

Untold Italy Episode 199: Perfect Pienza - Hilltop town of dreams in Tuscany's Val D'Orcia

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 199.

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 a tutti. Are you ready to pay a visit to one of my favorite parts of Tuscany? Today we're headed to Pienza... a small town that I discovered many years ago thanks to a tour guide I met in Lombardy. You see, I always ask our guides where their favorite place is to visit in Italy and on this occasion the guide did not skip a beat... Pienza she said, without a doubt! There are countless pretty towns in Tuscany to be sure but ...

I'm thrilled that Debora Brescian one of our favorite podcast guests is back with us today to tell us all about this wonderful town. Debora is a local Tuscan who many of you quite wisely have booked for a private tour of her home town Arezzo but she also ventures to the Val D'Orcia and Pienza too. And why wouldn't she? - it's magnificent.

Katy

Bentornata Debora, welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Debora

Thanks, Katy. I'm so happy. It's a pleasure to see you again and to talk with you.

Katy

Oh, Debora, it's been way too long. I've missed you. But here you are back with us and let us into some more Tuscan secrets. And I couldn't be more happier about that. Now, we do have a few more listeners of the podcast these days, so would you please introduce yourself to them and let them know all about you and the wonderful things that you do?

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Debora

So I'm Debora Bresciani, and maybe the people can also know me as Travel with Debora, and I am a tour guide. And in the previous podcast, I talked about Arezzo, the city where I live in Tuscany, and also the hidden treasure of this part of the Arezzo area with Castiglion Fiorentino, with Lucignano, a little bit about Cortona. And so I love to share with the people, of course, because it's a part of my business, the beauty and the history, but also the tradition, the atmosphere, the vibes about this part of Tuscany. And everybody knows Tuscany, so it's easy to explain and to talk about this.

Katy

Debora is an absolutely brilliant guide, I have to say. And she's shown so many of our happy listeners around Tuscany and Arezzo so far. But today we thought we'd share another beautiful town that we both love, and it's not too far from Arezzo, and it's in a very beautiful part of Tuscany, as called Pienza. So, Debora, shall we start by sharing where Pienza is? Where can we find this beautiful town?

Debora

Pienza - we are in Siena, and this actually is Val d'Orcia area. And you have to imagine that this small village, this small town is between Montepulciano and Montalcino. These two places are very well known for the good wine. And if we have the map of Tuscany, we have to imagine that we are in the southeast part of Tuscany. It's a nice place because Val d'Orcia is part of Tuscany. And in this area, we have a very nice village, not only Pienza, where you can really jump in the Tuscan landscape.

Katy

It's the typical one that you can imagine in your mind with the cypress trees and the tall pointy trees and the hills and little hilltop towns, isn't it?

Debora

Exactly. Generally, when I try to explain Pienza before arriving, it looks like to be in a postcard. Because Pienza is a very small town, you have to imagine that we are inside a city wall and we jump in the heart of the city of the town, across the first gate, and walking in the main street, we arrive in the main square, Piazza Pio II, where is the Renaissance. Around us we have the frame, like the Renaissance. And after this square crossing a small alley, a small street, we arrive in front of the fantastic view of Val d'Orcia. And the symbol of the Val

d'Orcia, as you say, is the cypress road. Maybe in your mind you can have the image of the movie The Gladiator with Russell Crowe and a part of this movie when he's coming back home and crossing the Cypress road. We are right in Val d'Orcia. We are near Pienza, just to give you an idea. And when you cross this small street and in front of you, you have the window of the Val d'Orcia. It's really a postcard.

Katy

Yeah, it's absolutely stunning. And you could just sit and gaze at it for hours and we'll go into it a bit later. But there's lots of places where you can see this beautiful view in Pienza as well. You could just literally stay there for a few hours and just watch the view.

Debora

Exactly. Because Pienza maybe is much more famous. But in this area in Val d'Orcia, you have to consider that with 50 minutes or 40 minutes drive. So it's very easy. You can visit Montepulciano, Montalcino, San Quirico d'Orcia, Monticello, Bagno Vignoni, famous for the spring water and are all different from each other. But in this typical countryside, in this typical landscape, also Pienza, because to arrive in this area, in Val d'Orcia areas, also in Pienza, we needed the car or the private driver. But also from here, you are, for example, 1 hour from Cortona, 1 hour from Arezzo, 1 hour and a half from Florence, around 1 hour from Siena. So it's also a perfect choice for a day trip, but also to spend some night here, because even if it's without a big hotel, because this is a treasure, so it's without a very big hotel, there are a lot of very nice bed and breakfast or villa or farmhouse agriturismo. And you can imagine, you wake up in the morning and when you open your windows, you are in this fantastic view.

Katy

It is so beautiful. And the really romantic thing is usually when you're staying in one of these places, they have the wooden shutters on the outside and you push the wooden shutters and there's the view.

Debora

It's like a dream.

Katy

It is like a dream. It's absolutely beautiful. So, Debora, tell us about Pienza, because this town itself is very beautiful too. And there's a reason for that, isn't there?

Debora

Exactly, there is a reason, because Pienza is the new name. You have to imagine that before this town, the name of this town was Corsignano. And was a place where was born a man, Engheberto d'Ugo Piccolomini. And we are really in the beginning of the 15th century, around then what happened, this man, he become a pope. He become a pope, Pio II, and he decided to change Corsignano. So his birthplace in a new Renaissance city, Pienza, is called also the ideal city of the Renaissance. And Pienza, when Corsignano changed the name in Pienza (Pienza means the city of Pius, the name of the Pope).

Debora

So we can say that the Pienza as we can enjoy and visit now, was built, rebuilt, on the Cortignano in the previous town when? Between the 1459 and 1462, in just three, four years and we are in the year of the real Renaissance for this reason I told you that in the main square you are like in the Renaissance, for which reason the main square you have the cathedral the cathedral in Renaissance style, rebuilt on a previous parish church. Then we have a Borgia building, we have also Piccolomini building, is really in Renaissance style because it looks like Palazzo Strozzi, Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence, just at the beginning of the Renaissance.

Debora

And also we have Il Palazzo Comunale, the town hall that look like Palazzo Vecchio old building, always in Florence. For this reason, we can say that following the project, the idea of the Pope - Pienza become the ideal city, the Renaissance example of the city for the Tuscany. Unfortunately, this project finished in the 1462 because in this year the Pope died and so we just have this and this is the Renaissance part and when I say you, before that, crossing a little alley, we arrive to the fantastic view. These alley are with normal name because these alleys call it how? Via dell'Amore, the street of Love, Via del Bacio, the street of Kiss, Via de la Fortuna, the street of the fortune so we can imagine that it depends which street you cross is your choice. You arrive in the postcard, you arrive in the postcard. So it's a mix between romantic, lovely part Renaissance I tried to explain, but since we have to come to understand the meaning of this village

Katy

And it's built on top of a hill and it's all kind of like a yellowy stone, isn't it?

Debora

When you arrive at Pienza on the top of the hill, what do you see? The bell tower of the cathedral and you can recognize it because it's completely white, yellow-white is a Travertino. It's the typical material used in that time for this construction. Also because the travertino is coming from Rapolano di Terme, it's always from the Siena area. So we use the same material.

Debora

But the Pienza is also well known because we are in Tuscany so we can't avoid to speak about food or wine. In this area, we have a good very quality of wine but in this case it's not for Pienza. Pienza is well known also for another food, Pecorino de Pienza for the pecorino cheese, sheep cheese. And what is interesting about this, then when you arrive and you just across the gate, the first shop that you see is a lavender shop. So you smell lavender. But just across this shop, you start to smell everywhere the pecorino cheese, because this is another important product, important food from this area. So it's another reason to come. You have to imagine you sit in the city wall in front of you the fantastic view with a glass of wine and a good quality of cheese is the perfect combination.

Katy

And it's hard to avoid that actually in Pienza. There's a lot of little wine bars there that serving the cheese. And you could go taste the different cheeses when I was there quite a few years ago. Now they just released the truffle pecorino.

Debora

Because Pecorino cheese is the name and the classic one you can recognize because it's red, because it's covered with the tomato sauce and it's dependent pecorino. How long is aged or with the water have a different taste? You can have seco (dry), semi sec (semi dry) like the wine. You can have a soft or under the grape, so you can taste a little bit of wine, the grape or as is the truffle or with pepper, you have just to stop and you can close your eyes and you choose something you can be sure that the quality is so good, it's amazing.

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Katy

And because it's sheep's milk, it's good for people that have got a lactose allergy. So it's much easier to digest than cow's milk cheese. And yeah, it's really delicious. And you could just go to Pienza and taste cheese all day, I think.

Debora

And also typically, if you stop in some restaurant everywhere, the typical dish is Pici Cacio e pepe. Pico/pici is a typical Tuscan pasta, like a deep spaghetti with cacio - in this case, pecorino cheese and black pepper is a typical you can find because it's a mix between the local pasta, pici and the cheese, the king of Pienza. And so is this a combination like aroma cacio e pepe, but in this case it's a pecorino from Pienza with the black pepper.

Katy

And the pasta is quite thick, isn't it? It's a thick, thicker pasta.

Debora

It's like a big spaghetti general handmade, just flour and water is something possible to describe.

Katy

So simple, but so good. And they do celebrate this cheese very well, don't they? Because I think it's in September, there's a special festival.

Debora

Yes. Cacio al Fuso is a game we can say. In this case, it's a game right in the main square. So in the heart of Pienza, with the shape of pecorino in the square, you can celebrate the pecorino cheese in every way in Pienza, not only to eat, but also as a game.

Katy

Yeah. Don't they roll the cheese down the hill?

Debora

They roll the cheese in the square and it's like a race between, but in this case, a race with the cheese.

Katy

Oh, I'm sure you can't eat the cheese afterwards, though that sounds a bit disappointing. I know, I remember when I was there, we went inside the palace there, which is the Pope's palace, the Piccolomini Palace. And what I did realize was he was a very smart man, obviously was building his own town, but he obviously chose the place with the very best view of the surrounding countryside, right, because.

Debora

It's a typical Renaissance building. So in this case, it's like a museum. So we need the ticket. Of course. But you have to imagine in this building, you arrive where you arrive in the building of a Piccolomini family. And in the middle of the building there is the big courtyard typical of the Renaissance time. With the ticket and with the people that they worked inside the museum, we can visit the room of the Piccolomini family and after that we arrive to the private garden. Because in the Renaissance time they had the private garden. And you have to imagine that in this private garden is in Italian style, but it's built where? In front of the Val d'Orcia. So we can have if we visit this building, we can have a super view because we are in the Renaissance. To the back we have the courtyard in the Renaissance style, the garden and in front again the Val d'Orcia. So it's a mix of art style. The view - unbelievable.

Katy

Yeah, the view from there is just stunning and there's this classic photo that you can take through there's an arch.

Debora

You can have your classic photo where you can see the cypress road, the different color of the countryside. And sincerely, the beauty of this area is also that every time you come under the rain, with the sun, foggy, every time you can have a dream. Because even if change the color with the sky, of course, but the color of the place remain the same. Generally - change a little bit brown and green, of course, it's depending which season we are, but we can say this Pienza is one of the unique place that also under the rain remain beautiful. Because even if change everything with the rain, but the atmosphere, the vibes that you can smell, you can

have is unique. So we don't care if it's winter, summer, spring or fall. Like this year, the weather. We started the spring under the rain because until June we have rain. But the view over there is always unbelievable.

Katy

Yeah, it's true. It really is. And I went there in autumn or fall, and what was really nice then, I think it may have been getting ready for that special cheese festival, but the town was decorated with dried flowers and it was so beautiful just even walking on the streets. Because everyone has made a big effort to make sure that the town is.

Debora

Beautiful, not because it's a beautiful walk. You are in the main street and just turn your head. You can recognize the symbol because you can see the bell tower or you can see the bell tower of the city town. The town hall, sorry. So you have a different corner but everywhere are always the symbol of Pienza or the square, the well that we have inside the square because in the square I forgot, sorry. There is also a Renaissance well and this is the perfect balance of the square. Thanks to that well, we have the perfect view, the perfect balance of the square and of the Renaissance. It's something really unique.

Katy

Yeah, it's very beautiful. So, Debora, I don't know if you know this, but did the Pope - was he going to make it bigger before he died or had he nearly finished?

Debora

Hey, good question. Maybe if he lived a little bit longer, the project will be also bigger because when we cross the street, we meet the square and then if we continue in the street, we continue to have an imaging about the medieval city, much more medieval, middle age. So maybe if he had much more time, he could change something more. But luckily but luckily the project in the main square was completed. That square is maybe if you can compare with Florence, because when we talk about Renaissance, it's Florence. It's like the little sister at the square of Florence, the copy of Florence.

Katy

I see that. I do, I really do.

Debora

The small and the sweet copy of Florence. Florence style.

Katy

Yeah, with a better view. Deborah and I were talking before, and Florence is always beautiful, but unfortunately, last few times I've been there, it's been super busy. It's hard to see the city.

Katy

Fortunately and unfortunately, this year was very busy too much because we haven't the opportunity to really understand the city because it's really too crowded. But Tuscany, luckily, is so big, so we can have the opportunity to visit a very nice place, even if Pienza is famous, but less in comparison, of course, Florence or San Gimignano or that place. And it could be a very nice option to know and visit Tuscany, maybe in a less crowded part.

Katy

Yeah, I think so. And you can also reach Pienza from Rome.

Debora

Pienza from Rome? A couple of hours.

Katy

Yeah, I know there are some day trips that go to Pienza from Rome, but yeah, it's a long way. You wouldn't do it by yourself.

Debora

Also because for Orvieto is more than 2 hours. Because for Orvieto, you need around a little bit less of two hour, 1 hour and half / 1 hour and 40 minutes. So it's more than 2 hours. Maybe it's too much, but I think.

Katy

With Pienza, what it means is it's just that little bit further out of Florence, as an example, that you do have to make a bit of an effort to get there. So it's not going to be as busy as somewhere like San Gimignano, because San Gimignano is quite easy to get to quickly from Florence, and that's why a lot of people go there. But to it's a little bit further and you need to go with a tour or with a driver, or have your own car, right?

Debora

And also, you know what? Maybe also Pienza could be a little bit more busy when? In the morning, because around 10/11 is the time that also sometimes the bus is coming, are coming also. But if you organize to stay a couple of days, three days, how long we want in Val d'Orcia in this area, and you can enjoy Pienza maybe in the sunset time, a little bit later, when the day trip tour are gone, you can have a relaxed and peaceful time in a nice place.

Katy

Yeah, I think so. There's lots of little boutique hotels, aren't they, like you said, B&B.

Debora

Exactly.

Katy

Yeah. Just really elegant. They're not too expensive, but it's a beautiful spot to explore the area. You can go to Montalcino, visit some wineries. You can go to Montepulciano or even like this is my favorite Debora. I told everyone last week on the podcast that I've made a big discovery which some people will probably laugh, but is around thermal baths. And there are some ones very close to Pienza at Bagno Vignoni, which are supposed to be very nice.

Debora

You are in the water in the pool in the middle of Val d'Orcia, of this huge and fantastic area.

Katy

And it's a warm bath because I don't like to be cold. And so for me, when they have the warm pool and then maybe because it's a little bit colder, there's the mist coming off the pool and

you could go maybe have a massage, you can go try some wine and then go back to Pienza for sunset. Oh, this is sounding fantastic.

Debora

Exactly. You can have everything food, wine, spa, massage. Can you imagine?

Katy

Yeah, it's a really beautiful place. And I got asked at the start of this year by some students do I feel responsible for bringing too many people to places? Sometimes I do. But a Pienza is quite well known and it is a beautiful and a perfect example exactly of how it was designed to be by the Pope. And they did a really great job because it's lasted.

Debora

Pienza is a place that the people really love. This place for the food, for the history, but of course, for the view, because it's unique. It's unique. And also because Pienza, we can say, is with a double UNESCO property because Pienza is UNESCO, is under UNESCO and also the Cypress Road are under UNESCO.

Katy

It's really interesting. I mean, for like I'm a bit of a like I always seek out UNESCO properties. So for those of you who don't know what it is, it's the United Nations lists areas, properties, places that they consider to be of cultural significance.

Debora

Or something important or something that if you see, you recognize where you are. Because, for example, if you see the Cypress Road, generally we quickly understand where we are in Tuscany. It's really a symbol of the Val d'Orcia.

Katy

I think, when sometimes you see that I can see this image in my head now of this road. And then you have this like, little Cinque Cento, the Fiat, the old-fashioned one.

Debora

Exactly. Because in that it's so nice also to organize Vespa Tour or 500, the Cinque Cento car Tour. And it's so nice, so colored. Also to see what in this street, typical countryside street in the middle of this color. This cypress road, the colored vespa or the Cinque Cento car, the 500 car, is another way to love Italy because these are symbol of Italy.

Katy

I've realized what really makes me love Italy the most. And it's a combination of a few things. Obviously, there's landscapes and food and wine and history. But it's also, for me, it's the tradition where you have places with tradition, but also where you have this innovation, where you have contrast between the old and the new. And that's where for me, it becomes very special because you can see just respect for the traditions, but also having the style and the vision for the future. I really love that about Italy.

Debora

We try to put together the old, so the tradition part, but the modern, the future, we try.

Katy

I cannot think of many other countries that do it as well, actually. And so that's what always keeps bringing me back to Italy. And also, this area is so beautiful. Debora, we need to go back to Pienza.

Debora

I'm waiting for you.

Katy

I think, you know Pienza. As I think you know, there are times when it is busy, but there is ways to avoid the crowds. So it's definitely a place to seek out. And what did you say to me before? You can always find a little spot of peace and quiet in Pienza to enjoy the view.

Debora

Sometimes I also love to stay outside the gate and because when we arrive there is a public garden and if we cross and we follow the street near the public garden, we arrive to another

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part, this old street. And you can sit in the chair, in the seat and you can have this fantastic view, but in this case, just to relax, because it's without cafe, restaurant, this area, it's just to walk. It's a promenade, we can say so where we can walk and join the view. Or if we are inside, right inside the piazza I really love across the Via de la Fortuna, the street of Fortune or street of Love, this nice, fun street. And here we have some cafe, some place where you can sit, drink something in front of Val d'Orcia, in front of your postcard. You can say that you are in your private postcard.

Katy

That's perfect. Well, maybe next time we meet up, we have to go and sit in our postcard and take a photo for everyone. And I think Pienza was really designed as the perfect town. And I think it would be difficult to argue that they did actually achieve that dream. They absolutely did.

Debora

There is a meaning if it's called the Ideal City or the City of the Light, because it's really the meaning of this city of Pienza. The Renaissance, the ideal city, the perfect city.

Katy

Amazing. Deborah if our listeners want to learn more about Pienza, Arezzo and Tuscany, and stay in touch and perhaps join you on a tour, (highly recommended) how can they reach you.

Debora

on Facebook, Travel with Debora or I have my site always Travel with Debora or just looking for Deborah Bresciani or with you.

Katy

Exactly. So we will put all of Debora's details into our show notes and so you can reach out to her, like many, many people have done. And I know Debora's always posting photos of her beautiful guests that have visited her. And we love to see your smiling faces and having a great time in Tuscany that you will always have with Debora. So grazie mille Debora. Thank you yet again. And, yeah, let's not make it so long since you come back on the podcast. You'll have to come back again soon.

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Debora

Yes, I can't wait. Thanks. Ciao. See you soon.

Katy

Grazie mille.

Katy

Sigh... if you haven't seen the movie *La Vita e Bella*, *Life is Beautiful*, it is a truly enchanting masterpiece that pulls on all your heartstrings. I won't spoil it for you but suffice to say that the city of Arezzo plays a starring role and no doubt I'll be skipping down those streets shouting "Buongiorno Principessa!" when we visit in July.

All the details and links to the places Debora mentioned (except Cortona - haha! are in the show notes at untolditaly.com/124 for episode 124. You'll also find Debora's details there. Make sure to look her up when you're in Arezzo.

Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did then it would be amazing if you gave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. If you're using Apple podcasts then you need to go to the show page for Untold Italy - not the episode page - and scroll down until you see "ratings and reviews". You can leave your 5-star review and message there.

Next week on Untold Italy I'm well and truly on the countdown to my trip and so I'm going to share one of our favorite episodes to date on packing for Italy. I've just listened to it again and there are some things I'd forgotten so it's an excellent refresher for anyone who's getting ready for their trip.

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