

Untold Italy Episode 151 - 2023 Italy trip planning with 2022 hindsight

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 151.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Ciao, buongiorno friends! I hope you're all well and still dreaming of Italy just as I am.

Today I wanted to share with you some of the learnings I had having spend 8 wonderful weeks in Italy this year. I went all over to the classic destinations and my favorite hidden spots which you know we always share with you here. I also traveled in many different ways - solo, with my family, in a group and with a friend. So this information sharing is hopefully useful to you and well overdue

But before we get onto that, I realized the other day that I'd booked our tickets for June this year around this time in 2021 and I don't mind telling you that a lot of people laughed and were a bit incredulous when I made that booking because the pandemic was still raging and travel conditions were still pretty unclear.

What a difference twelve months makes! Covid is still raging I guess, but travel is settling back into a new normal for now. And I know many of you are planning and getting excited about trips in 2023. My motto is definitely carpe diem! Seize the day! I like to jump at opportunities and I'm so glad I was able to spend so much time in my beloved Italy this year, gathering inspiration and ideas for years to come

Now I'm helping plan some travel for my extended family for 2023 and I can apply what I found this year for them and share all of this with you. Plus, if you listen to the end of the show I'll tell you how you can make some savings on your Italy trip

Katy

Okay, so what were my learnings from my 2022 travels and how can you apply them for your trip planning for 2023 and beyond. So the first thing I want to let you know is Italy is super popular, and we can't see that changing anytime soon. And that's because it's the reasons why

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we all love this country. It's because of the people, the history, the food, the architecture, the art, and the combination of all of the above.

Katy

It just has this amazing magnetic pull for people like me, and I know many of our listeners. So it's really one of those places that you really just want to go deep into and explore. And most people will want to go back a second or a third or a fourth or I've actually lost count of the times I've gone, but I'm very lucky that it's had that magnetic pull on me. And it's a very, very popular place to visit. I think another reason for that is it's very diverse. So you can spend some time in the north in Piemonte, where it's mountainous and there's lakes and beautiful wooded hills and vines for miles. But then you can go down south to Puglia where the landscape is completely different and the culture is different too. So there you have like these ancient olive trees that branch out over the landscape, hundreds and thousands of them as far as the eye can see. So beautiful and red, red earth in such contrast to what you find up in the north. So Italy does have a big diversity of landscapes and culture.

Katy

So I think that's another reason why people want to go back. But there's no denying that it's super popular. And I saw some stats recently. They said that 2022 was busier than 2019. So I don't know where it's going to go from here, because this year there were no Chinese tourists or Russians in Italy, or very few this year because of world events. And so they usually make up quite a big number of visitors to Italy. So most of the visitors were actually either English speaking or from Europe. So it was super, super busy. And I certainly noticed that in the major tourist areas. And when we talk about the major tourist areas, we're talking Rome, Florence, Venice, parts of Tuscany, the Cinque Terre, the Amalfi Coast, and around Lake Como. So they're the areas where everyone wants to go, funnily enough. But we've got some other suggestions for you, because when it's busy and it's popular, it means that it's crowded and more expensive. So today I'm going to go through how you can organize your time in those places that are very popular for a reason and how you can get organized if you want to make the most of your time. Okay? So if you like to win it when you travel, and if you like to throw caution to the wind and just wake up in the morning and decide what you want to do, well, that's great.

Katy

And there's definitely a time and a place for that. But I definitely do not advise you doing that in the areas that I just mentioned. You know, go free and easy outside of the main tourist areas. But if you want to visit Rome, Florence and Venice and the main sites there, if you don't do some serious forward planning, you're going to get frustrated. And that's because everyone wants to see those things.

Katy

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Everyone wants to go to the Uffizi Gallery. Everyone wants to see David in Florence. Everyone wants to go to the Vatican Museums and see the Sistine Chapel. And you know what? I totally get it, because those are absolutely incredible sites and part of the world's fabric and the legend that is Italy. I think that people think if they miss out on seeing those major sites and they all miss out on seeing Italy. And you know what? I totally understand that. But there are so many things you can do in Italy, and I don't believe that you'll have any less of an experience if you skip some of those things and choose maybe activities that are a little bit different. But anyway, it's each to their own, and there's no judgment here. You travel your own way.

Katy

I'm just here to help you organize your time and your travel budget and your itinerary so that it's optimized so you can have the most enjoyable experience for you, because that might be very different to what I like. But as I said, you do need to get organized. And so what does that mean? Well, I really want to suggest that you book your flights and accommodation as soon as you can, because we heard from my dear friend Corinna Cooke last week when we were talking about packing and what to wear in Italy, about how some of her favorite accommodation options had already been snapped up before September next year. And this happened to me too. And so I was a little bit shocked and a little bit surprised and had to change a few things around. It's especially true if you're traveling as a large group or you're a family with more than two kids. And this is when accommodation options are limited in this category. So you should get onto this job straight away if you're planning to travel in 2023. Now, we always use Booking.com or the Plum Guide for accommodation in Italy, mainly because you can see the type of room that you're getting. There's lots of pictures, you can read lots of reviews, and the cancellation clauses are very clear.

Katy

I know a lot of people like to book direct to hotels in Italy, however, what I found is, for myself, unfortunately, that the booking systems are not very good. I've genuinely struggled to actually do an online booking for Italian accommodation, and also I don't have time to be going backwards and forwards for a lot of emails, so Booking.com does give an incredibly easy experience and you know exactly what you're going to get. So that's what I use. Everyone's different.

Katy

If you do book direct, then obviously more money goes towards the end accommodation. But I think we need to all think about if you can't make an easy online booking or you can't find this accommodation in another way, then booking.com is actually providing a pretty good service to these operators that they may not be able to carry out themselves. Anyway, we have many, many useful accommodation guides on our site, Untold Italy, to help you book your travel, and, of course, we'll link to those in the show notes, so we have guides to the best districts to stay in in the major cities. So, Rome, Florence, Venice, and I think we've got one coming out

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in Naples soon, too. And then we've got some guides about in specific areas with deep dive into accommodation in the area around the Pantheon in Rome, because that's my favorite area to stay. I did try and mix it up a bit last year or this last year, and what I did find was that I thought I was in a Rome rut, but I really do like staying around the Pantheon area because you can walk to everywhere you want to go to, and you won't probably need too many taxis or to use public transportation. And so it's just a really happy vibe, too. There are lots of restaurants and fun things to do and there's ruins around every corner, and I really think it's a great place to stay. And so I'm going to be continuing with that Rome rut for the foreseeable future. So I hope to see you all there around the Pantheon area and close to Camp di Fiori.

Katy

So, yeah, as I said, we have accommodation guides for the major cities and the major areas to help you work out where to stay. So one of the other things we have is places on the Amalfi coast. So there's all the different towns are laid out because there are more than two towns in Amalfi coast. There's actually many more towns than Positano and Amalfi that most people know. So it's really worthwhile having a dig around to work out exactly the type of area that's going to suit your trip the most. So what we'll do is we'll link to all those guides on the show notes here for this episode, which is episode number 151.

Katy

And the next tip I have when it comes to accommodation is to really check the reviews. And that means to read them, read them, read them, read them, because people put a lot of information hidden that you can't really decipher from a five star or four star review. You might hear that there was a really good one from our trip to Palma where they said, I was reading the reviews that had recently been put on for this particular hotel and it was advertised as a family room for four people and there was only three beds in there. Well, that wasn't going to work for us. Sure enough, when we arrived there, exactly what happened, there was only three beds in the room. So I promptly went downstairs and had a conversation with the reception team down there. But it was like I was prepared for it because I'd read the reviews, but I hadn't read them, obviously close enough before I booked the accommodation. So it's really worthwhile reading reviews and you can really get a real insight into what's going on. So if you don't like being in a noisy area, people will often say on the reviews, oh, it was really noisy around here because of the bar next door. And that's when you go, that's not for me. Or you might love a bar, so it might be for you.

Katy

You might also find a place with excellent reviews in a position very close to, say, San Marco in Venice. But consider, how are you going to get there with your luggage and continue your onward journey? Finding the right position is really, really important, especially in a city like Venice, because it's really not fun squeezing on to a crowded vaporetto with all your luggage, especially if you've got children in tow. So this is actually a direct example from my family,

and I don't know if they're going to listen to me, but I've actually said to them, this does look like a nice apartment, I agree, but there's a few challenges with it, and it means that there's going to be a lot of walking with luggage. And even if you add another hour each way, walking or trying to work out the luggage, getting from the train station etc, it kind of eats into your vacation. And if you've got limited time, which is the case with my family, I don't think you want to be doing that anyway, that's just me. Like I said, it's your trip. I'm just giving suggestions.

Katy

So busy in the sense of the main tourist areas, busy also means lines and waiting. So I really suggest you get ahead of that as much as you can. You could spend a few more euros organizing a transfer from the airport to your accommodation, but consider that you could be waiting 30 to 40 minutes for a taxi, or you might need two taxis. And, you know, this is the case with my family, actually, because it's a family with two adults and three children, and they will not fit in the standard taxi. So it's much better and much more efficient to get a transfer in this case.

Katy

So this is the type of things that they might be little things, but they totally can make a difference to your vacation because the alternative to that is getting a train into central Rome, waiting around for a taxi to get to the next part of your journey, or like, accommodation. And it can just be a little bit energy draining. And who wants that? Especially when it's completely crowded and there's people everywhere. Why? No, I don't, really. When I'm going on vacation, I just want to relax.

Katy

Okay. Now, the same goes for tours and attractions. You need to book ahead and grab this time slot you're after and relax, knowing that you've got it all organized. You can schedule that part of your day if you want to be free and easy people, and you can just have that done. And then the rest of the day can be for wandering and exploring. But now the tours and attractions do need you to book ahead of time. And so it's important that you do do that because I can tell you now that the early morning slots go first, especially in the summertime, because it can get really, really hot inside the Colosseum and also inside the Vatican Museums where there is no air conditioning. So definitely book ahead and grab the time slots after and you'll have that bit sorted out, and then you can do your wandering later in the day. I just think it's a much easier way to do things. Yeah, you don't want to miss out either. I think that's the other point I wanted to make especially. There's a really classic example in Milan, the Last Supper painting. People often miss out on that because they think they can turn up and buy tickets where you can't. You need to book well in advance. Typically in Italy, the tickets aren't released until 30 to 60 days in advance, but if you book a tour, you can definitely get ahead of those. So we'll provide some links on how to book your tickets and our best booking sites. If you're not already receiving our email, where we send you all of that, please sign up. We'll

provide a link to sign up to our email sequence as well because it just takes you through step by step on how you can plan your trip and all the best booking sites that we use to streamline all your planning.

Katy

Okay, I'm now going to tell you something that you might not want to hear. I'm sorry about that, listeners, but this is a public service announcement about the Amalfi Coast, and I want to tell you this as someone who really cares about you. And some of them, you're our listeners that have tuned in week after week and you love Italy and you're excited about going there. And we know going to the Amalfi Coast is your dream. But I want you to consider that the photos that you see on Instagram and on the internet is just potentially not what you're going to experience. And if you'll go in there with your eyes wide open in that regard, then that's good. But if you're expecting sweeping vistas with no people and beaches that are relaxing, then unfortunately, you probably, unless you do a lot of research about the secret stuff, which, you know, we can help with a bit, that you may not find exactly what you're looking for. I can tell you that there has never been a busier time on the Amalfi Coast between May and October in 2022. It was very crowded, very expensive and not relaxing.

Katy

Positano is where most people want to stay and it's a really small town. It's tiny. And I had some feedback from a listener who said, Katy, you didn't provide very many restaurants in your Positano guide. And I said, well, it's a really small town - there's not that many restaurants there, relatively speaking. So, yeah, if you're going to be flocking to Positano, expect it to be crowded and expensive. And if it's not, well, that's fantastic, good for you. But, yeah, it creates a whole lot of other problems - in getting there and getting out, because obviously you can either go by road or by ferry, but it's all very busy and it's not... you know when I think of Positano, I think luxury. And when I think luxury, I don't think crowded. I think of unique and special experiences and having things all to myself. And so to me, unfortunately, now there's a gap between those two concepts of Positano and luxury. Unless, of course, you are a movie star and you're staying at some of the really luxe hotels where you can afford to do everything privately. But, yeah, I think there are plenty of other options along the Amalfi Coast even Minori, Maori, Ravello, even like, please go seek out some of these beautiful places. Some of them even have a sandy beach, which is not what you're going to find in Positano. I think if it was me and I was choosing, I had five days to spend somewhere on the coast, I would spend it in Puglia, I would not spend it on the Amalfi Coast. And that's because it's just a different and more relaxed vibe. You can still have your beach clubs and what have you, but it's not that hustle that you're going to get on the Amalfi Coast, but each to their own. As I said, no one's judging anyone. I'm just giving you some information to help you plan your trip. I just really feel like you can have a more relaxing, more luxurious experience in other parts of Italy.

Katy

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I think it's a really good time to point out now that I did travel this year in May and June and early July and late September and early October. And as I said, it was super busy everywhere we went and crowded. And so these are probably not the normal times that I would typically prefer to travel in Italy. I much prefer to go in April and May and October and November. That's because I'm not really going for the beach. I'm going for a different reason, and everyone is going for different reasons. And some people can't travel in the times that I mentioned due to work commitments and family commitments etc. But if I always had a choice, I would always go in April, May, and October and November because it's not as crowded. There are more festivals and exciting things happening in the springtime. You've got all the flowers coming out and yeah, it's just harvest is such a beautiful time of year. So I forgot to mention that at the start. But the caveat is I did travel in May and June and early July, and they're really the peak seasons in Italy. So just keep that in mind because that's when it's going to be busy and crowded, but undeterred. Next year I'm going back in September, but that's to coincide with school holidays here in Australia. So sometimes you don't have a choice, and you've just got to make it work for you. And that's exactly what I'm going to do and what we're going to do - and I'll let you in on a little secret because I'm having a big birthday celebration next year as we are going to go south of Amalfi to the Cilento coast. And we've already had a discussion about Cilento earlier in the podcast, another episode with my friend Danielle Oteri. And Danielle's family has got a beautiful small hotel down there, and we're going to have a party down there, and it's going to be great. There's beach clubs. There's a life changing buffalo mozzarella, and it's not that difficult to get to either. So if you'd like to understand some of the alternatives that you can have in traveling around this time of year, just listen to the podcast. You're going to find out lots of special tips now. Cilento I'm so looking forward to going there because for so many reasons and because Danielle is a favorite person of mine and a favorite guest on the show, but also because these smaller places, for me, that's where the magic happens in Italy.

Katy

And if I reflect on our time in Italy in 2022, it was really these places, these smaller towns, these country areas, these regions that have something super, super special that I really enjoyed the most. And so some of them were, Umbria, which has just made Lonely Planets must visit list for 2023, thanks to its incredible food culture, so the cat's out of the bag on that one. Umbria, is a really stunning region and there's no one there. It's right next to Tuscany and you would need a car to get around. Or you can join a tour. Like, we have a tour there with Untold Italy tours, but it's a beautiful, rustic, gorgeous region with amazing food. And speaking of amazing food, the other area that we loved to visit was the area around Bologna and Modena and Parma, the area known as Emilia. And it's definitely one for foodies. The Parmigiano Reggiano, the Prosciutto di Parma, the Balsamic vinegar de Modena. And the people there are so charming and friendly and there's cute little towns. I just don't understand why people aren't going there. And it's so much to explore. We went to the dairy where Stanley Tucci went, and he's searching for Italy series, and also the dairy where Massimo Bottura, one of the best chefs in the world, gets his cheese from. And it was so exciting. And my son learned so much about balsamic vinegar that he just he's nine years old

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and he wants to be a balsamic vinegar producer, so job done, I think, was an excellent use of time. But it was - what it was, it was that the people were so charming and they really invited us into their lives and we just had so much fun. Similarly, up in Lombardy and the Veneto, up in the lakes and mountains, these are areas that can be quite busy because it's a great place to go for European travelers, but you don't see many people who are speaking English and they're such beautiful areas and such friendly people. I really, really enjoyed it.

Katy

And of course, Puglia down south. Again, totally different architecture, friendly people, amazing seafood, just magic. Just one of those places. We just think, wow, I just definitely need to go back there. So, yeah, like, our favorite places in 2022 were not necessarily the big towns and the most popular places, they were the smaller towns where you really got to immerse yourself in the local culture.

Katy

So what I want to suggest to you is that if it's your first trip to Italy, then go ahead and see the highlights, but it also pays to be a bit curious.

Katy

And if you want the most awesome trip ever, this is just my opinion. You should mix it up with a combination of the classic sights and the lesser known areas. And even if you're just wanting to visit the popular places and you don't have time to skip around too much, then you can find these smaller, less popular places that are just as charming, because maybe they didn't make it to some Lonely Planet list or something, but you can find them anyway. For example, in Capri, most people would just spend their whole time in Capri Town, which is very gigi, it's got all the designer shops and everything, but we just loved Anacapri. It's just a beautiful little town. It's got lovely little cultural things happening all the time. My kids made friends with a ceramics seller. They call him their Capri grandfather. And he was giving them sweets, that's why. And it was just a really cute little town. And obviously we dropped in on Holly and Gianluca, who have been on the podcast several times, but did feel like a much more neighborhood area than sort of the hustle and bustle of Capri, which of course, if you want to go to, you can and go and visit Louis Vuitton and all those places, but we really preferred Anacapri.

Katy

The other thing is in Tuscany. Tuscany is a big place. If you want to go to Siena, that's fine. It's a beautiful place. But you can also go to another town like Arezzo. So Arezzo was empty. It was unbelievable. And it was just like stepping inside a movie set. It was just beautiful. And so I think you can really have these really unique experiences. Say one day you go and do the sights of Florence, and then the next day you jump on the train and go to Arezzo and just wander around like you're in some sort of movie scene from *Life Is Beautiful*. And I just think

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for me, that's a cool way to travel. And I wish I'd thought of it sooner, to be honest, because who doesn't like being the one who says, I found this amazing town in Tuscany? Well, I'm that type of person, unfortunately, and that's probably why I have a podcast. But anyway, I digress.

Katy

The other thing that we realized for us is that the experiences are everything. And so you don't have to necessarily pay for those either. A lot of the experiences were just simply wandering around. But if you want to do a paid experience, you know, really have to think about the things that are going to mean the most to you. So if you want to do a cooking class, choose one that suits your style and ability and is reflective of the local cuisine. And so I guess you can learn how to make carbonara in Venice - but that's what the Romans do. The Romans are the experts on this. And, you know, with the same with cooking classes, if you're not a technical cook and you really just want to make something at home that you can share with family and friends, then don't go for a technical class. I think go for something that's simple but easy to make and that's going to be super tasty and that everyone's going to love.

Katy

And if you love dogs, you can join a truffle hunt and really admire the relationship between the truffle hunter and his pooches. It's so incredible to watch because there's such a level of trust and connection between the truffle hunter and his dogs. It's really an amazing relationship. And I think there's nothing more special than watching that in action and being part of it.

Katy

Now, if you love history, please just indulge me. I think hire a local guide and you can watch the sites come alive with their stories and magic before your very eyes. We continue to support some of the vendors that we think offer outstanding experiences in Italy, like Liv Tours and Take Walks. And it depends on your budget and how much time you can afford to spend, but it really just makes a huge amount of difference to your experience because, unfortunately, initially, a lot of the sites are not well marked. Obviously down in near Sorrento our good friend Pierpaulo showed us a great time in Naples and also around Pompeii and Herculaneum. And I think really, it just makes a huge difference. You really will understand so much more about what you're looking at and how it relates to life in Italy, now, and also your own lives, because let's face it, the Romans sort of influenced everything.

Katy

But I think one of the most outstanding experiences we had was staying in an agriturismo or farm state near Modena, where the family made balsamic vinegar. And I mentioned before that my kids are really into it. My son is still talking about now and we're sort of working out how he can do some work experience when he gets older, perhaps. It obviously made a huge impression on him. And so those are the memories that you have that you're going to take

home. That was one of the major learnings for us for our trip in 2022 is to just maybe have some of those more local experiences in the countryside because they're really very special.

Katy

Now, everyone, the last thing I wanted to mention in terms of learning for 2022 and 2023 travel, and this is probably not going to come as a surprise to anyone, but prices are increasing rapidly as they are for most products and services around the world currently. And we're seeing prices increasing by 20% to 30%. So it can pay to get in early and lock in some pricing and some services. Now, as I mentioned at the start of the show, there is a way to save money, but you'll need to act quickly and decisively. So at the time of recording, there are some Black Friday deals that you can take advantage of, including 20% to 25% off day tours and experiences and 40% to 60% off language courses, as an example, plus lots of deals on travel gear and suitcases, etc. We'll add a link of our curated list of these deals so you don't get bombarded with everything into our show notes at untolditaly.com/151 for episode number 151.

Katy

So that's untolditaly.com/151. And I always like to think if you make some savings upfront, you can allocate some of it to something else a little bit special. And I made some epic purchases this year, including this gorgeous linen tablecloth in Sicily with the design of the Moor's head and Princess on it. And I so love it. I can't wait to get it out at Christmas time.

Katy

They are the main tips I have for you today but I want to close by saying that you should travel your own way and learn from your own experiences. Human beings are funny that way. We all want to see the same things at the same time and it's very difficult to convince people otherwise. All I say is really sit down and think about the trip you want to have because you have plenty of options in Italy and a myriad of ways to spend a few hours. In Rome, you could do that traipsing through the Vatican Museums or taking a ride along the Appian Way or strolling through Trastevere and stopping for a long leisurely lunch. Just choose what's right for you.

Next week we're taking a trip to Bologna and talking about the main dishes you should eat in and around this incredible foodie city. But until then it's ciao for now.