Untold Italy Episode 186 - Captivating Catania - Sicilian City of Charm

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 186.

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 Ciao everyone. Welcome back to Untold Italy the travel podcast that takes you from coast to coast of beautiful Italia. Today we're heading back to Sicily! The island is having quite its moment in the sun thanks to recent TV series White Lotus II and for filming locations of the new Indiana Jones movie. But those in the know, have always known, just how special Sicily is!

Joining me today is one such person, my friend Karen La Rosa whose passion for Sicily knows no bounds. I've had the pleasure of collaborating with Karen on several projects and am always blown away by the depth of her knowledge about Sicily, its culture and people. On this episode, we're headed to a place that Karen has a very special affinity with - the city of Catania. Often in the shadow of her more famous sister Palermo, Catania has many treasures of her own so let's dive in and learn all about them.

Katy

Bentornata, Karen. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Karen

I feel like we're old friends now.

Katy

Of course, we are. We've even been able to hug each other after so many times talking on the phone. So it was really so lovely to have you back on the show, Karen. And it's been such a long stretch between episodes. Now, I'm looking forward to chatting about Catania, but I've

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given you a short introduction, but how about letting our listeners know a little bit about you and your passion for Sicily?

Karen

I am Karen La Rosa and I started my company 15 years ago. I arrange custom tours and small group tours to Sicily, and I have had a wonderful time doing it, including a tour that Katy and I did together last year that was so much fun. My passion for Sicily is attached to my heritage, of course, and also just what I saw the first time I went and how I wanted to share all of that. I think I've done that over 15 years and I've had a lot of fun doing it and I am quite busy these days.

Katy

And so you should be. Karen has a deep love and knowledge about Sicily and there's really no better person to go around and discover the different areas, not just maybe some of the most common and most well-known places like Palermo or Mount Etna or Taormina. But she knows the secret spots. And so I was really thrilled to go on a walk around beautiful Catania with Karen. Nearly a year ago now. And it's perhaps a lesser known than the capital Palermo, but it's certainly an incredible and important Sicilian city.

Karen

I couldn't really agree more. I think it's a great city and really underappreciated by most visitors to Sicily today. It's true that if you only look skin deep on anything, it seems a little gritty with dark buildings, lots of graffiti, most of which is professing undying love for somebody or political in nature. But you have to look deeper than that in anything. So to understand anything, you have to understand a bit of the history, understand a little bit about the people. And there's some 600,000 people in Catania, which sits in the shadow of an active volcano. And it's been around since 729 BC, so only 2,753 years. That's a long time.

Katy

It really is.

Karen

But underneath the surface, there is this energy and a pulse. There's an entrepreneurial spirit among the young population. And in some ways, I actually liken it to New York City, which is

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also gritty and has a lot under the surface and a vibe. So it's a very interesting place for from that standpoint. These young people have an interest, and I've seen this actually all over the island, but more so in Catania, they want to combine the old world culture and the things that we think about on a, you know, as being grandma in the kitchen and these old images that come to mind. They want to combine that with modern age, with the skills and the education that many of them acquired when they've studied abroad or worked abroad. But they want to do it right and carefully. I actually was at a wine panel discussion about another region in Italy that is trying to bring their wines more to the front and they cited Sicily as a place that has done it right. I'm very proud of them on that score. It's a subtle vibrancy that's a little hard to pinpoint even for me. But as it happens everywhere, history makes the people who they are. And in Catania's case, it's a very deep, complex, and rich history. So I should probably back up a minute. Catania, where is it? It's smack dab in the middle of Sicily's East Coast on the Ionian seaside. We often say that Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean, and it is the largest of the islands in the Mediterranean but technically, there are three seas, not one. So you have the Ionian Sea to the east, the Tyrrhenian Sea is to the north, and the Mediterranean Sea is to the south.

Karen

Catania, it's not on the beach like Cefalu, but it's close to beaches. And it's it's got a glorious lava coastline very close by where the Sicilians are quite adept at sunbathing and swimming. It's like a developed skill. You have to be able to walk from your towel, spread on the rock, to the water and back. But they do it with ease.

Katy

I think you need special shoes. I don't think I'd attempt it.

Karen

You need special shoes. You need years of experience. But from a tourism standpoint, it's the perfect jumping-off place to visit the North, the interior, and the south. You're not more than an hour away from so many great places, and there's good road access. There's a good bus system. Mostly they travel by busses. There are some trains to help you get to these places. Beyond that, the airport is only 15 minutes from the city, so it's really quite easy in that regard. But I think some of the reasons that Catania hasn't been on many people's radar as a destination is perhaps because there's just misperceptions, just like every... Sicily, as a whole, has suffered from that. It's only really within the last 15 years or so that the veil has lifted. Now we have a hot destination and that's fabulous. Catania has to catch up a little bit.

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Taormina was on the grand tour back in the 19th century and it's been a haven for tourists forever. Ortigia is glorious. Who doesn't love Ortigia? Palermo has its own beauty. But Catania was always a place that people just wanted to pass through. I don't know. I was convinced of its merits a long time ago, and I know the tide will change. It's happening. I know that because sometimes I can't even find rooms there.

Katy

I do know what you mean about the energy, though, because when we were walking around and it's a young energy, it's really interesting. I don't know if there's a university there or...

Karen

There is.

Katy

Because I was getting that university vibe of the young people. And you get that in Bologna as well because you've got that strong student population, which I don't know what it is in any country around the world, if you have a strong student population, you do get that younger energy. It's fun to be.

Karen

There, actually. It is. They have a university. They also have a little tech thing going on there, like a little Silicon Valley. There is some technology and that thinking going on in the area. There are lots of, not necessarily in Catania proper, but in the area, artisans doing things like craft beer and craft gin and certainly wine. They're trying new things but still trying to do it with the things they hold dear and that work well in Sicily.

Karen

So Catania was settled by the Greeks back in, as I said, 729. Same people that settled Naxos. I try to be careful with the identification of these people because we refer to them as Greeks, but of course, they weren't Greeks. There was no Greece, really at that time. They were all settlements and territories and city states and things like that. They weren't unified and certainly, Italy wasn't unified until 1861. It operated as all these individual places. They came to Sicily because they wanted to find new land. They wanted to actually live someplace,

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taking what they knew from home with them and do some trade and bring their culture with them.

Karen

Magna Graecia is that. The Greater Greece. They had settlements all over the Mediterranean and all this. They built with intention. They built like they were going to stay there. Not huts like the Phoenicians may have built because they were moving around, but they built great stone buildings and they stayed in the area. If you fast forward 500 years. I'm just setting you up with this history here. Then came the Romans. After that came the whole parade of conquering peoples, Barbarians, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Anjouns Swabians, and then the Spanish. They had that. They had the volcanic eruption of major proportions in 1669, and they had a devastating earthquake in 1693 that wiped out half the population. That's a lot of history. When you look at Catania on the surface, it's hard to see all of that that went into or that is behind who these people are and what the place looks like.

Katy

It's really like geography is such an important driver of culture. And especially you talk to people in Naples and they live beside a dormant volcano. And they have a sense of urgency about them that is quite unique in Italy as well. But when you think about these people in Catania, and you can see that it's smoking in the background, it's bubbling away up there, Mount Etna.

Karen

All the time. And in fact, when you're walking up one of the main streets in Catania - Via Etna, you can see the volcano, and it is constantly emitting smoke. When it erupts, which is not infrequent, and even though it looks like it's two blocks away, it's pretty distant. But if it erupts and throws plumes of ash into the sky, then it rains ash on Catania, black lava ash. So that creates this dark sense in the city where there is ash on the ground sometimes. They clean up ash like we clean up snow, but they use it and they use it in the building material because the ash actually makes the cement sturdier. And it's using something that is a natural resource. It comes down from the sky and it's free and so they mix it in. And gives the buildings, if you've ever noticed that pink coloring on a lot of the buildings, it's an ash pink or an ash yellow. I love that. They're beautiful colors that I wish I could replicate in my bedroom. So that's something that they contend with all the time. Beyond that, the city, because it was destroyed during the earthquake in 1693, a number of date you will hear

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almost every day you're on the east side of Sicily, it was built by the Spanish, rebuilt by the Spanish in a very distinct Baroque fashion.

Karen

When you're walking around, there are many buildings that are really beautiful. The Palazzo Biscari is one of them. You see it as you drive through the aqueduct and come into the town, and it is beautifully ornate. Then there's a street called the Villa Crociferi, on which there are various churches, and they're beautiful, all different. The Cathedral itself in the Piazza Duomo is quite beautiful to look at. You've got a whole architectural thing capturing your eye.

Karen

Something else that they have there now that's capturing your eye is very Instagram-worthy because I've seen it everywhere. They have adopted the use of these colorful umbrellas to shade the streets. It's so wonderful to look at these beautiful colors on these otherwise dark streets that don't have a lot of trees. It also helps you stay a little cooler because it blocks the sun. That's a really fun thing to see as you're walking through the town. They do have a couple of gardens, though, that have fountains. One of the things I like to do is walk all the way up Via Etna to the Bellini Gardens. There's a beautiful fountain in there, lots of greenery, and across the street is Savia, which is the best place in Catania and in the area to get arancini.

Karen

So you go in there, you get your arancini, you go across the street, you sit in the gardens, and you just have a wonderful lunch people watching and enjoying the best arancini. There's also the botanical garden nearby, which is if you want a nice, quiet place to walk, and if you're interested in plants, that's a lovely place. Certainly not one of the A list things to do, but you need B list things to do, too.

Karen

The Piazza Duomo itself is the center of things, for sure. Like all roads lead to the main piazza. The Cathedral is on one side. There are two old gorgeous palazzo flanking it that are now government buildings. The so-called elephant statue is in the middle with the big fountain. It's getting a wonderful facelift now, but it's a centerpiece in the Piazza, on the side of one of the buildings off the Piazza is another fountain, a gorgeous fountain, I love it, that hovers over what remains of the Amenano River, which ran through the city before what's that

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magic number? 1693. Actually, it was 1669. Sorry, I was teasing you. During the major eruption that they had, it was submerged.

Karen

That eruption, even though it came from that distance, was so massive that the lava, which came down and it traveled very slowly, so there were very few casualties, but it came down to Catania and literally changed the landscape shape. So some of the areas where a building was right up against the water, suddenly it's not anymore. This river was submerged, and this fountain leads you right into the pescarilla, the fish market. All of this is right in the Piazza Duomo. The fish market is extraordinary, I think. I just love spending time there. It's been around for about 900 years, six days a week, from dawn until about 1 o'clock. It's like an Arab souk for fish. The vendors all have their catch, and they're all screaming and shouting and singing about whatever it is they have today. You have the man walking around selling parsley or lemons. It's quite a scene. I tell you, if you're a camera person, you don't get richer photos.

Katy

They play up to the little bit too, don't they? They know how to pose.

Karen

Yeah. Now they know they're being photographed. But it's so funny because over 15 years, I've seen some of these same people, and they're getting older just like I am. It's just funny. It's like, Oh, I know that person. They have a mezzanine. So it's like sunken in this area. And then there's a mezzanine level. And on the mezzanine level, a few years back, this guy that I know, Marco opened up a little stand called Scirocco, named for the Winds. And you can buy a cone of fish there and a local beer. And that's a fun thing to do and just sit on the stool and watch the people go by. Marco did a big catered event for me in 2012. Talk about an entrepreneur. He has done so many things. He's got another restaurant called Vuciata. I think we ate there. Best muscles I have ever had. hat's within the confines of the, not that area, but on the streets next to the fish market. Wonderful, wonderful restaurant. Underneath some of those umbrellas, by the way.

Katy

When you think we have fish markets, even the one in Venice. I'm going to say something a little bit controversial here. The one in Venice is really interesting and good too. This is on a

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whole another level. They're not bringing the fish from outside of their local area. It's all local fish. It's catch of the day.

Karen

Yeah, out at night and they bring it in the morning. They work so hard and you could see it all over their faces. It's hard work and the sun and the heat.

Karen

There's another restaurant near there where you can also see the river, the Amenano the submerged river. It's called A Putia Dell'Ostello. You go downstairs in this restaurant and you're in a little grotto and the river is just, or the little bits of the river are flowing by. It's a really cool place. I've done a couple of wine tastings in there and just to sit in there and hear the water and be in this grotto where it's literally cool. It's very nice, very nice.

Katy

Now, Karen, you haven't mentioned something that I thought you would maybe start off with is the patron saint of Catania, who is omnipresent.

Karen

I'm saving that for last.

Katy

Okay. Sorry. Spoiler alert.

Karen

Well, if you want, I'll tell you about her now because she is something in that city. There are more statues and motives and icons and images of her than you could possibly imagine. She is the patron saint. She was supposed to marry a Roman noble, and it didn't work out. And then so he decided to torture her for three days until she died.

Katy

Charming.

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Karen

Yeah. It's a grisly story. But she is also supposedly responsible for stopping the plague in Catania. They could not hold her in higher esteem. So every year, the anniversary in February, the first week of February, they go through this feast to commemorate her. They do it in the most amazing ways. Probably one of the most amazing things I've ever witnessed in my life. They have all kinds of different things going on. They have people carrying the candelabra, the big, tall guilt things that all the different trades have. They're all decorated and they're carried by men on their shoulders and they dance back and forth. They have the Fercola, which carries her remains that are in a silver-encrusted bust that makes your eyes pop. And then these people who are swooning in her presence, passing their handkerchief up to touch the Saint and bring it back to you and holding their children up to be blessed. It's just an amazing sight. It becomes this whole other city. Everyone participates. They have a part of it where these men, mostly men, are clad in these white robes with black hats, and they run up and down the street with giant candles on their shoulders.

Karen

It's all about sacrificing to her. They chant. It's amazing. It's a tradition, it's culture, it's ritual. It's back to pagan. It's Christianity. It's community. It's just a phenomenal thing. Again, if you're a camera person, definitely feast for the eyes and the camera. That is something that Catania has in February that I've just never seen anywhere else.

Katy

Where did we go and see one of the floats? Is it one of the floats that they take around? Was it in the Cathedral?

Karen

Yes, they have them in various places where they're parked for the year. Her remains are in the Cathedral, and you can peek through the gate and see all the silver back there. But yeah, the people who take care of these candelabra, they're kept in the churches and then they're brought out for the feast. So that's definitely something they do very, very well.

Karen

Another thing, all of Sicily has a very beloved tradition for puppets, made popular in the 19th century because they entertained people. People were poor and they entertained them with legends and histories, taught them about good and evil. They presented stories much like we

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would watch a film today and get involved in the character. These people would invest themselves and could identify with these characters, take them on and go home and talk about them and argue about them. It brought real joy to the community. In Catania, there is Fratelli Napoli. They're a family of real masters. They've made puppets for generations. You can visit their workshop. It's by appointment and you need a guide or a translator. But it's just an amazing thing to see how people dedicated their lives to this, very passionate people and very talented people.

Karen

They work on wood, they work on metal, they paint the scenes, they do the script, which in many cases is ad hoc. They'll have a basic outline. For six months/a year, they used to have every night a different show with these puppets. It's really an amazing history. To go and be in the presence of these people with these 100-year-old puppets hanging on the wall and they're sharing that is really something special to do in Catania.

Karen

Something else you can do - have you ever been on the Circumetnea.

Katy

The train? No, I haven't. Where does that take you?

Karen

That takes you from Catania up Mount Etna, the Eastern part, and then over the Northern part. It's a small gage railroad. It's very sweet. Usually, it's two or three cars. It's a great way to go up to Mount Etna. It's inexpensive. You sit there, watch the landscape change as you gain altitude. My friends 50 years ago would use that. They would use that to go to school. They'd hop on and hop off to go to school. And still today, you buy your ticket, you can hop off in Randazzo, you can hop off in Bronte, walk around and just get on the next train that comes by. So So it's a really inexpensive, fun way to visit Mount Etna, and you can do that from Catania. It's very charming. It's also used by a wine tourism company now, and they take you to an area where there are a couple of wineries on the train. You get off, you get on a bus, and they bring you to a couple of wineries. That's a fun way to visit a winery on Mount Etna where you're not driving and you can have a good time.

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Karen

Another really good thing about Catania that is, again, part of this vibe and this feeling is the nightlife. In Catania, there are bars when you walk around these side streets with music spilling out and people just enjoying themselves. There are some bars that have enormous screens and you'll see a whole group of people just sitting out there watching football or soccer. They have a great passegiata up and down that Via Etnea, which usually ends up in the Piazza Duomo, where there's often someone singing or performing. They have a food Renaissance going on in Catania, which has been going on for a few years now. There's great places to eat. I mentioned Vuciata as being one that I particularly like. There's Vinoteca Ostier, which is another wonderful restaurant and I usually do wine tastings there also because Vinoteca means they have great wines available. Tantikkia is another one. And I like Vinicolo for pizza and that's near the Piazza Stesicoro, which is at the other end of Via Etna, and another good location.

Katy

Was that where we went?

Karen

We did walk by there. That's the area where there is the Roman amphitheater. The sunken Roman amphitheater in the middle of... They live amongst these ruins that are just... Traffic goes around them. They got their first Michelin star a few years ago, this man, Alessandro, who was, I think he was 34 when he got it. Even me, from New York City, I can say it's one of the finest meals I've had. I've eaten there three times, so it's consistent. Really, really recommend if you want to try something high-end. Everybody thinks, Oh, I'm going to go and eat all these trattorias, and I'm all about that. But this is something special. They actually are just moving now, so I don't have a proper address for them, but they'll be in a more convenient location. I'll send you the address of that when I know it, and you can put it in your notes. But that's great... Variety is important when you travel.

Katy

I think so. Just mix it up a bit. Have some trattorias, have some high-end, go to the beach, go to do a museum another day. Well, that's how I like to travel anyway.

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Karen

Yeah, because you just want to see it from a lot of different aspects. But as I mentioned, the Roman amphitheater - Catania is one of the few places where you can see Roman remains. Villa Romana is obviously the big one in Sicily, but there's not a lot left from them and there are two amphitheaters in Catania, the big one. And then there's another one that it's behind, so you can't see it from the street. And they have the Roman baths, which are underneath the Cathedral, which are beautiful, amazing. Most people don't even know it's there, but it's on the right side if you're looking at the Cathedral. So that's special. They also have the Benedictine Monastery, which is part of the university now. And that's a really nice tour to take. It's an amazing place. And they take you through some of the university, the library, and things like that, which are interesting. But if you go on the weekends, and that's the secret, the university is closed. So they are able to take you into the staff offices like the Provost, which were these wonderful places where the Abbotts would be. And they do these tours. You can book them in English. So that's a really nice, interesting place to go. There's, I think, a lot to do in the town, in the city. You're 45 minutes from Ortigia, you're about an hour from Etna or Caltagirone, a little further, maybe to Villa Romana in Piazza Armerina, you're 45 minutes from Taormina. It's right in the guts of it. It's a perfect spot.

Karen

If you go up the Coast towards Etna, towards Taormina, you've got the Aci towns. Aci Trezza, Aci Castello. These are all these just very picturesque fishing villages with the lava coastline and flowers. I can't really recommend it more highly than that to say that it's a good stopping-off place and with a lot of things to do.

Katy

Most people would start their Sicilian journeys in Palermo. How does Catania compare to Palermo, Karen?

Karen

Well, Palermo is bigger. It's a bigger city. It's about a million people. Catania is about 600,000. From a size standpoint, right there, they both have good locations, actually. I just described Catania, but Palermo is in the western part of Sicily, which is still a little under-discovered. Therefore, there are fewer tourists. Equally wonderful things to see. Lots of farms and vineyards and the largest archeological park is Selinunte, and that's only an hour from

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Palermo. Cefalu is stunning, smaller resort town than Taormina, but stunning. There's a lot right there, too, but different.

Karen

I think for food, I would choose Catania. Palermo has obviously lots and lots of restaurants, but I think for food, I think Catania would take my vote. And for historic buildings, I mean, Palermo has just got a lot more. It's got a lot of historic buildings. It's got the arts, the two big, the Opera House and the Politeama, which does other concerts, symphonic things. They have many, many churches that have exhibits and things like that to see. So for Palermo, probably that would be the choice if you're really interested in just exploring historical things. For accommodations, I love Palermo's grand dams, the hotels, the Des Palmes and Hotel Wagner and those kinds of places. They're fun to stay in because they're historic.

Karen

But I think Catania's places are a little more intimate and unique. There are a couple of restored palazzi that I like to use. There's Palazzo Marletta is beautiful and Asmundo di Gisira is wonderful. The rooms there are just these neoclassical, fabulous rooms and very well located. The Liberty Hotel, wonderful people management, wonderful boutique hotel in the Liberty style. And that's right near Piazza Stesicoro. So these are good areas where you want to base yourself to walk around. If you're driving, I'd recommend Palazzo Bruca. It's more of a budget-friendly hotel. Been renovated recently, but it's got parking. So the big doors of this giant palace open up and you drive your car in and you can park there. So in a place like Catania, where it's tough to find parking, it's nice to have a place where you can park. These other places have valet parking and they will take the car and they will take it wherever they take it to put it away for you. I've actually stayed in Palazzo Bruca and it's great. You press the button, these doors open, big giant doors and you just drive in and park your car.

Katy

Goodness. Karen, have you driven in Catania?

Karen

Oh God, all the time.

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Katy

You are brave lady. I don't know if I would do that.

Karen

Goodness. Look, it's not for the faint of heart. It's funny sometimes because you're behind two people who are just, you know, windows open and they're chatting like there's no other car on the road. Or you know people don't stop at certain red lights because, Well, there's nobody crossing the street. Why do I need to stop? Rules are optional. But it's really not that bad. I mean, lots of one way streets, they're usually well marked. You just have to be careful, like driving in New York City.

Katy

I think you might need a New York state of mind to tackle that drive.

Karen

They do have an electric bus system now. A lot of the buses are electric. I thought that was pretty forward-thinking, and it's definitely better for the environment. The other thing about Catania is it's 15 minutes from the airport. Even considering that, there's an airport hotel. Palermo is 40 minutes from the airport and there is no airport hotel. Now, I'm not looking to stay in an airport hotel, but there are times when it's the right thing and we don't have an airport hotel. Hello, if anybody's listening, could we build one there?

Katy

But I mean, the Catania airport is very convenient, isn't it? And it's one of the bigger ones in Europe. It's a very busy airport.

Karen

It's actually busier than Palermo's. It has more international flights. Although I shouldn't even say this because it's rumor, but I heard just a little bitty rumor that maybe there'd be reinstated this nonstop from New York to Palermo. But I've been told the line, we cannot say anything until September. So I'm waiting to find out in September. And that would that would help. It would be one less stop. If there's no stop, there are fewer opportunities to lose luggage or to be delayed or have your flight canceled.

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Katy

So that was in place before the pandemic?

Karen

It was. There was for many years an airline that did that route. And they also flew to Naples nonstop. But it's closed. And then United started one and it was running for literally a hot minute, as they say, before the pandemic. And then it quickly shut down and they never started it again. But they hadn't thought about Sicily before, and now they think - 'this is a place I would like to go'. It's very beautiful. But the way, there's Indiana Jones that just came out and that's filmed in Sicily. They're filming The Leopard. It's going to be a TV series of The Leopard, which I actually saw them doing in June in several places. That's that's going to be a TV series, Netflix, I believe. I can't wait for that to come out. But that's filmed all over Sicily as people are using it as the gorgeous place that it is and the interesting and varied place that it is, so more people see that and think, Oh, I want to go there.

Katy

But it's really interesting at the moment. It's super hot there, isn't it, Karen? It's just in the 40 degrees centigrade, which is over 110 Fahrenheit or something, and it's I don't know how pleasant it would be right now, but it's definitely, we are of the opinion. I know you think this is that the shoulder seasons are absolutely divine in Sicily. Please consider traveling at that time because it's beautiful.

Karen

More people are this year. Typically, it was maybe the end of April to mid-October was the season, with the exception of mid-July to the end of August, where most people, most Americans anyway, didn't really travel there. This year, I had people starting in February and going all the way to the middle and towards the end of November. I have people there now when it's very hot. It is hot, but they're on vacation, so it's different for them. They're in the water, they're on the boat, they're at a winery, they're in air conditioning. They have not really complained about it, except to say, Wow, it's hot. We don't live there. So that's a whole different situation. But still, I think April and May are glorious. End of September is lovely. October, lovely. I mean, it stays warm. I've seen photos of people grilling out at Christmas time. The difference is that you are entering, or you have entered the technically, the rainy season. So there can be rain. I don't live in a place where it doesn't rain historically from May

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to October. They're used to that. So when the drizzle or the overcast starts in mid October, it's okay, it's the rainy season.

Karen

But I've traveled fine with an umbrella for when it starts to rain, which usually passes pretty quickly. And it's just beautiful because you've got the harvest in the Fall. Everything, you've got olive dripping off the trees and grapes off the vineyards. Every little town has some Sagre or a little festival dedicated to their local product, an artichoke or a chestnut or honey. It's just a wonderful place to be. And then in May and April, colors, the flowers, the hills are just carpeted in flowers and colors. It's just So it's a completely different landscape. And that's why I have to have so many photos. Because even though I've photographed something a hundred times, well, not at sunset and not in the fall, I'm a crazy person.

Katy

No, we've all got too many photos. It's such a photogenic place, isn't it? It's just crying out to be photographed, actually.

Karen

It is. Yeah.

Katy

Now, Karen has an absolute wealth of photos on her Instagram, and she has an absolute wealth of knowledge on all her channels. How can the listeners find you online, Karen?

Karen

The website has a lot of information on it, and the podcasts are listed there too. So if you haven't listened to the other podcasts Katy and I have done together, you can go onto the News dropdown at larosaworks.com. Instagram and Facebook is @LaRosaWorksSicily, one word. I have a YouTube channel, which I have to confess is not been attended to so much. It was a great pandemic project, but I need to gear up and get that more active.

Katy

Yeah, it's a lot. Content creation, I don't think a lot of people understand just how much work goes into it. It's a lot. Really, Karen does share some absolutely amazing stories and insights

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into Sicily, especially on her Instagram and Facebook. It's a really great place to go if you want to learn about Sicily. And Sicilian culture.

Karen

Thank you.

Katy

No, you put so much effort into it

Karen

I still enjoy it. I just still enjoy exploring. After all these years, there's a new town I haven't been to, or a new winery, a new place. I just find it all so interesting. These people are warm and wonderful, and they surprise me just all the time, just how generous they are with historically what was so little.

Katy

Now I'm going to ask you a tricky question, which is your favorite? Catania or Palermo? Do you have a favorite or is that just like choosing your favorite child?

Karen

I was just going to say that. That's an unfair question. They both have their merits and they shine in different ways.

Katy

I do think you have a soft spot for Catania, though. I think you feel like you're a champion.

Karen

I do. I've always been a champion of the underdog. But I also feel very at home there. Although I love all of it, all of Sicily for various reasons and ways, the proximity to Etna, there's some energy there, and I love that. My family, ancestry, couldn't be further away from there on the West Southwest area, but there's an energy on Etna, maybe with all the growing the wine, the lemons, all of that that I just feel somehow. And being in Catania, I feel like it's home.

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Katy

It's a magnetic field. Being close to the volcano, it's hard to describe. You can see it wherever you go. If you're in Taormina, you can see it. If you're in Caltagiron, you can see it. You're driving through the countryside, and it's omnipresent, it's there. And you can feel that it's that connection to the land that they have. And no doubt, because they can see it and feel it every day.

Karen

And they talk about her like she's a member of the family. She's responsible. I go to one winery and he says, We don't make the wine, she does. We just help it along. And in some ways that's true. The fertility that comes from all of her eruptions, which each one is unique, bringing different minerals and things landing in the soil - on the soil and going deep down. It's amazing. I just had a text exchange with someone who was on a previous tour who just texted me to say, sent me the photo and said, I made that pesto that we made with the mortar and pestle. And she said, I've tried it three times and it just doesn't taste the same. And it's because we don't have the ingredients. The simplest basil leaf over there tastes completely different than here. The pistaccios, the wheat, everything is just different. The cheese, everything.

Katy

Don't get me started on the pistaccios. Karen, you know how we feel about them in our family. Oh, Karen, I know how much you love Catania. And thank you so much for sharing the beautiful insight into the city with our listeners today. I really appreciate it. Grazie Mille. And thank you for joining us on Untold Italy.

Karen

Thank you so much for having me. I love chatting with you and sharing and I feel like sometimes you just put a key in me and I go like a robot, but it's just that's the passion I feel for it. So thank you for allowing me, indulging me.

Katy

Anytime. Anytime. Grazie, Karen.

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Karen

Ciao. Ciao.

Katy
I wonder if Sicily is calling your name? It calls mine constantly. I can honestly say that if I had to choose just one region to return to in Italy it would be Sicily - for the culture, layers of history, architecture, delicious food and wine, energy and of course its people.

If you're curious to learn more about Sicily make sure to listen to the earlier episodes on Palermo, the Val di Noto and Sicilian food we recorded together over the years. We'll put links to those and of course, Karen's details into our episode show notes on untolditaly/186.

And if you're feeling like you just can't wait and want to jump on a plane and discover Sicily for yourself, we have Untold Italy Tours of the island with places available in 2023 and 2024. Our small group tours in Sicily of 10 guests or fewer take travelers on a journey of discovery through the towns and countryside of this beautiful island that offers surprises around every corner. Our Eastern Sicily tour departs and ends in Catania while our itinerary exploring the west leaves from Palermo. Each trip is lovingly crafted to ensure you return home with a deep appreciation for the culture and people of Sicily - we can't wait for you to join us. Visit untolditalytours.com for all the details.

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all of our listeners joining us from around the world. If you have a spare moment we would so appreciate it if you left us a 5-star rating and review on your favorite podcast app. That way we can reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you.

That's all for today, on next week's episode, next week we'll be back with another escape to beautiful Italy but until then it's "ciao for now".

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