

Untold Italy Episode 212: Untold Italy - Our Story

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 212.

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

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 212. Ciao, buongiorno, everyone. Today, we're doing something a bit different on request from several listeners, and a special nudge from our recent client, John, who is planning a lovely trip to Rome, Florence, and Tuscany with his mom. Shout out to you both. I hope you have an amazing time. I often get queries about what Untold Italy is and what exactly it is that I do, which is quite hard to answer because I really invented my job, not on purpose, actually, quite by accident. But I guess it's understandable that people would be curious about how an Australian woman started a business about Italy with mainly Northern American followers and listeners. When I stop to think about it, that's quite strange, and I probably want to be curious about it, too. This is the so far and as yet untold story of Untold Italy, a small, mainly an online travel company that evolved from a series of ideas and opportunities to become what I hope is a trusted resource for travel in Italy. Now, our company is quite a new and perhaps unique idea in the sense that we try to help as many travelers as we can by different mediums: our website, travel services, videos, tours, digital products, and of course, this podcast.

Katy

I'd love to tell you that there was a grand plan behind it all, but it's really been a situation of trial and error, two steps forward and one step back, if you will. It's evolved from a humble travel blog to a fully-fledged small business with quite a few employees. There have been highs and lows, and I'm not too proud to admit almost adult tantrums, which have mainly been over technical issues. But overall, I have to say the highs have by far surpassed the lows. So this is our story, and I say our because despite current trends, putting founders and people at the front and center of businesses. I've never wanted Untold Italy to be about me or my personality. In fact, it does surprise a lot of people that I can become quite shy and

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embarrassed when the spotlight is turned on me personally, whether that's out and about in Italy or in my hometown or in a broader professional sense. I love chatting one-on-one with people on the podcast and in real life, but I do struggle with putting myself out there sometimes. Instead, I've really focused on building a community, company, and brand that transcends me as an individual, and I hope that gives it some longevity, something that I can pass the baton on to another leader to build the team when the time is right, probably a long time from now.

Katy

But even though I don't like putting the spotlight on myself, our story does start with my story. Here's a little bit of background so you can see how things evolved. I want to say upfront that I've had a lot of opportunities along the way that most people in the world, most people in Australia, anywhere, have not had the opportunities I have had. And this is a privilege that I don't take lightly. And for me, taking those opportunities is one of the best ways to respect that privilege. And I believe as long as I pass those opportunities on, then that's the way that I can give back. And we'll talk more about that later.

Katy

Anyway, I come from a family that over many generations has traveled far and wide, and my parents, mum in particular, made sure our family was traveling abroad as soon as we could financially afford it. This fostered a spirit of curiosity that is really important to me and also to Untold Italy. Throughout school and my studies, I was fascinated by faraway lands and different cultures, and I had a particular history teacher that made Renaissance Florence and Venice come alive. She had our class dress up in era-appropriate costumes and made us an historically accurate feast worthy of Catherine de Medici in her home here in Australia.

Katy

It's something I will remember forever, and so it was no wonder that when I started to explore Europe as a student, I headed straight for Italy. At that time, I was based in the UK, where I studied for five years and worked, but I was constantly plotting trips to the continent whenever I could. Now, I want to give a big shout out to anyone who traveled independently in the 1990s. I smile a lot when I think of those days pre-Internet, online bookings and the European Union. Things have changed a lot. We had to contend with multiple currencies and visa requirements for each country. We had little to no information back then except a trusty guidebook. I used to carry a Lonely Planet around with me wherever I went. As an aside, interestingly, Lonely Planet was founded here in Melbourne, Australia, where I live, and was

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founded in the very same suburb that I grew up in. I've never met their owners, but maybe there's something in the water here because the travel and publishing bug definitely rubbed off on me. Now, those travel days before the internet were amazing because above all, you had to be resourceful, creative, and patient, and be able to do a lot of quick arithmetic without a phone calculator to manage all the different money flying around.

Katy

You couldn't research a lot, you just had to show up and go. And mistakes were made, a lot of them. And there was absolutely nothing you could do about it. But I didn't care because the thrill of discovering new people and places was worth it.

Katy

After I graduated, politics and history major, of course, I headed back to Australia. And at that time, our country was in a recession, and while I had vague plans of being a journalist. I hadn't done the right studies, and I needed an income fast. So I landed a job in the IT industry where the pay was good and opportunities were endless. Over the next 15 years, I forged a career and developed skills at big international corporates, HP and IBM, in marketing and business analysis that I still draw upon every day. You meet some pretty amazing and talented people at those companies, and I was given incredible opportunities to travel the world, meet people from all walks of life, and continue my studies, an MBA with a focus on digital business. Little did I know that it would all come together in Untold Italy as it is today. And so I want to let you know if you're wondering what you can do and how you can take opportunities in life - I've learned along the way that sometimes things come along that are just worth pursuing. And even if you don't know exactly where they're leading, sometimes you should just have a go. Now, serendipity is a wonderful thing, don't you think? I met my husband, who is from an Italian migrant background, and was introduced to daily traditional Italian-style life and his mom's amazing cooking. Somewhat dormant dreams of Italy were stirring, but we lived in Australia and had no plans to move. I thought we'd do a few trips one day, but little did I know life had other plans. One dream I always had was to become a mom, and fortunately, our beautiful twins arrived safe and sound. Shortly after that, my husband was offered a role in London, and that was a turning point for our family and my career. It was probably a little crazy to move halfway around the world with two babies, but I'd lived in London for several years, and I knew it was our chance to travel around Europe. Plus, we had some families scattered around in various countries there.

Katy

I resigned from IBM, and in my spare time started planning travels and writing a blog, Untold Morsels, about family travel and food experiences. That's still trucking along a little bit today. You might run into it sometimes if you're researching topics on Italy.

Katy

Over the four years that we lived in the UK, I think we made over 20 trips to Italy, sometimes driving from London via France and stopping in Switzerland to visit my cousin, Nicky, and her family. That way, the kids grew up learning about their Italian heritage and being spoiled by so many very kind Italians we met along the way. I enjoyed writing, taking photos, and refining my craft. But let me tell you, the first attempts were extremely average, bordering on embarrassing. But it is what it is, and you have to start somewhere, and you got to take those first steps, and I'm glad that I did. Fast forward to 2018, and we arrived back home in Australia, and I knew I wanted to continue something to do with the blog. I'd done some freelance marketing for other companies, and I could have gone back to IT. But after hearing some ideas from other bloggers at a travel meetup, I was inspired. I started honing my SEO and affiliate marketing skills with big, big thanks to my dear friend, Sharon Gourlay, who taught me everything I know about those aspects of our business today.

Katy

I started the Untold Italy website. Not a stroke of genius, actually, but stuck for inspiration. I thought I'd just extend the Untold Morsels blog idea to Italy. It turns out it was an excellent decision, but nevertheless, it was a bit of a fluke. The site started building momentum, and I launched our Italy Travel Planning Community, a group on Facebook where people share their Italy travel tips and adventures that now has over 130,000 members. It's free to join if you haven't already. People are always sharing amazing tips and bits of information, things that I have no idea about, but it's all very exciting and there's beautiful photos. If you're on Facebook, it's a good place to go. We do like to keep it very, very friendly. I'm very strict on that. And we have a very strong team of moderators who look after it.

Katy

Now, at the time when I started the Facebook group, I was starting to build partnerships and earn advertising and affiliate income from Untold Italy, so I hired a virtual assistant, the other Katie Clarke, who is a core member of our Untold Italy team to this day. Katie has been with me since before Covid and through Covid, and I'm eternally grateful to her and her support.

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She's always there, and she knows what needs to get done, and it always happens. She's a marvel. At the end of 2019, my friend Josie hailed me up on Colin Street. If you're from Melbourne, you know that it's one of our best strengths. She was passing in her car and she said, Katy, I love what you're doing with Untold Italy. She suggested I start a podcast. So we did. Momentum was at an all-time high. I was having fun, starting to make a meaningful financial contribution to our family and loving life, generally. And then, well, we all know what happened next. February 2020 and Covid arrives. I'll never forget those early Covid days. On our Facebook group, travelers were getting stuck in Italy, having to travel over land to the UK to get home. People were becoming very critically ill and dying in their thousands. I'm not going to dwell on it. It was horrible. For Untold Italy and everything and everyone else, things changed overnight. We were all in a state of shock, weren't we? Everyone was impacted in different ways, but no one escaped it. People lost and were disconnected from family and friends for years, and livelihoods were decimated in a matter of weeks.

Katy

And in Italy, where Covid hit particularly hard, things were looking pretty grim. I had no idea what to do. I wanted to help my friends in the travel industry in Italy. They had no government handouts to help them through, and our income plummeted to almost nothing also. The podcast had just started up, and it seemed to be really weird to be talking about travel when everyone was stuck at home, but for some reason, and I don't know why, I continued. To this day, I can't tell you why I kept going, but I suspect I was in a state of shock myself and just needed some regular motivation to keep going. I also got so many, many lovely messages of support from people around the world who were grateful to me and Untold Italy for connecting them to a place that they loved when they couldn't be there. Now, as a history student, I read about these type of pandemic events before, and I was confident that eventually the pandemic would end. We just didn't know when.

Katy

So I kept going with the podcast and the Facebook group kind of turned into a travel assistance forum for people impacted by Covid who were traveling to Italy. And it was managed beautifully by wonderful Katie, who was at one point stuck inside a locked apartment complex in Southeast Asia. You cannot make this stuff up, can you? But it was this podcast that actually saved the day. And through it, I've met some truly amazing people, including some who are now partners of ours and some who are even on our team. In particular, Olivia who reached out from Torino, we instantly connected and recorded a

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podcast episode together and started a friendship despite a big generation gap, and now a tour company taking people to our favorite hidden spots in Italy.

Katy

I've been used to working with talented people in my former IT career, and I loved collaborating with others and bouncing ideas around. And while I loved building my little business solo, it was definitely not as fun until we started building a team. Katie has been with us since forever and is fundamental to our team, keeping the Facebook group on track and our site information up to date, which is no small task. There are literally hundreds of articles.

Katy

Mark came along next when it was pretty obvious I had no idea about audio editing. He takes out all the ums and ums, and there's a fair few bloopers floating around that we should probably do something with. Thanks, Mark, for making me sound awesome every episode.

Katy

Olivia is also critical to Untold Italy as a business. Her relentless positivity and helpful ideas are the backbone of our tour company. The list goes on.

Katy

Tyla is a marvel who manages our social media. Our tour host and our support team, starring Niki in Lake Como, our photographer Rhianna, and videography team, Yishyene and Ricardo, the Facebook moderators, and now our new trip planning team, including Carrie, who have also been moderating our community so wonderfully for a long time. They're all amazing people who bring something unique and special to Untold Italy from places all over the world, and I couldn't be more proud of them.

Katy

I can tell you, like most businesses, refining and honing our team and partnerships takes time and effort, and it really comes down to values. The people that we like working with and who we gather close at Untold Italy share our values of generosity, respect, curiosity, and connection. And above all, they do what they say they're going to do.

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Katy

They are creative and fun, and they have better ideas than I do and better ways of getting things done that I do, in fact. I love gathering them together each year where possible. In a few weeks time, we'll be exploring Venice. And last year, we zipped around Rome on Vespas, and I could not have even imagined we would have been doing that even two years ago.

Katy

Today, Untold Italy is a unique business in that we have a strong media Media and Digital Foundation via our website, podcast, and new YouTube channel, where travelers can access information to help them plan their trips to Italy for free. That's all supported by advertising and affiliate partnerships with trusted suppliers.

Katy

We also have services for people who want a bit of extra support and/or access to a list of super special addresses like restaurants, hotels, and activities that we don't share on our free media.

Katy

Of course, we have our wonderful small group tours to very special parts of Italy that take you to places to enjoy experiences that independent travelers can't reach. Our tours are something I'm really proud of. They require constant curation and attention, but I think it's worth it. We've got so many repeat travelers, and a big shout out to all of our repeat clients, Vicky, Kim, Caroline, and Rich. There's so many people, Sandy, and just - thank you so much for believing in us and for trusting us to take you to have the experiences in Italy that you really want to have.

Katy

Our business has gone from barely scraping by a couple of years ago to being wildly successful beyond anything I could ever have imagined. I'm so grateful to everyone who has supported us over the years and continues to do so. I feel so privileged that I'm now able to employ talented creatives and people with soul.

Katy

I also like to stop and take a moment to think about how lucky I am, personally and in the context of everything that goes on around me. In Australia, being a female business owner has its challenges, but that is nothing compared to my colleagues in Italy. I don't want to dwell on the negatives too much, but there is a definite and pervasive culture of misogyny that is deeply entrenched in Italian society. As a result, you may have noticed that we do tend to focus on mainly female guests and guides on this podcast. Don't get me wrong, men are fantastic. However, I just feel really strongly that these extremely talented Italian women need a boost. And while I'm in a position of influence, I'd like to raise them up the best way I know how.

Katy

And did you know that only 2 to 4 % of the world's population will travel internationally in any year? Sometimes when you're in the travel industry, it feels like everyone is on a plane somewhere, but clearly, they are not. Most people, due only to an accident of birth and where they were born, will never leave their hometown or village. So I think that given I have the privilege of traveling regularly, giving back in whatever way I can is so important. We're not on this planet for a long time, and I believe everyone deserves to live with dignity and opportunities. So I'm really thankful that we can contribute financially to causes that support that belief. And I'm thrilled I'm able to do that thanks to Untold Italy and all the support we have from listeners and followers like you.

Katy

That's it. That's the story of Untold Italy. This is not something we created on purpose, rather it's evolved and changed over time.

Katy

It's a story of serendipitous moments, wonderful people coming together, and challenges overcome. Life and business moves pretty fast these days. There are endless opportunities and possibilities to be taken if you've got the energy and motivation to grab them, and to know, sadly, when to let go when something doesn't feel right as much as it might hurt.

Katy

I don't know what the future holds, but I do know the team and I have so many ideas that need to be nurtured, tested, and grown, and that does feel exciting.

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Katy

To wrap this up, I'd like to thank a few people for making Untold Italy what it is today. Firstly, my parents, who started me off on a world of travel and adventure, my wonderful husband and children who unwaveringly believe in and support me, and all my friends and family who do the same. To our growing team, Grazie! - this is not a one person job at all, and I am so delighted to have you all by my side. I can't wait to see what the future holds. And of course, we'd like to thank you, our listeners, for all your support of Untold Italy over these 200 plus episodes and your enthusiastic messages and reviews. It means the absolute world to us that so many people from different countries around the world tune in each and every week to listen to the show. If you do enjoy it, it would be amazing if you took a few moments to write a quick review or give us a rating on your favorite podcast app. Grazie Mille in advance. We appreciate you and can't wait to make another 200 episodes.

Katy

That's all for today on next week's episode. We're back in Roma exploring some hidden secrets. But until then, it's ciao for now.