

Untold Italy Episode 158 - Slow travel experiences in Tuscany

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 158.

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

Buon giorno! Ciao! Hi everyone, are you ready to go deep into the Tuscan countryside today? I hope so because my friend Arianna from KM Zero tours is here with me today to talk about the slow travel experiences you can have in her idyllic part of the world.

Tuscany is one of the most popular places to visit in Italy but many people only visit on a day trip and only get a little peek at the glorious towns, villages, rolling hills and people that make this region so very special. Life in the Tuscan countryside is about artisans, producers, changing seasons and connections and Arianna and her partner Alessio had a dream to bring this beautiful lifestyle to the people of the world. For me it's clear they made that dream come true.

I'm so very proud to partner with them to bring you our seasonal Untold Italy tours of Tuscany. On our small group tours you'll enjoy many of the local experiences discussed on this episode and more. But most of all you'll leave with a sense of connection to this land and people you'll call friends forever. But let's hear more about that from Arianna.

Katy

Bentornata Arianna. Ciao. And welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Arianna

So good to see you again and thank you for having me here.

Katy

Arianna, I can't believe the last time you were on the podcast chatting with me. Since then, I've been able to meet you in person, not once, but twice. It's been so much fun getting to know you in person and I'm so thrilled that you've joined us back today. How are things in beautiful Tuscany?

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Arianna

We are absolutely excited to see you again as well. And we were so happy to be able to meet you this past summer and actually also this past Fall. Things here in Chianti are very, very good. We have been enjoying some delightful Christmas holidays with family and friends. Busy with the olive harvest, actually, at the end of November with lots of olive oil. It has been a really good season for olive oil. Very abundant. And now busy, busy, busy planning for some wonderful tours and trips and experiences for the next season, which is coming soon.

Katy

Very, very soon, isn't it? So everyone listening after my wonderful experience with Arianna and her team, and we went and spent a whole day exploring some of the most beautiful towns deep into the Chianti countryside that's near her home, in Arianna's home. I just thought we should share with people what kind of experiences they can have when they visit Tuscany. And I'm talking about what you can see or do. These are the things that you can feel and what you can just I think experience has more to do with all the senses. Not just seeing and doing, but hearing and tasting and touching and all of that. So one of the things that Arianna did for me, which was so special, is Arianna knows that I love baby goats. She arranged for us to go to this beautiful farm where they make goat's cheese. And I did get to meet the baby goats, and it was just so much fun and so special to meet this beautiful family that make these absolutely delicious cheese. But it wasn't just that we went to a goat's cheese farm, it was all of the things, it was the patting of the baby goats, it was meeting the family, tasting the cheese and understanding how they made the cheese. And so I wanted to get Arianna on to the show to talk to you about how that type of experience is very different to, like, some of the things that we do when we travel and going to museums and some of the major sites. This is a really different style of travel, but it's absolutely incredible. So, Arianna, why don't you tell us a little bit about the philosophy behind what you do and why you do it.

Arianna

With great pleasure. And first of all, thank you for all these wonderful things you just said. It just means everything for us to hear this. It's exactly what we were dreaming the first day when Alessio and I, we were chatting in front of this bar and just dreaming of this project that actually became reality almost ten years after, let's say, we are here and still talking about that and hearing these kind of things just makes me super happy. So thank you for appreciating and thank you for understanding the whole meaning behind it. Our small little tour company, we're based in Chianti. I was born and raised in the Chianti region of Tuscany, halfway between Florence and Siena. Father is from Florence, mother is from Siena, was born in the middle - so to please everyone, and that's a little bit what we have been building, our little nest, Alessio and I, and where we have been building this project that has the name of KM Zero Tours. The name tells you already a lot about it. The first part of the name of our company is KM Zero Tours, and the second part is Slow Travel Tuscany. And I think those two expressions, they are both the essential, let's say, part of our project, let's say Tuscany, of

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course, is a big name, is a big brand by itself. So, so many people back in 2014 when we were, you know, brainstorming some ideas of what we could actually create and which kind of experiences we could actually craft for travelers. So many people, they were just saying, but whatever, don't put that much time or effort or attention. You're in Tuscany. It's just Tuscany sells by itself. So just keep it easy and just put a random winery and then guests were happy. Yeah, for sure, perhaps some of the travelers would be happy. But I feel that there's much more to say about our home and our friends and about our territory - that in Italian, it means not just a land, but it means the whole culture that is actually created in that specific part of Italy. So that was the beginning, and we just thought to be able to share not just places, but also friends, and also, let's say, culture and traditions that are in our daily lives, but maybe they're not in all of the guidebooks that people or in all of the information on Google or whatever.

Arianna

It's not like that quick information that you can get, but it's a deeper kind of feeling and experiences that you can actually get only if you live in a place or if you know somebody who is from that specific place. So that was the beginning. KM Zero. In Italian, we have the kilometers. And so KM zero means 0 kilometers. It actually refers to a zero distance between you, the travelers, and all of the farms and the people who are, let's say, locals from here. So the whole concept of this movement is a big movement, the kilometers zero movement. And it's a similar movement, let's say, to the farm to table. But it refers not just to the quality and the seasonality of the products, but it also gives value to the relationship. So it's about, as you said, it's about going to a farm and meeting the farmers, interacting with people and touching the soil and understanding why a given product is made on that specific place and on that specific time of year and on that specific people. And then, of course, you just give a totally different meaning to that place and to the product and you have stories to hear. And then of course, you have stories to tell once you're back home and you have a place where you wish to return again and again. So it's no longer I think there's different kinds of levels of travel. The first is that when you are a tourist, they are all wonderful ways. I'm not saying that our way is the only way, it's just different approaches. So when you are a tourist, you're basically seeing places from another, like you're just basically you have something beautiful in front of you. You may read something about it, but you're not connected to it. You're just at different events, you are the ones looking at it. Then you have the travelers. And travelers is an already deeper kind of approach to travel - so when you want to understand more but then we are trying to encourage our visitors to become friends, which is even a deeper level to become friends with us and with all of our friends we have here. And to really not just see things, but really to experience in them and to look at them the same way that we are looking at them. That's our biggest dream every time we are building an experience.

Katy

The amazing thing about what you do is like it's not just a dream and I think a lot of people have these amazing dreams, but you actually do make it reality and it's a very, very special

experience. And I think if you're going on a trip to Italy, you just made me think just then that you can have all of those different levels of travel in one trip even. You can maybe go and see some beautiful sights in Florence or Rome and really have that one type of travel and just admire the artworks and all of that. And then you can take that next deeper level. But then I just feel like adding these different layers on even within a trip is just such a wonderful way to have a really rich experience. And I really do thank you for that. If I close my eyes, I can picture we went to a beautiful winery with some friends of Arianna and we're just sitting around this table. There's the beautiful vineyards in the background. But you know what I remember most? I remember the dogs are running around, the grandchildren darting in and in and out. And we were having this beautiful cheese platter and the wine and we went and saw the barrels where the wine was made, and it's, like, locked in my memory. And I think that's the type of thing we know, definitely, after years of travel in Italy and around the world, that's what really I'm looking for now. I crave it now, and I really go and look for it. And so maybe, Arianna, I've given a few of your secrets away, but what about we tell people about some of the other experiences that they can have in Tuscany, and so the different types of ways we can connect with your territory and your people.

Arianna

Yeah, thank you for this, because this is important. Again, one of my biggest, again, dreams at the beginning, it was not just I understand, of course, wine is a big thing here in Tuscany, here in Chianti especially. I was born in one of the most famous, let's say, wine regions of the world. So I feel blessed, and of course, I want to give value to this aspect. But there's not just wine. Otherwise, it would be a problem if we were only drinking the whole day, every day, every year, it would be a little mess. So the thing is, of course, there's much more. We are so close to Florence, which is known for the fine art - we do have smaller villages and hilltop towns here, where, of course, it's more rare to have such fine art and masterpieces. But still, there are so many artisans that are making these little villages alive, and there are traditions that go back for centuries and that really are adding so much into the identity of a specific place. So artisans from the beginning have been always a wonderful aspect in all our tours. Of course, also, we try to, let's say, to select different experiences according to the different seasons.

Arianna

For example, in Spring, we go to this wonderful Iris farm. The irises, they get to bloom at the end of April, beginning of May, so it's really like the peak of the spring time, and there are such beautiful flowers. And we know this farm, the artisans, she grows the irises, and then she makes cosmetic out of it. It's organic, and then from the olives as well. So it's a wonderful experience. Of course, it's beautiful all year round, but then, of course, there's timings when it gets extra special. So artisans, in my opinion, are a fundamental part of our Tuscan heritage. But not only, of course, the cheese artisans, as you were mentioning, goat cheese and pecorino cheese that are the two biggest production of cheese. We have no cow cheese in Tuscany. It's mostly about goat and sheep. And it's always fun because that's another

wonderful hands on experience where you really get to see the animals and to understand, actually, from how from the same milk, you can get a huge varieties of different products starting from the same milk. It's incredible. You can just - it's such a creative world. And you then have in front of you this cheese plate with so many different kinds of cheese, how is it even possible that starting from the same milk, you get all these incredible abundance, let's say, of taste and colors and textures, and there's so much, but not only, of course, then the olives.

Arianna

Olive oil is another big thing here also in that case, of course, it's wonderful all year round, but it gets extra special in the fall, especially in October. I'm just giving you some a little taste of how our Tuscan, let's say land, changes according to the seasons. But also some things that you may not immediately think when you think of Tuscany. So the little villages, the artisans, the olive oil farms and the cheese farms and the festivals as well. So all those more kind of hands on places and families that absolutely, in my opinion, deserve to be visited.

Katy

Tell me more about these festivals. I love a festival. I'm like I should be the festival queen. I love it, love them so much.

Arianna

No, it's funny because when I was a child what I'm talking about, when I was at elementary school, my teacher used to call me prezzemolino. Then in Italian he means the little parsley because I was everywhere. So it's something at this point, I think I will have it for my whole life. In any case, now I love all of these events as well. That makes, of course, extra special. And Italy is the perfect place for these because Italians, we love to be outdoors and we just love to share together and to share experiences. So a festival is one of the most fun and unique ways to experience, let's say especially the countryside. Of course, then you have also festivals in the cities, but they are different in the sense that of course, it's super crowded. Sometimes in the countryside there are smaller so festivals in the countryside are basically some outdoor events. It can be either more with street artists, so flag wavers and drummers and of course everything medieval style usually. And then always when I talk about the countryside, food and wine is like every time present. We don't even need to mention it in the sense that it's really so usually it can be either for a specific event for a specific time of the year, or it can be a food festival because there is a season of specific product.

Arianna

So for them, when the Fall, there is a chestnut festival because it's chestnut season. But it can be medieval festival because it's a medieval date or something to be celebrated. Or it can be anything actually around - we can create a festival around anything, really.

Katy

Any excuse for a party. I love it. It's so cool.

Arianna

Absolutely. And of course, then, like, music. And it's an occasion for people to stay outdoors and to just enjoy their time and to experience what a community is actually able to express or to give.

Katy

Yeah, it's really interesting, Arianna, because someone reached a few people reach out to me and they said they wanted to organize their trips to Italy around certain festivals. And I went 'ah!' because the challenge is a lot of the times it's just by accident that you can stumble upon them unless you're really well connected with a local person, because these things are not advertised. They're not listed on Google, they're not listed anywhere. Maybe a week before they go up, they might update their website, I don't know. But the way that you kind of find out about these things if you're not from there, is that you might see a flyer stuck to a lamp post or something. Or you need to know, Arianna, because it's something that happens in the rhythm with the seasons. And they might do it one week, one year, and they might make some adjustments the next year. So, yeah, you need to be very well connected to have these experiences. And also you need to be able to speak, I think really you need to have someone who speaks Italian with you if you're not that fluent because to understand and someone that's local to understand what is happening and why. There's one thing to look at these flag throwers and the drummers and everything, but if you get it in context, then it gives it a much deeper meaning I think.

Arianna

Most of the website are not even transplanted in English. Yeah, it's just about for sure. Either, of course, be in the right place at the right time. That is always possible. And then it's about luck. Or if you are a planner, of course, yes, for sure. It's best to know somebody who is a little bit involved in the local life, let's say, who can for sure help you to get into those kind of events, that's for sure. But that counts for a little bit for everything in the sense that of course he has the festivals for sure. But also when it gets to products that they seem to be easier to be found, for example, again, wine farms or cheese farms or olive oil farms or honey or whatever, then it really gets to different events. So of course, in that case it may be easier to find them even just from internet. But then, of course, it gets really hard to get to some very private, intimate businesses where you get to get into somebody's home and you really get to share, to meet the family, to meet the little children, to what I think your memories that are connected to the little goats and to meet Michela and Matteo and everyone in the family is a little child. That's what in the end stays in your memories for a longer time. And that is the big difference between visiting a farm and just being invited for the tasting and

learn about the product. And instead when you are invited in somebody's family, to be part of it and that makes, in my opinion, a big difference in any case.

Katy

Yeah, for sure. I think that just having spoken to our guests that were on different tours with us this year, there was one situation in Puglia we had where one of our guests really wanted to hug one of the beautiful, ancient, ancient hundreds of years old olive trees. And our bus driver took the whole group to his farm and introduced them to the donkey, and she hugged the olive tree there. But I've spoken to these people since then and that's what they remember. They remember that this man went out of his way to share his family home and the donkey and the olive tree. But it's very special and I really wish that everyone can have that experience because it does mean a lot to me and I know I've witnessed other people having strong reactions to those experiences too.

Arianna

And I think it's a wonderful way at least to explore the country because again, in the city you have a lot to see also that you cannot miss - there are the major museums. And it's perhaps a little harder to get to the private homes of the people because again, it's people living in big cities, they tend to protect a little bit their private life in the sense that they are always busy, always in a rush, always surrounded by people. And so their home becomes like a little bit their private little island. When they close the door they say now I don't want to know anything else except for just being with my family. In the countryside, it's a very particular situation because for example, now that is wintertime, it's only about the family. We have no human being except for maybe our 2 dogs - nothing happened. The thing is, of course, we have fun barbecues and everything in our home and we invite people but it's a lot different than in a city. Every time, all year round, day and night there's always people and things to do, concerts etc so you're constantly in a position where you can do things if you want to.

Arianna

Here 05:00 p.m. At this time of year it's dark.

Katy

Do you light the fire?

Arianna

We light the fire of course - glass of wine but it's super relaxing. So the thing is, when it gets to the springtime, when the days become long and you have all the beautiful flowers and the temperatures are wonderful and it's the time when to go out, then we have such an energy that we really want to meet people and to share as much as we can. And we want to travel kind of thanks to these other guests we have. So to learn stories and because it's just so much

fun for us and to share our homes because it has been like for months we have been more in a private mode so we are ready to share and to let the other ones be part of our lives and to meet new people. And that's also what I think it's important to understand also in the countryside, the difference. Also in terms of accommodation. I'm talking about, of course, my own experiences in Chianti and Tuscany, but I'm sure also in other regions, the Masseria in the south, I'm sure that in other regions it works the same. But let's say here in the countryside, everything is about family-owned and small accommodations, which makes a big difference than in the end, for the trip.

Katy

Yeah, they're so special. I can talk about this for a long time, but we're actually going back when we go to Italy this year, we're actually going back to one of the Agriturismo that we stayed at because my son had built a connection with one of the owner's sons who makes the balsamic vinegar. Like, he just made such a strong connection with Francesco that I said to them, my kids, where do you want to go if we go back to Italy? Do you want to go anywhere? And he said, I want to go back to that agriturismo, because he did make this really amazing connection. I'm actually not sure whether it was because we did get a lot of tastings of Balsamic, but no, there was definitely like, a bond between these/him and, you know, listening to this, you know, I think he would be in his mid 20s, just explaining his real passion behind what he did. And I was just thrilled to see, you know, my child, who is a bit of a fan of computer games, actually just come alive having this conversation. It was just incredible, actually. So we're very much looking forward to that. What are some of the things that people can experience in agriturismo in your area?

Arianna

So I think the first big difference between bigger, let's say you've had in a city and a smaller family-owned accommodation in the country is also the number of nights, in the sense that in a city, everything is quick. You just have so many plans and so many things to visit so many towns. And also, in the end, you just do perhaps one night, two nights, etc. And the convenience of where your hotel is located - so the area to be as close as possible to as many as possible of the places you want to visit us. So you want to be central so that you can optimize times. In the countryside, there's nothing to optimize in the countryside, we give value to different aspects, so we give value to really have the feeling to be welcomed in a warm and in a way that you're really feeling that you're part of the family. So, for example, we know lots of like, of course, we have our favorite agriturismo here, and there is always a family living on site. And in one case, for example, they have two little dogs, Maya and Toby. And when you arrive, the dogs become they want to play. And this helps you to build a stronger relationship. Usually most of the agriturismo, they require three nights in general minimum stay in absolute sense because I think it takes a little time for people to establish those relationships. If you stay only one night, of course, you just don't have the time because you're busy with your own plans and then, in the end, you just use it as a bed. But you don't have time to have a chapter which is absolutely so important to learn about the place you're

visiting. It's about sharing that specific recipe. For example, the homemade limoncello that Milanda, the owner of this. The homemade recipe is always the number one question. As soon as our guests, they taste her limoncello - the day after, I want to have the recipe. And then they start sharing tea together every day when we come back from the tour, it's really about they can't wait to go back and to just tell her, tell the family about what they have seen and what they have experienced and going to the garden and to chat about what's for tonight.

Arianna

And also the homemade breakfast, for example, that is never the same. So for example, one day you taste something you really love and then you're like, no, you need to tell me what was inside. All of these personal touches are so different from instead of having a buffet continental breakfast in a hotel that it's for sure, it's delicious, but again, you're not part of it. So nothing is personalized for you. It's just, you know, inside of you from inside that this is going to be offered every day in the same format, every season in the same format and to every single traveler in the same way. In some smaller agriturismo and places. You know that every experience is different because in the end everything is crafted. And also there is an impromptu, let's say every day is different just because you wake up and you decide together that today you just feel like making something together or it's just completely different approach. That, I think is what makes it so special. So by the end of the week you made friends.

Katy

Yeah. And you feel a bit like rejuvenated, you feel a bit more energized. That's how I feel anyway. It's funny how sometimes slowing down makes you have more energy for some reason. But I wanted also to say that even though you said that the areas like the countryside is not optimized, luckily, when you're in Chianti, it's super optimized just by nature because there's so many amazing experiences to have very close by that are so very different. I mean, another thing that springs to mind is you've got ceramics but then little few kilometers down the road, they specialize in making alabaster. And I really loved some of the souvenirs I bought back. I love the stoppers that you put on bottles because we don't usually drink a whole bottle of wine at home. So I need a stopper for the bottle. So I've got my alabaster ones that I got near Volterra. That is special. And every time I look at them, I go, aww Volterra. There's so many unique things that you can do very close, but it's all part of the fabric of life in Chianti.

Arianna

You're right. Chianti is like you have the impression of being with pure countryside in front of you and some spoiled views and very slower kind of pace. But at the same time, your central location. So Florence is less than 45 minutes, is about 40 minutes drive. And Siena is less than an hour. It's about 45 minutes drive. San Gimignano is 40 minutes. And county villages, there are so many options. Within 15 minutes drive, you have Siena, Impruneta and Volterra, as you

mentioned, Arezzo as well that we both know. So there are so many towns that are all, let's say, within 1 hour drive from the beautiful thing is the balance between.

Arianna

We have sometimes some travelers that say it's slow travel, okay, but does it mean that we do nothing the whole day? No, of course, it doesn't mean that. My approach to slow travel, then, of course, it's very personal and I'm sure that there will be different approaches. But let's say my own approach to that is to be able to balance. In my opinion, we all need to savor and absorb every experience. So everyone when you are traveling, you're exposed to so many different inspirations and stories and people and places and different traditions. And it's a wonderful and unique opportunity to really open your mind and to grow as a person in the experiences you can share, you can have for yourself, but also that you can share with others once you're back home. To really be able to absorb every experience, you need a little bit of downtime. So the only, let's say slow travel, it doesn't mean that you have nothing versus relaxing. It means about exploring experience during the day. But then to have a little downtime, that can be your little time after we come back from every day, from touring to stay at a farmhouse that really helps you. You can have a refreshing walk or you can have just your own time to absorb and to be prepared for another day, the day after. And that's, I think, to appreciate a sunset, that is a magic moment. And I see that when we have been exploring Siena and then San Gimignano, Volterra everything, let's say during our weeks, then we come back and there is so much beauty that also needs to be appreciated just by standing at these farmhouses with a view and with a glass of wine and to see the sunset.

Arianna

That's absolutely as important as all of the site-seeing that we have been doing during the day. So that's I think a good combination and balance between the exploring part and also just the appreciation of also the simple pleasures that can be anything. It can be, again, a chat with the owners, it can be sunset, it can be a lovely walk, it can be really just anything really done in the countryside.

Katy

It's so beautiful. And if you haven't been to Tuscany yet, I'm going to tell you that the light there is just, I don't know how, it must be something in the environment, but everything looks kind of golden and everyone looks fabulous in the light. It looks a really beautiful golden hues that just when the sun dips below the horizon. It's just something magical. I can't wait to go back and have that experience again for myself. And you really do need to take the time to savor it because I think it's one of life's moments that you will remember for a very long time.

Katy

Now, Arianna, we collaborate together on our Untold Italy tours together. But I know that many of our listeners have reached out to you and have organized some travels with you directly themselves. And let's tell them how they can do that. If they would like to do that.

Arianna

You can just go on our website, which is www.kmzerotours.com, and then you will find some of the samples itineraries that are already there so you can have a look. Then, of course, you can always reach out to me because again, we just love to make your own vacation, the special one. So if you have any special, we are the craziest tour guides - there's no crazy request for us. We can first customize and personalize the itineraries. We also have some accommodations displayed in the website. We have many more that of course, let's say I try to select the ones for each request, the ones that could be the best for the specific family, if you have children and children, how many nights? And all of this information that, of course, are important for us to be able to tailor the perfect itinerary. And again, as Katy knows, we love to give value to every single season. So that is also an important information to know in the sense that for every season there's different products, different experiences that you can have. So that means an excuse to come back.

Katy

No excuse needed, no excuse there. So for everyone listening, no matter where you're going in Italy, I think it's a really great idea to, you know, mix up and layer up your travel so you have a bit of that sightseeing, but you also experience a slower form of travel, those deeper connections. And, you know, when we're in Tuscany, there is no place that we want to be except with Arianna and her amazing team. And we just love working with you and we're just so thrilled to always have you on the podcast so you can come back again whenever you like. Grazie Mille Arianna, thanks for joining us again.

Arianna

Thanks so much for this opportunity. I hope you have enjoyed and I hope to see you soon in Tuscany - all of you. So any season, we are here and we can't wait to have you with us and to let you experience a little bit of our life and friends and favorite places here.

Katy

Amazing. Thank you, Arianna.

Katy

If you ever felt the pull of Tuscany on a prior visit to Italy or have simply been inspired by photos, books and movies then make sure to spend a little extra time exploring and meeting the people and places and trying the experiences Arianna mentioned.

When i think back on our trip to Italy last year, meeting the baby goats and family who tended them so lovingly to make their delicious cheeses was an absolute highlight. We also met fellow travelers and shared a glass of wine or two over looking a valley covered in vines while the winemaker's dog snuggled in for a pat. Afterwards we took a stroll through San Gimignano at dusk with a gelato. That golden Tuscan glow blanketed the countryside and I felt grateful beyond words to have those moments locked away in my memories.

If you'd like to know more about joining us on tour in Tuscany in Spring and Autumn/Fall then you'll find a link to our tour itineraries in the show notes at untolditaly.com/158 along with all the details of how you can enjoy those experiences together with Untold Italy and KM Zero tours.

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That's all we have about slow travels in Italy for today, we'll be back with more inspiring tales and practical advice next week but until then it's "ciao for now".