

Untold Italy Episode 141 - How to spend 2 to 3 days in Matera

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 141.

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

Benvenuti Ciao friends, I have a question for you. Have you heard of Matera and do you know where it is? This ancient city is the subject of our conversation today and I'm happy to share that my friend **Paolo Maragliulo** who lives in the city is joining us to tell us all about his home town.

We've heard about Matera a couple of times on the podcast but after my visit there in June I wanted to share something I learned - you really need to spend several days there to appreciate how unique the city is and experience its beauty.

Most people visit for a few hours and admire the views but it is really a place worth spending some time in and if you like, stay in a cave hotel. But let's not get ahead of ourselves, here's Paolo to share why you should stay a few days in Matera.

Katy

Bentornato Paolo. Ciao and welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast. Great to have you back. How's everything going in Matera?

Paolo

It is going very well. There's a lot of people and the weather is getting better and, like, it's not as hot as used to be few weeks ago, so it's much nicer to walk around.

Katy

Yeah, I can imagine. I mean, it's such a beautiful city, but it's all stone, there's not a lot of trees.

Paolo

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Exactly. And also face southeast, so especially in the morning, you have sun all day and it's not so much shade, so it's a difficult place to explore when it's hot.

Katy

Exactly. But it is such a beautiful and unique city, isn't it? But before we get started talking about Matera, because what I wanted to do today was explore why people should spend a little bit more time than what they usually do there. But before we get started on that, some of our listeners may have heard you talk about the pilgrim trails in Puglia, but some people might have missed out on that. So can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your connection to Matera?

Paolo

So I'm Paolo, Big Paolo as everybody knows me because I'm the tallest person in town, probably. I'm from Lecce, actually, which is in Puglia. I moved in Matera recently because my girlfriend is from here and she owns a little hotel, like a guest house, and she needed to be here. So we have lived in Lecce for a while and recently, right before COVID, we moved here, didn't really change so much because I do a lot of tours. They usually go from Matera to Lecce, so nothing really changed for me.

Katy

And when Paolo was talking to us about Puglia, he was telling us that that's probably since the start of tourism in Puglia, actually, so he's seen everything there is to know about helping travelers in this region.

Paolo

Yeah, I still remember when I went to university or started university 1996, and tourism was not an option yet, and my family was crying all the time, like, what are you going to do? You're going to waste your time, your life is going to be a disaster. And actually, I was super lucky because in less than five years, everything seems starting like a renaissance - first in Puglia. Tourism has arrived in Matera more recently, but it's a big movement that is increasing and it's really nice.

Katy

And it's interesting, isn't it? Because I think Puglia and Matera go hand in hand, but they're actually in two completely different regions, aren't they?

Paolo

They are, nobody knows that. In reality, the reason is that Matera is very close to the border. It's like less than 10 km from the border. But in reality. It's in a different region called Basilicata. Usually. Like we have a joke in Italy that we say that Basilicata doesn't really exist

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unless you don't go and visit it. Because it's a very deserted area and it's the second last in Italy for a population density. There's only 54 people per square kilometer. While Puglia has 4 million people, Basilicata is only 500,000 people. So it's really deserted. So it's really fascinating to explore because it's like jumping back in the past, like 50 years back in time, but it's also not so easy to explore. So Matera is easier because it's closer to Puglia, but the rest is like a little bit complicated.

Katy

It's off the beaten trail. It's like not even the path or the road. It's like really the wild west of Italy, isn't it?

Paolo

Yes, yes. Like yesterday I came back from Lecce to Matera and I did it by train. And still, if you want to come by train from Lecce, basically there's no national railway system arriving in Matera. So you have to go to Bari first with a train, then take a little company called FAL and for the last 60 km takes an hour and 41 minutes. Crazy. So for 180 km it takes 4 hours for me, from Lecce to go to Matera, you really need to like WANT to come.

Katy

But did you have a nice book with you?

Paolo

Yes. Plus they have long legs on a train is comfortable.

Katy

Yeah, that's true. That's very true. But I think that's a really good point, because if people are wanting to get around this region, they need to be aware that you do really need a car to make the most of it.

Paolo

I run a lot of cycling tours in the area because cycling is fantastic. There's not so many cars, so you have a lot of back roads. And even if you want to drive the region, if you understand that it's not as easy and there's a lot of twisting roads and it's beautiful. The countryside is fantastic because it's really like wild, so it gives you a completely different experience.

Katy

Well, I mean, I did a bit of driving there and it was fine everyone and I've got opinions on driving in Italy and there's regions that I don't like driving in. Hello Liguria. But I've found it quite straightforward. All right, so let's talk about Matera. We have actually talked about

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Matera on a couple of occasions on the podcast. But I think it's really fascinating to get different perspectives on the city because it is a really truly ancient and unique place and it's a very special place. And why do you love it so much?

Paolo

First of all, it's completely different from the rest because of the location. If you imagine the area is like a big high plateau full of durum wheat fields, and then all of a sudden, completely unexpected, you have this canyon and it goes very deep down, and on one side of it there's this place, the limbs seem like attached on the rock, and it's made by caves. There's nearly 5000 caves occupied since the beginning of the Neolithic age, so basically since cave men. It's the reason why it's a UNESCO site, because it's a town that has lived continuously since the Neolithic all the way until the modern age. And you walk and every step you take, you're walking on someone else's place. That's something that blows my mind every time. So you walk and you have chimneys next to you belonging to people down below. And also as a very interesting recent story because the government decided in the 50s to empty the area where the caves are because there were people living in really bad conditions, sharing the space with the animals, having no sewage system, no running water, no electricity. So from 1952 - 1968 15,000 people have been moved out. So you walk around and it's kind of a ghost place. It's like a frozen in time. So that's probably the most fascinating thing.

Katy

Yeah, it's really interesting. And what I guess I wasn't expecting about Matera when I was there and when I met you was that the I don't want to say the new town, but the town on the top of the canyon is actually a really beautiful town in its own right and it's really fascinating too. So you've got this interesting contrast between this ancient city in the canyon and this beautiful newer town on top. It's really interesting and I thought it was very beautiful.

Paolo

It's also interesting that you can explore the area where the caves are and you can be just on your own. And then the minute you go up on the newer, which is still older, like 1700s and it's not that new, you are surrounded by the locals because the locals love to walk up and down the main street, which is up on a flat section. So you have a completely different experience. You go from a very old place to a place very alive and full of cafes and restaurants and people.

Katy

Yeah - I just wasn't - because everyone talks about the cave city, but they don't usually talk about the 'new' in inverted commas city at all. And I really enjoyed that, especially when you showed us that skull church. I wasn't expecting a skull church, but anyway, there was one.

Paolo

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Yes, that's a typical thing of the Counter Reformation time. So like churches started they start building these churches during the 1600s mostly. That reminds you that we're going to die one day, so you better behave.

Katy

It's more like you better behave, otherwise you're going to go to hell. Not enjoy yourself while you're here. So I take it to enjoy yourself while you're here. That's my take on this.

Paolo

Under a very Catholic point of view, enjoying here also means be quiet, behave.

Katy

Oh dear. I would not make a good Catholic. Anyway. So Matera, as you said, it's a really ancient city. Why do people settle in that area in the first place? I mean, when you go there, like you described it's, all these fields around there and you have this surprising canyon. Why do people settle there in the first place?

Paolo

Well, it's hard to say because we're talking about a 1000 years ago. One reason is the case. So the fact is that you arrive and you have already like a place to hide or a place to settle down, even if the Neolithic, they also build the villages. But the fact that you have caves already built, of course, helps you also for rituals like religious for their burying people. But I think that the most interesting reason is protection. When you drive, if you want to go and visit Matera, you don't realize about the existence of the canyon until you get very close to it. And so I think that in the past, people were easily hiding down into the canyon because nobody can see you. So I think protection has been the very first reason.

Katy

It's a very good point. And the caves are made of this stone, isn't it? It's really soft stone that you can make the caves bigger and they can go quite deep into the city. And you can see easily how they could shape rooms out of them.

Paolo

Yeah, basically it's all limestone. We have two kinds. The top one is extremely soft and the bottom one is harder. And so when it rains, the water gets absorbed by the plateau, heat the hard rock part and start carving, creating this natural caves. Then in so many years, people have also managed to carve in the caves, but also carve new ones because it's extremely soft.

Katy

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Yeah, right. So you've got this mix of naturally formed caves and then manmade caves as well.

Paolo

And by the way, if you come for a visit, you know, there's so many fossils, I think it's fascinating that you walk around Matera just for that. You see shells scallops in the walls. Is very nice.

Katy

Yeah, it's a place where you certainly get a sense of time and longevity and how just such a dot we are and a spec in time that our lives are. I think it's really fascinating, as you say, because you can see all these sea creatures in the fossils in the walls. It's really interesting. Okay, so the thing is about Matera, people have recently discovered it and was recently listed as a UNESCO country and a European city of culture as well, which is testament to the rebuilding efforts that's going on in Matera. But people usually only stop for a day and certainly not overnight. Why do you think that happens?

Paolo

This is extremely interesting, actually. And it's a problem that we still need to face because the majority has recently discovered Matera. So most of the time they come to Matera without really expecting or knowing what looks like, and then most of the time they go away, like complaining about the fact that they haven't spent enough to explore it properly. But what happened is that a lot of Italians especially stop in Matera along their way to go to Puglia, for instance, or to Calabria or Sicily. So they break their trip, which is really long, and they just read on the book that Matera is a UNESCO site and say oh, there must be something interesting in there, without really knowing. And that's the reason. And it's a problem because of course, when you have a place that has a lot of tourists only during the day, it affects, for instance, the quality of the shops, for instance. So there's a lot of souvenir shops and it's hard to find good craftsmen, there are so many, but they are kind of confused among the souvenir shops that are more easy to find.

Katy

Yeah, it's interesting. We did stay overnight there and honestly, it's one of the most spectacular cities I've ever seen at night. So if you want to have a wow moment in your travels, staying overnight in Matera just so beautiful because it's all lit up and it's very quiet down in the canyon and you can just have a sense of the history and all that when you're walking through the streets and it's a very, very beautiful place. But I was one of those people, we didn't have enough time there. I'm guilty. So I definitely need to go back because what we found was there's just so many things to see and do that I just felt a bit disappointed in myself that I hadn't allocated more time. So maybe we can talk about some of the things to do because apart from walking through the Sassi, which is what the cave area is called, there's heaps of things to do.

Paolo

Yes. One thing that I love to show when people come, it's definitely the water system. The town has an amazing system of collecting water. The water that is collected on the rooftop then enters the gutters and then go down into cisterns and the cisterns are all connected. So you have the first one that works as a filter and so the sediments settle down into the first one when the water reaches the top of the cistern, takes another channel and goes to another cistern. And when you have both your cisterns filled up, the water continues down to someone else living down. So all the dwellings are connected somehow and it's all about sharing, which is so fascinating. Like you have people, for instance, living next to each other, their systems sometimes are connected, so they are always the same quantity of water. Yeah, that's super interesting. There's also big cisterns, huge ones. Like one is under the main square called the Palombaro and it's really nice.

Paolo

Other thing that I love, like as a Puglia person, I love the fact that there's a lot of nature in the area of Matera. So for instance, one thing that you can do is a trail that starts from the canyon area that we call Sassi area. You go all the way down, you take a bridge across the river that is responsible for the canyon and you continue up the trail. And there's a lot of abandoned caves to explore, rock churches and then if you do that in the morning - that's my recommendation, you have the sun lighting up the old town of Matera. You are on the other side of the canyon. So you enjoy the view at its best and it's very nice. And there's a lot of countryside outside if you want to hike or to cycle because it's extremely safe, not so many cars, so it's really nice. I recently discovered a guy that does ceramics. If you have time to explore, you find a lot of local craftsmen. This one, for instance, is one of the very few ones that go collecting clay. So instead of buying clay, like the majority of ceramics producer in Italy buy clay from Tuscany. Instead, this one goes by himself in an area that is full of clay and basically collected his local clay for this production. And it's whiter, so he wants to promote the culture also using the local materials. It's extremely fascinating and this is just an example, but it's so many of these local producers.

Paolo

The other thing is food - there's a lot of interesting things. Like probably the most famous thing of the area is this sweet long red pepper.

Paolo

Yes. It's sun dried and then deep fried. It's called Peperone crusco. Crusco is like crunchy. Bread is probably the most famous thing in Matera bread. Bread which is, I don't know for you, like when I talk about bread, I know what you think, but the bread in southern Italy is made with durum wheat. So the color is more yellow and it's higher in proteins and lower in gluten, for instance. So a lot of people say when I say bread, they say, oh my God, no, we

don't need bread. In reality it's an experience. It's a completely different bread. There's a very thick crust because in the past it was made in big shapes, like five to seven kilos. And the crust keeps the moisture. It's made on purpose to last for like a week.

Katy

And it's also like the preparation of it has got a special technique too. Right? So I think it takes a while to prove the bread.

Paolo

Yes, especially in the past it was always made at home and the family had this stamps carved usually in wood with the initials of the family. So you make your own bread and then you deliver to the communal bakery and you have it cooked there and then you have your initial imprinted on it. So when it's cooked, you're able to recognize it. What I found out is that now it's a protected thing, it's called IGP. That means that you can call the Matera bread, only the bread that produced in this specific area with the wheat grown in the area. A friend of mine, which is one of the bakers that have done this research to look for the most authentic recipe, has told me amazing stories about the fact that yet you have so many interviews to local people to understand which is like the most original recipe because people don't remember anymore. And there's a big movement of people, my generation, that are trying to help old people to remember because they felt like ashamed of their past. They tend to forget and now we want to know. So we are asking them back to explain us.

Katy

Yeah, it's a really important point because when I was in Matera and Paolo was explaining that it was really an area of shame, wasn't it? The Sassi people were very embarrassed about it. There was a lot of poverty there, so when people were moved out of the area, they felt a lot of shame and embarrassment. I don't know if I'm over stating it, so they sometimes don't like to talk about that culture. But as we've said, it's a really ancient culture and we need to preserve it and understand how things were done so we can share that with future generations. And it would be very sad to lose all of that knowledge and history. I guess the bread is a great example. What do they eat with the bread? Do they eat the peppers?

Paolo

Bread you can eat in so many ways. There is like the bread salad, bruschetta. Usually if you go to restaurants, they offer you always a little bit of bread and people most of the time don't know how to use it. So what they start doing is asking for olive oil and vinegar and they eat it like this. In reality, that's considered rude. We don't do that.

Katy

Don't eat the bread first everyone.

Paolo

Bread for us - it's like a tool that you use to clean the plate. Italians, even if they have the bread on the table, it's really rare that they touch it before the meal arrives because for us it goes with the meal. So you use it like an extra spoon or something to help you to clean the place essentially.

Katy

The old bread on the table - it's really like - when you have hungry children and they just want to eat. It's hard to keep the bread away, but it's true, it's like it goes after and it's really interesting. I think it's also from a digestion perspective as well. But I think it's better to eat the bread after the actual meal because if you have the heavy bread sitting in your stomach, that it's not I don't know. Italians have a lot of thoughts on digestion, don't they? I'm sure that's part of it.

Katy

So there's lots of churches in the new town as well, isn't there some interesting churches? We talked about the skull one, but there's other interesting churches in the new town too.

Paolo

Yes, there is one church in particular that I love. It's called St. John and it's a church built in the Middle Ages and it's really small, a bit out of the way, so basically tourists don't go there. And it's so fascinating inside. It's like being in the Middle Ages inside. Usually our churches are full of baroque altars and stacles. This one is super simple. There's no paintings at all, actually, but every capital is sculpted in a different way and the atmosphere is really charming. So I'm not really a religious person, but it's a place that really makes you feel like in a mystic atmosphere.

Katy

That's the spiritual vibe.

Paolo

Yes.

Katy

I'm not very religious myself too, but, yes, in some of those churches that are very peaceful, you do find that sense of calm. I think definitely.

Paolo

Baroque church is that you go there and you see gold and a lot of decorations and you think, oh, look how much money they spend to build this church. You don't really, like, see the spiritual side of it. Instead, this simple church here really gives me that vibe.

Katy

I love all the different layers. In Matera, you've got so many different years of history represented. What's the church? When you go, you walk the church that's on the big rock in the middle. What's that one called?

Paolo

That's called Santa Maria de Idris. And it's connected to another one called the San Giovanni in Monterrone. Especially, the second one is really interesting for the frescoes that you have inside. But it's so many churches like those in Matera because in the past there were a lot of monks living in the area and they had a church where they used to catch up at least once a week. And inside there's a lot of frescoes from the 1200s. So it's cool that you climb up to this rock and then when you enter, it's like a completely different world. And I always imagine this monks are looking for this remote areas where nature basically was telling them about God and like, a good place for them to pray. So, yeah, San Giovanni in Monterrone, is really nice.

Katy

Yeah. And it's sort of like you're looking down over the canyon and there it is, just sort of sticking up.

Paolo

Yeah. And there's also so many others on the other side, for instance, of the canyon, and there's also another one which is like 15 minutes drive outside of Matera called Cripta del Peccato Originale, the crypt of the original sin. It's really unique. Not only in Matera, unique in the entire southern Italy, because the frescoes are extremely old, so way older than 1200s, which is the average that you see in Matera, we don't know, but somebody says 9th century, which is when basically the Lombards were in southern Italy, the stylist different. And also the experience is very nice because you are in a private farmhouse, they let you walk to this crypt, which is into the canyon, as always. And they have created a very nice experience with lights and audio recorded voice that explain you how the place is basically made and all about the paintings. It's really beautiful.

Katy

I would love to see that. My friend Danielle spoke about this on an earlier episode and she said it's a bit like your Indiana Jones moment. So you walking through the countryside, but

this is the sort of vibe that you get from Matera. It's sort of like a frontier area and it's been used in a lot of movies, hasn't it? So, most recently, I think, James Bond, was it?

Paolo

James Bond is the last latest one. A lot of Italian movies that I'm not going to tell you because it doesn't make any sense to you. Another one that nobody knows, that has been filmed in Matera is the first Wonder Woman. The village where Wonder Woman is born and raised up is actually Matera. There's a lot of CGI though, so it's hard to really recognize the town. And the one that is famous for all of us is The Passion of the Christ - Mel Gibson one that was probably the first big production that has been filmed in Matera in 2002. Well, nobody knew about Matera basically having been there.

Katy

Now, I can imagine that it would have been a bit of a shock to all the locals to have Hollywood move in and film it's not a big town and all the cameras and everything going. It would be quite amazing, really.

Paolo

Well, when they were filming Wonder Woman, there were a lot of Amazons in town. So when they were, like, organizing parties, there were these women super tall, and all my friends are extremely short. They were like, shocked of seeing this woman so tall the first time ever for them.

Katy

Oh, my goodness. I mean, it's true, having been with Paolo, everyone knows him because he's so tall, but I can imagine you must have felt like people were encroaching on your territory. I'm the tall one here.

Paolo

Yes, exactly.

Katy

Oh, my goodness. That's so funny. Now, like I said before, we stayed overnight and I was lucky enough to stay in a cave hotel. So you can actually stay in a hotel that's been crafted out of some of these caves. And it's a very special experience. It was very cool. A bit humid, too, actually, inside the room because it's a lot of humidity. But it was very quiet. If you live in a city where there's a lot of noise, it's a quite interesting experience because there's literally no noise at all. It's just very quiet. I enjoyed it very much, actually. But you said any of the hotels that you think are especially nice to stay in Matera?

Paolo

I love a hotel called Sextantio. I like it a lot because they have restored a section that it's a little bit out of the way, and they did it with a very respectful way. So as you said, it's not just a hotel. Like, if you want to sleep in a cave in Matera, it's more than staying in a hotel. It's really an experience. And yeah, you're right, being in a cave has a lot of problems, let's say, like humidity. The other one is the light because you're in a cave. So the only light comes from the main entrance most of the time. So they're not extremely bright, but it's really an experience. And there's another one called the Aquatio - gives you a real sense of the simplicity of the life of people that were there. Because what it's unbelievable is that most of the time you sleep in a cave. There was a dwelling for a family, not so long ago. So you and perhaps your partner is a place that is also sometimes very big, but when you think there was like a family of 10/15 people living in that space, you say, wow.

Katy

And also their animals. As you mentioned before, when we were visiting some of the caves, they were saying this was for a family and their animals, which is, wow. Quite amazing, really.

Paolo

I was talking the other day with a guy and he told me that with his brothers, they used to fight to be as close as possible for the pool of the animals. That kind of shocked me. But they explained to me that it was warm. So in the wintertime they wanted to be as close as possible to the animals because of the warm. Which is shocking, I understand, but that life was really tough.

Katy

Yeah, I can imagine that they probably want to put it behind them. But I think it's important to know because it's in our lifetime, or maybe not quite our lifetime, but these people were living in a modern Western country in such a shocking kind of way, really. We wouldn't expect that these days, for sure. And we did mention food. Now, Paola - there's a lot of... Matera is actually quite known for great restaurants, isn't it? And it's like there's some really nice places. And what surprised me the most was how much seafood there is there.

Paolo

No seafood - you can find some restaurants, but it's not really traditional in Matera. Actually, if you ask for like a traditional dish, which is fish based, they give you baccalà. So cod. And Cod comes from Norway. It seems really weird, but that was the most common fish they have in the past because cod arrives salted or dry, so people in the past could store it for a long time, so don't feel like they are cheating you. It's really traditional.

Katy

What are some of the other local dishes? Because I love to go around and try local dishes wherever I am in Italy. And you've got Puglia is quite diverse, actually, with its cuisine. What's happening in Matera and Basilicata. Were you talking about the peperone?

Paolo

There's a lot of things about bread and a lot of vegetables and a lot of legumes as well. And this is fascinating because it's all related to wheat. So if you want to grow wheat, then you also have to have legumes because when you plant them, they help the soil to get enriched because they're nitrogen fixing. And also they are our main source of protein. So we don't traditionally eat a lot of meat. We have the legumes a lot. And then like the most typical soup is a mix of the legumes with wheat inside called Crapiata. Traditionally is eaten in August. I understand it's super hot, but we eat this soup in August traditionally. The other thing is mashed fava beans. That goes along with chicory, which is like a wild herb that we find in the countryside. And a lot of the local cheese as well. We have a free range cows in the area called the Podolica. Podos in Greek means walking, so they are free to go. So they don't eat as much as like a regular cow, so they produce less milk, but it's a high concentration of nutrients and so the cheese produced with this milk is extremely good and valuable.

Paolo

And the most typical one is called Caciocavallo. That sounds like a horse cheese. Horses are not involved in cheese making. It's because it's two bowls of cheese that you hang over a bar so they age without touching any surfaces because of the humidity problems that we have in the caves. And the other thing is salami because the only way to have meat is to hang and dry it and also to have it in the wintertime. If I can give you one of my favorite recipes that you have in Matera, it's called the Pignata. So it's basically like a ceramic pot that they covered with a piece of bread dough and inside is vegetables, cheese, meat, especially lamb. And it's left into the oven where you cook bread traditionally all night long. So it cooks at a very low temperature for a very, very long time. And when they serve it to you, you open up this bread that now is cooked and inside is like a treasure.

Paolo

What I like is the fact that, for instance, we bake foccacia. We do it when the oven is too hot for making bread. So you don't waste that temperature and you cook forcaccia. Then you have the right temperature and you cook bread and then when you're done, the oven is still hot so you don't waste that temperature and you cook legumes or the Pignata.

Katy

I love this. This is the best. Not only are you not wasting food, you're not wasting heat. This is fantastic.

Paolo

And what we're learning from the people that have lived in Matera is exactly this. How to recycle how to reduce the waste and how to live with other people sharing, even if you don't like them, but you have to share if you want to respect the environment as well.

Katy

Yeah, I think we think we've made a lot of progress. I say this a lot of times on this podcast. I think we think we've made a lot of progress. But when you look at some of these ancient traditions you realize that maybe we lost our way somehow. We didn't really find the right path and we need to go back to where we came from and rediscover some of these older traditions. It's really quite fascinating. Is there somewhere we can try that delicious. Sounds like a pie - sounds like something we call a pie. That dish you just described.

Paolo

It's a - well probably when you like to say a pie, you have worked on like a dough somehow in this case, instead, you just put everything into this container and then you cover up. But the dough is literally a lid that covers everything. So it's just a way to keep the steam inside.

Katy

Where can you try? Is there a restaurant you can try or is that mainly a dish that's made at home?

Paolo

No, there is a restaurant where you can try. It's called the La pignata, which is not really like a touristy place because it's not in a cave, it's not in a nice location, but the food is really authentic and genuine. There are so many others, actually, because it's a very typical dish in the area. Instead, if you want to have an experience into a cave, there's so many beautiful restaurants. Like, one of my favorites is called Le Baccanti. If you want to have like, a fine dinner in a cave with the local products that are selected by the chef and it's very nice. There's another one extremely famous in Matera called L'Abbondanza Lucana. But if you go there, you have to be hungry. It's hard not to eat a lot. And there's a little place that recommend everybody. It's called La Tierra. Basically, it was a grocery store. The guy has from his father as a grocery store and now it's turned into like a small little restaurant where you can try the most typical cheese and salami and salads and grilled vegetables, the fava beans, I told you, the soups. But it's a very good option, especially for lunch if you don't want to eat too much. I like it. It's very small and it's in an upper part. So it's where local stuff you recommended.

Katy

That to us and it was great. I can double recommend it. Thank you. And if someone wanted to stay in the top part of town, there's a really nice little small hotel or B&B that they can stay into, isn't there?

Paolo

If I can recommend my girlfriend's one?

Katy

Yes, please.

Paolo

My girlfriend's one. It's into the canyon part, but it's on the upper part, so it's not a cave. So it's a building called Il Sorriso Dei Sassi. I have to tell you that because otherwise my girlfriend will kill me.

Katy

And she's a very nice woman, so we don't want that to happen. We don't want her to go to jail.

Paolo

There's also another one which is still in a cave, but it's in an upper part called Sassi Hotel. That's good because it's not very expensive. So if you want to have an experience which is halfway between being in a cave and being in the modern part. It's good too, honestly.

Katy

It's a really amazing place to stay. So if you were going to be going there for say, two or three days, there's so much to do. We haven't even mentioned the museum, which was really interesting, actually, which takes you through all the different eras of Matera's history, starting at that Neolithic age. It shows you how the people lived there's. Lots of museums as well, to get more detail into the history. I was really disappointed that we didn't have more time there because you want to explore the Sassi and once you see the nature on the other side of the canyon, you're like, "oh that's a shame" - we would have loved to go for a walk around there because like you said, Paolo, the views back, you can automatically see how stunning those views would be and just the quietness of the nature out there as well. I think it's a really fascinating and beautiful town. Is there anything we missed? What else can we do?

Paolo

One thing you were mentioning, the museums came in my mind. You can see, for instance, a lot of houses which are like museums at the end, because they have set the house exactly as it was when the family was there. So you can see their tools, their furniture, and they explain you how people were able to survive in such a tough environment. So that's one thing. There's also another museum which is more modern art, but when we say modern in here, we say 1500s. So that's modern for us. And it's also cool because there's a section dedicated to a writer that wrote about Matera called Carlo Levi, his book titled Christ Stopped at Eboli. And the very first writer that talked about Basilicata, about the region and about the way of living of these people, especially. The title reminds you the fact that they were not really Christian and because they had a lot of rituals and superstition and magic. So it's really interesting.

Katy

Yeah, I think you can spend quite a few days exploring with Matera. One thing you could do is arrive in the afternoon and go exploring around the Sassi and go for dinner and enjoy at night and then get up and go for a walk the next day and then maybe come back and have lunch in the new town and go to some museums. I mean, there's a day and a half already done. So I think when we talk about Matera as maybe an add on to Puglia and we are taking people there this summer, but we are staying overnight and I think as a minimum, definitely stay overnight in this beautiful city because it's really one of the most fascinating and unique cities, not only in Italy, but also the world.

Paolo

I probably would like advise people to stay two nights. Probably that's to me the best, because it's not very easy to come to Matera, to drive to Matera. So if you plan a day where you make a series of stops to visit other places. You arrive in Matera in the late afternoon so you can enjoy Matera night. Then you have another full day to explore, to visit, then you sleep again, and then the day after, you have an entire day to drive and explore more till your next destination.

Katy

Yes, I agree. I think it's a very beautiful and fascinating place that deserves a lot more attention. Now, Paolo, I know the Untold Italy listeners would love to stay in touch with you and learn more about Matera and Puglia. And what's the best way for them to do that.

Paolo

They can reach me by email, on Facebook, or we can plan to have, like, a zoom call, for instance. If they really want a plan, they're staying in Puglia. They don't know what to do and how to organize their day. So I'm super happy to help them. And also through my website, I think they can find here all their information.

Katy

Yeah, that's definitely something you want to do if you go - I don't think anyone knows his region better than Paolo. I don't know. I've met a few people, and Paolo is my go-to guy for Puglia and Matera.

Paolo

Thank you very much.

Katy

So Grazie, Paolo. Thank you so much for joining us on Untold Italy today.

Paolo

You're welcome. You're welcome. Bye. Bye.

Katy

As I mentioned earlier, I was lucky enough to stay overnight in Matera this past June and I can tell you that it was a favorite xperience from my time there this year. I stayed in a cave hotel in the ravine and it was so unique, peaceful and beautiful. I slept so soundly that night after my colleague Olivia and I wandered home through the softly lit buildings, thinking about whose footsteps we were walking in from 1000s of years before

Olivia is taking a group of our food and wine loving travelers to Puglia and Matera this September for Untold Italy and we're so excited that they'll be staying in a stunning cave hotel and enjoying their evening aperitivo with views out over this unique city. We'll be sharing photos of the trip on our Instagram so keep an eye out for them on our insta page which is [@untold.italy](https://www.instagram.com/untold.italy) The trip itinerary is up on our page at tours.untolditaly.com so do check them out if you're interested in joining us in 2023

Of course we'll put a link those things, plus Paulo's details at his company [apuliahandmade.it](https://www.apuliahandmade.it) - and all the places he mentioned into the show notes at untolditaly.com/141

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That's all for today, next week we continue our adventures in Italy and I'm quite sure they'll be food related, but until then it's... "ciao for now".

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