# Untold Italy Episode 159 - Popular Tourist Scams in Italy (And How to Avoid Them)

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 159.

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 friends. Today's episode is a bit different because it's not so much focused on inspiration for your Italy trips - in this episode, we're going to get a bit practical. And it's especially for those of you who maybe haven't done a lot of international travel or it's your first trip to Italy. I'm going to let you know some of the more annoying things about travel in Italy - namely scams - and give you some strategies to avoid them.

The purpose of this episode is not to scare or alarm you because Italy is generally an extremely safe country to travel in, but I'm recording this to help you be alert, and give you some strategies for avoiding the small number of tricksters that like to take advantage of visitors who are understandably enjoying the scenery and the wonder all around them.

Now according to the World Population Review, Italy is one of the most visited countries in the world - coming in at number 5 with over 64 million visitors a year which, to give you some context, is about the same number of people that visit the United States from abroad each year.

And where there are large numbers of people, you'll usually find the odd scammer. That's true of most big cities around the world and I can certainly tell you that, despite being very well traveled, I've been scammed in just about every country I've been to including the US, UK, as well as here in Australia - taxis are the main culprit but there are plenty of creative people looking for a quick buck wherever you go. I think the only places I've been where scamming is not an issue is Japan (amazing country - you should definitely go there too) and Singapore.

In Italy, most of these 64 million visitors go to only a handful of places - Rome, Florence, Venice, Cinque Terre, Sorrento and the Amalfi Coast - and unsurprisingly the scammers tend to be concentrated in these areas. So if you really want to avoid the scammers then head off



© Untold Italy 2020

the beaten path into lesser-known areas but most people will touch at least Rome during their trips so all of these tips are definitely worth listening to.

So what type of scams are there…

**Katy**

And first up, the classic, the taxi scams. They're common the world over. Now, as I mentioned, not all taxi drivers are dodgy, far from it. But I think this is where I've had the worst experiences of being ripped off over my many years of travel. Classic scams here include not turning the meter on and suddenly, magically coming up with an extortionate fee, quoting a set fee that's completely incorrect, stating that they only take cash, which is also incorrect in Italy, they need to be able to take card and giving you the wrong change. And so you hand over a 50 euro note and they might give you back 10 when they should have given you back 20. And this really preys on people that are tired, especially if you've been traveling on a long haul flight and you're a little bit disorientated. People are speaking a different language. I think it's just plain mean. Now, I also find train stations are the worst for these because, again, there's lots of tired and disorientated people who just want to get to their hotel or accommodation.

**Katy**

And sometimes an airport is a little bit more fluid and you can see where to go. But a train station is just like a mass of people rushing to get everywhere. So take particular attention in train stations. Approaches at the airport from taxi drivers is also not allowed, so you need to get into the line at the taxi rank, which will be monitored. Even then, if you get in the taxi there, what I would do is ask, do they take cards and how much is the fare? And usually in Rome, there's a set fare to go to and from the airport, from the city, and I think it's around €50. It sort of changes every now and again, but it's around the 50 euro mark. So if anyone's telling you anything much above that, that's actually incorrect. What you would need to know, though, is you can probably only get three adults and luggage into a taxi. So if you need, you know, any more, then you do need to organize a transfer or get two taxis. Now, these taxi drivers, as I said, normally you can just get amazing taxi drivers, but you will get the odd one that's a little bit dodgy.

**Katy**

So how to avoid this situation is that you do not hail taxis really in Italy. It's not really standard practice. If you're hailing a taxi, they're going to know that's a tourist and that's sort of putting up a red flag and they can sort of adjust their approach anyway. And that's when you sort of get offered a price to go from here to there. The simple answer to that is no turn on the meter. So the other thing that I do is, where possible, I use taxi booking apps which work like Uber, and the taxi booking app in Rome is called Free Now and it's also available in Naples, but there's a different one in Florence, and that one's called Aptaxi. And so, just like Uber, it works in your cities around the world. Everything is tracked there, so you're less likely



© Untold Italy 2020

to be ripped off. Now, speaking of Uber, it's not really that common in Italy. You do see in Rome and Milan, but it's not that common. So try those other taxi apps and you'll probably have a better chance of getting the transport that you need. The other thing that I would do is especially coming off a long flight, and from Australia, it's at least 22/23 hours off the plane, so you are really tired is to book a transfer.

**Katy**

And I find the transfers are around €75, which to me is completely worth it because you just have someone meet you, they've got your name, and then they take your luggage and you walk, and then they drop you straight at the hotel and there's no funny business at all, and you've paid for everything upfront. You don't need to get cash out. It's just a whole lot easier, in my opinion. So they're my tips for avoiding taxi scams, and I think that they are usually the ones that get you the most. And we did have one situation last year, actually, in Naples, and so, just to give you an idea, we were with my husband, whose mum is from near Naples, and he speaks Neapolitan dialect. And we arrived at the train station and I had not taken my own advice and I had not booked a transfer to the ferry terminal where we needed to go. And that ride is about I think it's about ten minutes. Well, that ride cost us €35, which is incorrect, because we got in the taxi and he was chatting away and then he didn't turn on the meter and he said, oh, no, it's €35, which should be really about 10, I think. I think they've got a standard rate for that transfer in Naples, which is 20, which is still a lot less than 35. Anyway, by the time you're in, your luggage is in, your kids are strapped in, you're not really in the frame of mind to be arguing. So off we went with our 35 euro trip, and my husband was smarting for the rest of the day because it's just frustrating and it does seem to happen a little bit more often in Naples. So if you're in doubt, get the taxi app, the Free Now app, and book them in advance so you don't have that problem.

**Katy**

So apart from taxis, there's another scam that happens in Italy, which is a bit frustrating, and that's the skip the line tickets and tours that are offered on the street. Picture the scene, you're standing in a line at a major attraction, and the wait time looks like 2 to 3 hours. Up comes a friendly gentleman offering to sell you skip the line tickets or a tour so you can enter straight in. So tempting, right? Wrong. The only way to skip the line is to pre purchase your tickets and tours in advance.

**Katy**

And I have to say that one of the major benefits of the pandemic is that you can't, if there are any, is that you can't really access places like the Coliseum or the Vatican Museums without pre purchasing timed entry tickets these days. So there is a benefit to doing that. Now, this one is a typical scam that's used in the line for security at St. Peter's Basilicata, which is actually free to enter. So there are no tickets unless you want to go up to the dome. The security line there can be very, very long and frustrating. So don't fall for this scam, no matter how hot or tired you are. Another option these guys use is to offer you a very cheap



© Untold Italy 2020

tour of the sites. Now, if you've been listening along to Untold Italy for a while, you'll know that tour guides in Italy must have a license, which takes a lot of study and a very hard exam to pass. The guides, especially the good ones, are in hot demand and they would never go sprinkling on the street. They need to carry their accreditation badge at all times. So make sure you ask to see it. If someone tries to sell you a tour, my guess is they'll probably walk away at that point. But the easy way to avoid all of this is to pre book everything before you go. And I would say unless you're traveling between November and February or early March, then that's the best option. In those cases, you can probably walk into those attractions. But outside of those times, unless you are really flexible and happy to enter at the end of the day and have a lot of flexibility in your plans, or you're happy to wait for a little bit, then you do need to pre book. And we've got quite a few resources on how to pre book tickets, which we'll provide in the show notes here, which is episode number 159.

**Katy**

Now, that brings me on to some other things that are fake. Not fake tours, not fake tickets, but fake designer goods. I think most people understand that Gucci doesn't sell their bags and luxury items at local markets off a blanket, but just to make sure, those convincing looking knockoffs are not real. And they come at a different kind of price than the four figure plus tags you'll see on the legitimate versions.

**Katy**

Firstly, Italy is highly protective of its luxury goods industry, so you've been warned there are fines for anyone caught picking up a Prada labeled gondola hat in Venice or something similar in other places that you go. Secondly, knockoffs are generally made extremely cheaply using inferior materials and techniques and often in sweatshop environments, which is not something I'd want on my conscience. But fortunately, if you like to shop, then you can grab design items at discounted prices up to 70% off at discount outlets in Italy. Sure, you likely won't pay €30 for a bag, but you will get an authentic piece made to exacting standards, and you won't have to haggle in the street. The Serravalle outlet near Milan is huge. And there's also Barbarino near Florence and Castel Romano near Rome. So if you're into shopping, steer away from the fake designer goods and get the real stuff.

**Katy**

Another set of creative con artists. They're very creative, actually, and we've nearly been caught out by these people. Did you think that the guys dressed up as Roman centurions were paid to wander through crowds of tourists adding to the atmosphere? Sorry, no. They weren't often very charismatic. They invite you in for a photo, and then we'll ask for the cash before handing you back your phone or camera. Now, the city of Rome is really cracking down on these guys, but just so you know, this is pretty popular, and they tend to sort of hang on the fringes of major sites, so just keep an eye out for that. If you see one and you really want a photo because they do actually look quite good, just ask them the price upfront. It's probably the best way to handle that situation.



© Untold Italy 2020

© Untold Italy 2020

**Katy**

Another scam that often seems to happen in Florence for some reason is that a street artist accuses you of walking over or damaging their sidewalk art and asks for cash in compensation. This can be very embarrassing, so if it happens to you, try to simply hold your ground and walk away, because obviously, you probably have not walked through their artwork. Most people haven't done that, and any legitimate artist has usually cleared a big space around the piece that they're working on. Now, I tend to carry not much cash these days, or if any, so I do wonder how these people get on. But whatever you do, don't go anywhere near an ATM with people who try on these type of stunts and go straight to the nearest police person. Fortunately, you'll find lots of Carabinieri and police station at major tourist areas. So make your first beeline to those people and let them know what's going on.

**Katy**

Now, the next one I find a little bit awkward and a little bit sad, actually, and that's people offering free stuff bracelets, roses, anything that's offered for free is a big red flag that actual payment is expected. I find this situation to be very uncomfortable because unlike taxi drivers who earn a reasonable wage and should know better, it is very clear that the people taking this approach to earning money are pretty desperate, and they're often refugees escaping horrible situations at home. If this happens, I like to remind myself that I'm one of the lucky 2% of people in the entire world who travels internationally for pleasure and are resolved to be firm but kind because it can feel intrusive and it's a bit annoying, especially when they're quite persistent sometimes. This scam is also part of a pickpocketing effort, so I feel like the best thing to do is say Basta! which means no, enough, and you say it very firmly but not readily, and they usually go away.

**Katy**

Lastly, I wanted to let you know about some things that look like a scam but are not, and this section should actually be subtitled: Restaurant issues. Now, in Italy, you're generally charged more to sit outside in the piazza and enjoy your coffee or meal than if you were standing at the bar inside. This is not a scam, but it's standard practice, which makes sense when you note that there's a waiter involved in bringing the food and check or bill and drinks to you. Places, where your meal or coffee is going to be what many consider to be outrageously priced, are Piazza San Marco in Venice and Piazza Navona in Rome. If you don't want to pay €8 for a coffee, then don't sit outside here. But I actually think the price is worth it if you linger for a little while and enjoy the passing parade of people and the incredible atmosphere at restaurants. There's also often a charge for bread that's called coperto, which is technically illegal in some places, including Rome, but it's not very well policed. The charge will be around two to €5, depending on the location and style of the establishment, and it must be published on the restaurant menu, which you will always find outside the front of the venue.



© Untold Italy 2020

**Katy**

Now, in very touristy places (hello Amalfi Coast). You may see a servizio or service charge of 10 to 20% added to your bill. This should also be printed on the menu, so do make sure you check if you're concerned about inflated prices. But they're okay to charge that as long as they publish the prices on the menu.

**Katy**

Also in the category of not really a scam but incredibly annoying, is rounding up prices and always fun added extras, like a little rendition of O Sole Mio in your gondola, or letting you jump into the water at Capri's Blue Grotto. Now, I really don't have a problem with paying for those little extras, but somehow I feel like it falls into the tip category and it's not an upfront charge. And on that subject, tipping is a whole other issue and podcast episode, actually, and that's episode number 7 for those of you who want to brush up on the tipping etiquette in Italy.

**Katy**

So, lastly, before we wrap up, I want to let you know what to do if you get scammed. If you're getting scammed or someone overcharges you, should you report it to the police or Carabinieri?

**Katy**

Yes, I guess this is the right thing to do, but it can be quite difficult unless there are officers close by and you have specific evidence. The people that run these kind of scams tend to disappear pretty quickly as soon as they get an idea that you're thinking about talking to the police. I do know the cities are cracking down on scams where they can. In particular, the city of Rome has a program to catch up those guys dressed as centurions, but they typically just move to another place, ie. Not near the Colosseum. We encountered them on Pincio Hill in the gardens of the Gardeneria Borghese, and they can be actually pretty persistent as well. Apart from approaching the police, I think the best course of action is to move on and chalk it up to experience, and if the damage was minimal, have a bit of a laugh about it. Sure, it can leave a bad taste in your mouth, but do you really want a scammer ruining your much longed for vacation? It's giving them a double win. The best revenge is to move on and make sure others know what they can do to avoid the problem.

**Katy**

So, in summary, as I mentioned in the beginning of this episode, getting scammed is rare in Italy, except maybe by taxi drivers. So if you have your wits about you and are prepared, you'll avoid the worst of it. But if it does happen to you, don't beat yourself up. Despite countless trips to Italy, I fell for this taxi scam in Rome last year, going from the station to Piazza dela Rotunda. I was so tired and I just didn't have the energy to fight the ridiculous 30 Euro charge that I was presented with. But I'm paying it forward by letting you know that the



© Untold Italy 2020

best way to avoid a lot of these things is to pre book those taxis and transfers, and ideally not carry a lot, if any, cash. Now, if you'd like to reread this episode and understand it in a bit more detail in the transcript, then you can find the links to that and the taxi apps that I mentioned online at untolditaly.com/159 for episode 159. Now, friends, my team does hugely detailed notes for each and every episode, which you can find just by adding the episode number to the end untolditaly.com with a forward slash, and that way you can find all the info you're looking for, including place names, etc.

**Katy**

Very quickly. As always, thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all of you, and especially our Amici private podcast members, and of course, all our subscribers and listeners joining us from around the world. If you do have a spare moment, we would so appreciate it if you left us a five star rating and review on your favorite podcast app. That way we can reach more Italy loving travelers and help people plan their trips to Italy, just like we're helping you. That's all for today. Next week, we're heading back to beautiful Capri, but until then, it's Ciao for now.



© Untold Italy 2020