

Untold Italy Episode 240: Money Matters - Italy travel tips on cards, cash and more

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 240.

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 Clarke:

Benvenuti, Ciao everyone, hope you have some Italy plans brewing and if not, why not? Italy is always a good idea, no matter the season.

It's been a few months since my last trip and my feet are getting itchy. I was missing my friends in the Emilia region and of course a bowl of steaming tortellini in brodo and I managed to find an excellent version right here in Melbourne Australia where I live. If you're heading our way you might like to check out Trattoria Emilia. Buonissimo. If it's not on the menu, just ask. For the rest of you, it's really worth keeping an eye out for local restaurants that specialize in regional Italian cuisine.

Katy Clarke:

Lately, I've been working on a few exciting Italy travel-related projects that I can't wait to share with you in the coming months. The team is really digging deep to find ways to help you plan your trips and have maximum fun when you get to Italy.

In the meantime, in case you missed it, we just released a podcast episode guide. I know it's virtually impossible to search in Apple podcasts and Spotify for specific topics within a podcast so we took matters into our own hands and created a document that lays out the episodes by themes and destination. So if you want to find episodes about Florence you can go to the document and it will show the relevant episode numbers. We'll put the link where you can get the episode guide into our show notes for this episode and on the podcast app. I hope you find it useful. This is just the first step in my own personal crusade to try and simplify getting you the information you need in a simple and useful way so stay tuned!

Katy Clarke:

Ok so this week I wanted to chat about money and all things related to that while you're in Italy as I know some people get a bit nervous about it but really there is nothing to worry about. Things are much much easier than when we had to haul around wads of notes back in

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the days of the old Italian currency - the lire. Pour yourself a glass of wine if you remember those days. They really tested our maths ability didn't they?

These days, Italy is part of the European Union and their currency is the wonderful Euro. Honestly, I think if there is one thing that simplified travel over the past 25 years it was the introduction of the Euro and the ability to divide by 10s, not 1000s - if you know, you know

And while Italy is known as a place where cash is revered, these days I barely use any cash at all when I am traveling in Italy and simply use debit and credit cards to pay for everything. Most places also take Apple and Google Pay so I really only take physical cards as a backup. And that's true up and down the boot because there is a law that says shops and other services must offer payment by card for transactions above €10 I think it is.

There is one caveat here though. While Visa and Mastercard are the accepted defaults you will find it difficult to use American Express, Diners and other cards not affiliated with Visa or Mastercard. So please, make sure you bring a Visa or Mastercard or you may get into a bit of bother.

Katy Clarke:

Now it really depends on how you manage credit cards and debit cards in terms of your own finances as there are a few options on which cards to use when you're traveling.

A lot of people like to use their standard credit cards so they can collect points they'll later use towards flights and other travel costs.

I can't go into every credit card offer here but I think it does pay to look into what is included and charged by the financial institution very closely. Some cards may offer travel insurance and the ability to accrue a lot of points but do take a look at the exchange rate they can be very generous back to themselves. So you're paying a bit extra for these benefits. Nothing is ever free is it!! There are also cards that charge a per transaction fee so you need to do your research before you go to work out whether it is worth taking your usual credit card. I would say debit cards generally incur a fee for international transactions so look closely at that.

I like to travel with a specific travel card that is not directly attached to any of my bank accounts or credit facilities at home so I use the Wise card. This is an international Visa debit card that is very handy as you can transfer as much or as little as you want to from your home currency and it will be converted to Euros at one of the best exchange rates on the market and for minimal fees.

What you do is sign up to Wise and they will set you up with a Euro account and a home currency account. Before your trip, you can transfer however much you think you'll need in your home currency and you can change it into Euro when you need or want to. You can also top up your wise account quickly if needed from your main bank account.

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By the way, if you're interested, we also have a trip cost calculator so you can estimate your travel costs. We'll also link to that information in the show notes because I think it's quite useful to have a rough idea of what things are going to cost.

Ok back to the Wise account. On set up you'll also be asked if you want a card and you can order physical as well as digital cards which you can add to your online wallet. The advantage of the digital card is that you can set one up quickly and use it should you lose another card or, let's not tempt fate, but also if it gets stolen.

So now you have a Euro account you can easily access and to summarize, Once you've transferred money into your Wise account and exchanged into Euros you can just use your Wise card as you would use a card at home - there is no further exchange or fees to pay. It's simply tap and go.

Katy Clarke:

Wise have an app where you can keep track of your spending and also freeze cards if you're worried about security. On the app, you can also change your PIN number. I find it super handy and they also allow a few hundred dollars cash withdrawal per month should you need it.

I've been traveling with my Wise card for about 8 years now and it's been great. I always do have the cards I use at home as a backup on Apple Pay and Google Wallet but I mainly use the Wise card in Italy for ease of use, the best exchange rate and security reasons.

If you're interested in using this service I recommend getting organized well before your trip - probably 6-8 weeks because Wise are very strict on identification and protocols for setting up accounts and you want everything finalized before you go.

Now whether you use the Wise card, some other travel debit or credit card or your usual cards I also wanted to share a few tips with you that you may not have encountered before you go to Italy

This first always makes me panic a bit because I generally never have to do it at home any more and that is use my PIN number to approve smallish transactions at stores and restaurants. I have to dig deep in the memory banks to recall those PINs and that is where the Wise card comes in handy because in this scenario you don't have to remember the PIN you can just find it in the app. Anyway, best remember your PIN numbers before you go to Italy is my advice.

Katy Clarke:

Pay in Euros or your currency - If you are using your usual credit or debit card then sometimes you'll be asked if you want to pay in your home currency or in Euros. In this case, you should always choose Euro as otherwise you will be charged a transaction fee and a disadvantageous exchange rate will be used. It's a lose-lose situation for the unwary traveler. But to be clear -

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the beneficiary will be the payment provider, not the establishment where you are making the payment. Chances are they don't know about this scam so please, no need to take it out on them, simply say you want to pay in Euro.

So we've covered a lot here about paying by card and I hope you now understand it is really easy and just like at home to pay for things in Italy. You just need to do a few things to prepare before you go. But now I want to talk about cash.

Probably like most of you at home, I very very rarely use cash these days but there are some situations in Italy where cash is helpful and I usually take out around €200 for my trip and always come home with money.

You can organise currency before you leave your country if it makes you feel more comfortable but the exchange rates are often very poor and fees are charged on top. I usually wait until I arrive in Italy and withdraw from a bank ATM.

And it must be a bank ATM. You'll see Euronet ATMs and other non-bank-owned ATMs at the airports and in the major tourist zones. Please don't use these as they charge horrendous rates and also are often watched by thieves.

Go to a bank-owned ATM. You generally need to go inside a secured area and have some privacy for making your transaction. There may be a small fee of say €2 but it's a lot less than the Euronet ATM option. Just remember this - you don't need much cash, and if you do need to take some out, use a bank ATM.

Katy Clarke:

But like I said, I rarely use cash in Italy. When do you need cash?

Katy Clarke:

Very small transactions under €5 like when you buy a coffee or water at a bar so you can use the bathroom. In this situation, I'd pay by cash.

Katy Clarke:

Bathroom facilities at train stations often charge €1 or 2 so it's useful then.

Katy Clarke:

Taxis sometimes say their machine isn't working. Happens all over the world this one. So some cash is handy in this situation. Just make sure you get the correct change. I prefer to use the taxi apps in this case as you're less likely to be ripped off.

Katy Clarke:

Coins are useful if you would like to leave a small tip.

Katy Clarke:

Tipping - I am now going to very briefly touch on tipping as this has been covered in an earlier episode and in a detailed article we'll link to in our show notes. But, the general rule here is, tipping large amounts is not customary in Italy. If you wish to do so, go right ahead, it will be appreciated but I do not know any Italians who tip large amounts for any service. And that's because the staff are generally paid for holidays and sick leave and there is a generous and free health system or they are being paid cash and therefore not paying taxes. At restaurants you can round up and leave a few Euro per person but the 20%+ tip is not the norm.

In some tourist areas, tipping is becoming more normalized but it really isn't a thing Italians do. In fact, I've never been given the option to tip when paying by card. You need to leave cash usually so that's when it is a good idea to have some handy. However, like I said, if you want to tip. Go right ahead. If not, it's not expected.

Katy Clarke:

One time when you definitely do not tip is when you see a servizio or service charge on your restaurant check or bill. This is specifically a charge for service found in the most touristed areas of Italy and is usually between 10-20%. It is a mandatory charge but to claim that status it must be displayed clearly on a menu or other method before you enter the restaurant so it's worthwhile checking that if it's something you are going to be bothered about.

You can assume that in Italy's most beautiful piazzas like San Marco in Venice and Piazza Navona in Rome that a service charge will be applied. Personally I think that it's worth it for that experience but that's completely up to you.

Another charge you may see on restaurant menus is the coperto or cover charge which is usually around €2 per person and is collected by the restaurant to cover cutlery, tablecloths and whatever else is on the table. Once again, this should be identified on the menu and it is not optional.

Katy Clarke:

So there are a few little quirks about money in Italy but generally, it's very similar to what you are used to at home. Just make sure that you check the terms and charges on your usual credit or debit card if you choose to use that but really a Wise card or there's also Revolut which is similar is so easy to use and manage plus you get the best exchange rates.

That's all for today. If you'd like to access the resources I mentioned in this episode including the podcast guide, trip cost calculator and other tips head on over to our website show notes at untolditaly.com/240 for episode 240.

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

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If you listen on Spotify you can also leave comments on each episode and I really love reading all of those. We now have comment answering too so I'm ready and waiting for those!

Next week on Untold Italy, we're talking about my favorite cheese. Can you guess what it is? I dropped a bit of a clue at the start of this episode - don't worry, you'll find out soon enough. But until then it's "ciao for now".