

Untold Italy Episode 176 - A week in Tuscany with Untold Italy

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 176.

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

Buongiorno friends, welcome to your weekly escape to Italy and this episode is one I'm especially thrilled to share with you as today we chat with some of our lovely guests that joined our recent Untold Italy tour of Tuscany.

But first, let's start with some background. When I started this podcast and our website and community I had no intention of starting a tour company. Apart from anything else, it seemed pretty impossible to do that from Australia and anyway, I wanted to focus on helping independent travelers plan their own incredible journeys in Italy.

But, as I spoke to more people across the 20 regions of Italy, something sparked in me and an idea to share my passion for Italy's hidden spots and unique experiences was born. I wanted more people to enjoy the incredible hospitality and generosity of the Italian people in the way I had. To sit over a long lunch and hear stories of their land and their commitment to preserving long-held traditions. To enjoy music and wine. To feel like you've completely escaped to another world where time moves slower and in rhythm with the seasons.

I haven't always traveled that way, but as our family reflected on the experiences we enjoyed the most on our trips it was those moments that stayed with us the most. So while I'll always be in wonder and awe of the incredible monuments and art you find in Italy's major tourist areas, it's those intimate moments sharing a laugh with new friends over a glass of wine or wandering through a secret garden that we seek out the most.

Our tours are called tours because that's what people understand and search for but really what we offer is an immersive experience into the local culture, food and wine of some of our favorite regions of Italy. We go beyond the bucket list highlights to help visitors, like you, understand the motivations and lives of the locals. And we do this by tapping into our incredible network of local guides and operators all across Italy who, of course, are the keepers and custodians of their traditions.

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Our fantastic bilingual team based in Italy, facilitates these interactions and are just thrilled to see our guests' eyes light up as they hear the stories, share the food and wine and hospitality of our Italian friends. We're very proud of what we've achieved and I could go on about it forever but perhaps it's best to hear about it from our guests' perspective.

So now let's hear from Rita and Ed who joined us recently in Tuscany to experience the region in the Untold Italy way.

Katy

Benvenuti - Rita and Ed. Welcome on to the Untold Italy podcast.

Rita

Thank you so much.

Ed

Thank you for having us. Ciao

Katy

Oh, Ciao! Look at you with your new Italian words. This is great. I love you've got that beautiful post-trip glow happening. I just think you just looked fantastic. Did you have a wonderful time?

Rita

It was amazing. Yeah, it was really the trip of a lifetime. We had such a good time.

Katy

So good to hear. Now, before we dive into all your trip experiences, would you mind sharing a little bit about yourselves and how you came to want to travel in Italy?

Rita

Sure. Ed and I, probably just before the pandemic or during the pandemic, just started talking and dreaming about trips - what we wanted to do. We live in San Diego. It's a beautiful place, but we've just had the itch for a few years to travel. I think it was between Italy and Japan.

Ed

Yeah, I think so.

Rita

Yeah. So we settled on Italy for our first big trip to think about and dream about. And then Ed actually found your podcast.

Ed

Yeah, I started looking at podcasts about travel in Italy and stumbled upon yours. And I listened to a couple of episodes and shared them with Rita. And eventually, she found your website. And I think from there we started making our plan to take a tour with you guys.

Rita

We had finally settled on Italy, but then we were all over the place as far as itineraries and where we wanted to go. Once we finally picked the time of year that we were going to do it, and we finally confirmed that we were able to take the time off, that's when we started to zero in on some possibilities of where to go.

Katy

It was your first trip to Italy. I'm really curious, you just built it in a different way that most people do. Most people, when it's their first trip to Italy, they'll probably tackle Rome, Florence, and Venice, maybe the Amalfi Coast and dip a little into Tuscany. But what were you really looking for in a travel experience?

Rita

So we knew we wanted to experience the classics and introduce ourselves to those 3 - Rome, Florence, and Venice, which we did. But we both love food, we love wine, and we love just natural beauty and countryside. So we knew we wanted to spend some time in Tuscany that we could just savor and slow down to have that variation in our trip. So I think Tuscany was the one that we really knew that we wanted to go to, and we knew we wanted to experience that and accomplish that. But then it took us a long time to figure out how to plan the bookends. So we settled with the classics and ended up our very last three days at Lake Garda, thanks to your recommendation, and it was perfect because it was nice and calm to just reflect on the three weeks that we were there.

Katy

I was so impressed by the way that you pulled your trip together because, like I said, most people would just do the classics and dip their toes into Italy, so to speak. But it was really I remember when I first spoke to you about your trip, and I was absolutely thrilled that you wanted to have that more immersive experience because I do think it's very different to the experiences that you have in those big, major cities. Amazing as they are. I will never stop going to those cities because I love them so much. However, it is a completely different

contrast, isn't it, when you get those busy, busy cities? What did you like about it the most in Tuscany?

Rita

It's hard to pick one experience. We've talked about it and we'll share those with you. But I think what I liked about the tour the most was the experience with the people and just being welcomed into their homes. Producers of olive oil and wine and these beautiful farms and people that have worked in these different industries for generations. But then to really get to know them, we were a very small group, and then they would welcome us into their home and meet their families and their dogs and just really give us a taste of how passionate and generous the people are.

Katy

Yeah. This, for me, is the glorious thing about this style of travel is that you can actually have that intimate experience with people. And they are so amazing, aren't they? Just their dedication to one thing. Where in our busy lives, sometimes, jobs, we're all rushing around doing a million and one things and maybe not doing them. I mean, I like to think I do things well, but maybe not particularly well. But when you are just focused on doing one thing, one thing only, making wine or doing the olive oil or whatever their expertise is, they just have a calmness about them as well. I think that's just really interesting. It's just so different to our lives. That's what I like about it anyway.

Rita

It is really different to our lives. And it was very clear that the reason they do what they do is way beyond making money. It's more about really the true craft that they love. And this whole concept of taking care of the Earth and each other - really enjoyed that. Very refreshing.

Katy

Yeah. It's interesting. When I was there earlier in the year, we had some meetings with the people that we work with. I hosted a lunch in Rome. This is just to illustrate how generous and amazing these people are. So some of the people that you met, Arianna and Alessio, I invited them to this lunch in Rome, and they hadn't been to Rome for 18 years. They drove down to Rome to come to this lunch, and they brought presents for me. I was so emotional. But I think it really shows just how genuine people are and that they will go out of their way to make you feel at home with them and part of their lives and community. And for me, that was a great story about just how connected these people are when you're becoming friends with them as well.

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Rita

Those two were great. They would drive us around the countryside and tell stories about growing up there. Just really personal stories about what everything really meant to them.

Katy

Yeah. And it's such a beautiful part of the world, isn't it? It's just stunning. What about the farmhouse? Tell us about the farmhouse.

Rita

So Miranda, she was so funny and welcoming. I swear some of my favorite meals were prepared by her. She was just an amazing cook and made sure that everyone was comfortable. And she was just fun, too.

Katy

And it's in a beautiful setting, isn't it? I think it's hard to describe. And you can see photos, but it just doesn't do it justice, does it?

Rita

We'd wake up and my clock was always a little off. So I was getting up around sunrise and we'd look outside the window and it was just vineyards with the sun coming up and this little mist over the mountain. And it was just unreal.

Katy

I don't know what it is about that Tuscan light. There's something really magical about it. It's like a soft glow. They should make a filter for Instagram, Tuscan glow.

Ed

There seemed to always be, no matter where you were, just incredible view and just so many opportunities to take really good photos. We definitely had that at the farmhouse. They were very helpful and they actually helped us with some of our other planning as well. But it was just nice to come home there. Very comfortable. Great breakfast in the morning. They didn't mind cooking us extra espressos in the morning because Americans apparently drink way more espresso than anyone else. So we were drinking a ton of coffee.

Katy

I did get a few reports back about that. It's like, Why do you drink so much coffee? But the coffee is so good, so you want to have it. Why not? Oh, goodness. The farmhouse is beautiful. Just for everyone's benefit, what we do with the farmhouse, we like to have a nice base so that we can go and explore. The thing is, Tuscany is a very big region. I think some people

think, Oh, we'll just go to Tuscany. But it's actually really quite a big region. On your experience, you just scratch the surface, actually, because you missed a whole big chunk of the coast and up the other side. But you did have some amazing trips and day trips, etc. What were some of your favorite things that you did?

Ed

One of my favorites was we went to the olive oil farm where Tobias and his family were running, and we just got to watch. He introduced us to how he makes wine and his approach to making wine and how he takes that same approach to making his olive oil and how cleanly and just natural it's made. That was very interesting. Then he invited us into his home where his parents were and his kids were, and they fed us an incredible meal. I feel like that in and of itself symbolizes very much what this trip was, was sitting at someone's table. It's such an intimate thing to be invited into someone's home and to spend time with them there. And we just did that almost basically every single day that we were on the tour. So that one really struck home to me just because they had two sons and they were really friendly and got along with everyone and it's beautiful.

Rita

It's just like going to a friend's house. And it was just so beautiful. And then Tobias broke down the different ways to process olive oil and how larger producers would go about it. But why his slower and more laborious method is better. He chooses the way to process olive oil because it's better and it takes longer and you're not going to make as much money, but you know that the quality is going to be exceptional.

Katy

Isn't it amazing that just a staple for them, that just so much passion goes into that one thing, just to make it just right, just the way they want it? I just love that passion and the fact that he was able to share that with you. And also, did you taste the olive oil?

Rita

It was so good. That's the only thing after seeing... Because we also visited winemakers and you taste the olive oil that they produce, taste the wine. My favorite was probably the iris farm. It was just so magical. And then she has these products that are all natural and took us to where she cultivates honey from the bees and all of the rows from the olive trees. And then, again, shared a spread, food that she cooked herself and showed us her basket weaving techniques and just very, very intimate and sweet.

Katy

Yeah. I haven't actually been to that iris farm yet because it's only flowering actually in certain times of the year, obviously in Spring, which is why you were there. But Olivia, who's there with you from Untold Italy, she was like, Oh, my gosh, Katy, this is the most beautiful

place I've ever been to. She lives in Italy and she's seen many, many places and she was just absolutely... She was quite emotional about it, actually. She said it was one of the most beautiful places. But yeah, I love the fact that there are all these people doing their own thing, going around doing their own business, but you're willing to share that with you. But unfortunately, the thing is, you can't really find them on the Internet. Can you imagine some of these people doing web-based businesses? Because I can't.

Rita

Well, that's what makes it so special. There's no way that Ed and I could have put together a trip to meet all of those families and experience. There's just no way that we'd have these encounters that... We knew that we'd be doing some of these activities, but we really had no idea how very personal it was going to be.

Katy

I'm so happy to hear that. I mean, for me, when we created these tours, it's not about taking people just to certain places. It's about helping you have a connection with those places. Most importantly, the people who were there that make those places very special because I feel like in travel sometimes where people are doing a checklist of places that they want to go. But sometimes I think it'd be really great just to sit back and think, Why do I want to go? And how do I want to experience these things that will make it very special for me that I'm going to remember it for a long time? You do remember the Colosseum and you go, Wow, that's a huge building. But for me, similarly, just an experience I had in Tuscany in the summer was visiting the goats cheese farm, and there was all these little baby goats everywhere. And Arianna knows I love baby goats. She took me there on purpose. And I was like, Oh, my gosh, there's the baby goats. But it was really, again, sitting down with the family, understanding their passion, and all of that. And that's, for me, what makes an amazing trip.

Katy

Well, you saw some nice towns, too. And I think it's really important to see some of these beautiful towns because this is part of the history and the culture and I think... And they're also very different. This is what amazes me. You can be in one town one day and then you just go off to another town and it's completely different. Did you have any favorites that you went to?

Rita

It's really hard to choose. Second to the last day, we spent the afternoon in Siena. I know that's a lot larger than some of the smaller towns, but I just was really in awe of that place. And so that's one place I really want to return to. And then Greve, which was right by the farmhouse, that was really charming and fun too.

Katy

It's these little places that are just so special, aren't they? And you can't really explain why, but something just speaks to you. It might be a little view or something like that. So tell us about the food, because I think you are big food and wine lovers. I think when I reflect back and I touch base with all our guests that have been on the tour. That's the one thing that really unites people that are on the tours is that they're really passionate about food and wine, and so am I. So I'm like, yes, and so is Olivia. So we're very happy that people have an amazing culinary experiences because that's what we're hoping for you to have. Did you enjoy the food?

Rita

Oh, my gosh, it was amazing. Olivia was great because there were some things that she really educated us on. We were looking for some nice balsamic to bring back, so she gave us some tutorials on what to look for quality wise. Even though it's not from the region, that was our opportunity to find some balsamic. But we were expecting to have amazing pasta, and we did. And it was absolutely to die for. But some of the things that were more unexpected, I would say, was the produce because we had no idea it was going to be the peak of artichoke season. So we had amazing artichokes, so many different ways. So that was a highlight for me, artichokes and delicious fried sage. That was awesome. And fried squash blossoms, amazing tomatoes.

Ed

All the truffles in the world that we could ever want. Oh, yes. I've never seen that much truffles being served.

Katy

Oh yeah.

Ed

I've never had an entire plate of pasta just with a nice blanket of truffle on top of the food.

Rita

A mountain of truffle.

Ed

The food was just beyond. We expected to have the best food and everyone told us, you're going to eat great but every night we would come home and come back to the farmhouse and say, I can't believe we had that day. I can't believe we ate such good food. Everybody in our group was just like, Wow, this is the best pasta we ever had. That's the best ravioli. We made the ravioli, so no wonder it was so good.

Rita

Yeah, that was the best you can get. It was really good.

Katy

So the truffles, tell me more, because the truffles are fresh out of the ground, too. And they're just like, I mean, we have truffles here in Australia, but when you have them over there, you're like, Oh, that's what truffle tastes like.

Rita

Yeah, that's how we felt, too. They're just fresh. When they're fresh, they're just so much more delicate. But we went up into the mountains and went truffle hunting with a man and his dog. His dog's name was Rospo. And we have video of the dog finding the truffles. And then we got the son of the main dog that usually does it. And so the son was a little bit wild. And so they had to be careful that he didn't eat the truffles once he found them. So cute. And then after we found about a dozen truffles, which is so... I can't even explain it. It doesn't do it any justice for me to try to explain how fun it was. We went with the son, Luca, to have lunch, which he and his brother prepared, and they had wine that they make themselves. So it was just really special. Again, amazing produce and pasta. Oh, we had meat that day too. Yes, they made some steaks for us.

Ed

Artichokes again, fried artichokes and raw artichoke salad. Every day was just another... Our minds were blown again by the food.

Katy

I love the way that it's so seasonal as well. So you can go back in fall and it'll be completely different because they've got different things happening, like chestnuts and they've got the olive oil harvest is happening. So that's why I'm a bit of an Italy tragic because I keep coming back to have these experiences over and over again because they're always different. But it's still this symbiosis with the land I just really love. And you also did a cheese-making class, didn't you?

Rita

We did. It was so much fun. We first met the sheep.

Katy

Oh, yeah, important.

Rita

And there was a lamb that was just born the day before. So sweet. And we just got to meet the gentleman who was in under the Tuscan Sun. And some of the sheep were in the movie

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too. And he was so cute and proud. And he showed us how to make Pecorino. And we all made it together. And it's aging now. So I understand that we're going to get an email when our Pecorino is ready to be shipped.

Katy

Oh, my gosh. I love Pecorino. And I think the amazing thing about Pecorino is it's good for people who have got lactose intolerance because it's sheep's milk. And you also did a cooking class. And have you... Well, you've only been back a week, so I won't pressure you to say, Have you cooked it yet? But have you got plans to cook then?

Rita

We have not, but we definitely will. That might have been one of my favorite meals, actually. I'm not just saying that because we made it ourselves. But Camilla, who taught the class and then prepared the pasta for us, made the best cacio e pepe. So basic but so delicious. Just pure and she did it right in front of our eyes. And it was beautiful. It was just so good.

Katy

I do love that. Oh, my goodness. Just getting hungry. I've just had my breakfast. I'm just thinking, I'm hungry. That's the problem, isn't it? You're like, Oh, I ate so much. And then suddenly, four hours later, you're like, Okay, why not? Let's just keep going. All right. So I know you covered a lot of ground when you were there. Do you feel like you got to know Tuscany in the way that you wanted to?

Rita

Absolutely. I would say it exceeded our expectations, honestly, because every day was so different. And I had no idea that we would have such an intimate experience with the people. You just can't find that anywhere. I'm so happy that we did that. I want my friends and family to experience it because it's just you can't even explain it.

Katy

I think you can take a little piece of that with you when you come back. I know I do. It's a grounding thing. I have some things in my house. Just to remind me that even though I live in a big city and I live a very fast-paced life, that there are people that are living in a modern country, but they've still got their foot in the past and very grounded to the land and to the seasonality. And it's a nice reminder to slow down a bit and really just enjoy living instead of trying to constantly tick things off a list. That's how I feel anyway.

Rita

Yeah. We were really impressed too. Most of the wine that we had was organic or very close to organic. So we've learned that the regulations in Italy to put that organic label on a bottle are quite strict. So they have to work really hard to maintain that and also have a product

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that's delicious and that they feel good about serving. That was something that was also unexpected. I had no idea that we'd be having such great organic wines.

Katy

Yeah I think they're very proud of that. I think even there's lots of different biodynamic ways that they methods that they use, and it's very special. Like you said, they're very proud and they want to make sure that they're making an amazing product and also respecting the land at the same time. I feel like we've got a lot to learn, really.

Rita

We heard a couple of times that the way climate change is progressing, it's hard to predict how much longer actually the cultivation will continue. It's going to look a lot different. We learned a ton. It was great. And we felt good. We drank a ton of wine and every day and we felt great.

Katy

I know. Well, I don't use as many sulfates in the wine as what we do in the what I call the new age wine or new country wine. So from United States and Australia and South Africa, use a lot more chemicals and sulfates in the wine to preserve it. So I love that history of it, though, that they've been doing this for centuries, and they know what they're doing because it's been passed down.

Ed

I think that really comes through in the quality of everything that they make. It just tastes cleaner. It tastes fresher. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that they're not traveling long distances as well from where they pick it, to where they process it, where they bottle it, where they age it. And I think by the time we get, even though we're in California and we're in Southern California, wines that we like that are in Northern California take so long. And the process of traveling down here, they probably have to add some additives to try to keep it fresh. It's a different product, like Rita said, anytime - we'd drink every night, we drink a ton of wine every night and no hangovers for the most part.

Katy

Just a ton of coffee.

Ed

A ton of coffee helps. We weren't hungover, but we were really bright-eyed and bushy-tailed the entire time. We needed that extra espresso.

Katy

I love it. I love it. Sorry, can you just explain the contrast between the other stops that you did in Italy? Was there a huge difference? Because I know that was something that you were looking for.

Rita

We had three weeks. The first week was Rome and Florence, and we had an amazing time, but it was all on us to prepare the itinerary and make decisions. And so with three nights each in those massive cities, it's really hard to make decisions on how you want to spend your time. And we're the type of travelers that want to experience as much as we can, but we also don't want to be cramming things into our schedules to the point of being exhausted or not being able to savor the moment. So three nights in Rome, three nights in Florence, and then a week in Tuscany was amazing, relaxing, exhale. Olivia had everything set up for us. This is where we're going to leave the farmhouse at this time. We'll be back at this time. Everything was decided and everything that we did was something that we would have planned ourselves. But it was all of the planning and headache taken away. And so it was really, really nice just to have that guide and be taken care of so well. So it was great. And then after the week in Tuscany, we went to meet a friend in Venice for three days. And that was kind of a whirlwind as well. Not enough time to spend in Venice. We can't wait to go back. But yeah, it was a shock because we had to make decisions again. We made some really good decisions, though, I would say.

Ed

Yeah, we did all right. We were looking around for Liv.

Rita

I was texting Liv.

Ed

How do you get on a boat? How do I get to my hotel room?

Katy

I know, I do that all the time. Even in Melbourne, because Liv's from Melbourne, I'm like, How do I go here, Liv? She's amazing. I think it's great to have those different contrasts. I think this is the amazing thing about Italy is it's so diverse. Even within Tuscany itself, everything's different just a few miles down the road. It's amazing. But when you have that contrast between the cities, Rome, Florence, Venice, and then that time in Tuscany, I think you did an amazing job with your trip planning. Wonderful. I'm curious, now you've had a little bit of a taste of Italy, so are you keen to discover more?

Rita

Oh, my gosh, we can't wait. It's going to be the south. I think actually we spoke to you about Sicily, so we can't wait to go to Sicily. But Olivia talked about Puglia a lot, so that's also on the list.

Katy

And it's so hard to choose. I know. I can't even remember how many times I've been now, but I haven't even been to all the 20 regions, and there's always so many places I want to go back to. But I would say Puglia is like... I call Puglia a little bit of a more chilled out version of Sicily. I love Sicily. Italy has this way of pulling you in and making you want to go back. I think it's because of that diversity that you can experience.

Rita

So much, but within a small space. I think by the end, we were really feeling comfortable with the train system and getting around and navigating the language a little bit as well. We can't wait to get back. We stayed 3 weeks for that, for Americans, a three week vacation is a lot. Might have to do two weeks next time.

Katy

Yeah, I mean, it's a lot. I think it's an assault on the senses because you've got everything happening. You've got a different language, you've got all these amazing sites. There's the busyness of the cities and then the more chilled out. It's a lot to take in, I think. You maybe get three or four days in and then you start to relax into everything and then if you're staying for two weeks and it's almost over. But everyone, you do have that constraint. I know a lot of Americans do. I think it's a really good idea to mix up the cities and the countryside a bit. I think it makes a really big difference actually to the experience. Well, did you have anything else you wanted to share about the trip?

Rita

I would just want to thank you for all of your guidance. You really helped us put this together and made it an incredible experience. The entire thing was amazing. Olivia, she was so much fun. It was like hanging out with a friend for a week. It was great. She did a wonderful job of making everybody feel comfortable and helping us learn. We'll just never forget it.

Katy

Great. Thank you so much. That's exactly when we started this company, which wasn't that long ago, it's really that feedback that I was really hoping for. I'm just so happy that you had that experience. Thank you both. Grazie mille Rita and Ed for sharing your experiences with our listeners. I'm so thrilled. You had such a wonderful time and we're able to experience the Italy that I cherish with all those incredible landscapes, towns, villages, customs, and traditions, but most of all, the Italian people. And I hope you make it back to Italy very soon.

Rita

Thank you Katy.

Ed

Thank you.

Katy

I hope you enjoyed hearing from Rita and Ed on their time in Tuscany with [Untold Italy tours](#). It's such a thrill to hear them talk this way about what we've created as it's exactly what we hoped our guests would feel and come away with having spent some time with us and our local friends across Italy.

As in Tuscany, each and every one of our experiences reflects the local flavor, history and traditions of the regions we visit which are so incredibly different. Just next door to Tuscany in Emilia Romagna you'll have a different experience altogether exploring their local traditions while the contrasts with Sicily and Puglia are on a whole other level which you might have guessed is why I keep returning to Italy again and again.

So if you think this kind of travel experience is for you, we would love to have you join us on one of our trips. You can find out more at untolditalytours.com or in the episode show notes at untolditaly.com/176 for episode 176 - there's also links in your podcast app.

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On next week's episode, we're heading back to beautiful Venice for some tips on extending your budget there while still having a magnificent time.

But until then it's "ciao for now".