, to make sure that they get their Tartufo Di Pizzo in Pizzo.

Katy

How big is it, Karen? Golf ball size. Tennis ball size. How big is it?

Karen

Definitely much bigger than a golf ball. I would say bigger than a tennis ball. Yeah, bigger than a tennis ball. It's a good size. It could be a meal. And they come in all different flavors. So that's not to your liking. I mean, there's one that has lemon and has limoncello in the center. They have strawberries - they have delicious strawberry ice cream. There cream centers. So there's a menu of tartufi.

Katy

That sounds amazing. I don't know how I missed that. Well, I do know how I missed that, but we're too busy visiting relatives. But next time, pizza for the tartufo.

Karen

And the area is also known for tuna fishing, and now they can't fish right off the coast there, so the fish is brought in but if you want designer tuna in jars or in cans also, but then even more expensive stuff's in the jars, buy it there. It is really amazing tuna.

Katy

So that's the real gourmet stuff. And do they put the chilies? They put oil and chili, I imagine.

Karen

Yes, of course, they have all different types, but with the pepperoncini is also, of course, popular because Calabria is known for the pepperoncini.

Katy

Delicious. Wow. So where are you up to day five there?

Karen

We're day five moving into six, so we don't have much time left. And this is sort of what I was thinking we hit the Aspromonte Mountains we were on the edge of them a little bit down there in Gerace. But I think it would be nice if you got to the Scilla Mountains. So it really depends now at this point, if you're going to be flying out or you're going to be continuing driving up the coast, let's say, or down the coast, depending on which direction you started out your trip. So if let's say you're going to be returning to the airport in Lamezia Terme with your rental car, would then proceed to the S Mountains, which are in the center of the region. They're often called the lungs of Europe. They've done tests and they've found that it has the cleanest air in all of Europe, which seems amazing that it's not Northern Norway. And there's just a lovely walk. It's on a sort of a boardwalk because they don't want you to go off the path to step on the ground and disturb the ground. And the name of it is the centuries old pine trees, and they're called Giganti di Fallistro. So they're the Giganti di Fallistro. And it's just a lovely walk in the woods. And it will give you just a whole other aspect of the region. So I would definitely do that and perhaps have lunch in Camigliatello Silano - a little town there. Just to get that feeling of a mountain town. There is skiing there in the winter. So if you went there in the winter, you go for skiing. But let's say then you have to return back to the area north of Tropea, let's say, because you don't want to be late with your rental car or go back to the airport, but you want to do something else. I would probably stop in Cozensa, which is another one of the provincial capitals, and it has a very nice old town to see another old city to sort of round out your tour and then perhaps stay overnight right by the airport or

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depending on what your schedule is. But if you were going to continue north and let's say you were to go to Puglia afterwards.

Katy

Okay.

Karen

Let's say after you sort of got a little feel of the fresh air of the Scilla Mountains, go to the Eastern Coast again to the Ionian Coast. So it'd be way north from where Gerace was and stop off in Rossano. Another food agricultural product that Calabria is known for is licorice, wild licorice. And so there's a very interesting Licorice Museum there, as well as a museum in the town that has the main piece in the museum is a 6th century illuminated manuscript that is really beautiful. It's a Codex referred to in English as the Rossano Gospel. And it's very beautiful. Anyone who's interested in ancient religious artifacts, it's very beautiful and it's very important. I mean, there's many things you can see in that area. But like I said, the licorice Museum in factory is very interesting to see.

Katy

They make lots of licorice products there. My mum loves licorice gelato, which is strange.

Karen

In the store there. They don't have gelato. They have more like licorice candy licorice. They also have just a natural licorice root that you can make a tisano with. And the licorice root is very sweet.

Katy

Naturally sweet.

Karen

Naturally sweet. Yeah. But the natural licorice, though, is nothing like these Twizzlers and what people know as licorice, at least in the United States, it is very strong stuff. And the little I guess you can call them candies. They're very strong. So you either love them or you don't love them one or the other. But they have all kinds. They have ones that are sort of jellied with different flavors, lemon, orange and candy coated. But it's really wonderful licorice there. Amarelli is the family and the company that has the licorice factory and museum. So then you could continue up to Puglia or Basilicata, my other specialty. However, if you were going to go up the other coast and you wanted to, let's say go to the Amalfi Coast, perhaps you might want to stop in Diamante. Diamante has two nicknames. One of them is the Peperoncino City and the other one is Murals City. So that is the home of Calabria and peperoncino, of course - you can find it everywhere. And people grow up in their backyard.

But that's sort of the famous spot for the pepperoncino. And they have a pepperoncino festival in September every year. And so that might be a stop because also it's on the water and it has a really lovely old town with murals painted all over the old town. So it could be a nice stop on your way up on the west coast

Karen

There's so much to see. And I think what people do is they go down the very fast auto route, which is a very nice road, actually. But yeah, if you just need to take a little detour off to the side there to get to Diamante and some of these other towns, and you find a really different scene there. So lovely.

Karen

Yeah. You could continue like you said, you could just get on from Cosenza, for example, after you say in the Scilla Mountains, you just then get on the highway and go straight up and you pass everything. You could be anywhere practically when you're on a highway.

Katy

That's right. But yeah, there are some lots of nice little detours. I think Scalea is supposed to be quite nice as well, isn't it?

Karen

Yes, it's gorgeous. Scalea is gorgeous. That was also apparently in the Bond movie, the recent Bond movie. There is this Arcomagno - beautiful arch there that is just really incredible natural wonder. Wow.

Katy

Karen, so there's a lot to see in doing Calabria. Is it Calabria actually the biggest region of Italy or it's one of the biggest regions, isn't it?

Karen

It's a good sized region. There are like 2 million people who live there. Sicily is quite a bit bigger. I think Sardinia is also larger, but it's a good size.

Katy

Yeah. But it's actually very long.

Karen

It seems big. Yeah, it does, because the mountains run down the whole center of it. And so to get from one side to the other, you look at the map and you just can't always go, oh, from here to there. No, you might have to go all the way up and around.

Katy

Yeah. I remember driving through the mountains and there was a lot of twists and turns and yes, it can take a bit longer than what you're expecting, I think. Now, Karen, you've given us a little taste of Calabria because you can literally spend a lot of time there - I know you do. So if you wanted to spend a little bit more time there and really explore the culture, how can we do that?

Karen

Well, I mean, you could come on a tour with me.

Katy

What a great idea.

Karen

I started the tours because people kept asking me about tours to Calabria and it was very difficult coming up with an itinerary. And at first I thought a week and I couldn't do it in a week. I had trouble doing a week and saying to myself, yes, that would be north to south and really sort of cover everything. So the first one I did it, I did ten days and then I said no. So the next year when I did it, I did eleven days. So one of my tours is eleven days and you get a really good feel for the region. But I felt like you needed more than just the seven. And then, of course, there were so many places that I had to leave out. And so I came up with the second itinerary and that one is twelve days. But there are so many things and even with those there are things that I've left out in the region. And I said, oh, I really would have liked to have included this town, but sometimes just for some logistical reasons even it's just difficult. You can't include everything.

Katy

I mean, it's just a really fascinating region. And if you are interested in seeing Italy that's not been modernized or part of the tourist infrastructure, it's a really interesting place to visit because it's definitely a place where people live ordinary lives, but they're living amongst history and culture that's been there for thousands of years. And it's a very ancient place, isn't it, in a very family oriented and village life place?

Karen

Yes. And also, for example, people on the tour note that they don't see other tourists except in Tropea, a place like Tropea and Pizzo to a certain extent. But you're walking down the street and you're surrounded by Italians. And for example, in Reggio, they have their Corso, the main walking street, and every night it's full of people. And they're all local people. They're not really even Italian tourists. I mean, they're a handful of Italian tourists, but it's not as if people are flocking there to walk down the street. And so you really get a feel of this is the local culture. This is what the local people are doing. It's perhaps what someone might have had 50 years ago in some of these other, more popular places now.

Katy

Yeah, I think that's a really good analogy, Karen. So I appreciate you building this. Itinerary for our listeners and sharing your knowledge about Calabria. It's really a unique and special region, and I'm sure many people are curious to know more. And how can they do that either with you either virtually or in person?

Karen

Yes. Well, I have a website that is the name of my book, calabriatheotheritaly.com. A little bit of a mouthful, but calabriatheotheritaly.com. And on the website, as I mentioned, there is a blog with many detailed posts with a lot of pictures about many of the places that we've talked about. I also, of course, it started with the book, and you can find that pretty much everywhere, of course, everything's online nowadays. So it's in paperback and electronic copies. I have another website that's just my name, karenhiad.com, that has links to various countries where you can perhaps even buy the books, because I have one about Basilicata also. So you'll find my detailed itineraries of my tours. I have two in Calabria, two itineraries, and one in Basilicata, Calabria's Northern neighbor, and especially with the Calabria Itinerary, because I have so many blog posts about Calabria - you can click on most places that are on the itinerary and then read full blog posts about them and pictures. And so you can really get an idea of what's there. And if there aren't articles, you have to go read my book. But everything is either in a book or on the blog.

Karen

And I also have if you do Facebook, I have a [calabriatheotheritaly](https://www.facebook.com/calabriatheotheritaly) Facebook page, and that is pretty much exclusively about Calabria. And then I have a [basilicatoauthenticitaly](https://www.facebook.com/basilicatoauthenticitaly) Facebook page and on Instagram, [karenhiad.com](https://www.instagram.com/karenhiad.com). And I do have a YouTube page, too, with some videos that I've done, but it gets overwhelming.

Katy

There's a lot of content. But the thing is, I think what's really impressive that Karen has built this body of work that you really can't find this information in English and not only is it unique in that respect, but it's also very high quality and Karen is a wonderful writer and if you're

interested in stories from Calabria, you definitely get a hold of her book because reading it made me laugh out loud several times, but it'll also transported me to the places that I've just scratched the surface of in Calabria. So, Grazie, Karen, thank you once again for sharing your passion for beautiful Calabria with us on Untold Italy.

Karen

Thank you, Katy.

Katy

Calabria is definitely a feast for the senses. We spent almost a week there visiting family a few years ago and barely scratched the surface. I truly wish I had Karen's expert advice to guide us then as I would have loved to see the Riace bronzes and spent time up in the mountains enjoying the slower pace of life.

The infrastructure in Calabria is improving every year and it's becoming an increasingly popular place to visit. If you're the type of curious traveler who likes to explore off the beaten path, it's one of those places that will reward you in spades. Of course, if you have family connections in the region you're in luck. The Calabrese are generous and kind to a fault.

We've put all Karen's itinerary suggestions, plus a link to her book and tour departures on the show notes on our website at untolditaly.com/130 for episode 130

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 time on Untold Italy we're revisiting our episode all about *caffè* or coffee. I can't do without my daily coffee and of course, it has to be Italian. You'll hear all about Italy's favorite beverage on our next episode.

But until then it's "ciao for now".