

Untold Italy Episode 134 - Palaces and castles of Piedmont

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 134.

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

Hello, Ciao everyone. Are you inspired by architecture and opulence? Well, this episode is for you. Italy is not really known for spectacular royal abodes like its neighbors France and Austria but that's just a case of poor marketing because actually, you'll find many of the most beautiful royal residences in the world in Italy.

In this episode we're returning to the beautiful northern region of Piedmont where the royal family of Italy continued a long tradition of building incredible palaces and castles that started many centuries earlier. Joining us is Piedmont guide Carlotta Muti from Torino Discovery who has a passion for her region, its beautiful architecture and royal stories that she's excited to share with you today, so let's welcome her onto the show!

Katy

Benvenuta Carlotta. Ciao and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Carlotta

Hello, Katy. Thanks for having me.

Katy

You are very welcome. It's wonderful to have you join us today from Royal Turin, Carlotta. Are you having a lovely summer?

Carlotta

Yes, we are having a very lovely and warm summer at the moment. The sun is shining and it has been shining for the past two months. Yes, it's a wonderful day.

Katy

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Yeah. And there's been a really big buzz about the city hasn't because of the Eurovision Song Contest. It's been an exciting time.

Carlotta

Yes, we have been experiencing this great event and it's been so lovely, so nice. There were so many people coming to touring from all over Europe and the world and it's been really exciting. Also meeting the bands, they were doing improvised concerts throughout the piazzas of the city, so the squares of the city. And it was a very exciting time. I wish we had Eurovision each and every year here in Turin.

Katy

I love Eurovision. That's one of my pet things that I love. And I won't mind telling you that the Eurovision movie, which I don't know if you've seen - it's actually the thing that got me through the pandemic, apart from this podcast, of course, but yeah, I can take in any Eurovision things at all. So I'm so glad you had a lovely time. Now, before we get chatting about the amazing palaces and castles in Piedmont, can you tell our listeners a little bit about yourself? What's your story and how did you become a tour guide?

Carlotta

Yes, of course. So I've always been interested in tourism, even though I have a degree in neuropsychology, which really doesn't match my profession at the moment. But I quickly realized that tourism, especially incoming tourism for welcoming people into my own country, was my vocation. And I wanted to show people around and to tell them stories and to share some good experiences with them. And when I started as a tour manager, I wasn't a local guide yet back then. I started in 2010, so twelve years ago now, and I started going around as a tour manager with groups of travelers all around Italy throughout the whole country and so I learned a lot. It was a great school for me. And then year after year, moving around with my suitcase always ready, I realized that I also wanted to be a little bit more rooted in Torino, which is my birthplace. I've been born and raised here, probably will die here gladly. And so I started to have the desire of getting the local guide license, so I started to study. I got on books once again in my life and got my license in 2017.

Carlotta

And ever since I've been a local guide. And I do it with great pleasure and looking into the eyes of my guests when they come across some of the things that I show them and seeing how unexpected they were. Because Turin is not at the center of the map of Italy is not one of the main destinations. The first destinations that come into your mind when you think about Italy. Nevertheless, it has some treasures, really some treasures to see and seeing the enthusiasm and how happy they are when they discover the things. That's my reward and that's what makes me get out of bed every morning in the heat of the summer or with snow in the

wintertime and just go out and explore with my guests. So this is my full time job and I just love it.

Katy

That's amazing. And I can just really hear that passion that you have for your region and your city coming through. And really what we're trying to do here on the podcast is show people like how diverse and interesting Italy is. And Piedmont is a very unique region. Maybe tell everyone where it is and so they can picture it in their mind.

Carlotta

Yes. You know, Italy is shaped as a boot. We are located on the northwest part of the boot, right at the top. And Torino is a couple of hours drive from Milan, to give you an idea. And it's only 1 hour from the border with France. So the location is a very charming one because Torino is located in the Piedmont region. Piedmont actually comes from Piedi Monte, so at the feet of the mountains. In fact, Piemonte is also surrounded by one side of the Alps. There is also a very nice scenery from some of the hills around Turin because you can see the whole crown of the alps. Not only we have Torino, that's the main city in Piemonte. It counts about 900,000 people, so it's quite a populated city. But also there is a lovely countryside. We have a great wine production region that is called Le Langhe and another one called Monferrato. And they are just not even 1 hour from Turin. And so it's a very lovely place to live in, I have to say. And Torino was also the first capital of united Italy. That we are quite a young country because we were born as a whole country only in 1861 and Torino became the first capital, even though it was only for just a few years. We take a big pride in that.

Katy

Yeah, of course. And it's really interesting because people often don't think of royalty when they think of Italy. But in fact, Piedmont has a very long royal history, doesn't it? It wasn't even just starting with the unification. It goes way back.

Carlotta

True, absolutely. The unification - you know the country was unified under the crown of the Savoy family. And the Savoy family had been living in Turin for a very long time. They had been living in Turin for over three centuries at that point, in the 1800, since the mid 1500. And they were originally dukes and then they elevated their title to kings and that's why they were able to unite the whole country under their crown. And then eventually the capital, after a few years was moved, interestingly enough, not to Rome first, but to Florence first, because Rome wasn't part of the kingdom at the beginning. It was taken a decade after the unification. And so eventually that was moved to Rome because it was more central. Nevertheless, Torino has still and is still visible, has the first parliament of our country with the original furniture in one of the palaces scattered around the piazzas in the city center.

Katy

I didn't know that. That's lovely. And what about this family? Were they very interesting, the Savoys?

Carlotta

They were, honestly. It looks like some other Italian aristocratic families are more famous, like the Medici family in Florence, for example. But there is a reason why there has not been much talk about the Savoy family, because it's still sort of a fresh wound. Because even though they are a very ancient dynasty, one of the longest living dynasties in Europe, actually, along with the British one - the wound was still open because they were kings and queens of Italy, and they were the royalty of Italy up until the end of World War II when there was a referendum and when the Italian people decided to vote for Republic over monarchy. So they had to leave the country and go somewhere else. And they still live in Switzerland nowadays, so it's still a sort of a fresh thing. So for quite a few decades, there was not much talk about them. But now we are starting to go back to the roots and since there is a little bit more distance with those events, it's easier to talk about them now. And I believe they are also making a TV show at some point. I know they have written the script about some of the events of the Savoy family, some of their stories, and hopefully we're going to see it on the screens in the next few years. We'll see how it goes. But there is more to talk about them nowadays than a few years ago.

Katy

So who are the main protagonists of the family? Who are the main characters?

Carlotta

Well, the first one and the one that had the idea to move the capital of his duchy, there were dukes in the 1500s, they were still dukes, was a man called Emanuele Filiberto, the capital of his duchy, was in Chambéry, France. It would be a couple of hours drive from here across the Alps. And then he decided to put a little bit more distance between his Duchy and the French power. And what better way is not placing the barrier of the Alps in between his Duchy and the French kingdom? And that's why he decided to move to Turin. And when he arrived, he already knew the city, because he had been here as a child, but he didn't remember it very well, probably. And when he arrived, he was a bit underwhelmed because Turin was still quite a small, I wouldn't say really village, but still a small city, and it wasn't ready to be European capital. So he had to do a lot of work. He and his successors had to do a lot of work in order to elevate the level of the city to the one of other European capitals. And I have to say they did a great job.

Katy

And how did they do that? I think I know, but I'm going to ask you.

Carlotta

Okay, well, they did it through architecture, mainly, so architecture, and they built lovely palaces for themselves. So as their own, let's say, family house and symbol of their power. But not only they tried to enlarge the city and they did it trying to draw straight lines. So there is a lot of scenic perspectives in Turin from the palaces, you have these straight big roads with a view at the end of them. And so through the architecture, they were able to send a message to the people and to the other crown heads of Europe, meaning, watch us because we are important and we are going to do great things. And eventually they did.

Katy

I love that they make their statement with architecture and art. It's just I don't think we do that these days. We make our statements (I don't know how we do it these days), but we certainly don't do it with these grand gestures of buildings and boulevards and perspectives. And I think it's a bit sad, really. Like, I really admire that they took the time to do it. I mean, I know there's probably collateral damage of slaves and stuff, unfortunately, but

Carlotta

a lot of taxes, too

Katy

And cheap labor. Yeah, for sure. But the result is absolutely stunning, isn't it? And I think that's probably what gives it a different feel to other Italian cities. It's got a bit more of a grand feel than you have noticed in other Italian cities. Florence is beautiful in its own way, and Venice is beautiful in its own way, but it's got a very unique look and feel.

Carlotta

That's true. That's true. It has the feel of these great piazzas with amazing buildings. There is also a part, which is the most ancient district in the city, that comes from the Roman settlement originally, where you have small alleys that you're in the Middle Ages eventually became a little bit windy. But the great areas created by the Savoy family, they are very grand and wide and with all these Baroque architecture, elegant and rich, and sometimes when you go around and you have a stroll, you really think, wow, they must have been really powerful. And you see they still send the same message nowadays through the architecture. When you think that, because you see the policies, that's when they get their message straight ahead into your mind.

Katy

Exactly. Now, do you have some favorite places? Because I know that the thing is everyone listening. Piemonte is quite well known for its palaces and castles because obviously it was the royal center. So I really want to find out more about these places, because when you go

to Europe, especially if you come from the US or Australia, we don't have these beautiful architecture. So it's really unique. And many people have been to, let's say, Versailles in Paris or the many castles in England and Scotland, but they don't really know that they also there in Italy. So if you're interested in these beautiful this beautiful architecture, you can certainly see that when you go to Piemonte.

Carlotta

True. There is not only the royal palace, there are so many royal residences and palaces and castles throughout not only Turin, but also the surrounding areas of Turin throughout Piedmont. And there is a name for this whole complex of residences. We call them the crown of Delights. They are more than a dozen residences, all scattered around Turin and surroundings. And some of those were used as countryside residences, summer places, places to live in the summer, otherwear hunting lodges, because the Savoy family loved their hunting. That was, of course, a French influence, the French influence of the chasseurs or the hunting with the horses and the dogs. And here in Piedmont, the family, they were hunting deers, and they had amazing reservoirs around these residences where they could spend the whole day hunting deers with a lot of guests participating in the hunting. And hunting wasn't only a hobby, but it was also a way of expressing their power, because if you were good at hunting, you were good at making war, and so you were military strong. So you see, there was always a double significance there.

Katy

There's a message. Yeah, I think they were a little bit more (I mean, I don't know if that's subtle), but it seems a little bit more subtle than some of the ways that we express these days. There's always symbolism happening. It's just fantastic. Okay, so tell us about some of these palaces. I want to know more.

Carlotta

Well, starting from the very heart of the city of Torino, there is a royal palace that was their official residency and the symbol of their power, meaning that not only there are the royal apartments, but it was a big, massive complex that takes a whole part of the center. So there were, for example, the stables. There was the Mint, where they printed the coins, where they made the coins for their Duchey, and there were the royal archives. And those structures, they're all attached to the main palace, meaning they could go from their bedroom all the way to the stables without really being seen from the outside. So it's basically a full district. There are gardens, even though the gardens of the royal palace, they aren't the biggest ones, but they had so many reservoirs in the countryside, they didn't need too much space in the city center. And there is a royal library as well, where the self portrait of Leonardo Da Vinci is kept. That self portrait of him portraited, as in his elderly years, and the royal palace was the symbol of power. So when you see it from the outside, it looks sturdy and serious, even though it has a very nice white plastered facade in the best of the French influences.

Carlotta

And not only all of those places were set inside the palace, but there is also a very special place inside the palace, and that's the Chapel of the Holy Shroud. Now, I don't know if you are familiar with what the Shroud is, but the Shroud is probably the most important relic of Christianity. That's the linen that supposedly wrapped the body of Jesus Christ between his death and his resurrection and carries the science of the presence of his body, meaning that there is sort of a projection of the image of a man with all of the characteristics, for example, the stigmata, the nail signs on the hands and on the feet, the chest wounds, the signs of the crown of thorns and it's very historically accurate. And that is kept in Turin, because that was originally a property of the Savoy family. They had acquired it from an aristocratic lady when they were still living in Chambéry back during the Middle Ages time. And after buying it from her, they kept it as a relic for their own family. And it was not only a religious symbol for them, but also a sign of power. Once again, once again, they placed it on the outside of the palace and they showed it to the people and the people were rejoicing and celebrating in front of the relic. And that was religious, but also a political thing. And they kept it inside the Chapel of the Holy Shroud, which is a masterpiece of baroque architecture.

Katy

Amazing. Yeah. And you can visit all of these places today, can't you?

Carlotta

Yes, you can visit most of these places. The stables you can't visit because they are still in need of a very good cleanup and restoration. And they will probably become part of the University of Turin eventually, because they need a lot of money to restore them, actually. But the royal library, the Chapel of the Holy Shroud, and the royal armory as well, so the collection of arms and armories of the Savoy family. And it's a spectacular collection you can see while visiting the royal palace. And this armory is set in a wonderful big long hall with these cultures of horses. And they look like taxidermy horses, but really they're not. There are wooden statues with real horse skin applied on top and they look so realistic that it's unbelievable. And there are these amazing pieces that they are not even only weapons anymore or armories. They become like jewelry. They are so refined and precious that they are amazing to see.

Katy

Wow. So what happened when the Republic was announced? Did the state seize the property and all of the things belonging to the royal family. Is that what happened?

Carlotta

Yes, they had to give up all of the palaces that they owned to the Italian, the new Republican Italian government, and they had to leave. Of course, some things they didn't leave behind. I mean, the movable things, like some pieces of jewelry they still own, but the palaces they needed to be given up to the Italian state. In fact, the Royal Palace nowadays is a public museum, so it's managed by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Art.

Katy

They can't have been too happy about that. I can imagine. I mean, they probably have a very nice place in Switzerland, I'm sure, but to give up those beautiful palaces just like that must have been a bit of a shock.

Carlotta

It must have been shocking, yes. And you may think that the Shroud was still kept inside the chapel of the Holy Shroud, but that's actually not the case. It's kept in the nearby cathedral because the Savoy family kept the property of the Shroud up until only 40 years ago. So in the year 1982, they left one member of the family left the Shroud, the property of the Shroud, as a last wish to the Pope, on the condition that the Shroud was kept in Turin rather than being moved somewhere else, say, Rome, for example. And since it's now the property of the Vatican, that's kept in a place that belongs to the Vatican, meaning the cathedral, rather than the chapel, which is part of the palace and government owned.

Katy

There's always politics, isn't there?

Carlotta

Yes, there is. But it's not a long way between the old place and the new place, because actually, the chapel of the Holy Shroud and the cathedral, they are physically attached to each other. And basically from one you can see the other. So from the chapel, you are up on the upper floor and you look down into the cathedral, and from the cathedral you can look up into the chapel that is beyond the altar. So you see, it didn't travel very far - the Shroud probably a good thing.

Katy

It's probably very old and delicate. Probably need to stay very close to home. Wow. So that's the Royal palace and that sounds absolutely magnificent. And would that be one of your favorite things to do in Turin? Just to go and explore?

Carlotta

Yes, that's one of my favorite things to do because the furnishing and the decorations are so lush and rich and beautiful, and so it's a spectacular place to see. And there is specifically

one room that I really like, that is quite a small room, but it's the Chinese room. So basically what they did in the 1700s, they sent the first architect, the main architect that they had, they sent him to Rome, where these Chinese lacquered panels were actually coming directly from China, and they gave him a budget to buy some of them in order to cover the walls in this room. Eventually the money, unfortunately the budget wasn't enough, so the architect, he was a very smart man, he bought whatever he could and then when he came back to Turin he reserved a little part of the budget to pay a local painter to make some fake ones. And even if it's not written anywhere, I did a lot of research in order to assess which ones are the real Chinese ones and which ones are fake. And I'm afraid you would have to join me on a tour to distinguish them because we have to investigate and be looking at some little details in order to distinguish them. But there is a way to distinguish them, even though not many people know that.

Katy

I love it. I love a little bit of intrigue. Well, why not? Well, maybe they kept a bit of the money for themselves. You never know, do you? Alright, so if we go to Turin, we definitely need to see the Royal Palace. Is there somewhere else you can recommend?

Carlotta

Of course, there are so many other places I can recommend. In Turin, if you want to see another very nice palace within the Turin city limits, you can go to Villa de la Regina. In order to do that you need to get across the river. The Po river is the main river in Italy and cuts the city of Turin into two. One, that is the main site with the city center and all the surroundings and a side that has all of the hills of Turin. So it's the greenest part of the city. And within this setting you have Villa della Regina. Not only this is a Villa of the Queen, but also it has wonderful gardens and there is a vineyard, a working vineyard on the hill and in the gardens of the Villa della Regina. And they still produce wine, red wine nowadays a typical wine from Turin, from Chieri, that is a city near Turin, called Freisa di Chieri. It's a very good, nice red wine. And Villa della Regina can be considered a love nest of a newlywed couple. But really these newlyweds, they weren't really, let's say, getting along very well. Meaning that this marriage was the result of an agreement that put a massive conflict to an end. A massive conflict that happened in the 1600. It was a conflict for the succession of the dynasty. Basically, the original duke, he died very young, he had a child, but this child, he was too young to be in charge, of course. And so his wife, the wife of the duke and his brothers started to fight and ended up fighting for more than a decade. And that resulted in really a civil war because everyone in the city took sides for her or for them. And eventually this fight for the control of the duchey was put to an end. And the way to sign and seal a deal was to have a marriage in the family. And so the groom, he was Maurizio, he was a former cardinal in his 50s, and he married Ludovica, she was 13 and she was his nephew. So you see how this wasn't a marriage made in heaven by any means at all.

Katy

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Oh my goodness.

Carlotta

Luckily for Ludovica, for her Maurizio, the former cardinal, he died after just a few years and so Ludovica, she was still very young and she decided to live a very long and happy life as a widow in Villa de la Regina. And so in the gardens you have this amazing view of the vineyard. Those gardens are like sort of a theater, so you have half a circle of hills that look into the main courtyard of the villa and if you go on top of the gardens, on the top levels, you are able to have a wonderful view of the city.

Katy

And is that all furnished as well as it would have been when Ludovica lived there? Or has that got some different types of furnishings?

Carlotta

There are some different finishings because eventually, during the late 1800s and beginning of 1900s, that became sort of a female boarding school. And so it was transformed a little bit and then it was completely restored and so the decorations were restored to the way they were. So you have many different rooms. There is another Chinese room that is lovely in here, but this Chinese room has decorations that were done all by a local architect. And there is even a signature on one of the walls, along one of the figurines on the walls. And it's another lovely place that is a bit less known from other main palaces like the Royal Palace. Nevertheless, it is a gem.

Katy

Tell me, Carlotta, did Turin get impacted by the wars? Were there damages to the buildings and palaces?

Carlotta

Yes, there were damages to the buildings, not to the main main ones, because those, as well as the statues, they were sort of protected and they were not targets. Turin had other very strategic targets. For example, the Fiat factories. Fiat is the make of cars, the most important make of Italian cars. Manufacturer of Italian cars nowadays is merged with Chrysler. But back then they converted the production into weapons or vehicles for the war and so that was a strategic target for them. But of course, there is always collateral damage when there are bombings and so some buildings were damaged, at least partially in the city center. So there was a bit of work to do after the war in order to tidy it up to the way it was.

Katy

Yeah, I think it's really interesting though, if you compare what happened in France, though, because you obviously in France obviously had the revolution, so a lot of the furnishings and decorations got completely trashed in that process of the revolution. But that didn't happen in this part of the world in Turin. So you have a lot of beautiful remnants of the past that you're not going to see, perhaps in France, where the revolution was the catalyst for people destroying things.

Carlotta

That's true, that's true. Luckily, we preserved quite a lot of the original furnishing, some things that are not in Turin anymore. They were transported eventually to Rome. So in the Quirinal in Rome sometimes you have, for example, there is a library, a wonderful baroque library with design carved wood that is in the Quirinal, Rome, that was transported from one of the palaces of the Savoy family in Turin when they eventually moved over there. So some things we lost in the process, but luckily not too many. And there are still some masterpieces in Turin that really deserve to be seen.

Katy

Amazing. So what else can we see? I'm loving this.

Carlotta

Well, speaking of hunting lodges in the surroundings of the city, there are two that I would suggest that you visit. One is called Venaria Reale, that is the biggest of the hunting lodges. Imagine that the complex has 80,000 sq meters of floor surface. So the Reggia of Venaria has 80,000 sq meters of floorings and there are 60 hectares gardens. But all of these is actually set just next to another little village. And another big reservoir of the Savoy family that nowadays is a public park of 3000 hectares of nature. So it's a massive complex. And these gardens, the big ones, the very big ones, it's called Parkco Madria. De la Mandria. And so it's a natural and architectural masterpiece because again, it features the Baroque architecture, which is the leading style in Turin. And the Baroque architecture dates back to the 16 and 1700s. There is a wonderful gallery that is so light and bright, where you have these checked floorings and you have amazing carved decorations and stuccos, all in white and very light blue. And this is probably the most amazing room in Venaria. But also having a walk in the gardens is quite an experience. The gardens are set on different levels and there are fountains and there is this sort of fishing pond in the middle and you have, again, much like you have in the city of Turin, these lovely straight, long, scenic perspectives from the palace and from the garden as well.

Katy

I'm sure they had some pretty amazing parties there.

Carlotta

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Yeah, amazing parties and sports. And they had a part of their staff, meaning a few hundred people, that stayed there permanently. And there were kitchens for each and every kind of guest of the palace, kitchen for the royal family, kitchen for the guests, kitchen for the kids. So the children, they had a separate cook and attendees that cared for their nutrition and all of that. That's why the complex is so big, because so many guests were actually hosted at the palace and they needed a space for the serving staff. The service staff lived either on the ground or lower ground floor or on top of the attic, where I can tell you, in the summertime it was probably very hot, unfortunately for them, quite unpleasant.

Katy

Imagine if that was so powerful. There must have been some quite interesting people coming and going from these palaces, kings and queens of European nations, and I imagine it was quite incredible.

Carlotta

True, there were ambassadors, there were guests, very important guests from all of the other kingdoms that visited the Savoy family. And of course they always wanted to show off a little bit in order to let other people know that they were a great dynasty. So they always had guests. In fact, the hunting was never done only for them, but it was always done for guests that were actually visiting the family. And they created spaces for them. For example, going back for 1 second to the royal armory that was created as the first sort of museum permanent exhibition for the guests visiting the palace to give them this feeling of greatness, but also to sort of intimidate them a little bit.

Katy

Interesting. Always when I think about these Baroque palaces, I always kind of imagine, I don't know if you've seen Sophia Coppola's Marie Antoinette with all these huge dresses and colorful huge cakes and just like complete excess, but it's kind of intriguing and all of it at the same time. Now we probably look at it and think, wow, that's just a bit too over the top. But I can imagine it was pretty big sight to behold when everything was in full swing at some of these palaces.

Carlotta

Yes, there were these crazy lunches done after the hunting where the deer then was prepared for lunch and there was a big celebration for the person that actually hunted and was able to win over the deers - so he was the celebrated person for the day. And in terms of table setting, they had amazing china sets for even up to 120/150 guests for a meal. So really thousands and thousands of pieces of China, french manufacturers, German manufacturers, Chinese manufacturers, really precious ones. And to make the centerpieces they created, especially starting from the 1800s, when the way of eating started to change - because before the 1800 they would eat a horizontal meal, meaning that every single course was brought at

the same time and was set on the table. So it was very full of things to the table. Then from the 1800s they started to eat on a vertical order, so one course after the other was brought to the table, hence the table was very empty. And so they created the center pieces and they were mirrored surfaces with these sort of sculptures made of sugar and sand together that depicted either human figures or architectures. And so there were these sort of chef architects or architect chefs that were paid to do these jobs.

Katy

No expense spared. Yeah, spectacular amazing. I mean, if you're going to be transported back in time, you might as well go there. I don't think the medieval slums or the Roman slums place we want to go back to the castles, definitely. Okay, this all sounds amazing. Where else can we see how we've done 3 palaces?

Carlotta

Yes. Well, another hunting lodge that is very different from Venaria but I absolutely suggest that you see it, that you visit is the Hunting Lodge of Stupinigi is that is a bit less known compared to Venaria, which is probably the most famous. But actually Venaria boasts these lovely gardens while in Stupinigi, my opinion, there is one of the best Baroque and Rococo halls of the whole region, and that is the central hall of the hunting lodge. The hunting lodge has quite a peculiar plan because it's shaped as an X, so it has four diagonal wings, and from those wings, the paths and the roads for the reservoir that was behind the lodge departed. And each wing was dedicated to the house of some members or guests of the family. And they all met in this central hall that was designed by probably one of the most important architects that operated in Turin. His name was Filippo Juvarra. And it's just a stunning, stunning hall with a chandelier made out of bronze and crystal in the middle that is so big that every time that I look at it, I start to wonder how long it took them to light all the candles on it, because I think there are more than 100 candles on it. And also the flickering light of the candles reflected in the crystals must have been just amazing. Especially reflected on these very elaborate decorated walls with frescoes and with these Trompe-l'œil, these images that sort of trick your eye into thinking that they are architectures, but they're just painted, really. And these big windows overlooking the park behind the lodge. It must have been spectacular setting for weddings. In fact, there was one wedding that happened in 1773 that took place in Stupinigi, and that's the occasion when they decided to place the massive chandelier that is just in the middle of the room. And there is also one very famous guest that stayed for a while in Stupinigi, and I'm talking about Napoleon, when he started his Italian campaign and he conquered basically the whole of the mainland Europe, he traveled a lot, and on his way to other parts of Italy, like Rome, he stopped in Turin and he decided to sleep in Stupinigi.

Katy

Oh, I don't blame him. He was a pretty fussy guy. And you've got to see this, like we'll put a picture on the show notes because, honestly, this is one of the most incredible rooms you're

ever going to see. And I don't know why the Instagramers haven't really discovered this, but let me tell you, it is truly spectacular. I think it's even more spectacular than the hall of Mirrors at Versailles. It's just stunning. I can imagine there's so many stories from this place because it is actually so stunning.

Carlotta

It is. It is so stunning. There is one very funny story about another very peculiar guest of the palace. He wasn't a human, but he was an elephant. He was an elephant, and his name was Fritz.

Katy

Fritz?

Carlotta

Yes. During the late 1800, there was this passion for exotic animals, and the Savoy family decided to have a little sort of zoo for exotic animals in Stupinigi, since the park is so big. And they had the idea of transporting these elephants from Africa, that was actually a gift that they received. And then that arrived in Europe and traveled all the way to Turin. And this elephant was treated as a prince, so he was fed the most amazing things. Probably nowadays, with our knowledge of nowadays, we wouldn't feed him the same food, but back then they gave him cabbage, rice. They cooked rice for him and even a little bit of wine sometime that he was entitled to get. Actually, Fritz lived quite a nice, long life. Unfortunately, at the end, he had to be taken down because it started to go crazy. Unfortunately, probably the setting wasn't the best for him, especially the climate, but they tried their best to make him feel like a prince for his own life. They even built a little, well, actually quite big pond for him so he could do the bathing that the elephants do. So he was probably the most the strangest, at least, guest of Stupinigi.

Katy

I mean, the word hunting lodge is quite you sort of picture a rustic hut, don't you? But nothing could be further from the truth. It's, like so opulent and decadent. It's really quite amazing. I can't stop looking at the photos of that, actually.

Carlotta

The setting is just amazing. Yes, it's very far from being rustic. All of their palaces are very far from being rustic. Even if they were just maybe used a couple of weeks out of one year for the summertime. Well, they did things grand.

Carlotta

They didn't stop at just some sort of basic arrangement. No, not at all. Did you have one more that you wanted to share with us, Carlotta?

Carlotta

Yes, there is another one that is located south from Turin, is probably 45 minutes drive, and it's set in Racconigi. And this is one of the late residences of the Savoy family, meaning that we get into the 20th century, the beginning of the 20th century and the end of the 19th century as well. And Racconigi has another amazing park, not used for hunting anymore, but just for strolling around and relaxing in this fresh greenery. And there was specifically one guest that lived here, and she was called Regina Elena. She was called also the Regina Buona, the good Queen, because she was the queen of the people. She was a philanthropist. She didn't really thrive into luxury, but she wanted to be more down to earth. So she had a very simple nutrition, for example, and she really cared for the people. Each and every summer time when she went to Racconigi, she organized events for the children of the family, so there are pictures of all of these children running around the park with Queen Elena. And she also was of great help just afterwards, after the earthquake that took place in Messina in 1908. That was a massive and very destructive earthquake. And as soon as she got the news, she left whatever she was doing and she traveled to Sicily and she went to Messina. And she really helped physically. Not just that she went there to give support, but she started to work in order to help people. She took care of as many people as she could. So that's why she's remembered as the good queen. And she was also a feminist, so she supported women's rights and the condition of the woman back at the beginning of the 20th century, which wasn't yet a very easy moment for women.

Carlotta

And speaking of women, there is another queen that is quite an interesting one. She's called Regina Margherita and she's the one of the pizza. Pizza margarita is named after Regina Margherita. And she is another really interesting character. She didn't really go to Racconigi, not at least as much as Elena. Nevertheless, I just want to mention something about her, Regina Margherita. She was one of the first women who wanted to drive a car at the very beginning of the 1900. And she loved traveling. And they basically made up sort of a first version of a caravan for her, so she could actually sleep and have sort of a washroom for her on these movable means of transport. And she's the one that is always depicted with all of the pearl necklaces around her neck. And they say that each and every layer of this necklace was a betrayal done by her husband on her. Nevertheless, she always wore this necklace. This necklace is one on top of the other, full with pearls, with a very dignified and brave way. And yes, so she's another interesting character that we can discuss during many visits around Turin. So you see, there is history done by men, but also by a lot of women.

Katy

Wow, this is news. So the Queen Margherita of the pizza fame was driving a caravan dressed in pearls.

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Carlotta

Well, she was dressed in pearls. She couldn't really drive the caravan throughout the whole of Europe, even if she wanted to. But she had to eventually have a chauffeur/a driver for her. But yeah, she's still one of the first women who drove in Italy.

Katy

Think there's like a pizza if someone wants to start a new pizza brand, there's this whole imagery I'm coming up with especially for delivery. Someone turning up with the pearls. I love it. I love it. It's so interesting. And I love these female protagonists. And going back to Queen Ludovica and Queen Elena and Queen Margherita. How amazing. Yeah, royal history is very interesting and it's obviously the best that we have in terms of documentation, obviously, because the people of lesser means don't really get to tell their story. But I think at least we have these amazing palaces that have so many stories to uncover and I love that you can do that in Italy, and it's just real shame that not as many people know about this. It sounds like if you're in Piedmont, you could spend all your days exploring palaces if you wanted to.

Carlotta

True. And if you decide to visit Racconigi, watch out for the storks going around because there is a preservation center for storks and they make their nests on some of the chimneys on the roof of the palace of Racconigi. So have a look around for those if you decide to visit.

Katy

Well, I was just about to say that Piedmont, it's like some of the places that are like, they've stepped straight out of a fairy tale. And so I think it's definitely one of the most romantic regions of Italy, in my opinion. Now, if our listeners want to explore Turin and Piedmont, and it's beautiful palaces more, how can they do that with you Carlotta?

Carlotta

Well, they can visit the website, www.torinodiscovery.com, and they can have all the information that they need. They can book a tour directly on the website, or if there is something in their heart that they really want to do and it's not on the website, they can just hit their mail and send me a message at info@torinodiscovery.com and I will be more than happy to tailor a tour based on their special interest.

Katy

Yeah. Amazing. I think you should definitely do that. And we'll put all Colotta's details into the show notes. Now, I wanted to say that hidden gem is a very overused term in travel, but I have to say that Piedmont is one of those places that could definitely define the phrase. So it's got castles, palaces, historic cafes, amazing wine, truffles - everything is incredible.

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Grazie Carlotta. Thank you so much for sharing your beautiful Piedmont with us on Untold Italy today.

Carlotta

Thank you, Katy. Thank you very much. Ciao.

Katy

Italy has so many gorgeous stately homes, castles and palaces. I find it truly intriguing that English speaking travelers don't flock to them like they do Versailles in France or the many castles in England, Scotland and Wales as they are just as beautiful and intriguing. But as I mentioned at the start of the show they aren't marketed terribly well.

Of course we'll be exploring this tradition of great stately homes with Carlotta on our upcoming tours of Piedmont. No doubt we've only scratched the surface of the intrigues and stories that the walls of these palaces hold and she has many more tales to tell.

If you'd like to know more about touring Piedmont which is known for truffles, chocolate and Barolo wine as well as Palaces then head on over to tours.untolditaly.com where you'll find the detailed itinerary for our trip. We'll also include a link in our detailed show notes at untolditaly.com/134 where you'll also find the names of the palaces and Carlotta's details should you be visiting Turin and in need of an amazing guide.

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all of you, our Amici private podcast subscribers, and our subscribers and listeners joining us from around the world. So we'd love it if you helped spread the word so we can reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you. And the best way you can do this is by leaving us a 5 star rating or review on your favorite podcast app or forwarding this episode onto a friend who also loves colorful towns, delightful local customs and the magic of regional Italy.

That's all for today, stay tuned for more Italy travel stories and surprises next week, and until then it's... "ciao for now".