

Untold Italy Episode 170 - Etiquette tips for your Italian trip

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 170.

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! Hello friends. I know many of you have only a few short weeks away from your trips to Italy and are getting very excited. And as many of you are traveling there for the first time or after a long gap I thought I'd record a quick episode on Italian customs and how to mind your ps and qs in Italy.

I'm afraid this one's a little bit bossy but after some of the things I saw in the last few weeks in Rome and Venice, it seems somehow a little basic manners stay at home for some people when they travel abroad. And while it's understandable that it can be a bit stressful away from home, it's important to remember that you're a guest in this beautiful country and need to behave as you would visiting your grandma or even your best friend's grandma

So today I'm going to take you through a few top tips on how to observe Italian customs while you're enjoying the magnificent sites of Italy.

Katy

First up, we're going to be talking about greetings. This is maybe a little bit different to how things work in our own country. Sometimes if we go into a shop, we just hustle in and start looking for what we're doing. That's not the case in Italy, where they always say Buongiorno for good morning or good day, or Buona sera if it's the afternoon when they enter a shop or restaurant. This is a really beautiful custom, I think, and it's really friendly and adds that personal human touch to every single interaction that you have when you're in Italy. I really love it. If you accompany with a big smile, then that's even better. When you're leaving, you would also say Buona Giornata or Grazie, when you're leaving. It's a nice way to round off the interaction. As I said, make sure that you give a big smile too. It's amazing how far a big smile will get you.

Katy

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Now, Italians like to shake hands when they're meeting someone for the first time. Maybe sometimes we like to think that kissing is a lot involved, but that's really reserved for friends or close colleagues. You know what? It can get a bit confusing because the Italians kiss on two cheeks, the French do three kisses, and who knows which side to start? When in doubt, go for the handshake because that's the easiest way to not get things wrong. Another greeting or saying that you might like to learn before you go is if you want to move past someone, and believe me, given the crowds that I saw in the major cities in the last few weeks, they are going to be needing to get past people, you can say *permesso*, which roughly translates as, May I? Or Excuse me. It's a lovely way to make sure that people know that you're there and that you want to get past, but it's not rude in any way, shape, or form. Maybe when you're listening to these, you're thinking, Oh, goodness, maybe I should learn a little bit of Italian. I think that's a really great idea. We have several episodes on getting yourself ready with some useful phrases of Italian before your trip. We'll pop those into the show notes because it's really a great way to really be polite when you're in Italy and people really love that you've made the effort.

Katy

Point number two that I wanted to make was entering churches. Most trips to Italy will involve peaking inside the Vatican museums, or St Peter's Basilicas, or any type of church because there are some incredible art on display there. Typically, on any trip to Italy, even if you're not really so into churches or art, you will probably enter one or two churches. The etiquette of what's required here is quite simple. You need to cover up, and that applies to both men and women, and that means you are expected to cover your shoulders and knees and remove hats in churches. This applies from St Peter's Basilica in Rome to San Marco in Venice and all the little churches and chapels in between. Now, I've had some emails and comments about how people weren't asked to cover up and others were looking for tips on basically trying to get around these customs, but seriously, don't be that person. It's simply showing respect to follow these customs. It's not difficult. If you can't handle a little perceived discomfort to show respect, I'd argue that you should probably stay at home. Please cover up. Just have a cardigan that you can throw over your shoulders, or a scarf or something like that. It's not difficult. Another tip for ladies, if you're traveling in summer and it's really hot, wear a light maxi dress and just bring a light scarf to cover your shoulders in summer.

Katy

The other thing I would like to point out is that churches are first and foremost places of worship, so don't talk too loudly or on your mobile phone, or get in the way of people trying to pray or conduct ceremonies. Unfortunately, you do see people trying to take photos and all sorts of things while people are in mid-prayer. We really just need to understand that they're not primarily tourist attractions, even though they're incredibly beautiful, but they are places of worship. Let's let the people who pray and worship there do so in their peace and quiet because it is really generous of them to allow visitors to come and admire their space also. Right. So I did tell you I was going to be a bit bossy, and I think I have.

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Katy

Well, let's take a little break and talk about coffee and bars because definitely you'll be trying to either buy a coffee or gelato when you're in Italy. So when it comes to coffee, and Italians don't drink milky coffees like cappuccinos after around 11 AM. This is because they have some strong opinions on how milk is digested and basically think it doesn't agree with your body when it comes to the afternoon. So if you want to order a cappuccino after 11 AM, go right ahead. It's more than fine. You'll get one, but you might get a quizzical look on the side.

Katy

So how do you order the coffee? So typically you order your coffee at the cashier. You get a receipt that you hand to the barista and tell them which coffee you have ordered. This can also apply to busy gelateria. You choose the size and type of your order, the cone or the cup, and how many scoops, and then you pay and wait for another server to scoop the flavors you want. It can seem a little bit of double handling, but this is the way that it works. In Italy, it's a custom. It's the way that they do things, so it's good to know in advance that that's how it works because otherwise, it can be a little bit awkward trying to manage money and ice creams and coffees, etc.

Katy

If you choose to sit outside in the piazza (which is really a great idea), you need to know that it's going to be more expensive. And sometimes it's a lot more expensive because you will be served by waiting staff instead of the staff at the cashier. And that's all part of the experience. In Piazza San Marco in Venice, it is not uncommon to pay €8 for a coffee, so really make it count and enjoy the spectacle around you and understand that you are not getting ripped off.

Katy

Number 4, and this one's an interesting one because it is regards to tipping. Around the world, there are many different customs and expectations around tipping, and we actually have a whole episode on this topic. That's episode number 7. But as it comes up almost daily on our Italy travel planning community on Facebook, I think it's worth revisiting. Unlike in the United States and some other countries, large tips are not customary or expected as a general rule in Italy. Of course, if you have had an amazing time and service on a tour or in a restaurant, then do show your appreciation in whichever way you feel comfortable. Usually, Italians will round up their cheque or bill to the nearest €10 or €5 depending on the cost of the meal. But it's completely up to you. No one is going to be offended if you show your appreciation with a tip. This is one of those customs that you can be aware of but can adapt your circumstances because I know if I've had a particularly great tour guide, I really do like to give them a little extra to show my appreciation.

Katy

And that brings us to food and restaurants. So again, there's some really unique and different customs that's good to be aware of when you visit Italy. And the first one that I want to mention is not to touch the produce when you're at a local market. It's counter intuitive to most of us because most of us want to go and check the fruit to see if it's ripe or to see if it's a good one. It hasn't got any bruises. But in Italy, the vendor will select the best fruit and vegetables for you. They'll probably ask what you want to use it for. And this is really their obsession with food coming out because, for example, if you wanted to make a sauce with tomatoes, it's a very different type of tomato and level of ripeness, perhaps, than if you wanted to make a salad. Vendors are very proud to be able to help you choose the correct fruit and vegetables for your needs. Let's respect that. That's their customs and enjoy that experience because it is part of being part of another country. Now, if you want to see how the market vendors react if you do go around touching produce, you can check out Stanley Tuccis' Searching for Italy in the episode set in Venice. He was quite royally told off.

Katy

Another interesting quirk or custom that Italians have that may be different to your country is that eating and walking is considered to be a little strange, except when it comes to gelato. If you're getting take out, this is unusual for Italians, but make sure that you check the rules about eating outdoors as it is forbidden to sit down on some steps of some churches in Santa Croce in Florence or by a fountain and eat in many places. Another really great example of this is on the Spanish steps in Rome. It's not really a custom to go around eating and walking. Italians take their food very seriously, so they like to sit down and enjoy their meal over a long period of time. And sometimes when you're out and about, you do need to grab something quick to eat. But usually the place where you're buying it will have a bar that you can stand up and lean against and eat it. And that's really what's expected.

Katy

Now, if you are sitting down and eating at a table, particularly with Italians, you'll need to wait until everyone at your table is ready to eat and has their meal in front of them. And everyone would normally say, Buon appetito before eating. And that's a really nice custom. I know we have this in Australia too. I would feel very uncomfortable eating before everyone at the table had their meal in front of them. So it's one of those things where I think it's just a matter of respect and enjoyment. So I don't like watching other people eat while I'm not eating either. So I think that's a nice one.

Katy

The next one I'm going to tell you is a little bit different and it's a common misconception. I think some people think when they go to Italy, they need to order the full offering on the menu, which is usually anti pasta or appetizers and then a first course and a second course, a second course and then dessert. Well, you really don't need to do this. There's no expectation of doing this at all. It's totally okay to just order a primi or a pasta dish. You could order just that. Or what I like to do is usually order some anti pasta and a primi. We don't need to order a full three course meal and no one's going to be offended if you don't.

Katy

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But that takes me to the next point is that in some countries, and mainly the United States, I think, is that if you don't finish your meal, you can ask for a take out container to take it home. Now, you will find this in Italy, but really it isn't really a thing and people might be a little bit confused as to why you do that. Just to be aware that taking home leftovers is not really a thing in Italy.

Katy

Okay, now this is where I get to the really bossy bit, and this is around tourist sites and behavior around tourist sites and how to really make sure you're conducting yourself in a way that is helpful for everyone. I can't stress enough how busy it is in Italy. I think everyone that I spoke to in my last few weeks there has really said they're not sure that there is any slow season anymore. Everywhere is particularly busy. Just to be aware of that and that everyone is really wanting to enjoy themselves and go and see these incredible monuments and enjoy them for themselves. Because when there's a lot of people, then unfortunately, that's where some behavior can go out the window. Now, unfortunately, there have been many instances reported of people removing artifacts from Pompeii, carving their names into the Colosseum, and even driving electric scooters and a prestige car down the Spanish steps in Rome. And that's before we even get to Venice, where people jump in the canals and go swimming. Now, I know our listeners are way too smart to do anything like that. But sometimes when we're traveling and having a great time, we forget that people live and work in these places.

Katy

So remember, above all, that you're a guest in this beautiful country and treat the sites and people with this respect that they deserve. A part of this respect is being patient as, like I mentioned, the crowds are huge, especially in the main sites such as the Colosseum, the Vatican Museums, the Uffizi gallery, and Pompeii. There are lots and lots of people and big lines. What you should do is arrive 10 to 15 minutes before your allotted time on your tickets or tours, as logistics is a huge part of moving people around the tourist sites in a really efficient manner so you can enjoy them at the best of its capacity.

Katy

Part of that is minding your manners. I know travel can be a bit stressful, but there is absolutely no excuse for interrupting a tour guide who's in midspeech to ask if they are your tour guide and if not where yours is. This actually happened to us last week, and I was quite gobsmacked because the poor guide, he really handled it very, very well. However, these people are doing their job. I understand that this person really wanted to find their tour, but you need to be aware of what's going around you.

Katy

And that includes the space that you're taking up. People standing in front of thoroughfares and blocking entrances and not being aware of the space that they're taking up is really frustrating for a lot of people. And also people that have a genuine need to move around their city, something that's becoming a huge problem. So let's all just be a little aware of our environment and make sure that we know that even though we're traveling, that we're a guest in someone's country. I did tell you I was going to be a big bossy, but I'm really serious. I did see some quite extraordinary behavior last week in Rome, in particular, and it's really

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frustrating for people that live there, but also other travelers because everyone's there on vacation wanting to have a great time, and let's just all try a little bit harder to be a little bit more aware and generous to each other. Next up is traveling on public transportation. This can be another really stressful thing, particularly if you haven't done this before and you're getting used to how it all works.

Katy

When you're traveling on the intercity fast speed trains, try to get your luggage in the overhead racks as there is really very limited space for big cases in each carriage. That's another good reason not to take a huge case. But if you really need to do that, then definitely book a business class seat because it only costs a few euros more and that will give you the best chance of storing your luggage at the ground level. Now, always sit at your allocated seats. If you want to change, do that after your ticket has been checked, but don't assume people will want to swap seats. Everyone has purchased their ticket, they might have been settled. We don't know their circumstances. So you can ask nicely, but I really wouldn't assume people will want to swap seats. I have seen some very curt no's in the past, but Italian people like to sit in their seats and enjoy the ride. That's on the intercity fast speed trains. I think another good tip for that is to arrive again on the platform that you're going to be traveling from a little bit earlier and get on that the carriage that's allocated to you on your ticket. Because if you're trying to wheel luggage through multiple carriages, it can block people and it can be very frustrating. When you get to the station, you'll see the platform that you need to go to. On your ticket, it should say which carriage you need to go to, and you can find the carriage on the train or even sometimes on the platform. It makes it really easy to get on and off.

Katy

Now, on local transport, buses, trains, trams, make sure you validate your ticket as soon as you board or before you go onto the station, because it's not simply enough to have a ticket, you need to validate it with a time stamp. What happens then if people are unaware of that is that they can cause some problems if the ticket inspectors are on board because we've seen this many, many times is people like to argue, visitors like to argue with the ticket inspectors, and then it holds everything up. You can imagine if that happened on your bus, on your transit to home, it would be particularly frustrating. Apart from anything else, to save yourself some embarrassment, some fines, and all of those things, make sure you validate your ticket as soon as you board a bus or tram.

Katy

Now, the last section that I wanted to talk about is around taking videos and photos and images. So if you're an influencer, an Instagrammer, or you're really serious about taking photos, you will need to get up super early to avoid the crowds and enjoy your time taking photos. Otherwise, this is going to be really tough. You're limited to about a minute of posing at the Trevi Fountain and other big sites due to the crowds. Seriously, you don't want to be the person that needs to pose for 10 minutes while hundreds of people wait. I'm not exaggerating. It is literally hundreds of people around the Trevi Fountain. Really, I don't think you're going to get the best shots with hundreds of people craning their necks and photo bombing by accident or on purpose. If you really want amazing people free photos and the

ability and time to pose as much as you like, then definitely go early, seven o'clock maybe, to the Trevi Fountain, Piazza San Marco in Venice, etc. And then you're going to get those photos you want. It's not going to be as frustrating for you or for anyone else if you're going in the peak times.

Katy

The last thing I wanted to mention about this is please don't take photos of people without their permission. And that especially applies to children and also to older people in Italy. I get it. They may look adorable, but consider whether you'd want random strangers taking and sharing photos of your loved ones. Even though they're particularly cute, I just think we need to be aware that people may not consider themselves to be cute. They may consider themselves to be really intelligent, smart individuals that value their privacy and may not want their images shared across the world. So please, let's ask people permission, and if it's a child, you'll need to ask their parents. So let's all keep that in mind.

Katy

There's some of our general etiquette tips for today for your travels in Italy. I hope you find them useful. And excuse my bossiness, I do feel really passionate about people making sure that they take a little extra care of being polite and sensitive when they're traveling. Travel in Italy is such a wonderful experience that I know you're all going to love and enjoy. Let's just take with us the vibe that we want to go to take memories and lovely local souvenirs and leave only footprints. We all make mistakes and we often get a little bit stressed traveling internationally, but do try to remember that you're in your best friend's grandma's house. When in doubt, use your best friendly smile, a big Buongiorno, and you'll make sure that you'll have a beautiful time.

Katy

So these are some general etiquette tips for today - I hope you find them useful and excuse my bossiness. Travel in Italy is such a wonderful experience. I go by the motto of take memories and lovely local souvenirs and leave only footprints. We all make mistakes and often get a little stressed traveling internationally but do try to remember you're in your best friend's grandma's house and when in doubt use your best friendly smile.

As always We've put a transcript and details of these tips into the episode show notes on our website at untolditaly.com/170 for episode 170.

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

That's all for today, next week we'll take another dip into the magic of the Italy... "ciao for now".

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