

## Untold Italy Episode 197: Trip Report - Learnings from Katy's Excellent 6 Week Italian Adventure

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 197.

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! Buongiorno everyone. I'm back from 6 wonderful weeks in Italy and wanted to share with you some of the many things I learned along the way. On this trip, I visited some classic destinations, some family favorites and also many many new places I hadn't been before.

Because of course, Italy is the country that keeps on giving. The sheer diversity of each region is the reason so many of us keep going back again and again. And that's diversity in all things - food, wine, culture, history, landscapes and even language. It's truly amazing. One minute you're standing on an alpine meadow surrounded by cows with huge bells around their neck and the next you're in the Ferrari Museum in Modena marvelling at the incredible Italian skills in technology and design that are the cornerstone of these prestige vehicles.

This trip was mainly a vacation with my family and friends but also included a few work stops added in as we prepare for some new and exciting small group tours for 2024 and 2025 which will be ready to book soon. We're very excited to bring these places to you as generally, you need a car and a good knowledge of Italian to make the most of your experience there. More on that in future episodes but let's get started on an overview of my time in Italy recently.

### Katy

I'm going to give you a quick summary of what we did, and we'll do some deep dives into these areas in later episodes to come. First up, the big cities. There's no denying that Italy was and is super crowded in the major tourist spots. I would say 2023 greatly surpassed 2022, which was already seriously busy. These places, Rome, Florence, Venice, parts of Tuscany, Sorrento, the Amalfi Coast, and Cinque Terre are popular for a reason. And if you feel the call to go to these places, then you must. But for those of you traveling next year, what that means is you need to be super organized, especially if you're traveling between March and the end of October. And you do want to see the major attractions like the Colosseum and Uffizi Gallery. And what does that mean in practice? Well, busy means taxi lines are very, very long, and sometimes it's even difficult to get a taxi. Trains are super crowded and there's not much

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room for luggage, and it's super difficult to see anything properly, let alone read information boards at sites like the Vatican Museum and Colosseum.

## **Katy**

Popular restaurants and tours are booked out months in advance, and it also means hotel prices skyrocket sometimes up to three times their usual rate, which is pretty shocking. Because I visited there recently, I just wanted to give you some quick tips on what you can do about this and get organized for 2024. So yeah, as I mentioned, get organized and book as much as possible well in advance. If you're traveling in the first half of 2024 and can do a lot before Christmas this year, do it. Having been in the travel industry a long while now, I can tell you that sales activity literally explodes on the 26th of December once everyone has digested their Christmas dinner. So if you can get some of your planning and booking done before then, and I know everyone is incredibly busy, I think it's only eight weeks before Christmas now, which is a little bit crazy, then you'll be well on your way if you can make those bookings now. I'd also advise you to book transfers where you can, especially if you're in the peak travel periods, even from the train station, if you prefer not to wait in line for up to an hour.

## **Katy**

Because here's the thing, this is very typical in Rome. Rome hasn't issued new taxi licenses for years and there's a huge lack of supply. That's obviously a problem that the city needs to address. We can't fix that here. But just be aware because one of my team and a family member both wasted half a day and mis-trained due to this problem. I've just public service announcement there. Just be aware of that. The other thing I really learned this time when I was in Rome and Florence was to plan downtime and relax in your days as well as activities. When you're planning your time in the big, major tourist areas, make sure you just plan some time just to sit and relax because you are going to be dealing with a lot of crowds. I always like having scheduled relaxed time, and I always stay close to the center so I can dip out and explore on foot without having to rely on transport. For activities on this trip in Rome, I had visited Ostia Antica, which is Rome's ancient port city, which was built around the same time as Pompeii. It's a fascinating place, and it's worth the half-day excursion to explore.

## **Katy**

Guess what? There are only a handful of people there, and I'm not really sure why because there's an amphitheater, ancient Roman bathroom facilities, which are quite fun, frescoes, mosaics, and the whole forum and Roman roads. Whatever you see in Pompeii is actually

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there in Ostia too, except the volcano, of course, and crowds of people. Another site that I revisited was the Baths of Caracalla, which is not far from Circus Maximus, right in Rome itself. And again, it's an amazing ancient site. I recommend getting the virtual reality glasses that help you imagine exactly how magnificent these ruins were in their heyday. You can just be amazed at the color and the grandeur of what the bath houses were, and they're actually free for Romans to enjoy. There are also very few people here. In Florence, we did a great food tour with Devour tours that took us deep into the Oltrarno district, well away from the main crowded areas. In Florence, the crowds are really concentrated in this very small city around the Uffizi Gallery and Piazza de la Signoria. Wow, it's so crowded. We ended up staying up on the hill overlooking Oltrarno and the Pitti Palace, and it was a lovely half-hour walk into the city center.

## **Katy**

So strategic and you want to make the most of your time away from crowds, you can definitely do that in Rome and Florence, even when it is super busy. Now, another thing that I like to do is to get up really early in the morning and go for a big, long walk in these two cities. You can easily see the major sites in Rome in a big circuit, relatively crowd-free, as well as stopping for a coffee or breakfast along the way. You can do that in about an hour and a half. The Trevi Fountain gets busy very early, so you might want to start there first. But as the Colosseum doesn't open until 10:00, you'll get some great photos there in the morning hours. Of course, in Florence, being a very small city, it's even quicker. You can zip around the sites where you want to see the outside of the buildings very quickly. Having chatted with a lot of people while I was in Rome and Florence, so we do chat to a lot of operators there, we do know that booking the main attractions well in advance is absolutely critical. I'm going to do a separate podcast on this in a few months as things are really in a state of flux and it's not really clear what's happening at the moment.

## **Katy**

Like I mentioned, I've spoken to various interested parties, such as tour companies, ticket companies, and tour guides, and no one is happy. Example, there's been a recent change at where tickets are now required to have the visitor's name printed on them, which will be checked against the visitor's ID. That might sound like a good idea on the surface, but with 30,000 visitors a day to the Colosseum, this looks like a disaster in terms of managing security lines quickly. Not to mention impossible to change once they've been issued. Anyway, my advice on that front is if you want to do a tour, which I highly recommend, go with a small group company like Liv Tours or Walks of Italy, who can manage the ticketing for you as it's

really in the interest to do so. Now, as I said, things will settle down, hopefully. I'll do another podcast and update our articles on buying tickets for the Colosseum because it's simply not clear at the moment. Anyway, after all that hustle and bustle, I was really looking forward to some fresh country air and we definitely got that. In fact, we got some fresh mountain air.

## **Katy**

So it's time for me to tell you about the places that I hadn't been to before. And perhaps if you've been along for a bit now, you'll know that we headed north to south to role and the Dolomites region. I had a lot of insight into what to expect from my friends Kate and Vin from a website, Throne and Vine, you can hear on previous episodes. But of course, there's nothing like experiencing something for yourself. Really nothing prepared me for the sheer beauty of this area. It's got soaring, jagged peaks, beautiful alpine meadows, apple orchards, and cliffs covered in vines for miles and miles. There are castles on almost every outcrop, and mostly people are speaking German. Now, this area north of Lake Garda borders Austria and has been the subject of much annexation and reconquering over many centuries by a variety of empires and kingdoms: Romans, Austro-Hungarians, Germans, and even Napoleon had a go before the region was recognized as part of Italy after the Second World War. Really, who can blame them for having so many castles and fortifications? It really is an area that's quite unique, and they do mainly speak German and have done so for many, many centuries.

## **Katy**

Really, this area feels like another world away from the hustle and bustle of Milan or the ethereal beauty of Venice. As I mentioned, the preferred language is definitely German, which is an official language of this autonomous region of Italy. It's very unique. I was a little bit surprised just how Germanic it was, but it's all good. We had a lot of fun. Our first stop was Marano, where yet another surprise await us. The climate there is described as Mediterranean, but it felt almost tropical to me with warm and quite humid. It's warm and quite humid, and it's like a little macro climate almost. The result is lush vegetation and some of the most beautiful gardens you're ever likely to see. You can enjoy many beautiful walks around the area that are suitable for many levels of fitness and capability. And this included for us to stop at Trauttmansdorf castle, which is a lovely garden lover's paradise. It's a huge complex of formal and informal gardens with beautiful blooms and interesting vegetation. You can easily spend half a day wandering around all the different areas within the castle, and it's quite spectacular, actually. I've never seen a set of gardens quite like it before.

## Katy

And by the way, as I mentioned, the region is dotted with castles. So if that's your thing, you will not be disappointed in this area. It really feels like there are castles on every hill, so you can duck in and out of them if you choose. I would say though, some of the roads are fairly narrow, and if you're driving, yeah, just to check it out because we nearly got stuck, as usual, on one attempt to get up to one of the castles. But it was here in Merano that I had the biggest revelation of the trip and something that I'm chasing after here in Australia with not much luck, and that's the natural thermal bars that this area is famous for. Merano is known for its natural thermal springs, and the bathing complex here takes full advantage of that and much more. It's a huge pool complex with around 25 pools at various temperatures, both inside and outside options. And in fact, biggest pool, you can swim from inside to outside and back again. We spent half a day lounging in the pools, and the main one is set to almost body temperature. So it's lovely and warm and relaxing if you're someone like me who feels quite miserable being cold.

## Katy

Now, if you were into the cold therapy, and honestly, I think that's a little bit crazy, there is also a pool at 18 degrees Celsius, which is about 64 Fahrenheit for our American listeners. Well, that's way too cold for me, and I gave that one a miss. They do also have a sauna there and lounge areas and grassy areas outside where you can relax. There's a cafe. Literally, you can spend the whole day there. So what I'm going to do in a later episode is really talk about these and the etiquette around how to approach them, because it's a little bit confusing. When you first go in, you're not quite sure what to do. I would say if you wanted to try the sauna, then nudity is the order of the day. So if that's not your thing, you might want to skip the sauna. But we'll go into that in a bit more detail on another episode. Now, the Terme Merano complex is in the center of Merano, which is such a pretty and colorful town surrounded by alpine, peaks, and pine-covered hills. And if you've ever been to the area around Lake Garda, you can get an idea of the architecture.

## Katy

And it's very pretty, cobbled streets, lots of lovely little restaurants and shops set up for visitors. And it's just a really cute town, and it's in a very spectacular environment with the mountains in the background. You won't hear a lot of English spoken, though. Like I said, it's mostly German, and there are plenty of Swiss, Austrian, and German people visiting there who love to come to this area. You get a real sense that you're in Europe, in fact, rather than just in Italy. The cuisine of the area reflects the German influence too. There are lots of

dumplings and a serious dedication to pork products like speck, sausages, and salami and cheese. Lots and lots of cheese. Now don't worry, it's Italy, so you can also get a great pizza too. Plus, this being one of Italy's most productive wine regions, there are a lot of different wines to discover, like new ones like I tried a Lagrein, and you can visit many, many wineries too. If you don't drink alcohol, that's fine. Our kids like the freshly pressed grape juice that we found at a cute stop on one of our walks. We were just wandering by and there was this little grape juice stop and they were pressing the grapes fresh to order and it was absolutely refreshing and delicious.

## **Katy**

The sweets there are fantastic too. You think about lots of and fruit-based desserts and it's just what's required after a long walk in the hills. Walking in the hills and mountains is basically the thing to do in this region. Our next stop was Alpe de Siusi in the Dolomites. This is a huge alpine plain dotted with small villages who are lucky enough to have some of the world's most magnificent peaks as their backdrop. It's well over 1,500 meters above sea level, and there's nothing quite like the stunning contrast of green pastures surrounded by majestic mountain ranges. I think the Dolomites are some of the most spectacular mountains I've ever seen. They jot into the sky, dramatically providing this contrast to the pastures below. In summer and fall or autumn, there are so many walks and longer hikes to be enjoyed. You want to be out there in the nature, let's just say, because it's very, very special and quite a unique environment. I think the Alpine pastures is a great way to start if you're wanting to do some more easier or low-key walks because it's quite flat around there and you can still enjoy the majestic peaks around you.

## **Katy**

However, what we learned pretty quickly is that the peaks often get covered in clouds. Makes sense, really. I did quite a bit of trip itinerary adjustment on the fly with the use of live webcams to make sure we were headed to places that did not have the limited visibility. You could be a bit disappointed if you were expecting these huge jagged peaks and you just had a visibility of pea soup in front of you. But we managed to avoid that, like I said, by checking out the live webcams. You do need a reasonable level of fitness and robust knees to do even the shortest walks here. This is because there is generally a steep incline and also decline to contend with along the way. The kids obviously coped really well, our children, and we did. We had my parents with us, and there was definitely some challenging moments for them. But even if you have a few mobility issues, it's okay because luckily there are refugios or

mountain stops at most of the cable car and lift entry and exit points where you can relax with a coffee or a beer or a glass of wine and enjoy the views.

## **Katy**

Now, if you are going to this region, it pays to do some serious research on the location and opening hours of the cable cars and mountain transport systems. I found I needed to invest quite a lot of time understanding how it all works because there are so many options going to different areas in the various peaks and on the Alpe de Siusi plateau. There is an excellent system of busses in the Alpe de Siusi area too. However, we preferred having the flexibility of a car, especially as we change plans on the fly quite often, again, due to some cloudy weather that was interrupting our peak viewing moments. Now, apart from the mountains, there are also some stunning lakes that you can visit, like Lago di Braies and Lago di Carezza, and you can walk around these too. Their water is turquoise and so beautiful, and it gives an incredible contrast to the mountains beyond. You can even go for a swim in Lago di Braies. And as you can imagine, I wasn't too keen to go swimming in a freezing mountain lake, remembering that I like the body temperature waters of the thermal spa, but it can be done. And actually one of our friends did it, and I think she found it very refreshing.

## **Katy**

So if you wanted to do that, you can. But do check. I'm not sure about Laue de Carette, so you can't actually swim in all of the lakes. The parking situation at both lakes is really well organized, but you can get quite busy. So there's car parks and overflow car parks. And so you just need to pay attention to all the signage, of course, and to anyone giving instructions. I'm not sure how you'd go about getting there by bus, though, as they were a pretty decent drive from our base at Alpair to Suzy. Like I mentioned, both sides were pretty busy when we went there in mid-September, and I can imagine in summer it's a little bit more crazy. There are lots of cute towns to visit in the area like Ortisei, Castelrotto and Chiusa, all with colorful buildings and dome-top churches. You can browse shops, selling local crafts, and stop for an aperitivo or a coffee. These towns are clean as a whistle. That's because there is a really strong commitment to the environment in this part of Italy, and it really, really shows. They're really spick and span, and you really feel like you're in a place where people take big pride in their community.

## **Katy**

We also spent an afternoon in Bolzano, which is the region's bustling capital. It's a charming small city with lovely piazzas and cobbled streets. But the highlight for me was the

archeological museum, which explores the fascinating life and death of a 5,000-year-old man known as Otzi, who was discovered in the ice in the early 1990s. I'm actually going to add a link to a recent podcast episode I listened to about this story because it's absolutely fascinating. These people stumbled across his body in the melted ice, and it just is a scientific journey of discovery about how they've worked out, how old he was and how he lived, and in fact, how he died, which is actually, I do believe, he was murdered. It's one of the most ancient murder mysteries, and it's just absolutely fascinating. I think I read it in *The Ancients* or I heard about it in *The* I've got some more details on that in that podcast. But I'll put a link in the podcast show notes for you because it's such an interesting story. The museum does an incredible job of telling it in a really fresh and accessible way. So you're not sitting there thinking, Oh, gosh, this is boring.

### **Katy**

No, you're actually trying out how he tied his shoelaces and things like that. And you can actually see the mummified body of this 5,000-year-old man that's been preserved in the museum and where so much research is going on to how these people lived. And once again, I say this a lot on this podcast. We think we have made so much progress, but I don't know. He might not have had electricity and computers, but he seemed to be living a fairly similar life to us. Now, I have to say, September was a great time to visit this area. It didn't seem to be too busy, and there were so many events happening that were celebrating the harvest. We managed to see a mountain horn concert one day upon Alpe di Suis, and we also joined in on the Gastorgellen Festival in Chiusa. This is a whole world of feasting, music, dancing and local traditions. I have never seen so many grown men of all ages dressed in leather shorts. Even all the teenagers and twenty-somethings were dressed in traditional costume, and were joining in the festivities, including yodeling. I mean, it was really lots of fun, and experiencing these local traditions is one of my favorite things to do in Italy.

### **Katy**

If you can do that while you're there, definitely get onto it. The challenge is, though, a lot of these things aren't announced until maybe six to eight weeks before. I was frantically doing some research online to find out what festivals were on when we were there, and these popped up in around late July. I had to reorganize our itinerary a bit to make the most of it. But yeah, we really enjoyed all of the local traditions, including the music and the food and all of that. It was sad to leave the mountains, but I did have a commitment to take my son back to Emilia Romagna, which is one of our family's most favorite places. So we headed back to the area near Modena for a few days for our tortellini, Parmigiano, and balsamic vinegar

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fix. And this time we stopped at the Enzo Ferrari Museum, which gave everyone a thrill. I'm not an obsessive fan of prestige cars, but I do love design and especially where tradition meets innovation. And this is where Ferrari and Italian prestige brands excel. And the cars are absolutely beautiful, actually, especially I love the older, more vintage ones.

## **Katy**

This is only one of the Ferrari sites that you can visit in Modena. There are quite a few others. And if you want to visit the factory site, that's at Maranello outside of the city, but the one we visited was the historic cars display and a peak inside Enzo Ferrari's world, and that's in the center of Modena. Now, by the way, something I found out just recently is that if you're a foodie and you're having trouble getting into Massimo Bottura's main restaurant, Osteria Francescana or Francheschetta 58 in Modena, you might also try Cavallino at the Ferrari site in Maranello, where the famous chef has collaborated with Ferrari at the refurbished site of the original company cafeteria. I have to say, though, the prices don't expect the prices to be a cafeteria standard, though, unfortunately, this is one of the world's most famous chefs. So expect the prices to reflect that. We opted for another delicious plate of pasta at Moderna's Albinelli Market before heading back into the countryside, where we reacquainted ourselves with our friends at Acetaia Sereni and joined an amazing gelato class at local cherry specialist, Toschi, in Vignola. We really love this area.

## **Katy**

It's so special. We were lucky enough to be dropping by when there was a great festival happening in one of the local towns. And it's just an amazing sight and feeling to be part of these local festivities. I can't recommend them enough. It's sometimes difficult to work out what's on when because they do really announce them at the last minute. But that's why you need to leave a little bit of buffer zone in your itinerary. And if you can, definitely stop by because you won't regret it. You'll have a great time. And as we did, we just loved being back in that area, and we promised to go back again and again because we do love it that much. Now, after all, the Northern Italian experience was time to head south for more sun and seaside breezes.

## **Katy**

And this is where I was having a party with my family and friends, getting everyone together in Italy that I really love. I hadn't actually been here before, and I really was excited to go because I've heard so many great things. And so this time we headed down to the Cilento Coast. Just beyond Amalfi exists a whole other world.

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## Katy

This is the Cilento Coast. It's the same sea, the same delicious food. Actually, it's probably way better than the Amalfi Coast food. It's way less people. There are sandy beaches. There's lots of history and pretty hilltop towns. It's a beautiful, beautiful spot. Here we got up close and personal with the buffaloes who make the milk for the life-changing Buffalo mozzarella cheese. We also met the makers who twist the curds into delicious balls of goodness. Who knew you can make so many things from this milk? Even gelato and serum for your face, which is honestly, I bought a lot because it's really amazing. Now, for those of you who are lactose intolerant, it's been given the green light by several friends and family members who cannot ever consume cow's milk. They were having these cheese and the products all the time because it did not affect their tummies like cow's milk does. Now, in Cilento, we walk the ancient Greek temples of Paestum, both around and inside. You can't do that in many places in the world, go inside. It's quite amazing. You can just marvel at how long they've stood the test of time, and I think it's over 2,500 years, which is really quite incredible.

## Katy

In sleepy fishing villages and hilltop towns, we found coastal views for miles and sandy beaches dotted with beach clubs empty, despite the sea being a Katy-approved temperature and the sun deliciously warm. This was in late September. Meanwhile, stories from the Amalfi Coast, packed beaches, packed towns, and people getting frustrated. Anyway, we weren't frustrated. We sailed along the Coast and munched on Caprese salad and Italian donuts, and then we dived into the Tyrrhenian Sea. It was pretty amazing. In the evenings, we ventured back to our beautiful hotel, Hotel Borgo La Pietraia, and we were fed like queens and kings by Chef Mario, whose food you want to eat even though you've been eating all day. I'll do a deeper dive into this area known as Cilento, but suffice to say, we'll be back. Now, if you're curious, you will need a car to explore here properly, but the driving is easy and quite relaxed by Italian standards, I have to say. I would feel comfortable driving there myself, but even on my own, I think. Now, after a beautiful 10 days in the Cilento area, my last stop was Ischia, where I went full immersion into the thermal bars.

## Katy

Ischia is an island off the Coast of Naples, and it's a volcanic island known for its thermal baths and Hot Springs, and here I was in heaven. On Ischia, you can visit thermal bathing parks or just lounge around at your hotel. Ours had several warm pools inside and out. It was divine and so relaxing. I can highly recommend it. If you do feel like getting active, you can

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take a boat to around the island. Our Captain, Chiro, was fond of saying, Leave nothing behind in Ischia. And what he meant was experience it all. And that meant jumping into the sea regularly, even though it wasn't body temperature. I didn't mind because Chiro told me I had to do it. It was crystal clear and refreshing. We swam through a grotto, shop at a pretty town and stopped for an incredible seafood lunch overlooking the island's Castello Aragonese. Because Chiro thought of everything, we also had the opportunity to swim to a spot on the Coast where the seawater is warmed naturally by volcanic activity. It was pretty amazing. Another day, we took a land tour of the island and learned more about its history and culture, stopping at viewpoints and a unique local winery with some truly fascinating sculptures.

### **Katy**

We took in more views of the castle before schlepping it back to our hotel pools to relax. Now you can see Capri in the distance from various points on the island of Ischia. And all the time I knew how busy and crowded it was over there, and I was just thinking, Well, I'm so happy to be here relaxing because Ischia is a large island, almost five times the size of Capri. It's got a similar topography and the same beautiful water. It's also got the thermal baths, many more beach clubs than you could imagine, and friendly locals. They told us that even in peak season, you can find a place to relax on this year. In early October, it was positively serene, and I'd definitely go back there to relax very soon.

### **Katy**

This was the last days of my trip, and we spent the last night in Rome where it was and still is unseasonably warm. I never get tired of the eternal city, so it was amazing to have one last big walk and 'perfetto' Roman dinner before flying home.

### **Katy**

Overall, this trip was a huge adventure, and I loved discovering the new places I had never been and quick tips into Rome and Florence.

### **Katy**

As I mentioned, I'll be doing a deep dive into these areas, hopefully with some locals on board to share even more insights into how you can make the most of your time there. Obviously, I've only got one perspective and one way of looking at things, so I really like to have other people on board to share their ideas too.

## **Katy**

Now, if you're looking for the places I visited and didn't quite catch their names, head straight on over to the show notes on our website at [untolditaly.com/197](https://untolditaly.com/197), where they are all listed. And of course, you'll find show notes for each and every episode, as well as hundreds of useful articles to help you plan your Italian trips from accommodation guides to region information and things to do. We're building Untold Italy into a one-stop destination for your Italy travel plans, and we're really proud of the attention that we pay to the accuracy and detail of the information that we provide.

## **Katy**

Now we'd like to thank all of you for your ongoing support of Untold Italy and your enthusiastic messages and reviews. It does mean the world to us that so many people from countries around the world tune in each and every week to listen to the show. If you do enjoy it, it would be incredible if you took a few moments to write a quick review or give a rating on your favorite podcast app. Grazie mille! in advance, we so appreciate you. Now that's all for today. On next week's episode, we're paying a visit to one of my favorite northern Italian towns, Treviso. But until then, it's 'Ciao for now'.