

# Untold Italy Episode 216: 10 Reasons We Love Italy's Umbria Region

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 216.

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 everyone, are you ready for a trip to the beautiful Italian countryside? Today we are headed to Italy's green heart and the stunning region of Umbria - one of our favorites and a place that is special to the Untold Italy team in many ways.

Umbria is a landlocked region of Italy that has not seen the influx of foreign influences that caused other regions like nearby Tuscany to change and develop into European super powers in their own right.

Instead, you might say Umbria is almost like Italy at its purest. From a strong Etruscan heritage, the region has gently evolved without much radical change or influence from outside forces over many centuries. Here traditions endure and the pace of life rolls a little slower.

Joining me today to discuss all the wonders of Umbria is podcast favorite and author of the Glam Italia travel guides, Corinna Cooke who shares a love of this under-the-radar region. So without further ado let's dive in and find out all the reasons why Umbria has captured our hearts.

## Katy

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

## Corinna

Hi, Katy. Thank you for having me back again.

## **Katy**

You are always welcome. I know you're just about to head to Italy again, too, so I'm excited that you could squeeze us in. Where are you going this time?

## **Corinna**

This time I'll be in Tuscany. It's funny because last time I recorded with you, it was 48 hours before I was getting on the plane, and now we're at 35 hours. We're not too far away from doing one of these in the car on the way to the airport.

## **Katy**

I reckon that would be fun. Oh, goodness. I know you're going to be beautiful Arezzo, so that's not far from where we're going to be talking about today, which is exciting. Even though you're probably not going to go to Umbria this time, I thought we could shine a light on this region that really flies under the radar for reasons probably to do with a lack of marketing. Can't think of any other reason.

## **Corinna**

Let's call it a glorious lack of marketing because it's kept it for us. It's kept it magnificent. You don't pull into any town virtually in Umbria and have 50 tour busses arrive right behind you. It's just magical. I love it.

## **Katy**

Let's just give everyone a picture of where Umbria is, because when we tell you, and if you don't know this area, you'll be like, Oh, right. Why didn't I know about it? Because it is actually snuggled like a little cocoon in a blanket between Rome and Tuscany. It's right there, right in the middle. And it's in a beautiful spot of central Italy, and it's just a magical place. But before we get started on our deep dive into the wonders of this region, Corinna, tell me, what were your first impressions when you visited Umbria?

## **Corinna**

My first impression, and I'd actually written this here down, that it was the first thing you need to know about Umbria, is that it looks like every romantic dream you ever had about Italy. So when you close your eyes and you dream about Italy, what are you dreaming about? There's beautiful rolling hills and the vineyards and the olive roads and the Renaissance and

medieval towns and castle towns on the hills. And it's that. It's beautiful and it's timeless. And I feel like everybody's very familiar with Tuscany. I feel like it's almost what Tuscany was like 30 years ago before the tour busses really took hold. I I don't know. It feels like an escape, a beautiful, magical escape. What do you think?

### **Katy**

Yeah, I agree. I felt instant relief. When the last time I was there, we'd just come from the Amalfi Coast, so everything was very busy. It was like a relief to arrive in Umbria. It was a different pace of life. There was no crowds. It was peaceful and tranquil. You could just breathe in the air and just feel at peace, I think. It's a really different vibe to a lot of the other parts of Italy where things are pretty frantic, like Rome and the big cities. It was a relief, actually. I just felt at peace, actually, when I got to Umbria.

### **Corinna**

Yeah, I think maybe there's a piece of your soul that stays in Umbria. When we say it's peaceful, it's not like you're sitting in a field with nothing to do. There's tons of beautiful little towns and so much history and so much art. Oh, my goodness. There's just so much of everything. The only thing there's not so much of is mass tourism. So you really can just really enjoy everything. You're never sidestepping the selfie stick guys and those guys that sell a laser things and everything. And you're not walking down these beautiful medieval streets and seeing endless souvenir shops trying to sell you cheap T-shirts and other made in China nonsense. It just feels so incredibly authentic. I think that the pace of your steps just slows down just a little bit. And I feel like you just breathe just a little bit more. And you're still seeing all this mind-bendingly beautiful, beautiful stuff everywhere all around you. I don't get enough of it.

### **Corinna**

I love taking tour groups there. Well, actually, all of my tour groups, no one's ever been to Umbria before. And so they're not quite sure what they're getting. And there's that little bit of trepidation. I pick them up in Florence, and you know that there's a part of their brain going, Where is she going to be taking us? Can we trust her? We get there. And just that wow factor is astounding. And you see it on every single face, every single time. And then as we cruise through our time there, everyone's just so completely and utterly in love with the experience. I think that it's magic. So it's not just me and it's not just you. You get to see it with other people over and over. I'm sure with your tours as well, do you get that same...

## Katy

We took a group there in November last year, which was we were so thrilled that these people decided to trust us and come along in November because that's not sometimes people's favorite time to travel. But they had an amazing time. It's at that time where one of the wonderful things about Umbria is happening, which is local traditions and festivals and things around the harvest, which are as old as the days of time. People have been having these experiences in the rhythm of the seasons. You can really see that happening in Umbria in a really organic way as the way that it has. It's not set up to attract people. It's just happening the way it has for thousands of years. I think people are genuinely surprised, as you say, and in a really nice way about the pace of everything and just how gentle and genuine people are there. Absolutely thrilled to share their beautiful home with you and excited that you're there to visit. So there's no jaded, or we've seen a thousand tourists already this week. They are genuinely excited to see visitors.

## Corinna

I find that with my tour groups, just simple things. We were walking I was walking along in Gubbio, and the ladies saw a spot they wanted to go into that had truffle foody things, like truffle seasoning, truffle oils, truffle whatever. And you see tasting places all over Italy. But the lady behind the counter was completely enchanted to see my group of six women come in and was talking to them and asking them questions and saying, Oh, you like this? You must try that. The whole thing was this entire experience, not just of tasting stuff, but of having this lady want to tell them stories and want to suggest, Oh, look, and if you do it like this, it's really great. And again, I was standing in the street because I've been out there taking photos when they all came out. And one by one, you just saw the look on their faces because it was more than just visiting another cute town. It was a whole experience with taste and touch and smell and sound and humans and everything. It was the whole shebang.

## Katy

The connection. That's how you build connections. I think, like I've been saying this to a lot of people lately, sometimes people have an idea of Italy, of what they're going to expect when they go there. I feel like this hospitality in this genuine interest and connection is something that people are genuinely looking for when they're going to visit Italy. It might not be the same for other countries that people go to visit. I don't know that anyone's expecting that when they come Australia, for example. But I do think that people are looking for that when they go to Italy. Umbria is definitely a place where you can find that. People are proud of

what they do, and they're proud to share it, but not in an ostentatious way, but in a very calm and generous way.

### **Corinna**

Yes, exactly. And they haven't been burnt out by mass tourism. So places where you just get the endless tour busses coming through, that after a while starts to jade people a little bit. And they're seeing some of the not best of humanity, getting off the tour busses, demanding this and demanding that. And I think it can make in certain places at certain times, you find you're not going to get that touchy-feely, yummy, Italian hospitality that you've been hearing about or dreaming about. And it's because you're in the middle of Disneyland. The people that work the counters at Disneyland can't be all touchy-feely either. They got to crack through the people and get things going. So it's really nice. It's nice to be able to come and have some time in a place like Umbria. I'm crazy about the place. So did you know that it has some of the very best olive oil in all of Italy, which is really saying something.

### **Katy**

Yeah, it's amazing. Everyone's so proud of the olive oil in Italy. It gets to be a bit of a joke, but actually, Umbria and olive oil is very well known to be some of the best. It's different varieties that they use there, the different soil, the different landscapes, the different terrain, and that all goes into making a different product. I think it's definitely one of the experiences that you've got to have when you're there, if you can, especially if you're there around the olive harvest. It's a really special experience. We've actually got an earlier episode, if anyone's interested, I would put a link to it in the show notes because they do the olive harvest and you can experience that. If you come on our tours, it's one of the most special experiences because they do pick the olives by hand. You can have a go at that and then try the fruits of your labor.

### **Corinna**

When you went back and re-listened, because you had to have gone back and we listened to the episode, didn't it make you want to go do that? I was listening to the thing going, Oh, I want to do that. The whole thing where he goes to the place where they do the pressing and all the men have the whole thing that they do. I'm like, Oh, I want to experience that so badly.

**Katy**

I know. I just wanted a whole big slab of bread just to dip in my olive oil and just enjoy.

**Corinna**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Katy**

All right. Shall we talk about some of the things that we really love? Because we've talked about in general terms, but what are some of the things that just make your heart seeing about Umbria?

**Corinna**

Oh, gosh. Everything. It's such a great place. There's so much to see and do. I am one of those people. I love wine. I don't try and pretend to be a winophile or... I don't sit there and swirl and sniff and do that stuff. I just really love drinking good wine. And Umbria has some sensational wines that probably most people, if you haven't been to Umbria, you may not have reason to know about them. And I think it's always fun to have a little checklist so you know, okay, here's some wines I can try and here's some reds to look out for. Because, again, everywhere you go in Italy, the wines are different, and it's all based on the types of grape that are growing and the type of terrain that they're growing on. So Sangiovese and Umbria, to me, taste quite different from one 30, 40 miles away in Tuscany. Do you find that, too?

**Katy**

Absolutely. That's the pride and I guess there's science and an art to winemaking, which is so interesting to me. I don't, like you don't get into the nitty-gritties of it. Like Liv and Andrea know all of the cherry notes and all of those things. I like what I like. But I do think it's interesting the way people adjust the taste of their wine and they understand how the weather and the terrain impacts their production. But they're also always trying to match it to the food that they make. It's always complementary to the food. One of the things, if you like white wine, one of the things that I really like in Umbria is the Orvietto wine, which is a white wine. So good.

## Corinna

Do you drink Est-Est-Est? That's one of my favorite. I love Est-Est-Est. Then also, there's a couple I particularly love a white in Umbria. One is Grechetto, which is a wine that really is specific to Umbria, as far as I know. It's one of the main whites of Umbria. It's like a medium body. It's refreshingly acidic. I don't like those fat, buttery, chardonnay kinds of wines. I like things a little bit crisper. So Grechetto is another lovely white from Umbria, along with Est, although my driver, Lucca, who does all of my Tuscany and Umbria tours, he's also a sommelier. In the offseason, he teaches wine at the University in Florence. So when he sees me with wine, he just rolls his eyes and he's always going, I hate you. I'll be like, Oh, I love this.

## Corinna

There's another one, if you like light, fresh, summery, sparkly whites, there's one that comes from near Spoleto. It's called Trebbiano Spoletino. It's very dramatic and flavorful and I always think of it as a summer wine, just a lovely white, sparkly wine.

## Corinna

Then, of course, they're super famous for reds in Umbria. They have this one called Montefalco Sagrantino, and it's one of the most tannic and age-worthy wines around. They say one of the most tannic and age-worthy wines on the planet. Now, of course, that means nothing to me, but I thought it was quite interesting. It's good. It's just really good. It's a Sagrantino grape, and it's similar to a Sangiovese.

## Corinna

Then there's another one called a Montefalco Rosso, which is a blend of Sagrantino and Sangiovese. If you like robust reds, I always think of drinking reds in the winter with a big hearty bowl of Umbrian pasta. It's good stuff.

## Katy

Yeah, I think Montefalco is actually such a cute little town as well. It's one of my favorites, actually. When you walk up the hill and you're coming to their tiny little piazza and there's some fabulous restaurants there. You can order your Tagliere you get your lovely platter of delicious Umbrian meats and cold cuts and cheese. Then just with your glass of wine, it's a little bit of perfection there in a moment.

## Corinna

Yeah, it's like, what else do you need in life? Sitting there in a beautiful town with great food to snack on, a nice hearty red wine to drink. It's not a lot more you need.

## Katy

Not really. Of course, Umbria is very, very famous - there's a special area of Umbria that's actually super famous for its cured meats, and that's Norcia. Even in Rome, Campo di Fiori, there's actually a shop there that specializes in meats from Norcia. So it's so good, that stuff. I don't know what they do. It's all wild boars and pigs.

## Corinna

Yeah. And it's the pigs graze in the fields and on the hills. They're eating that grass. And so the herbs and the stuff that naturally grows in that grass on that hill, wherever it is that they're eating, that's what they're ingesting. That's what makes everything taste so different.

## Corinna

And it's the same with the cheeses. They're all so specific, and it's based on the cows where they're grazing. I think that's just tremendous. I was going to tell you before we got off the wines, there's this winery that I take my tour groups to that this winery, this land, has been in the family for 800 years. I think that's another thing you get a lot of in places like Umbria, where it's not just new people coming in and making wine. A lot of it is really deep generational wine or the way they make their porchetta, or the way they make their cheeses and everything. We're talking just so many generations deep. 800 years is pretty fancy.

## Katy

How do you even fathom that. It's a really strong commitment to tradition. When I like to talk about Italy in terms of what really gets me buzzing about Italy - is when tradition and innovation combine. But actually, if you really want to get to the heart of the tradition, then Umbria is such a great place to go because this is where they're so deeply committed to their traditions. Even most of the festivals and things they have, there are very rooted in medieval and Renaissance, things that they did back then, and they've been going for hundreds of years. It's definitely a place where you get that sense of Italy. Maybe it's purist.



## Corinna

You're this It's a little wee dot in the spectrum of time. The moment that you are there is just so... Our whole lives are so infinitesimal when you're in a place where you can see time going this long, and everyone's still there, and these families are still there and it's all still going. I think it's tremendous. But it's also it's big truffle country. So if you enjoy truffles, there are truffles everywhere. All the menus, everywhere, they have got truffle options as well.

## Katy

Pasta Strangozzi, I think it is. Strangozzi pasta with the truffles shaved on. That's delicious. It's a different type of pasta than you get up north in, say, Piedmont, because it's actually not an egg pasta. It's more made with flour and water. It's got a totally different taste.

## Corinna

A very different texture. Yeah. That one's actually from Spoleto. It looks like a tagliatelle. In fact, I'm not sure if I put it in my newsletter or if I put it on social media, but we'd stopped for lunch in Spoleto, it was back in October. And I had this Strangozzi with an arugula pesto, pistachio nuts, and I had a handful of little baby tomatoes and a local stracciatella cheese. And it was possibly the best thing I ate in Italy the entire year. And I had a lot of food in Italy all that year. It was so incredibly good. And yes, the texture of this pasta is so different. Everything about it is different. It was wonderful.

## Corinna

They also have this another thing, another food to look for. There is called Torta al Testo. It's like a bread. It's a Focaccia that looks almost like a pita bread. And you go and get sandwiches and they'll have a filling in the middle. Normally, something like prosciutto and pecorino or something simple like that. But it's really cool because this bread dates back to Roman times. Whenever you say Roman times, you want to think 2000 years ago. And the 'testo' part of it is the stone plate that the Romans used to cook this bread on. These thin, almost - not like pancakes in there.

## Katy

Flatbread.

## Corinna

They're pitta bread size. Yeah, like a flat bread. But oh, they're fantastic. And it's just this cool thing that you can sit down and have this sandwich for 3 or 4 dollars, 3, 4 euros, and you're actually having a piece of history, something that's been going on for 2,000 years there, and they're still eating the same thing, which I think is really neat.

## Katy

Yeah, I love the bread because - have you tried the Crescia in Gubbio? Because I think they're specialized in this Crescia bread. It's similar. It's a really tasty bread that they fill with meats and cheese as well. But it's specific to Gubbio, which I love, too. It's like, Oh, well, we just make our own bread here. I like it because it's not too thick, because sometimes you can feel like there's a lot of bread.

## Corinna

Yeah. You'll put these in the show notes, won't you? Because I think it's really important when you... Sorry, there's me telling you. But I think that it's really good when you go to these places to already know, Okay, I'm going to Gubbio, I should try this. I'm going to be in such and such an area. I should have this on my list of foods to try. Because otherwise, you forget about it. Then you get home, you're like, I didn't know about that. I didn't know there's a special bread or a special pasta.

## Corinna

There's this other thing called impastoiata. It's quite hard to say. impastoiata, which is a traditional mix of polenta and borlotti beans. And it's mashed up. It's that texture, a little bit like mashed potatoes. It looks like my absolute favorite dish that I have in Puglia, which I eat every day in Puglia, which is the Fave e cicoria. So in Puglia, they make it with fava beans, and it's all mashed up. Here, it's with polenta and the borlotti beans But it comes back from that cucina povera, the poor people's food, where they didn't have anything, and they didn't have meat, and they didn't have stuff.

## Corinna

So they would have to make very simple foods normally with three or four ingredients. And these bean mashup things would be full of protein and full of nutrition. And they're amazing. And they often serve them with some bit of green, like dandelion greens or whatever, which you may think, oh, but they're fantastic. And then right before you can get a bite, the waiter

comes and he just glugs this really green olive oil all over it. And it's like you've died and gone to heaven. It's so good.

**Katy**

Very good. Oh, my goodness. Yeah. I mean, it's just a different style of eating there, too, isn't it? There's no whistles and bells there. Don't expect anything fancy. This is rustic food. I think you did briefly mention the Porchetta, but this is where rustic food comes into its own. I'm sorry, if you don't eat pork. I'm really sorry, but it's so good. It's one of those things that you just dream about it. My mouth's watering right now just thinking about that crackling on the top and the juicy meat stuffed with herb. Oh, my gosh. Sorry, Corinna.

**Corinna**

So when you are in Norcia, have you eaten Pasta alla Norcina? This is another Umbrian pasta dish that you can get it all over Umbria. I mean, Umbria is not giant. It's relatively small, but it's a dish from Norcia. But it's pork, sausage, ricotta, and local black truffles, tossed around in pasta. And it's one of those things that you could put on your list for the last meal if you're about to get executed and you need to choose what you're going to have. I'll go to the pasta.

**Katy**

I love it. And some of this food, it doesn't look that pretty, but my goodness, does it taste good?

**Corinna**

Isn't that crazy? And you're looking at it and you're thinking, Well, so this is what's all the buzz about. It's pretty simple to me. And then you take that first bite, and then you can't talk to anybody else at the table at all because you just have to focus on all the stuff that's going on in your mouth because it's too fantastic.

**Corinna**

There's this other one that I like, because I'm crazy about Crostini. I love Aperitivo hour, and I love eating where it's just a few fingery foody things to have. So I love Crostini, like crazy. And they have a really famous one in Spoleto called Crostini alla Spoletina. And you'll find it, again, around Umbria, but it is originally from Spoleto. It's black truffles, anchovies, olive oil, and lemon juice all mashed up. When you hear anchovies, don't think those nasty brown, salty

things that we get here and around the world. This is a whole different. Just think little whitefish. But it's so good.

**Katy**

The anchovies gives it umami, which is that - like the fifth taste or whatever it is. You have your sweet, sour, salty, and then there's umami. The anchovies give it the umami, which is the... I don't know. I guess the French would call it the je ne sais quoi or the... I don't know what it is. That's special.

**Corinna**

It's the magic. It's the magic to take something that looks a little bit like cat food because some of these things do look a little bit like cat food. But oh, my gosh, it's so good. I told these ladies on my October tour last year. Because they were like, Oh, I don't think I want to eat that. I'm like, "just close your eyes and bite". And they're like, "Well, I don't know". I'm like, "Just do it. You can always spit it out." And that plate was cleared in 10 seconds flat.

**Katy**

I mean, it's so important to have someone that's going to boss you around.

**Corinna**

I would say, You know what? Try it. If you don't like it, we'll order you something else. If you don't like it, you know...

**Katy**

If you don't like it, take a sip of wine and move on to the next thing.

**Corinna**

Yeah. There's someone else at the table that wants it. But this was it was created because, again, in times when people did not have enough food and there wasn't meat and there wasn't all this stuff, and they needed something hearty and substantial in their bellies, because walking up to Spoleto, it's very, very steep and very, very high. So now there's escalators that take you up there. But in the old days, of course, people had to walk, and so they could have these big hearty crostini to keep them going. But have you been to Spoleto? Are you familiar with Spoleto?

## Katy

I haven't been to Spoleto. It's on my list. Tell me about it.

## Corinna

Okay, so this is everything I've ever wanted in a town. Every time we go there, I start telling Luca because Luca is always with us, my driver, I'm like, oh, Luca, I think I should move here. I start listing off all the reasons why I should go live in Spoleto. And then he reminds me that there's no trains nearby, and it's going to be too isolated. But it's fantastic. So we're in the domain of being a... think of it as a castle town on a hill, but it's way up high up there. And you take a series of three or four escalators to get up there. It was first settled in the fifth century BC, so we're going back 2,500, 2,600 years ago by the Umbri tribes, and you can still see parts of the original walls. There's still there. You can walk up to that and see them and everything. Then the Romans were there by 241 BC. It was already Roman colony. You have lots of ancient Rome that you can see well preserved inside this town. There's a really cool ancient Roman villa house that you can go down into, and there's the frescoes, and there's all the stuff.

## Corinna

But also it has a Roman Theater. So a theater for plays and music and not a gladiator joint. And of course, the Roman Theater is up on the edge of the hill with these views out to what were views to forever, there's a little bit more building around it now. So that was built in the first century BC, and it was still in use in the fourth century AD. So I mean, 500 years of this thing being used all the time for poetry readings and plays and music and everything.

## Corinna

Then during the Middle Ages, a church was built on it, on one edge of it. There was a church with cloisters built, and there was the Corvi Palace. So the church is the Church of Santa Agatha and then the Corvi Palace - they were built where the stage is. Now they're the State Archeology Museum, which if you're interested in museums and archeological stuff, it's really cool. But the theater is still in use over the summer. So Spoleto has a fantastic music festival that happens across June and July. Well, actually, it's music, dance, opera, theater. And they have 170 performances experiences happen across the spell. And there's all kinds of phenomenal artists and stuff that come there. It's a really big deal to go to it

## Corinna

. So it's a city you got the ancient Roman stuff, you got a little bit of medieval stuff. But a lot of Renaissance. So you got that really beautiful old Renaissance town to walk through. Unbelievable food. That's where I had the Strangozzi. And it has a fantastic cathedral. It's called the Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta, And it was originally built in the 800s and then got a little renovation in 1198. That just blows my mind. These dates are ridiculous. But it does have frescoes from 1209 that are still beautifully intact.

## Corinna

So that's some really old stuff to see. If you're into frescoes and things, it's phenomenal. And then Filippo Lippi, they brought him out from Florence to do some painting there, and it's incredible. The chapels with his frescoes are phenomenal. And he actually, that's where he ended his life. And so he's buried there.

## Corinna

And Pinturicchio has... There's a whole lot of Pinturicchio in there as well. And there's tons to see. You can even be someone that's not really interested, particularly in art. It's an incredible cathedral to come and have a look around.

## Corinna

But another thing with Spoleto is you can walk the walls. So when you come up out of the escalators, you can veer right and go straight into the town, or you can veer left. And there's pathways that are wide enough for one and a half lanes of traffic. So beautiful big wide sweeping. And you take three steps and suddenly you're just in the country, but up high with these ridiculous views out over Umbria. They're just breathtaking.

## Corinna

And then as you come around the back, you can see this fantastic aqueduct. And it's one of the symbols of Spoleto. It's enormous. It's 230 meters across. One side of it is against Spoleto, and it goes across this ravine to the other side. On the Spoleto side, you have the Rocca Albornoziana, and on the other side, you have the Fortilizio dei Mulini. It's 230 meters across. While we were there, it was having some renovations, but normally you can walk across. You can be out there in the middle of this with these ridiculous views if you like taking photos. Like there's me with my iPhone just going absolutely out of my mind every time.

## Corinna

And it's 80 meters high, so it's a very dramatic-looking aqueduct. So that's fun to see as well. It's a fantastic town. Once again, it does get some tourism, but it tends to be people who've been told to, "Oh, you need to go check out this place". You're not going to be there with hordes of bus tourists and stuff. And it's wonderful.

## Katy

You did mention the landscapes and the views from there. I think we didn't really touch on that before, but I think we need to go into it because Umbria is known as the Green Heart of Italy. It's a big agricultural area, but it's also just full of plains. It's dotted with these towns like Spoleto that's on a hill. You've got fields and olive trees and flowers in springtime and sunflowers in summer, just absolute miles and miles of sunflowers in summer, just pointing their little faces up to the sun and bending as the sunsets in the afternoon. It's a really evocative place.

## Corinna

It's quite dramatic mountains as well, like Mount Subasio and stuff. They're very green. I mean, why they call it the Green Heart for a reason. But even if you know you're going into the Green Heart of Italy, it still stops you in your tracks a little bit when you see it, I think. When you're talking about flowers, I always pair together, Spoleto - we then head on to Spello, which is another gorgeous, tiny, tiny dot of a town. I mean, it's ridiculous, isn't it? We're sitting there looking at each other on camera smiling.

## Katy

Did they put that flower pot there on purpose? Yes, they did. They did it to make it look super cute and to make you fall in love with it. It's absolutely gorgeous.

## Corinna

Well, they have May through August. They have this. It's like an ongoing festival called Finestre, balconi e vicoli fioriti, which is windows, balconies, and little streets full of flowers. They have these little Vicoli, which is a little side street, like an alleyway that maybe has six houses on it. And everybody gets together and they have their whole plan with what flowers they're doing. And every surface is covered in flowers. And it's not even like neighborhoods. They're smaller than neighborhoods. They take it really seriously. And this town is just an explosion of color of flowers and the smell of flowers. And it's so beautiful. I don't even know

that they make words for something as gorgeous as that. And there's the smell and just everywhere you look, it's this beauty. Then, of course, in June, they have the, which is where they make the street tapestries of floral pictures, which is phenomenal.

**Katy**

On our tour, we actually visit the festival. If you're prepare to get up early on your vacation, we are ready.

**Corinna**

Do these people even realize how lucky they are?

**Katy**

I don't know. That's pretty cool. We've got a really strategic plan about how to visit it because it does get a little bit busy. But we just - mainly with local people. But it's a very special festival, and it's something that you won't see anywhere else.

**Corinna**

It's amazing. And the smell and the colors. And then putting that in context with this town, which... I mean, if there was not one flower in this town, you would still think it was absolutely breathtaking beautiful. So you take that and now you fill it up with flowers in these flower walkways. Oh, my goodness.

**Corinna**

And they have flower gelato. So when you're there, there's several artisanal gelato shops. And I always say to people on my tours, you didn't come all the way to Italy to eat manufactured pretend gelato. If you're here, eat the real stuff that's made at the artisanal stores where they make it probably cost the same. And it tastes... There's a whole completely different thing that happens with the taste and with the texture and with everything. But in Spello, they have all these flower flavors. So when I was there in October, I had a two scooper because I couldn't choose. And it was like one scoop of rose-flavor gelato and one scoop of violet-flavored. Just fantastic. And made from flowers from Spoleto.



## Corinna

There's some great art. There are two in the Baglioni Chapel that has absolutely breathtaking fresco. They're by Pintoricchio. They were done between 1500 and 1501. And literally every inch of this chapel, every centimeter, for those of you in metrics, is covered in frescoes and the vibrant colors are mind bending, and it's got a glass floor that you're on, but it's absolutely incredible. And I think a lot of people that go to Spello don't know about that.

## Corinna

And then there's another thing that's just outside of the town that is fantastic for anybody that is interested in ancient Roman stuff. In 2005, they were excavating to create a parking lot. And of course, you get a digger in Italy, you're going to find something ancient. They found 500 square meters of an ancient Roman villa. And of the 20 rooms that they discovered, 10 of them had absolutely sensational mosaic floors - ridiculous. So if you're somebody who is interested in ancient Roman stuff, or might find that a little bit interesting to go have a look at as a little sidestep, once you've done eating your gelato, your flower gelato, it's well worth seeing.

## Corinna

Then also, for those of you who have read a book called In Bel Centro by Michelle Damiani, she is based in Spello. That's the town where she set it all. It's fun if you've read something and you've loved someone's story and you've loved the way they tell a story, to be in their town and start recognizing things, I think is really fun.

## Katy

She's actually been on this podcast, Michelle Damiani. I'll put the link to that episode. She had such a great story to tell about that. Of course, Spello is really close to probably the most famous town in Umbria, which is Assisi. I think a lot of people know about Assisi, and we did a recent episode on that, too. We probably won't go into too much detail about Assisi here. But that's another beautiful town with such an interesting past. See Umbria is just full of everything. That's just down the road from Perugia, which is the capital, another amazing and interesting city.

## Corinna

I die over Perugia. I just love it because it's very cosmopolitan and chic. It's also historical. Sitting in the main street up there, having a coffee or a glass of wine and just letting the

world go by you is magical. Perugia, the first inhabitants there, were from the sixth century BC, and that was the Umbri tribes. Then the Etruscans were there. There's Etruscan walls. There's Etruscan stuff that you can see. So anytime you hear Etruscans, think 850 BC to 350 BC, and you're in the right parameters. Actually, there's this big well. Have you been to the well? It's a massive Etruscan well. So again, think 850 BC to 350 BC. And it's so big, it has a bridge going across the middle of it, way down there. But that's cool to see.

**Corinna**

And then there's the Palazzo dei Priori, which was built in 1293, and it's now the National Gallery of Umbria. If you're into art, there's a lot of Perugino there and Pinturicchio there. They have a summer jazz festival in Perugia, which is fantastic.

**Corinna**

But do you know the story about the Perugina chocolates, the Baci chocolates?

**Katy**

Oh, come on, tell it. It's a good one.

**Corinna**

Okay. Everybody will recognize them as soon as you see them. There's these little Perugina chocolates called Baci, which is Kisses. When you open it up, once you know to look for it, you'll see it's in the shape of a boob. And what it was, was the guy that owned the chocolate shop had this mistress who every day he would send her a chocolate in the shape of a breast. And inside of it would be a little note saying some sweet little thing. And now you can buy these chocolates. And each time you open one, it's got a little note in it that says whatever. It's always something kinda romantic-y. It's not like a Chinese fortune cookie. But these little boob-shaped chocolates. And so they're from Perugia. And when you're up top, there's a Perugina chocolate shop there.

**Corinna**

But when you arrive to Perugia, it's really cool because you come in at the bottom of the town and you park, and then you take these escalators to get up. And the escalators take you into a middle ground where you're underground and you're in this underground city. What it is, is the Baglioni family that I referred to when I talk about Spello, they were like the Medici of

Umbria without all the important art and stuff that the Medici did. But they were the leading family of Umbria from about, I think it was 1438 to 1540. An important influential family, which, of course, you get full of all kinds of nutty characters and all kinds of crazy nonsense that goes on as well, which I'm always fascinated with. But there was this whole thing. Umbria was one of the Papal states at that time. The Pope decided to impose a salt tax that hit Tuscany and Umbria and it led to massive starvation because salt was how they would preserve food. And so you had all these people dying. It was catastrophic. And so the Baglioni decided, okay, let's get rid of the Pope. We're going to be a Republic. We're no longer going to be under the Pope. So the Pope, which is Pope Paul III, he wasn't going to have a bar of this. So he decided to have a war for Jesus and send in his troops. One of the things that he wanted to do to show his domination was knock down the Baglioni fortress and part of their buildings and build his own Papal fortress on top. And then in 1860 or something, they knocked it down because they wanted to show not being under the hand of the Pope.

**Corinna**

But anyway, so you have the bottom ground where you park your car in the down city. You go up in these escalators, up, and now you're in middle land. So you're still like an underground city. And it's what remains of the Baglioni villas and chapels and streets. And it's just the craziest thing. You're walking around underground in this what? Probably 30, 40 meter ceilings. It's fantastic.

**Katy**

Did you know that they have the Christmas market in there, in that section?

**Corinna**

Stop it.

**Katy**

All the little stalls.

**Corinna**

That's where you'll find me in December. It's seemingly endless. You could go lose yourself in Umbria for a week and be driving around every day at leisure, just cruising around these little

towns and go and discovering things and eating incredible food and never get bored. It's tremendous.

**Corinna**

We haven't talked about Deruta. So Deruta is another little dot of a town that is famous for handpainted ceramics, and that's all that's there. You get there in this teeny tiny little town, and it's just streets of workshops where they're doing handpainted ceramics. Everything from giant urns that are taller than you are to little espresso cups. Everything you can think of is there. It's so nice because you stroll the streets and you're looking at the different workshops, looking for patterns and colors that you like.

**Katy**

And it's not salesy, is it? It's chilled.

**Corinna**

Not even slightly.

**Katy**

They don't even know how to do it. So it's like you go and you're just browsing. And if you want to ship something back, cool. If you don't, then just moving on. It's so relaxing.

**Katy**

I'll tell you something, though, that's not relaxing in Umbria for me anyway. If you're a little bit fearless, I need to tell you this story because our friends, Sarah and Sal, suggested that we go to Gubbio for the day when we were there a couple of years ago. Gubbio, a lot of people think it reminds them of San Gimignano because it's got that medieval, kind of... there's some towers, there's a lot of winding little streets, and I think people are always looking for the next San Gimignano. But Gubbio has a little attraction. It's like halfway up a mountain. If you want to go up the mountain because it's a beautiful view and if you're into that type of thing, there's a mummified saint at the top of there, Sant'Ubaldo. We had to go, apparently, because that's what children quite fascinated in - "I want to go see the mummy". But to get up there, you need to go in a special transport. Let me tell you, I am not doing that again in a pink fit. It is a chairlift, but you stand up and it's in the shape of one of those wrought iron bird cages where it's like a...

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**Corinna**

Yes. Oh, my goodness.

**Katy**

A few people in their max. It's all open on the sides, except for the bars of the bird cage. You get in there and I was like, I'm not good with heights, okay? This was not cool. I got in there with my son, and I was just immediately like breathing really heavily. Then he's going, "Are you okay, mum?" and I'm like, "Oh, not really." Anyway, it takes about, I reckon, about 10 minutes to get up the top. My poor family, it was a hot day. Everyone was wearing sandals, and I made them walk down the mountain on the gravelly park because there was no way I was getting back in that bird cage.

**Corinna**

I just know if I got in one of those things, something would go drastically wrong. I'd be It's like on those memes you see on Instagram with the chairlift flying around and all the people are flying off out into the distance. That would be me. I just know it.

**Katy**

If you're not scared of heights, I think it's fine. Everyone else was like, What's the big fuss? I was holding on to the thing for dear life. They actually have an amazing festival in Gubbio, actually, as well, which involves lanterns and processions. I know Olivia went there last year. She said it was amazing. Hundreds and hundreds of people following this beautiful beautiful procession with huge candles.

**Katy**

It's just so full of these traditions, Umbria. That's what I think makes it really special. I reckon we could keep talking about this for another hour, Corinna, really.

**Corinna**

Easy. I think that's something really important - if somebody is listening to this and they're thinking, I might add Umbria in to a trip, would be to have a look and see what festivals, what Sagre are on that month, and maybe pivot your trip around that because it's such a wonderful experience, whatever one you get to. Even if it's one where it's just huge big

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wooden tables in the middle of town and everybody sits down and eats food prepared by all the ladies in town. It's fantastic, all of it. It's such a great experience to really flesh out your Italy travel time.

### **Corinna**

I get it now when people are going for the first time, a lot of people want to be hitting the Venice, Florence, Rome, Amalfi, everything, and I understand that. But if you can fit some time in to go somewhere that's less traveled, I think it's brilliant. And then if you're coming back for a second trip to Italy, why not try and bank a few days in Umbria because it's wonderful, especially if you're comfortable driving, which actually driving in Umbria is quite easy. It's not like crazy traffic or anything too nutsy. So you can have a really lovely time just doing a little bit of exploring and eat yourself into a coma.

### **Katy**

You do need to drive in Umbria. But yeah, like you said, I'd be comfortable driving there on my own, and I probably will be later this year, actually, so there you go.

### **Corinna**

Before we go, I have two things to tell people. One of them is I just finished this hilarious book that is set in Umbria. There's an Irish woman called Rosie Meleady, I think her name is, and she has a series of about five books. She moved her family to Umbria to by Lake Trasimeno right when Covid hit. And I think all she did was just write books that whole time. And they're hilarious, but they also give you that feel for... like they accidentally bought a 22-room villa.

### **Katy**

Oh, dear.

### **Corinna**

That needed tons of work. But the first book is called A Rosie Life in Italy. It was just really enjoyable. And so I read it and I have one of the ladies that came with me in October She reads a lot of the same books as I do. So I send it to her. I'm like, "You got to read this book". And then we've both been buzzing backwards and forwards through them.

## Corinna

And then the other thing is, there's a girl on Instagram. If you are on Instagram, there's a girl called @shaynateresetaylor, all squigged into one thing. She was a model here in the U of S. I don't really know too much about her pre-life, but things went wrong in her life. And she decided to pack up and move to Italy. And she bought a little farm in Umbria. And her Instagram, I literally stalk her because I start my day seeing what she's been up to in Umbria. And it's always like she's doing - like walking out on her land, and she's got her dogs and her chickens. And there's a whole thing when she was building the chicken coop and getting the chickens. And I was literally checking in every day to see if they were laying eggs yet. And I think in her other life is a chef or she does cooking classes or something like that. I know she was doing online cooking classes, but it's just another way to get a window into how beautiful Umbria is without looking at a travel brochure, seeing some real people life there. You'll see what I mean about how it's like every romantic dream you've ever had in Italy. That's what it looks like.

## Katy

I can't wait to get there later this year. I feel very lucky to be going back there for a special wedding. I'm excited.

## Corinna

Yes.

## Katy

Corinna, thank you for sharing your insights. I really feel like shedding a light on this beautiful area because it is Untold Italy, and we're trying to reach places that people maybe don't know about. I think this is one of those places that's so unsung and it's just so worth visiting. I think you've given people a million reasons why they should visit Umbria. So thank you. Now, if people want to stay in touch with you, which they should, then definitely read your guidebooks and do all the things with Corinna, how can they do that?

## Corinna

So all the books are available worldwide on amazon.com. For those of you that don't know me, I write the Glam Italia - How to Travel Italy, Book series. I'm on Instagram @corinnatravels, but you can go to my website, which is corinnacooke.com, and it's bound to be in the show notes somewhere. And that has links to everything, to the blog. I have a great

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newsletter that goes out about once a month that has an enormous membership. But that's another really good way to get some information. But otherwise, just social media. I'm mostly active on Instagram out of all of them. Do you TikTok by the way Katy?

**Katy**

My gosh - you can't be everywhere. I'm just like - No, I don't TikTok? I don't even know - well, I should know.

**Corinna**

I feel like I'm the only person on the planet that is not actively doing stuff on TikTok, and I can't keep up. So, half the time, I can't get up with Instagram. But anyway, that's where you can find me. Actually, if you Google Untold Italy and Corina Cooke, there's all these episodes that I've done on here, which have been so fun. There's some great stuff to find that we've talked about in the past, huh, Katy?

**Katy**

I know. We talk about everything. I love having you on, and we never run out of topics. Ever. It's just going to go on into perpetuity. Thank you, Have a beautiful time in Italy and Tuscany, and we look forward to catching up when you get back.

**Corinna**

Thank you for having me. Ciao tutti!

**Katy**

Honestly, I can't stop thinking about Umbria and I'm very excited to be heading there later this year for a very special wedding and staying a while. It's not the sort of place you can rush through in a couple of days. This is an area that requires a bit of commitment but it surely pays you back in spades with deep immersive local experiences.

If you're the type of traveler that likes to wing it and go with the flow then Umbria is the place for you as you won't be competing with hordes of other visitors. In Umbria you can throw caution to the wind and be as free and easy as you like, exploring the towns, valleys and hills of this perfect pocket of Italy, stopping for tagliere - plates of local cured meats and cheeses and lovely wine.

Umbria is a destination we especially like taking our tour guests to. We know the people who book these trips are the type of people that like to be surprised (in a good way). They're not

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so interested in Instagram-worthy moments but are ready to go deep into the local culture and explore the heart of Italy. We love seeing their faces as they soak up every little town and village along with their ancient traditions - from local candlemakers to cheesemakers, they are all so very proud of their crafts and produce. It's a delight to be a part of it.

If you'd like to learn more about our small group tours of Umbria we've put a link into your podcast app and our website show notes at [untolditaly.com/216](https://untolditaly.com/216) for episode 216 as well as link to our online Umbria travel guide if you prefer to explore on your own. Of course, Corinna's details are in there too. She hasn't written a guidebook to Umbria just yet but I'll see if I can convince her.

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. That way we can reach more Italy travel lovers just like you.

Next week on Untold Italy, fresh back from my trip to Rome and Venice I'm sharing our top 5 must-have experiences in Rome. These are the things I return to again and again each time I visit the Eternal City - and I can never get enough of it. But until then it's "ciao for now".