

Untold Italy Episode 220: Italian Hospitality: Come as a Guest, Leave as a Friend

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 220.

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

Buon Giorno! Hi everyone, today I wanted to talk about Italian hospitality and what that means. I truly believe that when most of us book trips to Italy we are looking to experience more than just a laundry list of sights and attractions. I think many of us travelers want to experience the famous Italian hospitality that we've heard about - a generosity of spirit and friendly people that help you build a connection with what is undoubtedly one of the world's most beautiful countries.

Visitors to our countries Australia, America, Canada, and the UK where most of our listeners come from probably don't expect the same type of welcome that we dream of in Italy and that's because our cultures are vastly different and we offer contrasting experiences.

So what is this famous Italian hospitality? Let's hear about it from someone who really knows what it means to not only experience it but deliver it day after day to their customers. Today I'm welcoming my friend Giovanni from Joe Banana Italy back on the show to share his thoughts on what I think is one of Italy's most precious resources - the warmth and generosity of Italian hospitality.

Katy

Bentornato Giovanni, welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Giovanni

Thank you. Thank you, Katie. It's a pleasure to be here again and another great podcast for your listeners.

Katy

Let's hope so. Let's do this. How are things in beautiful Southern Italy at the moment?

Giovanni

Beautiful. The weather is getting better and better. People are starting going out on the boats, seeing Capri, the Amalfi Coast, and time to eat outside. I have to say the spring already came, and we're enjoying it. We're seeing a lot of tourists, too, by the way. Well, we are Easter time now.

Katy

Yeah. Things are getting busier earlier, I think, aren't they?

Giovanni

Yeah, we are quite busy. Even this year, it seems a country very, very requested Italy. Thanks God.

Katy

Well, I think the weather has been fairly warm, really, and people are a bit worried about the heat, maybe in the height of summer, so I think you might not be able to have a rest next year. I think it will just keep going.

Giovanni

Yeah. No, the weather is getting, well, not really hot, but to be honest, it's a pleasure. When the weather is like that, especially in the springtime, all Obviously, in August, it's hot anyhow, but summer is summer.

Katy

Exactly. Now, we've had many new listeners join us since you were last on the show. Would you please introduce yourself and let everyone know about your company and your background and why you love helping people enjoy your part of Italy?

Giovanni

Sure. Let's introduce myself. By the way, thank you again for having me. As you know, I'm Giovanni, and I'm the owner of Joe Banana Italy, which I founded together with my brother Paolo. He also did a few podcast with you. We are in the tourism industry since 1998, and I started my own business. I created Joe Banana Limos in 2009. So it's about 15 years now. And as you already know, because you know what we do very well, we love this job. We actually... we do it, obviously, we do it for money, but we do it with passion. We love to welcome our guests. And when we welcome them as a guest, then we say bye-bye as a friend. Because they have to become friends. When somebody comes, the hospitality we have, we want to show them - like you made a friend at your home and you're welcoming in in your home and we take them around. We take them to a restaurant which we like to go. We take them to a beach which we like to go. We take care of them. Actually, soon they step into Italy until the day they go.

Katy

And how do you do that? What things do you do? How do you help tourists?

Giovanni

Well, we started 15 years ago as a limo company. So thanks God, we both speak English fluent, and we lived outside. I go to visit the United States every year. I made friends there, travel agents. We started as a limo company. I mean, I used to pick them up at the airport to take them around to visit Rome, to visit Pompeii, to visit the Amalfi Coast.

Giovanni

Then slowly, slowly, we open a travel agency, as we love this, where we actually sell everything in terms of tourism. So you don't have to worry about booking your hotel, or your boat, or your tickets, your guides. We take care of everything. And every year, year by year, we try to do those little add-ons to go out a little bit of the mass tourism. You know that very well. It is beautiful when you show something to the people, which is a little bit out of the beaten path, as we usually say. For example, now it's very, very popular, the mozzarella making. And we do a lot of tours, taking them to a very small mozzarella cheese factory. Having your clients, which in the meantime became friends, putting their hands in the mozzarella dough, making the mozzarella, making the little balls.

Giovanni

We love seeing them doing the pizza themselves and have them eating their own pizza. They made with their hands. The same thing is with pasta. These little experiences make us different than the others. If I have to be honest with you in terms of money. You do make money, but I would make more money having people taking them on the regular Amalfi Coast tour, instead of taking them to the mozzarella. But as we love this, I like showing them what tourists don't see. And it's quite nice, to be honest with you.

Katy

Yeah, it's lovely. And what I've always appreciated about you and your company is the care that you take to ensure every customer has a wonderful experience, whether they're joining a full private tour of Italy or a special boat tour along the Amalfi Coast, or even simply taking a transfer from Naples to Positano. What is driving you to give people this special experience? Why do you treat customers the way that you do? Do you have a philosophy?

Giovanni

As I travel a lot, I really want to be welcomed as I welcome people when they come here. I mean, if you pick up a guest, for example, from Rome and take him to Positano, and you just go straight, like the classical limo service without even talking to them, like a business transfer. We don't do that. We like to chat each other. We like to stop on the way, take wonderful pictures. You know the landscapes of Italy? They're beautiful wherever you go, from Lake Como down to Sicily, wherever you drive, it's really beautiful. For example, yesterday, I was talking to a guest, they're from New Jersey, and they're 14 of them. They said, Giovanni, we want to visit Como, Venice, Florence, Cinque Terre, and then we want to go to Sicily. I said, What? Italy is why it's about from North to Sicily, it's about a thousand miles. And I said, well, it's possible if you have about 15 days. And then the last stop before heading to Sicily was Sorrento. So So they're going to spend about 4 nights in Sorrento and in the meantime, having the boat tour, the Amalfi Coast, the gastronomy, the famous gastronomy tour we do. And then they said, Giovanni, we want to go to Sicily, but we don't want to drive there. And I said, you are going to Sicily by plane, so you need one and a half hour from Sorrento to the airport. Then unload the luggage, upload the luggage, then carry the luggage in the airport, and then be there 2 hours early, then get to Catania Airport and get the transport. You're going to spend about seven hours. In six and a half hours, we drive there in a luxury, comfortable vehicle, Mercedes. We have this new Mercedes Sprinter - very, very comfortable, Katy, to be honest. Like a first-class of the plane, like a business-class of the plane. And I say, in six and a half hours, you don't drive through the desert -you drive on

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the Coast, you enjoy the panorama. And I send them a few pictures of the way they go. And they say, "Well, it's done. Let's go back up". And that's what we do with the transfers.

Giovanni

When we pick someone up, for example, from Naples to Positano, we stop on the way, let them take a picture. There is this granita spot, the lemon ice on the way. We buy them a granita whenever we can, obviously, whenever the schedule permits that. But people already, they feel like a friend because you talk, how many days you spend in Italy, what you're going to visit, where you're going to see. You suggest them some restaurants to have dinner, for example, in Positano, or Sorrento, or the Amalfi Coast, anyway. So it is the first impact that you already became a friend with someone, even if you never met them before.

Katy

It's true. I've had that granita. It's very, very good.

Giovanni

That one is good.

Katy

That one. I've also had the gelato from Paolo's favorite gelato shop, and that was pretty special, too.

Giovanni

Yeah, that's another thing, by the way. Most of the people, they have gelato, they have gelato in Florence, in Rome, in the main city where millions of tourists go. And when we do the gastronomic tour, like we do the mozzarella, the pizza, the olive oil, all these things, we love to take them in a famous gelateria, which no tourist goes. Only local goes. And it's always full, by the way. And we take them that you can explore all this fresh flavor because when they make the hazelnuts ice cream, they don't make it with the concentrate or the flavor. They make it with fresh hazelnut - ice cream. So it is a little bit different. You can tell. Obviously, you have a gelato in the middle of the time. I don't want to say it's not good. It is still good. But where millions of tourists go, it is a little bit more industrial, to be honest. But this is what we like to let them do. They actually expect that many, many tourists, when they come to Italy, the hospitality. We have actually raised up within the hospitality. When

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someone rings at your door, you let them come in, you make the famous Espresso, you give them a cookie.

Giovanni

And we raised up with the hospitality. Even if we do this as a let's say, business, but we have it in our blood. And many people, especially from America, from Australia, even from Europe, to be honest with you, even if they are close to us. They expect the hospitality. Sometimes they are really impressed because they do not expect a driver to buy them a granita on the way of a transport. They say, "Where I am?"

Katy

It's so true. I think that people really do have that expectation when they come to Italy. They think that they want to have a warmer, more connected experience with the people. It's not just about taking photos, it's about having a conversation and learning a bit more about people. I think that's a really beautiful thing for tourism in general, actually, not just in Italy, but all around the world. I think if everyone gave a little bit more hospitality I think the world might be a friendlier place.

Giovanni

Yes. Let's say that Italy is a little bit different, to be honest. I travel a lot, and it is in the people habits. To give hospitality. I don't want to say everyone is like that. I don't want to generalize, but unless people are doing my business with a little bit of passion, you do give the hospitality that clients deserve.

Giovanni

First of all, the flexibility. This is another way to give hospitality to the people. The flexibility. For example, I was in a strike in Rome two days ago because this rental car in Italy, Italy is a beautiful country, you know better than me. But the politicians, some things, they don't really work well. The bureaucracy, let's say. And so we were on a strike and I had clients, they came to Sorrento, and they actually lost the luggage at the airport. I said to them, Listen, I'm going to the airport. I'm going to Rome for a strike. I'll come and I pick up the luggage for you, and I'll bring the luggage to your hotel. How much I owe you? You don't have to owe me anything because I'm in Rome for a strike, but that is a part of hospitality. Obviously, if I have nobody in Rome and I have to send a vehicle, I get charged. But if was another one beside me, say, okay, I'll send you a car, give me \$500 to get the luggage, to be just an example. But as you

have it inside, something sometimes it comes naturally. We don't work on it. It is all natural, to be honest with you. It's that part of flexibility that you have inside?

Giovanni

For example, we have been together. For example, the Lemon Tour. You remember the Lemon Tour? We had a few years ago, we had a Lemon Tour at that place. They didn't even know what tourist are. But the people were welcoming the hospital. You remember they made the coffee, they made this, they made this because sometimes it's in the blood of the people I always say.

Katy

Well, I have to say, though, on that day, I ate the best lasagna I've ever had in my life, and I'd never I've experienced any lasagna before or after that lasagna, and I still talk about it because they made it with the smoked mozzarella and the lemon rind. Oh, mamma mia. So good. That was good. It was so good.

Giovanni

Don't make me hungry.

Katy

I think it's just so critical for people to know that you probably don't get this all the time, but I do really appreciate that you would do that for a friend. You would bring their luggage from Rome if you were in the area. It's those little things, I think, that really make all the difference because no one's expecting that because certainly that would not happen maybe in our country. No, definitely not. But it does happen in Italy, and it's part of, like you said, the blood or the DNA. I think it's really a lovely thing.

Giovanni

Besides this, getting the luggage, we are expanding. Thanks God, we have about 10 vehicles. We have drivers, which we train one by one. And I said to a driver last time, I said, "Okay, now tomorrow, you have to transfer, pick people up in Sorrento, take them to the station. And he said, "Okay, Giovanni, do I drop them off outside?" I said, "No! You go in the parking." He said, "Why we go in the parking? We pay the parking?" "Yes, you pay the parking. You have a machine and you have people taking the luggage inside the station. Show them the display

where all the train are marked, show them the track number, and then you say bye-bye." It is important doing this. It's because you want to be treated like that if you go in a foreign country. So I don't want someone that kicks me out of the car outside the station. I don't like this. So go in the parking, walk with them in inside the station. If you are in a rush, you have another service schedule, maybe in the best way you can, you tell them, "Guys, I'm going to drop you right here, walk inside there. You point them out where you have to walk, where they have to walk, and that's it. But when you have time, you have to".

Giovanni

And so me and Paolo, we train the drivers, even the guides. Paolo, about 10 years ago, became a professional licensed guide. So he takes people to Pompeii, to Capri, to Herculaneum. And he has a lot of guides working for him, and he train himself, the guides, very well. But not train I don't want to say he trained the guides to explain them what an archeological site is. We train them how to treat the clients. Even me - to the drivers, I don't train them to drive the car because they already know how to drive the car. They do speak English, but I train them how to treat the clients, how the clients are happy. And besides this, how can you make more money? Because if you help a client, if you are a friend, the client will tip you at the end of the day. And it's important. You work for that, but it has to come from your passion.

Giovanni

Obviously, there are many people, they miss out this experience, not with us, because the mass tourism, better than me, it's all around. And this is what makes us different. We are flexible, we customize the itinerary, and we try to make clients' wishes and clients' dreams comes true always.

Giovanni

For example, Just an example of today. I have two drivers with 13 people from Sorrento. They're supposed to do the Path of God. Yesterday, we had some rain. And Path of God, it's a beautiful path that goes along the Amalfi Coast, and it's spectacular. I suggest that to everyone - when it rains, it's not recommended. On my opinion, it's not good to go because it's a path, and it's even a little It's a bit dangerous. So you have to be careful. You have to walk. So these clients call, they say, Oh, the forecast saying tomorrow is going to rain. What are they going to do? So I changed all the schedule, and I will come there. I supposed to pick them up in Sorrento and take them to the Path of God. So I switched all the vehicles and I give them 2 vehicles and they are enjoying the Amalfi Coast, plus they're going to an olive oil

mill because one of them wants to see how the olive oil is made. And so we will come there. That's the difference between the mass. When you buy, for example, an Amalfi Coast tool on a mass tourist website, right? It's that one. You are together with 20 other people. You want to change. You can't change. While with us, we have that little flexibility. We try to welcome everybody. I could definitely say to the client, listen, I don't have the vehicles tomorrow. I take you to the Path of God, even if it rains, I don't care. But you would never do that because you do your best to welcome them, to accommodate their wishes and try to make them enjoy - they're spending money on vacation. This is something we always say.

Katy

Yeah, it's so true. It's so many times when you are disappointed because you've booked something thinking it was going to be quick and easy, and then something's happened and you maybe need to cancel it or change plans, and then you've got nothing to fall back on because you are part of a bit of a machine. Because there are so many people going to Sorrento and the Amalfi Coast now. It can be more difficult to have a special experience, I think. I can only tell people what I experienced. I wanted to tell this one story about Paolo. Paolo wanted my family to try some tuna that someone had made, and he forgot to bring the tuna on the last day that we had with him. Then he dropped it off at a bakery near the airport, and he also bought us some pastries. But I mean, he made it so easy for us to go and pick it all up, and then it was such a surprise. I mean, maybe it was a little thing to him. I don't think it was because he had to drive a long way, but it was very special to us.

Katy

I think those little touches can really make a big difference. That was, well, I don't know, it was a few years ago now, and I still remember those experiences. My kids know Paolo and his ability to eat pizza. That's his claim to fame. I think definitely we experienced Italian hospitality with your family and your team. It was really very special. I really hope other people get to experience it because I have a lot of experiences in Italy, as you know. I'm there quite often. I don't remember all of them, so I remember a lot about yours.

Giovanni

Even with the boats, for example, when you do a Capri boat tour, it is nice to enjoy the boat. For example, we decided a few years ago to don't do sharings on the boat. I know we could definitely make more money because people doesn't want to spend too much money. But do you really think you go with 12 other people unfamiliar, which you don't know, and itinerary is fixed and you have to drop off in Capri 3 hours. Well, what if I don't want to drop off? You

have to because it's a fixed itinerary. When you start doing sharings and fixed itinerary, you are not able to give that hospitality you have been given in the past. And so we decided to give private boat tours to Capri, but with flexibility.

Giovanni

3 days ago, a family booked a Capri tour on a boat on a 38 feet, the famous Gozzo boat in Sorrento. They booked this tour. They were supposed to go to Capri. At a certain point, the skipper was talking with the husband of this client and said, "What about Positano and Nelano? or those little places on the Amalfi Coast?" And the skipper said, "Well, we can definitely switch. You don't want to go to Capri, we go to the Amalfi Coast. There is no extra cost. The day is eight hours. We are going to enjoy." So they completely switched the day. And in the office, we didn't even know that. So when one of my assistant called these guys for the courtesy call, Maria, one of my assistants said, "How was your day in Capri? Did you enjoy on the boat? How was it going?" "Oh, we actually switched. We are on the Amalfi Coast, we are not..." Can you imagine? How it works, the flexibility and the hospitality? You could never do that If you do a sharing tour, you're booked for a Capri tour, you have to go to Capri. There's nothing to do. And this is what makes us a little bit different than the others.

Katy

Yeah, I think that's so true. I didn't prepare this question, but I do have a question. Have you experienced something like that, hospitality somewhere else in the world, or is this something you think is quite uniquely Italian?

Giovanni

I travel a lot, I have to say. I've never been to Australia. I have to go, it's on my bucket list. But I did all the United States. I did about 30 states in the United States. I did the entire Europe. And I have to be honest with you, we have something different. I don't want to say. I mean, the hospitality is nice wherever you go, whenever you pay - you know better than me, you get. But It's a different culture. It's a different culture. So obviously, you cannot expect. I had clients, I took them to my home. You cannot expect a driver in the United States or in Australia that he takes you to his home for a lunch. I took clients to my home because they became a friend, especially when they laugh with you, they enjoy the day with you, they appreciate. That's the most important thing, by the way. When you explain them things, even on a one hour transfer, from Naples to Sorrento, you drive by Pompeii, Herculaneum, you go through Naples, which is the third largest city of Italy. It's older than Rome, by the way. And you tell them, well, this is Naples, this is Pompeii, that's Capri in the distance, because the

view is fantastic when you have a transfer on the car from Naples to Sorrento and the Amalfi Coast. When you see that people are appreciating what you are telling them, because they were not expecting a driver explaining a few things. That is the click that steps from guest - friend, from guest to a friend. And when you see people that they appreciate what you are telling them, what you are explaining them, then you understand, "Okay, these people are my friends." And I have to say 99... it seems high, this percentage, but 99% of the clients, they act in this way.

Giovanni

Now with this package, we are the Italian package are going on fire, thanks God, even this year. We have a tour of Italy, for example, which is 12 days. We actually call it the Earth of Italy. It's 12 days. Includes basically everything. It costs about 7,000 per person if you are two people. If you are four people, it costs you about 5,500. Four or five-star hotels. A driver, which he act as a host because he's with you for the entire day - tickets, guides, boat tour, all these these things, and then you take care of them as soon they step into Italy.

Giovanni

This is the difference even with the big tour operator we were talking about before. You pay this amount of money if you go on a big bus with big group tour, and you cannot say to the driver, "Stop here or stop there or I want to take a picture of that". No, it is all fixed. So what we did, we created this little package, which are very reasonable, on my opinion, because they include almost everything. And everybody can have access to those, and they are treated like VIP. That makes even the difference between the mass tourism. And that is where they really appreciate the hospitality.

Giovanni

For example, I really wish to have something similar when I go in the foreign country. Someone that takes care of you from the moment that you step at the airport, picks you up, takes you to the hotel. You don't have to worry about to carry the luggage. You don't have to worry about to book your hotel, organize the planning, the tickets. You know better than me what tickets are in Italy. Colosseum tickets, we're not talking about the war we do to buy the tickets, the Vatican tickets, and all the rest. So we already have tickets in our hands. We buy tickets for them. The guide is all there with them. A local professional licensed guide is something important for every person that comes, especially in Italy, especially in Rome, in Florence. You need a guide. You need a guide that shows you around. There are too many things to see, too many things to do. And it's quite, on my opinion, important.

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Katy

Yeah, I agree. I was chuckling to myself because I used to travel very much independently and try and do everything myself. I had my special badge that I did this all myself. But as I get more experienced, goodness me, I do appreciate being looked after, actually, especially when I'm on vacation, because I don't really want to feel like that I'm working. I do just want to relax and have everything taken care of for me, which would shock my younger self, to be quite honest with you, because I was so independent and all of that. But I think if you haven't tried that style of travel, I really encourage you to do it because it's really a different experience. I don't think you miss out on any experiences locally. I think you will actually find that you experience more because, like Giovanni said, you can make a relationship with your driver. We've had some amazing stories where drivers have taken them to meet the family farm in Puglia because the guests wanted to hug an olive tree. That's the type of thing that you can do. It's a very different style of travel, but if you haven't tried it, you definitely should.

Katy

Now, Giovanni, I really believe that experiencing true Italian hospitality, like you've described, is very important to our listeners. I know that they would like to stay in touch with you and experience it for themselves. How can they do that? How can they reach you?

Giovanni

They can easily find us. You just Google - you can Google Joe Banana, you will find the Joe Banana tours in Italy. We have a website, we have a live chat. We have about six people in our office helping people. By the way, the private package tours - they have a 24/7 assistance because they have their own phone. We do the shift for the girls in the office, and it's really important. So they can send us an email. Most of the single service, Katy, are actually purchasable on the website directly. For example, the single transfers, single tour, the Amalfi Coast, the gastronomic, the one we're talking about, that can go on the website, joebananalimos.com, and they can buy and check the availability right there. Obviously, if they have questions, they are very welcome to get in touch with us. We are here to help. That's what we do from about 20 years.

Giovanni

And while for the package, it is always better to have a call. We have a toll-free number for United States and Canada. They can call us for free and talk with someone in the office and have some suggestion and help planning the trip.

Giovanni

You know better than me that planning a trip, it's not that easy. It's not that easy, to be honest.

Katy

Oh, that sounds wonderful. And everyone, really, the Joe Banana team is just wonderful. Just such a great bunch of people that really just want to help you plan an amazing trip to Italy. So grazie mille, Giovanni. Thank you for joining us on Untold Italy today, and I'm very glad we're friends.

Giovanni

I'm very glad you invited me again. Thank you for having me on your podcast. Thank you to all the listeners that are listening us and guys, welcome to Italy! Ciao, ciao!

Katy

Benvenuti. Ciao, ciao.

Katy

So what do you think listeners? Have you experienced this Italian hospitality and friendliness for yourself? Are you looking forward to having that experience when you go to Italy? Speaking for myself it's what we as a family look forward to the most on our trips to Italy and we do end up returning to the places where we best experience it again and again.

And what astonishes me the most is at these places the experience is not only welcoming and kind - no matter the time of year, whether the team is super busy or if they have staffing challenges. You can never tell because these companies and services, just like Giovanni's team take great pride in their culture and how their guests enjoy it.

If you'd like to know how you can experience southern Italian hospitality with Joe Banana Italy then head on over to our website where you'll find the show notes at

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untolditaly.com/220 where you'll find all the details of how you can get in touch with Giovanni's team.

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all our listeners - well over 100,000 each month! joining us from around the world. We'd love it if you helped spread the word so we can reach more Italy-loving travelers and the best way you can do this is by leaving us a 5-star rating or review on your favorite podcast app.

That's all we have from Italy for today, next week we're taking a trip to Sicily to hear all about one of its famous wines. So until then, it's "ciao for now"!