

Untold Italy Episode 228: Top 5 Experiences to try in Florence

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 228.

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. How's your Italy dreaming going? I hope it's full of amazing art, gelato and walks through sleepy villages and towns. No doubt many of you are dreaming of Florence, that most romantic of cities on the Arno River that captures the imaginations of so many of us.

Katy

It certainly was a place that I longed to visit when I first started dreaming of Italy, thanks to my history studies, books like *A Room with a View*, and the movie adaptation of that novel. If you haven't seen it, get ready to swoon. It's an absolute classic, and it really just captures the essence of Florence and everything that you dream of.

Katy

Now, I've been lucky enough to have visited Firenze and as it's known to the locals on many occasions, and quite a few in the last few years. So I thought I'd share with you the experiences that I like to have when I visit the Renaissance City. Some are paid and some are for free, but they are all things that are uniquely Florentine and ones that you'll look back fondly on when your time there is over and you're possibly dreaming of another trip very soon.

Katy

So here are my favorite experiences to have in Florence, whether it's your first visit or your fifth.

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Katy

One thing that I really love to do in Florence is soak up all the art and culture. Florence is simply bursting at the seams with incredible art, especially from the Renaissance era. But the city has a long tradition of supporting artists and artisans, so you can find museums and galleries to really suit any interest, from modern art to fashion, and of course, Renaissance art.

Katy

Now, most visitors go to the Uffizi Gallery, which is home to some of the world's most priceless art by Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Rafael. It's an absolutely mind-blowing collection housed in a purpose-built structure that also included the Uffizi or Offices of the Medici family, hence the name.

Katy

The Uffizi is a huge and overwhelming collection, and it's not so well-marked, so I do recommend that you take an audio guide or a guided tour to make the most of your visit. And yes, you must book in advance. It's also closed on Mondays, which can catch some people out as they're doing their trip planning.

Katy

The other spot most people visit in Florence for their art fix is a smaller and much more accessible Accademia gallery. This is where Michelangelo's original David statue is housed. There are two copies of the statue in Florence, one in the Piazza Della Signoria, near the entrance to the Uffizi Gallery, which is the spot where it originally stood before it was moved to the Accademia for its protection. The other is at Piazzale Michelangelo. Personally, I think these copies don't really come close to capturing the beauty of the original carved out of a single block of Carrara marble.

Katy

The Accademia Gallery has a small collection of other works by Michelangelo and Renaissance artists. It's very accessible in the sense that it is small and not overwhelming like galleries can be for some people, including me. I love art and immersing myself in a painting or sculpture, but I have to admit that sometimes it all feels a bit much.

Katy

I like to spend an hour or so getting to know works of art, and this is where Florence really comes into its own. In Florence, there are literally hundreds of churches you can pop into for free to see some of the world's most prized pieces of art. The best thing to do is take a wander around the neighborhoods and pop your head into a church or two and get ready to be wowed.

Katy

One of my favorite spots is Santa Croce, which is home to works by Giotto, Brunelleschi, and Donatello. It's also the final resting place of Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Galileo, Rossini, Dante Alighieri, and Florence Nightingale, who are all honored there with monumental tombs that are really incredibly beautiful.

Katy

Another is the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmen. Here you'll see these stunningly beautiful early Renaissance frescoes by Masaccio, who broke from the symbolic medieval tradition by creating more realistic paintings of people in honor of his patron the wealthy merchant, Brancacci.

Katy

Closer to the Duomo, the Medici Chapel or Chapel of the Princes is part of the Church of San Lorenzo and honors the city's leading family of the Renaissance era, stuffed full of treasures, including statues by Michelangelo.

Katy

The chapel is a riot of colored marble inlaid on more marble because they could.

Katy

Onisante is a church a little wander away from the Medici chapels where the crowds don't go. It's baroque façade shields a wonderful collection of fresco goes by Gilandeo and Botticelli, who is also buried in the Church, with explorer, Amerigo Vespucci. These are just some of the places you can visit to get your art fix in Florence. The city is literally bursting with art and art museums. As I mentioned before, I like to take my art in bite-sized chunks, so you'll find

me dipping in and out of churches, shops, and cafés, which, in fact, is the ultimate Florentine experience.

Katy

But one place you cannot ever miss, thanks to its magnetic force, is the beautiful Duomo, the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, the icon of Florence. So my next experience you have to have in Florence is to pay your respects and fall in love with this stunning building from every angle. Now, perhaps it was because the Duomo was covered in scaffolding when I first saw it on my inaugural visit to Florence, that I feel so much passion for the building, and especially its facade - covered in intricate designs of green, pink, and white marble, topped with the terracotta tiles of Brunelleschi's dome.

Katy

It's absolutely breathtaking, both up close and from a distance. You have to see it at dusk and dawn when the ethereal Tuscan light bounces off the stone and you can see the building glow. It's simply magical. I like to go and find new places that I can admire this beautiful building from at a different angle each time that I'm in Florence, and at various different times of the day, but especially at dusk and at dawn.

Katy

Of course, heading inside and up the 364 steps to the top of the dome is a must-do on the list of many visitors to Florence. This inside view gets you up close and personal to the dome that Brunelleschi designed and built, one of the world's greatest architectural achievements. Climbing those stairs is an awe-inspiring experience. When you're up that high, you can really appreciate the ingenuity behind the creation of the dome. Some of our team members recently had a VIP experience climbing the Dome, and it was absolutely absolutely incredible. After all the crowds have left, you're able to climb the stairs up to the dome, go out onto the terraces, and then come back down into an empty cathedral and turn the lights out. And that experience is with Walks of Italy, and it's one of those things that you remember forever.

Katy

Unfortunately, I didn't get to see it, but maybe I will next time I'm in Florence. Now, if you want to view the dome from the outside, consider that you can see the cathedral in all its glory from Giotto's Bell Tower, which forms part of the Cathedral complex. There's a few more

steps for this one, which maybe around 400, but some strategic viewing stops along the way to the summit.

Katy

Now, for those of you who want to learn a bit more about the history, art, and architecture of this magnificent site, pay a visit to the Opera del Duomo Museum, where you'll find a treasure trove of artifacts and artworks that form part of the Cathedral's collection.

Katy

But you know what? My favorite thing of all is that I just love seeing the Duomo from so many different vantage points that I try to find something new each time I'm in Florence. Some places that offer a view include the Rinascente department store's cafe, which is great for a lunch with a view. If you're very kind to the staff there, they'll give you the prime position, which happened to us last time, which was an absolute thrill.

Katy

At dusk, I like the cafeteria at the Oblate Library, which serves aperitivo, naturally, and gives you a superb view of the dome all lit up after dusk. Hearing the bells toll from that vantage point is very special also. I just remember sitting there with a few of my team, clinking our glasses and just having to pinch myself thinking, Wow, I'm in Florence. Definitely in Florence. During the day, you can pay a visit to the Palazzo Vecchio, which will give you the Medici's view of the Duomo. The Palazzo Vecchio is one of the lesser known and actually my favorite site in Florence. It's where the ruling Medici family lived until they moved over the river to the Pitti Palace. Of course, they had many vantage points to see the progress of the Dome's construction. If you visit there, make sure you peek out the windows or from the tower for the best views in town.

Katy

So, there you have it. Make sure you find your favorite Duomo viewing spot. It really is the heart of the city, and I cannot imagine visiting Florence without paying my respects in some way to this symbol of the Renaissance. Walking the cobble streets of Florence and up all those stairs is sure to build up an appetite.

Katy

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And so, of course, you must try the most famous dish of the city, and that's the Bistecca alla Fiorentina, or Florentine steak, as some people call it. Traditionally, this steak dish comes from Chianina, which is a Tuscan breed of cattle. The meat from the cow is aged between 15 and 21 days. To compare that to the meat that we have at the supermarket, which is aged probably maybe 48 hours, you can imagine that there's a big concentration of flavor. The meat is then cut as a very thick T-bone, and each piece weighs up to 1.2 kilos, and it's around three to four fingers high. So it's really not for the faint-hearted. Done properly, the steak is brought to room temperature, then it's cooked quickly over hot coals. Per the Tuscan tradition, the meat is basically blue, but they will serve at medium rare. The meat is then seasoned with salt and pepper and olive oil. Just a note to anyone who is fussy about how well done their meat is. If you like your steak well done, don't ask for this dish as it will be a chewy and unsatisfactory experience. The meat is supposed to be cooked very quickly and have the char on the outside and be very rare in the middle.

Katy

So I suggest that you order something else as this steak is definitely meant to be served rare. So it's a lot of meat, and is it worth it? Well, I think so, and it depends on how much you like red meat. I don't eat a lot of red meat, but I do love it when it's cooked very well, like in the Florentine tradition. I have to say it's one of the highlights of my eating experiences in Italy. But again, it's a lot of meat, so if you're not used to it, you can actually share, obviously between two people. I know some people very well that would really go for it. My son is one of them. He loves meat. But don't feel that you have to order lots of sides and everything like that. If you want to just try the meat, just go for it. Some places that you can try, Bistecca alle Fiorentina in Florence are Trattoria 13 Gobbi near the train station, and Del Fagioli in the center. Trattoria dall'Oste and La Bucchetta are very popular, too.

Katy

But make your reservations, folks, because these places are popular. And don't forget, if you want your meat cooked more than medium rare, look for a different cut of meat, a different type of steak, because otherwise, you're probably going to be very disappointed.

Katy

I was actually reading some reviews of restaurants recently, and it was quite interesting because people, I don't know what they were expecting, but to me, the meat was cooked as it was supposed to be, and people were complaining about how rare it was. Just to be aware

that's exactly as it should be. If you get something overdone, well, then you're not getting the Florentine steak.

Katy

Changing tack now because I do love a bit of exclusive shopping. And by that, I mean shopping experiences that special and unique. It doesn't have to be super expensive. You find some very special shopping in Florence, thanks to its long tradition of supporting artists and crafts.

Katy

One of the things I like to do is find a beautiful fragrance. I love different types of fragrances and the way that they smell different on your body. One of the places I always stop at is the Farmacia Santa Maria Novella. This is a place that traces its roots back to the early 13th century and ancient preparations by Dominican monks who made the best use of aromatic herbs from their garden to make many things, including the company's famous scented waters.

Katy

In the 16th century, Catherine de Medici, of course, a Florentine f Catherine, one of the famous daughters of the city, bought a specially made fragrance with her from the Apothecary when she moved to France to marry the Dauphine in a strategic alliance for the Florentine state. Catherine would later become a formidable queen of France, and the fragrance, Aqua di Santa Maria Novella or Aqua della Regina, the Queen's Water, is still available to purchase to this day. I also have a covered bottle of that perfume because I love Catherine's story, and it's definitely one to seek out. There's a few good biographies you can read of her. She was a really interesting person, and I've visited a lot of places that she's been to in France and also in Italy. For me, finding that perfume was a real thrill. Now, the store itself in Santa Maria Novella district, is always beautifully decorated, and it's like stepping into a wonderland. It's so elegant, and the products are showcased in a masterclass of visual merchandising. I think the last time I was there, they had an anniversary exhibition, and someone had made this beautiful art installation, made of paper, paper flowers, and it was just absolutely stunning.

Katy

It's one of those things where photos just don't do it justice. Definitely, go and have a pop inside the shop. You can even just have a look around and do some sampling of what they

have. They've got beautiful soaps, perfumes, hand creams, all sorts of things. It's a really beautiful shop.

Katy

Over the other side of the Arno River in the San Niccolò district, you'll find a perfumeier who builds on that tradition with over 1,500 pure essences and exacting techniques to make the most of these beautiful fragrances. It's really fun to go and try the unique preparations made there at Sileno Cheloni, and they'll even help you make your very own unique fragrance. It's a really beautiful shop, and I love to go there.

Katy

A lot of the essences come from flowers that are grown near Florence. It's a very local industry, and it's something that's been obviously there for a very long time.

Katy

Now, when I'm at Sileno Cheloni, which is a beautiful store, I like to pop over the road to perhaps the most incredible jewelry store I've ever laid eyes on, and that's the store of Alessandro Dari, who's a master jeweler. He is inspired by the city of Florence over many eras, Etruscan, medieval, and Renaissance, and he makes incredibly spectacular sculptural jewelry.

Katy

It's got things like gargoyles and castles on it. It's like a store that you can imagine might be in Diagon Alley or something, but it's really brought to life here in real life in Florence. Even if you wouldn't wear this style yourself, which I definitely wouldn't - I'm more of a simple classic style of jewelry. You really can't fail to be impressed by the intricate designs and artistry on display. Dari is recognized as one of the top goldsmiths in Florence and in Italy, and each piece is incredibly unique and beautiful. I go to the store every time I'm in Florence for a little bit of inspiration, because someone who has that much commitment to their craft and attention to detail, you can't fail to be inspired by.

Katy

For something a little lighter in the suitcase and on your wallet, Florence is known for paper crafts. At Il Papiro, you'll find luxury stationery and other items featuring stunning traditional colorful marble designs. I have a few notebooks from here, and it's such a pleasure to feel the

quality of the paper and admire the handcrafted designs. In fact, we've got an outlet of Il Papiro here in Melbourne, a shout-out to those lovely ladies. And they have marbling classes, and I believe you can also do that in Florence. And if you can, it's such an interesting technique of adding paint and swirling it. And you have to be very careful when you put the paper into the paint, because if you make one wrong move, you have a big splash instead of a beautiful design.

Katy

I would say planning some time for shopping and window shopping is always a good idea in Florence. When you find the perfect pieces, you'll have something to cherish and remember Florence forever. I really love my notebooks that I have, and from the paper place, and I've got my fragrances. It's like stopping and remembering your time in Florence every time you use them.

Katy

The final experience I like to have in Florence is to take to the hills and admire the city, nestled in the Arno Valley, from a distance. Here you can see the Duomo rising resplendent among the city's houses as it has for centuries. Depending on where you go, it's also a great way to escape the crowds in the old town and enjoy a taste of the countryside of Tuscany, which a lot of people covet anyway.

Katy

The first place I'm going to mention is very popular, but it's popular for a reason. Piazzale Michelangelo is a classic place to go and admire views of the city. It's right above the San Niccolo district, and it's a pretty steep climb up a lot of steps to get there. If you think that it might be a bit much, you can grab a taxi to go there also. It can get very busy, especially at dusk, but that's because the view is absolutely stupendous. You can grab yourself an overpriced Aperol Spritz from a street vendor and watch the sun dip below the Tuscan Hills in the distance as the sky evolves in shades of pink and orange over the rooftops and Duomo.

Katy

There'll be plenty of people there, but I have to say it's an absolutely beautiful, beautiful scene. The photos that you get there will be spectacular because it's just Florence at dusk. I need to say For a quieter experience, but the same panoramic view, you need to climb a little

higher above the city to the steps of the Abbey of San Minato al Monte. Here you'll see the whole city laid out before you in all its splendor.

Katy

You probably won't get a spritz here, but you will have the opportunity for a moment of quiet contemplation to marvel at the buildings below that have stood for centuries and are holders of many, many stories.

Katy

Another spot that's a little further out of Florence, but is beloved by many, is Fiesole, a small town on the city outskirts. I mentioned the movie *A Room with a View* earlier, and there are some really dreamy scenes set here. If anyone's interested, it's the Merchant Ivory version of the movie or the book *A Room with a View*, made in 1985, starring Helena Bonham Carter. It's just a magical, wonderful job of capturing the Tuscan light and ambiance. There's such a friction between the old, maybe stuffy English ways and the Italian joy for life. It's a really wonderful film. I really encourage you to seek it out. It's quite hard to find sometimes these days because the streaming platforms tend to drip-feed things to us. If you ever see it, and if I ever see it on the streaming platforms, I'll let everyone know on our social media because it's really a beautiful, beautiful movie. Now, to find out for yourself why this place is so magical, you can take a taxi or walk in around an hour from Florence, or you can take the local busses 17 and 7 to reach Piazza Mino, where they hold a local market on Saturdays and café tables spill out onto the Piazza every day.

Katy

The vibe is relaxed and local compared to the crush of the city below. So once you've had your restorative coffee or glass of wine, you can climb the steep hill to the convent of San Francesco for more beautiful views of Florence. Then make your way down to the Roman theater and Etruscan ruins and explore the history and the heritage of this important part of Florence. Now, many people make Fiesole, their base and venture into the city for day trips, which I think is a lovely idea if you have a few days to explore.

Katy

On our last visit, we only had time for dinner in Fiesole, and we very much enjoyed our meal in the outdoor courtyard at Coquinarius, so I recommend that too.

Katy

Now, there you have it. There are my five experiences that you have to have in Florence that are special to this most beautiful of cities. Thanks for joining me on this little jaunt around the city.

Katy

Florence is very crowded these days for most of the year, so I recommend taking the quieter options I mentioned. Enjoy some quiet time admiring the views or taking your time in a church stuffed full of priceless art.

Katy

Or I particularly like visiting there in winter when you can stroll around the streets in your warm winter coat and duck into a Trattoria for some Bistecca or pasta, and then head back out to the streets for a spot of shopping or art appreciation.

Katy

If you'd like to follow in my footsteps visit some of the favorite places that I mentioned or try some of the experiences that we talked about here in Florence, head on over to our website, show notes at untolditaly.com/228 for episode 228. We provide the list of all the restaurants and places that I mentioned, because it is quite difficult sometimes to follow along with my Aussie accent and also the Italian words.

Katy

Grazie mille. 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-loving travelers just like you. If you listen on Spotify, you can also leave comments on each episode, and I really love reading all of those. Unfortunately, they haven't worked out a way for podcasters to reply to questions on that function yet, but we have asked for it, and let's hope they come through soon.

Katy

Next week on Untold Italy, we'll be heading back to the beautiful Liguria region to chat about one of my favorite sauces, pesto. But until then, it's ciao for now.

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