

Untold Italy Episode 183 - Wheeling around Italy: Accessible Travel Tips

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 183.

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! Benvenuti friends. On this episode, I'm talking about a topic that I think is very important and to be honest it's taken quite a while to find the right person who I could chat about it with but I am delighted to say I've found exactly the right person. Today we're chatting about wheelchair accessibility and general accessibility issues when traveling in Italy.

If you've spent any time in our favorite country then you may have wondered what it would be like to get around if you weren't fully mobile. In a place where many of us do over 20,000 steps a day what is the experience for people who get around in a wheelchair or who have limited mobility?

To be honest the thought of it is quite daunting to me but then in rolls my new friend Aimee Maldonado who is an absolute inspiration and is here today to share her amazing tips for getting around and having a fabulous time in Italy in a wheelchair.

Aimee is based in the US but she also has an apartment in Florence and spends lots of time in Italy exploring on her own in her manual wheelchair. Even if you're not concerned with mobility this is a truly inspiring and eye-opening discussion about what is possible with incredible determination and tenacity.

Aimee's got so many tips and bits of useful advice for you so let's dive right in.

Katy

Welcome to Aimee. Ciao and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Aimee

Ciao, thank you for having me today.

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Katy

I'm actually so thrilled to have you join us, Aimee, as we had a bit of a chat last week and this conversation is well, well overdue. I'm so thrilled to have found you. But before we dive into our chat about accessible travel in Italy, can you share a little bit about your story, your background, and how you came to fall in love with and spend so much time in Italy?

Aimee

Yes, I was born in the US. My parents are from Mexico, but I completely fell in love with Italy. I went the first time by accident, and then I never stopped going back. I loved it so much that now I've gotten an apartment in Florence, and I go as often as possible. I am a full-time wheelchair user, so that surprises people sometimes as to how I get around. But I actually find it fairly accessible, and I tell everybody the three most inaccessible cities I've been to are actually in the US, and they're DC, New York, and Boston.

Katy

It's amazing, isn't it? We have these assumptions about what works and what doesn't and how you can manage in different environments. But I think the best way to resolve some of these assumptions is to actually dive in and have a chat about what actually works and doesn't work when you're in a wheelchair. So, Aimee, but before we get onto that, can you just tell me what's the most favorite thing that you love about Italy? What is it? What makes your heart sing?

Aimee

It's the people, it's the culture. To me, when I'm there, I feel at home. I tell people if there's such thing as past lives, I think I must have lived there.

Katy

I totally understand that feeling. Absolutely. All right. It's one of those places that if you feel at home, you know. And I think a lot of the listeners that are listening today have that feeling, too.

Aimee

When I'm there, I feel at peace. I feel calm. I'm stress-free.

Katy

I love it. And it's so funny because a lot of people think Italy is this hugely chaotic place, but it's been going on like that for a very long time, and they've got their way of doing things. And as long as you know how to navigate those, the cultural aspects and all of those things, then I do feel like you can fit right in very easily. Okay, so, Aimee, I think most able-bodied people will probably take some of these things for granted, but we thought we would help everyone have an understanding of what are some of the challenges wheelchair users face when they're traveling in Italy because even the short chat I had with Aimee before, it opened my eyes to

so many things. So, Aimee, let's just have a go at some things that might be challenging about hotel stays in Italy.

Aimee

First of all, I think we have to have a very open mind as to what accessibility is because everybody's version of accessibility is different and everybody's needs are different. So it's going to vary from person to person. I try to be as open as possible, and what works for me might not work for somebody else. I'll start off with my wheelchair as a manual wheelchair. It's fairly light and it's fairly narrow so I can fit in through a lot of doors that might not be very wide that other wheelchair users might not be able to fit in through.

Aimee

To start off, hotels always want to check for accessibility, but don't just go based on what it says. You have to ask the right questions. A hotel might say that there has an elevator, so then you make the assumption that it's wheelchair accessible. Well, in Italy and many places in Europe, there might be two or three steps to get to the elevator. So it does you no good that there's an elevator if there are steps without a ramp. Or there might be an elevator outside, but to get into the hotel, there might be two or three steps.

Aimee

So one of the things I do is try to look for pictures of the hotel where I could see what the entrance looks like, if it's street level, if not, if there's a ramp, or there might be a side entrance where there might be a ramp. Then just ask, there's a hotel that I really like in Rome, and if you look at it from the outside, there's three steps to get in, but they have a ramp that they bring out and it's not a problem staying there and I love it.

Katy

What's the name of that hotel?

Aimee

The Albergo del Senato, it's right in front of the Pantheon.

Katy

Yes, I love that hotel. Wow. You wouldn't think necessarily that a hotel in that location would be accessible to wheelchair users, but that's great to know. I'm really happy to hear that.

Aimee

Yes. Then one thing that I found in Italy in particular that's very interesting, sometimes when it's a wheelchair-accessible room, it ends up having two restrooms inside. So that makes it really nice when you go with somebody else and two people are trying to get ready. At the same time, you have two complete restrooms.

Katy

You probably don't get too many bonuses like that, so you got to take them when you can. That sounds good. I like having my own bathroom.

Aimee

It's happened to me at four different hotels in Italy, and I think it's the most interesting thing.

Katy

What are some other things that you need to think about at hotels? Because I can imagine, I'm just thinking about a hotel that I stay at sometimes near there, which is the Albergo del Sole, and it's got steps to get down into the main breakfast area.

Aimee

And some hotels will. And then at that point, there's some that have ramps that they'll bring out. And then there's some that are willing to accommodate you. They'll say, Well, we'll take your breakfast to your room, or we could set it up in this other part of the hotel. So then that depends on you whether you're comfortable with that. I am very flexible with that. So to me, that would work - for many people, they feel like they want to be with everyone else, and that's understandable, too.

Katy

Yeah, I Yeah, I do understand that. And some of these hotels are quite small. So even just thinking about that hotel, even if you were to get down into that area near the cafe, it would be actually quite hard to maneuver around, I think. But I'm sure at that hotel, which I do love, is that the staff would go and help you and bring something to you.

Aimee

That's one thing that I found in Italy in most of the hotels, the breakfast is set up, buffet style and all of the employees are always willing to help. What do you want? I'll go serve you. I'm like, Oh, don't worry about it. I can serve myself. But they're always willing to accommodate and help. And sometimes I do accept the help because it's just very busy and I don't want to be in the way or drop anything. So every time I do it differently, depending on the situation.

Katy

It sounds like you have to just be generally very flexible when you're traveling and in life, which I think it's a good reminder for those of us that have fairly high expectations that flexibility is the key.

Aimee

Yes. And then also, it helps to know the measurements of your wheelchair, both the width and the depth of it. The reason you want to know that is because you want to know if the elevator doors are going to be wide enough if there's an elevator. Usually, the room doors are

not an issue. But in most places around the world, what I found is that the doors to go into the restroom tend to be narrower than the doors to go into the bedroom. And an issue might arise there.

Katy

And do you just email the hotels and ask them?

Aimee

Again, I normally start off by looking at pictures, and I've gotten pretty good at being able to tell if the door looks fairly wide or not, and if I don't see any pictures of what I need. And I also Google to see if there's any reviews from anybody that stayed in a wheelchair. When I do reviews, I try to put in there that I'm a wheelchair user, so people have an idea. But if not, then I will email the hotel and then ask them these questions.

Katy

Would you be using the standard booking sites to find those reviews, or is there something that's specifically dedicated to wheelchair users that you can access?

Aimee

There are new services now that have started trying to cater to wheelchair users. I have not used them, so I don't know how reliable or how big of an inventory or selection they have. I normally just check on TripAdvisor, but also just do a general Google search.

Katy

Good to know. I think if you book on booking.com, they do have accessible... well, you can eliminate things, shall we say, and so you narrow things down rather than maybe make the final selection using them. They've got quite a few good filters there. But I mean, you can immediately see if it doesn't have an elevator so they can be eliminated from your search. There's a lot of things to think about, isn't there?

Aimee

Exactly. Again, just because it says wheelchair accessible, sometimes they mark that. It might not necessarily be accessible. So you want to double check all of those things.

Katy

Yeah. I mean, remember when we were talking last week, you mentioned, I asked you, why don't you use an electric wheelchair? And you had a really good response.

Aimee

So electric wheelchairs. I am fortunate enough that I can use a manual one. Some people are bound to an electric one, and so they don't have the choice. But if you have the choice, I

would use a manual one because it's easier. It's going to give you more flexibility. It's lighter and it's going to open up more accessibility because the manual ones tend to be smaller and more compact.

Katy

And you can collapse them as well, right?

Aimee

Yes. So that's another thing. If I want to get around the city, normally I just roll around everywhere in smaller cities like Florence. In Rome, usually, I just stay in the center and can roll around anywhere. But if I'm ever going to take a taxi, then I can take any taxi. I don't have to wait for an accessible one, which might be harder to find and might be non-existent in smaller cities. I just can transfer from my chair into the taxi, and then the chair can be placed in the trunk or the back seat, whatever's most convenient at that point.

Katy

Italian taxi drivers have not maybe the best reputation, but have they always been helpful towards you?

Aimee

I've never had an issue with any of them. They've all always been very kind. They're always always willing to put the chair. I do a lot of traveling by myself. So if I'm by myself, I just jump in the taxi. They take care of putting the chair in the back. It's just a matter of me telling them how to collapse it and how to take the wheels off or whatever needs to be done.

Katy

I think it's worth mentioning that you also are your Italian is very good. So, Aimee's studying, I think you do two lessons a week, right?

Aimee

Yes, I do.

Katy

I guess that helps.

Aimee

I will say that when I arrive, whatever city I'm arriving to, and that's just across the world, I like to have a private driver pick me up and take me to the hotel or wherever I'm staying because when I get there, there's more suitcases, so it might be harder to fit the wheelchair and the suitcases, especially if I'm traveling with other people. Also, there might be strikes. I have my driver

guaranteed and I don't have to stand in a taxi line after a really long flight.

Katy

Yeah, that's a great tip. I think it's good for everyone, really. But especially you don't want to be navigating taxis and big, long queues with luggage. Because when Aimee and I were talking before, I really had a light bulb moment. Well, how do you actually move around with your luggage? All of these realizations were coming to me. I was a bit disappointed in myself that I hadn't really thought about it before. But I can imagine just trying to navigate an airport with your luggage is a bit of a challenge, too.

Aimee

I travel a lot, so I have practice just rolling it by my side or pushing it in front of me. But not everybody can do that. And one thing I found that in Italy, in particular, they are very nice at the airport. And they helped me from the time that they helped me get on and off the airplane all the way to getting my suitcases, getting it off the conveyor belt, and then bringing the suitcase with me all the way to the taxi, versus here in the US, they help me get off the plane and then I'm on my own.

Katy

That's interesting. Do some of the airlines better than others? Is it mainly the airline staff and you could pre order that, or is it typically just the ground staff?

Aimee

The people that get you on and off the plane, those are run by the airport, so it's the ground staff, and it has nothing to do with the airline.

Katy

I know my parents are traveling later this year and they're traveling on Emirates and they do have services that you can pre order. But I think it sounds like the ground staff in Rome are pretty excellent.

Aimee

When you're traveling by air, you do have to let the airline know ahead of time that you're going to need wheelchair assistance because they're the ones that book and communicate with the ground staff from the airport so that all of that is coordinated and they can get you on the plane.

Katy

Well, it's good to know that you get such a great welcome when you get to Italy - no wonder you love it so much. It's like, Oh, I can help. People are helping me. Fantastic. Amazing.

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Aimee

In Florence, I already know all the ground staff by name.

Katy

Oh, wait, you fly straight into Florence, do you?

Aimee

Generally, that's where I fly into.

Katy

Okay, well, I mean, that's where your apartment is, so I guess that's the best place to go. Now, what about trains, Aimee? I can imagine a lot of people find the prospect of getting on the trains and navigating the stations very difficult, even if they're not in a wheelchair. How do you manage the trains?

Aimee

The trains are also very easy to use. It's just a matter of organization. The first thing you have to do is... What I typically do is I look at the train schedule and see what train I might want to take. I try to take the fast train versus the regional trains because they're just going to be more efficient and less stops. Once I figure out the schedule that I want to take, then I send an email to the Sala Blue that's part of every train station. You can find their email online. You can also email the one in Rome and then they'll direct you to wherever you need or forward your email if you're going to go somewhere else. You need to contact them at least 24 hours before your train departs or the train you want to take because then they have to coordinate the service. The first thing they have to do is make sure that the wheelchair accessible post is available because there's just a limited amount of them. They need to make sure there's not someone else that's already booked it. And as long as it's free, then they'll reserve it. If not, they'll tell you, Well, that's not available - this is the next closest train to that time.

Aimee

And they'll ask you generally, Is if you have a blue card, which I don't because I live in the US and I just explained that. And they will also ask you if you're traveling by yourself or with someone else. So if you're traveling with a companion, they can reserve you and one person with you together so that you have an assistant or just a companion with you. If it's, say, three people traveling, then they won't reserve for the third person. The third person has to make their own travel arrangements. Once I get that email confirmation, then I have to go to the train station and buy the ticket. Unfortunately, up to now, you cannot pay and buy the ticket online, but you have your reservation secure. That's something I just figured out this year. Before, I used to go to the train station the day before and buy the ticket. Now, I just get to the train station early the day I'm departing and buy the ticket and then go to my meeting point. They usually ask me to be at the train station about 45 minutes before the

chain departs.

Aimee

The meeting point changes every time, even within Florence, even within Rome. So you have to read those instructions as to where they tell you to meet. Generally, they do not speak English at the Sala Blu but you can use Google translate to send that email, and usually you can figure it out.

Katy

It sounds like it might be worth while getting some of those phrases and organizing them before your trip if you're heading off. So you've got them ready to go.

Aimee

Yes. And what I do now is I have an email template that I just use every time. So I just look at the email that I sent the time before, and then I just change the date, the times, and the train number.

Katy

Very clever. And so La Sala Blu is the organization that helps people in wheelchairs in Italy. Is that or is it just related to the train station?

Aimee

Just related to the train station. It's with the Trenitalia.

Katy

That's a good point. It's not with Italo, it's just with Trenitalia?

Aimee

I've never used the Italo, but from my understanding, they have their own service system that you have to go through.

Katy

Okay. All right. I can understand why you just choose one and stick with it because you don't need to be learning anything else.

Aimee

And they're also the ones that have the largest train schedule, so it's just easy.

Katy

Yeah, sure. And the spot on the train, is that comfortable? Is that in a nice place or do they pop you near the bathroom?

Aimee

Usually, I think it's usually carriage three. It's in the, I guess, what you would call the business section. So, it's a little bit nicer. There is an accessible restroom. One tip I would say is use the restroom on the train versus at the train station because it's easier to find an accessible restroom on the train than a lot of times

at the train station. And then it's your choice. I usually transfer from my wheelchair into the seat, the train station seat, but you can stay in your wheelchair. They have it set up both ways. And the people from the train station, from the Sala Blue, they'll help you with your luggage as well, like get in and out of the train with your suitcases and then walk you again to the taxi if you need.

Katy

That's good to know that you get some help. I think it would be quite daunting to try and manage that on your own. But I guess it's definitely about how to access that. And what I'll do is I will grab the email address of the Sala Blue and put it in the show notes so people can go directly there if they want to.

Katy

Right. You mentioned bathrooms, Aimee. And I think that's going to be one of the biggest things that would be very daunting going to another country. And Italy, again, is not very well renowned for having great bathrooms and accessible bathrooms, even for able bodied people. How do you go in your wheelchair if you want to use the bathroom? Where do you go?

Aimee

Again, that's going to be something of perspective. Is it a bathroom that's accessible, that has grab bars, that's special for wheelchair users? Yes, there are some. One thing that I really like in Italy, when they do have wheelchair-accessible restrooms, they are very respected versus in the US and in a lot of other countries, everybody wants to use the wheelchair restroom because it's bigger and it's more comfortable in airports, but in Italy, no, it's separate. It's usually kept locked. Even when it's not locked, people respect it and don't use it unless they are in a wheelchair or have some type of special need as to why they have to use it.

Aimee

Now, there aren't those restrooms everywhere, but usually you can find them at museums. One thing in general, museums are usually free for wheelchair users in Italy. If it's an emergency and you need to go to the restroom, sometimes you can just run into the museum because they're not going to charge you. They let you skip the line, go in and out, use the restroom, and you've solved your problem. They're also at the big shopping centers. They will

have wheelchair-accessible restrooms.

Aimee

And I found that a lot of the restaurants now have wheelchair-accessible restrooms. There's even a restaurant in Rome where the restroom is downstairs, but they have an elevator that you could use to get down to it, which I think is amazing. And then in a lot of cities, maybe the restrooms are downstairs, but they will have the wheelchair-accessible restroom in some part of the restaurant that's upstairs and you just have to ask. Now, not everywhere has them, and that's not the case everywhere, but always ask. Just because it seems like they're not accessible or there's not one doesn't mean there's not one hidden somewhere.

Katy

Should we give a shout out to the restaurant in Rome? Because I think they deserve one.

Aimee

Yes. It's close to the Vatican.

Katy

Close to the Vatican. With a name like that, you'd expect. I think Italy has a reputation of being difficult in a lot of these type of things, but it's really great to hear your perspective on that and where to find places that will actually be helpful and provide the experience that you want to have because you deserve it, absolutely. You want to have the same, if not better, experience than everyone else. Have you been to the Rinascente? Because they have a lot of rooftop areas. I'm wondering if you're able to access those.

Aimee

I've gone to the Rinascente in Florence, and they do have the rooftop and it is wheelchair accessible. There is an elevator to get all the way to the top. It is a very small elevator and my wheelchair fits in perfectly. One that's a little bit wider might not make it all the way.

Katy

Because I think that's... I was thinking when you were talking that it's a department store, so they would maybe have some of those facilities that you might not expect everywhere else. I know there's one in Milan, I'm not sure about the accessibility of their rooftop, but if you can get up there, it's really worthwhile because it's a beautiful view of the Duomo up there.

Aimee

Yes. And like the Coin stores, they're modern. They have restrooms inside. Also the Vatican has accessible restrooms. It's just a matter of asking. Like I said, you never know. Also when you find one, go even if you don't want to go.

Katy

I know. Sounds like a little thing, but I'm sure you might regret it later on if you don't.

Aimee

When we went with my grandmother, that's what we would tell her. Okay, there's a restroom here. Do you want to go? She would say no. Then half a block later, she wanted to go. Well, there's not one here now. You have to wait.

Katy

What about restaurants? Because I guess a lot of people's favorite restaurants, you think about them and

there's a few steps to get down. You mentioned this one in near the Vatican that sounds amazing with this lift. But how do you manage getting into the restaurants that you want to go to? Because I'm sure you don't want to be limited by the fact that you're in a wheelchair.

Aimee

I found most restaurants pretty accessible. There's lots of options of restaurants that don't have a step to get in or maybe just have one step. With me, with the manual chair, again, it's very doable to do one step, so that's not an issue for me. There are some restaurants that maybe have two or three steps, but at those restaurants, they've always been really nice and they're willing to carry me in Cleopatra style, and I'm up for it. Now, not everybody's going to be up for it. And again, if you have a powered wheelchair, then it might be too heavy for them to be able to do that or more of a risk that the wheelchair might break. So it might not be feasible. But if it's feasible and you're willing to do it, people are always willing to help.

Katy

That's so good to hear. All right. So now, A me, why don't we have a little bit of a chat about how... Most people will be going to the big cities. Let's have a little bit of a chat about how we tackle some of those big cities in a wheelchair and then maybe go into some of the smaller places because I know you've got some very inspiring tips about Siena, which I love. How about Rome? What can we expect in Rome?

Aimee

All of the city centers are generally going to have cobblestone. And yes, it's going to be a bumpy ride. And to me, I'm used to it. I'm fine with it. To me, just rolling through a park and tree limbs or whatever might be there. It's not an issue for me. For some people, it is an issue.

Aimee

One thing I find that I prefer to push myself, if somebody wants to help me or tries to push me, it seems like when people are pushing you, they push down. So there's more of a likelihood that the small wheels are going to get stuck between the cobblestone and that you might flip out of the wheelchair. So when I navigate the roads, I tend to just look down and

concentrate on the cobblestone in front of me and make sure that they're not too separated or to go around the rougher spots and things like that. And again, I try to not have people push me. Now, if there's some steps or an uphill, then I might ask someone to help me up. And then again, just paying attention as to how I'm navigating. If it's a downhill, it might be easier to go down backwards, so there's less of a likelihood of flipping out of the wheelchair.

Aimee

There's this thing called a third wheel that it's a wheel that you can stick at the front of the wheelchair. A lot of people like to use it. I used it last year when I did the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. And for that, to me, it worked very well because we were walking all day versus I can't imagine myself using that in Rome or Florence or some of these other cities where I'm constantly going in and out of shops or in and out of museums because it is bigger and bulkier and it extends 2-3 feet on the wheelchair. And so to me, it's not practical for that. But I have seen people in the touristy cities use it. I'm not sure if they're removing it when they're going into places because it is fairly easy to remove. And so that I will say, again, I like to roll around everywhere. That way I can explore the streets and get lost in the streets, which is one of the things I love doing. And then that's how I find some unique and yummy restaurants that aren't filled with tourists. And so that's me. Some people prefer to have a taxi because they can't go long distances, or they might prefer to have a little bit of a driver - that way, they can leave you right at the front and pick you up right at the front. And it limits the amount that you're rolling around in some of the cobblestone or the more complicated streets.

Katy

Now, you mentioned you stayed right in the heart of Rome, which is our favorite building, the Pantheon. Rome, around that area, is pretty flat too. It's not until you get up towards the Colosseum and up to Monti and the Spanish steps where you start getting into steepness.

Aimee

Correct. Rome is fairly flat. The area around the Vatican is flat. The area around the Pantheon is flat. I even find as long as you don't go up the Spanish steps, the area in front of it and around it is flat as well. This trip that I was there last month was the first one that I went exploring the Monti neighborhood, and that was deeper, but it was still doable. I was by myself and I was able to push myself up and down the hills by myself without any big issues. Granted, I go a little bit slower when I'm by myself than when I have help pushing up. But there was also people that came across me that would ask me Can we help you? And this time I said, No, thank you, I'm good. Other times I have accepted help. It just depends how tired I am. And I was going really slow because I'm one of those people that stops and takes pictures at every corner because I see a cool plant or a cool window or whatever it might be.

Katy

I'm one of those people, too. How about Trastevere? Do you, have you spent much time there?

Aimee

Yes, I've spent time there. It is fairly flat. The cobblestone are, I would say, rougher in that area, but it is still doable. Again, as long as you go slow and steady. I found that the shops and the restaurants in the area were accessible as well as the church that's right there in Trastevere.

Katy

It's a beautiful church, isn't it? It's absolutely stunning.

Aimee

Yes.

Katy

You mentioned as well the Vatican, and I've been there with a friend who has a walking stick, and they were very helpful to her. There's a lot of different ways you can get around in the Vatican, too, isn't there?

Aimee

There is. To get to the Sistine Chapel, there is an accessible route and one of the people from there will escort you once you're ready to go and see the Sistine Chapel. The thing that I would say is different from my understanding is most people get out of the Sistine Chapel and there's a route to get to St Peter's Basilica through the inside. When you're in a wheelchair, you can't do that same route. You have to exit the museums and then come around the outside to the front to get into St Peter's, but you do get a skip all of the line, so that's nice.

Katy

Well, it's quite a long way around the back there. It's not a short little trip, so you definitely deserve to skip the line there.

Aimee

Then once you're inside St Peter's Basilica, there's a rooftop, which a lot of people don't know. There's actually an accessible route elevator to get to the rooftop. You could get the views up there, which are beautiful.

Katy

They are really stunning. I was there last year on a very hot day. Yes, you're right. It's quite a large elevator there to go up onto the roof of St Peter's. It's a really good point. The other big, obviously, site that people want to see in Rome is the Colosseum. I know it does have an elevator there.

Aimee

Yes, it has an elevator. When people say it can't be made accessible because it's old and we don't want to ruin it. I'm like, The Colosseum has an elevator. If they were able to manage to

put one in the Coliseum without ruining it, you can get one here. So yes, the Colosseum is very accessible. It has an elevator to go up. And now I was just reading that now they opened a new elevator to go up to the upper level that just opened within this last week or two. Amazing. I'm going to have to go back when I go in November.

Katy

There's always something new to see the Colosseum.

Aimee

I'll come back and report.

Katy

We need you to do that. Absolutely. I mean, it sounds like Rome is pretty good to get around. Have you been to the Altare della Patria? I think there's a lift to get up on the roof there, too. I don't know if you've been.

Aimee

Yes, there's an elevator to get up, and actually there's a fee, but if you're in a wheelchair, they don't charge you either. Excellent. Yes, you can get up there. There's also an elevator to go down into the Forum. Then I found the baths to be where the Roman baths are to be very accessible too, because they've made platforms, so you're not really rolling over the gravel. Everybody's walking on these platforms, so it's actually smoother.

Katy

Amazing. Is that the Baths of Caracalla? That one?

Aimee

Yes.

Katy

I love that site. It's one of my favorites in Rome. Then, of course, if you're in the Colosseum Forum area, the Capitoline museums, I'm sure. Although getting up that hill, or is there a back entrance?

Aimee

That's one of my tricks, what I did in Siena. I had a taxi take me there. Then I went into the museums. Then when I left, I just rolled down. I will say that one is quite steep, so you want to be careful. I rolled down backwards to make it safer and not flip out.

Katy

Good idea. I don't know. I think I would find that very difficult because I don't like anything speedy. It sounds like going down backwards is a very good tip.

Aimee

I would say it's good to have gloves on your hand so that you don't mess up your hands.

Katy

Another good tip. I love it. I mean, in Florence is your hometown. Is that an easy place to get around and see things?

Aimee

Florence is fairly flat. To me, I find it very easy to get around. Again, it's the cobblestone. The cobblestones in Florence are different than the cobblestones in Rome. And so it's just adjusting from one to the other ones. The one in Rome are flatter and bigger. And so it's adjusting how you have to roll around them.

Again, you have to look at the ground, make sure that there's not any big gaps where you might get stuck or flip out of your chair. One thing that I've noticed that they've been doing in Florence is they've been doing a lot of street improvement. So some of the streets, the cobblestone have been reset, so they're much smoother than they used to be. That's something that's nice. One tip anywhere in Italy and I would say anywhere in the world, which makes people nervous is the sidewalks, not all of them have curb cuts at the end, or sometimes there's cars parked on the sidewalks, or sometimes they become very narrow so you can't get down them is I like to roll on the street a lot. It makes people really nervous. But to me, you also have to be a conscious person.

Aimee

If you're going to make the choice to roll on the street, then you need to be alert for taxis and cars coming and also understand that they have the right away. So scoot over and let them go by.

Katy

I can tell that that's a calculated risk for you, but it's fine because in most of those center areas, there's very small number of vehicles that are going down there.

Aimee

Well, and sometimes there's, like in Florence, one of the main roads, it has huge busses that run by it. The roads already narrow, you have the busses. And if you're there, I usually try to squeeze in between two cars that are parked to get out of the bus's way and not risk the bus making it around me.

Katy

You're so inspiring. Just feel it. Just go. I'm going down the street like an Italian Ferrari driver. Yes. Don't let the bus stop me. Amazing. Florence is doable as well. What about in the Duomo? Is there an elevator in the Duomo?

Aimee

To get into the Duomo in Florence, the entrance is actually around the side and the back and there's a ramp to get in. There's not an elevator, there's a ramp to get in and then you can go inside of the Duomo. There is not an elevator to get up to the actual dome part, but you can go inside and visit the church. Most of the big churches in Florence have some type of accessible entrance with a ramp on the side like Santa Croce, Santa Maria Novela, Santa Spirito. They're all accessible.

Katy

That's great. Because if you want to go see some art, just roll yourself into the church. Santa Croce is one of my favorites. It's got so many surprises around every corner there. It's something that I think everyone should go see.

Aimee

Yes. Then the courtyard museum on the side, that has an accessible entrance too.

Katy

Picturing it now. Yes, indeed it does. Let's talk about a city that people might find very disconcerting if they're in a wheelchair, that doesn't have any traffic, any car traffic. It's Venice. This is a city of over 400 bridges. Now, that sounds like a challenge.

Aimee

I have been to Venice and I did find it challenging. They do have a map that marks the accessible route. I found I'm really good with maps and I found the map confusing. I am the kid that loved maps, still loves maps, had globes and everything always growing up. But that map was very confusing to me. One of the things, too, is it'll show you the routes, but then some of them depend on you getting on the Vaporetto at one point and then getting off at a different point to get from one, I guess you could call it from one island to the next island. Then the map shows more the route within the island that's accessible. Some of the bridges are supposed to have or have these little elevators, but there's keys to them. I could never figure out where to get the keys. There are companies that do accessible tours of the island. I think if I were ever to go back or decide to stay there for the night, I would hire one of those companies to do a tour so that I could figure it out how it works. Then once I see them do it, then I'll know how to get around.

Aimee

Like I said, I did find it challenging. I've read that the best time to go which I've never done it and I'll have to do it one day and report back again, is when they do the marathon. I believe

maybe a week or two before the Venice marathon and for a week or two after. They set up ramps for the runners across all of the bridges. So they start setting up the ramps, I think, a week or two before, and then they remove them a week or two after. That's what I've read. I'm not sure what the timeline you'd probably want to confirm that with locals before going. So it makes the city much more accessible because there's no stairs on the bridges, it's all ramps. And the marathon used to happen in November. I checked it before we got on the call. This year, it's at the end of October, and it seems like last year was the end of October. So you would want to look ahead and then plan your trip around that. I would suggest that.

Katy

That's a great tip. I guess the other thing to note, though, is that some of those bridges are pretty steep, so you'd want to either get some help, maybe getting up them, and then roll down backwards.

Aimee

Exactly.

Katy

So you don't top all over. Yeah, excellent. I think Venice is one of those places sounds like it might be a good idea to get some professional help. What can we expect about tours that cater to people that are in wheelchairs? I've seen this a few companies pop up lately. And what's your impression?

Aimee

The only tour especially designed for wheelchairs that I've done was in Machu Picu, Peru. Everywhere else in the world, I've just gone in, looked for the tours, try to figure out what they do, where they see. Then I write the tour company or the tour guide or whoever's organizing that particular tour, and I say, I'm in a wheelchair, I can do one step, maybe even two steps with some help. I can pop the chair in the trunk, I can transfer. I give them as much information as possible. Then they tell me, Yes, we could do it. It's accessible, or "We'll figure it out", or "We'll find help". That's always how I've booked it and I've done it. Again, when I do reviews on TripAdvisor, I like to put, "This tour was accessible". I've had really good luck and success with that, from doing food tours to winery visits to hiring private drivers, different things like that. It's always worked for me. I've never had an issue. And if a company is not responsive or they respond right away like, Oh, we don't do tours for people in wheelchairs, or if they have it on their website, like, No wheelchairs or no stroller, then I don't even bother approaching them because if they don't want my business, I don't want to give them my money.

Katy

Sounds reasonable to me. I guess it's really interesting that people have seen maybe an opportunity to cater specifically towards people that are in wheelchairs. I've had some feedback from people that have written in to me that some of them, they haven't been on

them, but they seem quite expensive. But I can't make a comment. Do you have an impression about that?

Aimee

I've seen tours that cater for people in wheelchairs, but it's more like a complete trip planning. I think they do tend to be very expensive, double or triple for what I could plan it on my own. And they also seem to be more limited in to the things that they do or where they go. A lot of them, I'll give you an example, it's not a group tour for wheelchairs, but when you're on a cruise, generally, most of the tours are not accessible. If there's a tour that they call as accessible, basically, they have you sitting on a bus or a van all day and you just drive around and you see it's not really getting up and down and out and actually seeing and exploring the sites.

Katy

All right. So what I'm hearing from you, Amy, is that if you have a little bit of creativity and a little bit of flexibility that you can really tackle this stuff on your own, how about some of the smaller places? You mentioned Siena and you really blew my mind when you told me about that. So I'd love our listeners to hear what you did in Siena.

Aimee

Siena is a very steep city. We went as a day trip from Florence, took the train, got to the train station. At the train station, I got a taxi. I had him take me all the way up to the Cathedral in Siena. Is it a Cathedral? Is it considered a Cathedral?

Katy

Yeah, it is.

Aimee

I had the taxi take me up to the Cathedral in Siena. Once I was up there, went in, saw it. It is accessible. It was a museum across from the Cathedral. Then I just started going down the city because that's basically at the top of the city. It was just easy to roll down. Now, some of the streets or sections where I was rolling down were very steep. And again, there's cobblestone, so you have to be careful, but it is doable. There was a few where I went down and then maybe I had to go back up, but it was much easier than having started at the bottom and having to push all the way up. I might have had two or three hills versus 100.

Katy

It... I mean, I reckon you easily deserve three or four gelato a day just by rolling yourself around. There's a lot of muscle work happening there, I'm sure. Amazing.

Aimee

And then with San Gimignano, it's steep. So once you get into the town, you go up, and then on the other end, you're going to go down. And so if you have enough upper body strength,

then I did it up and down by myself this last time I was there last month. But it's also, if you have somebody with you that can help you push, it's very doable. And then most of the shops have no steps or one step to get in. So if you wanted to go in and explore, you can.

Katy

And if you went with someone and they were driving, are you able to use a disabled sticker that they have in some parts of the world? Here in Australia, if you... My dad, for example, he's got limited mobility, so he has sticker that he can access certain car spaces. Is that possible in Italy?

Aimee

I don't know. I know that Italy has placards that they issue for people to be able to use the handicap parking. Every time I say I'm going to take my US 1 and see if they'll allow me to use it. And every time I forget, since I don't use a car much over there. But that's one of the things that I've been trying to figure out if they would allow me to use my US one there, or if somebody's coming from another country, if they would allow you to use your placard from that country. I don't know the answer to that.

Katy

You can report back on that one, too.

Aimee

Yes, I will report back on that.

Katy

Fantastic. You know and then the other, what place that I was thinking of that would be like... I don't even know where you'd start, but I do know that you, Aimee, would have a solution. It would be the Amalfi Coast and places like Positano. Have you ever attempted that?

Aimee

Yes. What we did, it was actually my first trip to Italy, it was part of a cruise stop. We hired a driver to take us the Amalfi Coast. We stopped in Sorrento. I was able to roll through Sorrento. That was not a problem. Then we went to Positano. That is going to be more challenging because it is very steep and it's all these stairs. There was a section of street where the driver left us and I was able to explore some shops. So it is doable for a visit. I would probably not stay there unless the hotel is right off the main road and then I know for sure that the hotel is accessible because then I know I'm also going to be probably more confined to that hotel than just a few shops and restaurants. We went from there to the town of Amalfi, and then that had some areas and shops which were accessible. Again, it's doable for a few hours. I probably wouldn't and stay there overnight.

Aimee

Then I stayed in Naples. Naples is very accessible. Then took the ferry to Capri. The ferry is accessible. Then once in Capri, I was able to do a boat tour to go around the island and see the Blue Grotto. The boat was not per se accessible, but I was able to jump out from my chair and get into the boat, and they helped me, and then they left my wheelchair in a shop. Then once we got back, they helped me get again out of the boat and into my chair, and my chair was waiting for me.

Katy

That's amazing. I'm so glad you had that experience. It's one of my favorites in the world.

Aimee

Then the funicular up to the island from where the ferry leaves you is accessible. You can go up into the island and explore it. The same thing for Orvieto, the funicular is accessible. You could go to Orvieto by train, take the funicular up, and then explore the city.

Katy

Another one of my favorite places in Italy, it's a beautiful town. That's so cool. Aimee, you are amazing. I just love that you just don't let anything stop you and you found ways. I think it's really inspiring. We have a big Facebook group of travelers and we hear a lot of petty grievances on that every day, but I really feel like that anything can be overcome with a positive attitude and just a bit of creativity. Thank you so much for sharing your insight and experience traveling Italy. I know many, many people will have found this discussion extremely helpful. If our listeners had any questions, would you be happy for them to reach out to you?

Aimee

Yes, they can reach out to me through my Instagram account, which is @whirlingtheworld, and just send me a DM through there, and I will be happy to help them in any way I can.

Katy

I think it sounds like you've got a really good process of reviewing places on Trip Advisor. Do you do that regularly?

Aimee

I used to be much better at it. I'm two years behind on my reviews. I need to go back and finish reviewing everything that I've done these last two years.

Katy

I know we had a bit of a pause there, didn't we? Let's not mention the pause. But it's probably worth going back and it'd be great to hear your reviews.

Aimee

I was actually one of the few people that was traveling throughout the pandemic. It was nice because nowhere was crowded.

Katy

I know. You're having to give up your quiet Florence now. It's a shame. Grazie Aimee. Thank you so much for sharing all your deep insight and for joining us on Untold Italy today. It's been truly inspirational to hear how you travel through Italy with such a positive attitude and just with your eyes wide open and just enjoying every last minute. I love it. Thank you, Aimee.

Aimee

Grazie. It's been a pleasure.

Katy

You know what, I think Aimee is amazing but I also think it shouldn't require so much effort in terms of planning, thinking, cost and physical exertion on her part to have the experiences that so many of us take for granted.

There are a lot of news reports these days about the crowds and heat in Italy and I stop to wonder how Aimee would manage it. Probably with a big smile on her face and no complaints... which is more than can be said for some of us who have fewer challenges.

I think it's going to take a much bigger effort on the part of able-bodied people as a collective to make things much easier for people who are traveling with a disability but in the meantime let's all take a leaf out of the Italian attitude and offer to help individuals where we can.

If you're keen to learn more about accessible travel in Italy or are inspired to pack your bags now you've got these on-the-ground ideas for getting around and enjoying yourself when you get there we've put all the tips, ideas and links Aimee shared as well as her social media links into the show notes on our website at untolditaly.com/183.

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.

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That's all for today, next week Danielle Oteri and I will be chatting about the summer season so far in Italy and takeaways for those of you who are traveling soon or thinking about a summer trip to Italy next year but until then it's ciao for now.

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