

Untold Italy Episode 243: Staying Safe in Italy - Tips and Tricks for Avoiding Scams and Theft

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 243.

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:

Buongiorno a tutti. Welcome to another episode of Untold Italy, where we aim to provide you with practical advice and inspiring insight for your travels to Italy. Today, we're diving into an important topic, how to keep yourself and your belongings safe while traveling in Italy. But before we get started, a big shout out to listener Jane from Virginia Beach in the United States. Jane and I met earlier this year in Rome when she was on a food tour with my friend Nesim, who you may have heard on previous episodes. She just sent me the most beautiful email about how she used our podcast episodes to plan this special trip with her daughter. And you know what? Sometimes it's a bit surreal to know that people are really paying attention to what I say as I talk into a microphone from my home office here in Australia, but I really get a big thrill out of knowing that the advice has been helpful. If you have a moment, leaving a rating or review on your favorite podcast app helps us reach more people like you and Jane. And they're also so exciting for me and the Untold Italy team to read and enjoy.

Katy Clarke:

So thank you Grazie! to those of you who take the time to do that. It really is very much appreciated. Okay. So today I wanted to talk about a topic that gets a bit of coverage in our Italy Travel Planning Community on Facebook, which is free to join and everyone is welcome. And that topic is personal safety concerns, especially to do with scams and petty theft. Now I'm going to go through a few scenarios and let you know what's common and what's a bit of scare mongering and give you some practical tips to take both before you leave and during your trip. But I really want to emphasize that overall, Italy is a very, very safe country to travel in. I've done countless trips there over 25 years and I can say that I have only had one petty crime incident in a very crowded tourist area which I'll go into in a little bit more detail later.

Katy Clarke:

In terms of violent crime, Italy is ranked 33rd on the global peace index. And to put that into perspective, Australia where I live is ranked 19, the UK is 34, Canada is at 11, and the United

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

States is at 132 out of 163 countries. There are still, for some reason, a lot of outdated tropes flying around about mafia and other organized crime in Italy. If you're concerned about that, please don't be. Those people are focused on themselves and local issues, certainly not tourists. I've felt safe walking around at night in all the major tourist areas in Italy as, generally, they are buzzing with people, including families and friends, and everyone is quite friendly. To be honest, there is much less of a problem with intoxication and the poor behavior associated with that to in Italy, as it really isn't in the Italian culture to get drunk. So that particular issue, and we all know what that's like when you're around a lot of drunk people is not really something that you will generally encounter in Italy.

Katy Clarke:

Of course, when I'm traveling solo, I avoid walking at night in poorly lit areas and where there aren't so many people - on my own. I would also do that in my own city, so there's no reason to change that practice when I'm abroad. The main idea is to reduce risk and not be a target for opportunists, which is really important when it comes to keeping your property safe. Petty theft and personal scams are more of a problem in Italy just as they are in any major city around the world, and you should take your usual precautions. I'll go into some specifics, but suffice to say, pickpocketing and theft happens in crowded areas like major tourist attractions and transportation hubs - train stations, bus stations and ferry terminals. Imagine you're in a crowd of hundreds of tourists admiring the Trevo fountain and enjoying its beauty and perhaps you're not really paying attention to your belongings. This is really where opportunistic thieves are most likely to be a problem. They'll target anyone who is distracted and disoriented and where they can see an easy win.

Katy Clarke:

Anyone that's, you know, looking a little bit more alert is not gonna be their target. Crowded tourist areas like the Trevi Fountain, outside the Colosseum and Vatican Museums in Rome are where these thieves hang out. Florence is a much smaller city, so be careful around the Ponte Vecchio and Duomo and area outside the market and Uffizi Gallery. In Venice, Piazza San Marco and the Rialto Bridge are the most likely spots, and in Naples, it's around the train station where it's really more of a problem. And this is true pretty much in every city. The train stations are the problem. And so the main stations around Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples, Bologna - they're pretty busy and big stations and there's people and crowds everywhere. But another one that's maybe not as obvious, this very small and crowded train stations of the Cinque Terre, which is actually where I was relieved of around €80, about 8 years ago.

Katy Clarke:

I'll tell you the story because it's really important to understand that even though this was a country area, this was a very, very crowded train platform because on that day, the ferries weren't running along the coast due to very poor weather that day. So everyone was traveling by train and we were all packed on the platform. There was no personal space and everyone was pushed up against each other. The thief that got my €80 obviously had a field day because it later transpired that a few people on our train carriage had also been robbed.

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

Now, at that time, we were traveling with young children and we were very distracted because we were trying to keep them safe and also try to get on the train at the same time. These crowds and being distracted is the perfect scenario for an opportunistic thief, so what I wanted to do is if you're in these areas give you some tips on how you can keep your belongings safe. First up, as I mentioned, you need to stay alert and try not to be distracted, which is usually easier said than done when you're admiring a magnificent, gushing baroque fountain with around 500 other tourists or you're trying to keep your eyes on your children. But if you're prepared, you can minimize the chance that you're targeted by avoiding crowds as much as possible and choosing a sensible way to carry your things.

Katy Clarke:

Personally, I carry my usual cross-body bag and have it positioned across my shoulder and in front of me so I can have my hands on it at all times. I have several quite nice bags and I don't feel the need to have the security-type versions that you can find. Although a lot of people do prefer those. I do think it's best if the bag has an internal pocket or 2, so you can stash some things away. Of course, it should be zip it up. So it's not a temptation to grab whatever is inside. So I have seen people wandering around with open bags and that is the biggest invitation to a thief. So do not leave your bag open, have it zip it up, and make sure there's no temptation for anyone.

Katy Clarke:

What you also don't want is a backpack where you can't see anything. That's an open invitation to thieves and, honestly, if you have a lock or something on it, that's annoying to get things in and out of, and it also suggests that you have something worth stealing inside. It goes without saying that you should keep any bag in your sight at all times and definitely don't leave it on the back of a chair at a restaurant, particularly if you're outside. And in fact, when I was living in London, I did have a very nice bag that I bought in Italy stolen from the back of a chair in a restaurant. So I have learned that lesson the hard way. And it's really annoying. I think as a woman, I love to have a lovely bag to take with me and I don't really like keeping them on the ground or, you know, sort of wedged in between my knees, but sometimes you're really going to have to do that, unfortunately, because you want to keep your bag and your belongings safe. Now when you're traveling by train between cities in Italy, you will leave your luggage either above your seat, which is probably the safest, or in the luggage area, which you may not be able to see from your seat.

Katy Clarke:

And this is another really good reason to keep your luggage fairly small, because if you can get it above your seat, then it's much less at risk. But anyway, I've never had a problem with luggage on trains. So it's sort of up to you to make the risk assessment, but I would make sure that it's locked and if needed, you can buy a separate bike lock on one of those chains that you could wrap around your case handle and lock it onto the luggage wrack. If you've rented a car, it's never, never a good idea in any country, in anywhere in the world to leave your luggage inside the car. However, sometimes this is unavoidable. So in that case, make sure it is well covered or hidden in the trunk or the boot. And you park the car somewhere with 24

by 7 security, or it's out in the open where everyone can see what's going on. We've had to do that several times and I have to say we had a lot of luggage in our last trip.

Katy Clarke:

We had a van cause we had quite a few people travelling with us and I think we've learned now where to go to put these cars. My poor husband, he had to get into some pretty tight spaces with our van, but it's really worth it when there's 24 by 7 security. Cause you just don't want to have to be dealing with that later down the track. A lot of questions get asked about jewelry as well, and whether you should bring jewelry or wear jewelry in Italy. And, you know, in terms of jewelry, I wear my wedding and engagement rings, but personally I don't bring anything especially valuable with me. Otherwise, I don't really take my rings off and I have a very good habit of putting them back on it in the morning after I take them off at night. Because I would be worried about leaving anything nice behind somewhere. So I'm more worried about my forgetfulness than them getting stolen.

Katy Clarke:

And so it's really a personal choice. I know plenty of people, you know, are walking around looking fabulous in their jewelry, in the streets of Italy and Rome and the big cities. And it's a complete personal choice, but I'd be more worried about leaving it behind somewhere rather than getting it stolen. And that brings me to the phone. Now everyone's phone is kind of wedged to their wrist or their hands at the moment. And like most people, I use my smartphone camera for all my photos. And I basically have my phone out with me always because I'm using it to pay for things, check maps, look up things, take photos, you know, the works. So it's probably not the best idea, but, you know, to have your phone out all the time, but I think you would be very unlucky to have it stolen from out of your hands.

Katy Clarke:

And I mean, if someone is going to do that, think they're pretty intent on snatching your phone and would do it anyway. So one option in this case, which is a bit pricey, but it looks nice and it adds a level of protection to your phone is these cases called Bandolier, and they're kind of cases and wallets that are like a tiny cross body bag, and they go across your body as it says, and, they're on a strap and you can have like a, you know, a card or 2 and your phone and it's, you know, a bit more secure. And I'm probably going to look into that or something similar for our kids who are pretty keen on taking photos everywhere at the moment with their phones. So if there's a practical solution like that and you feel more comfortable, then that's probably a good way to go to. My understanding is that most phones disappear from restaurant tables and it's generally after a distraction has been made so that you take your eyes off your phone. So make sure to keep your phone on your person or have one of those Bandolier lanyards, especially if you're seated outside where it's easier for someone to come and approach you.

Katy Clarke:

Now here's a big one and I do want to mention passports specifically because it is a requirement to have a national identification on you at all times in Italy. For most of us who

come from outside of the European Union, that means a passport because we don't have an ID card as they do in Europe.

Katy Clarke:

And our driver's licenses are generally issued by state level authorities. Police can and do ask you for your passport. So you do need to carry it with you. And we've seen this increase a bit lately. In the past, I've carried a copy with me and left the originals at the hotel, but because the frequency has increased and this has been reported by several members of our untold Italy team who either live in or travel to Italy regularly, I will carry my full passport with me, and I have it stashed in the internal pocket of my bag. Make sure you've also got a digital and photocopy of the passport in case in the very worst scenario it goes missing. But, you know, I've made the risk assessment and to be honest, the paperwork and the pain of trying to go through and present yourself to a police station to show your full ID if you've been asked is quite significant.

Katy Clarke:

So for me, I think carrying my passport is okay and I've got a backup plan should anything happen and that's keeping the digital copy and the photocopy. And if you really wanna be organized, you can have a little passport photo with you as well. You know, I'll go into some stats later because you'd be very unlucky if that happened to you.

Katy Clarke:

Now if you are robbed, then you need to try to stay calm and you need to take action immediately. So you should report the theft to the local police as you'll need the report to claim on your travel insurance. You will find the police and the Carabinieri, which are the national kind of national guard. And they are usually around in most major tourist areas. But if you need to call the emergency number in Italy is 112 or for police it's 113.

Katy Clarke:

But as I said, you will find plenty of officers around the main tourist areas and you can go and approach them. If your passport goes missing, then you will need to contact your country's embassy or consulate and this will likely be in Rome. So if you're in Rome, that's fairly straightforward, but if you're in Florence or Venice or Naples or somewhere else then you'll need to get to Rome to sort that situation out. It's a very unlikely scenario, but if you get your card stolen obviously you need to cancel your cards with your provider immediately. I recently did an episode on money, and I've got some really good tips on how to reduce the risk around carrying your normal cards, and that's carrying a travel card that you can top up with money from home. And I really prefer to do that because I don't want to cancel all my cards at home because I don't know about you, but I have a lot of direct debits and things happening with my cards. And if something goes wrong, it's extremely painful. Anyway, I want to reiterate that passports being stolen is a rare though, completely upsetting and annoying occurrence.

Katy Clarke:

It is rare though. Some quick stats for you that I could get about travelers in Australia, which I couldn't get from other countries, unfortunately. But in Australia, over half a million Australians visit Italy each year and last year around 350 passports were reported lost or stolen in Italy by Australians, so that's much less than 1% of Australian travelers and as we're discussing here today there are some steps you can take to minimize the risk.

Katy Clarke:

Next up I wanted to make you aware of some of the pickpocket tactics and scams that you should keep an eye out for. These scams and tactics usually have a variation on a theme and these people tend to work in teams and one person will try to distract you while another is ready to take your money and rob you. This is not unique to Italy. It happens in all major cities around the world and is as old a story as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, which if you want to see those scams in action, you can just go and watch that movie or read the book even.

Katy Clarke:

So the first one is a fake petition scam, which I've actually seen quite a lot outside St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. And so how this one works is that a young person, someone that's looking very friendly will approach you with a clipboard asking you to sign a petition. Now that petition might be to support a charitable cause such as helping disabled people or supporting some sort of international or local organization. Now, while you're distracted signing someone in their team may pick pocket you and this might not happen, but also at that time, they may also ask you for a donation and they may actually get a little bit aggressive if you refuse to pay. So this, as I mentioned, happens outside the big tourist areas, and I've seen it a lot outside St. Peter's. Cause you can imagine they're trying to prey on people that have potentially a more charitable point of view.

Katy Clarke:

Now, how you can deal with this is you can politely, but firmly say no, no grazie or no, thank you and keep walking. I think the message here is just to be wary of anyone who comes and approaches you in crowded tourist spots with a clipboard. I know clipboards are fascinating for children. I know my children love them, but, yeah, just stay away from those people. It just becomes really awkward and chews up time. It's annoying too.

Katy Clarke:

The second one is the friendship bracelet or rose scam or any other type of small gift. And that also happens obviously in and around the major tourist areas.

Katy Clarke:

So in case you are approached by someone who's offering you a free (in inverted commas) friendship bracelet or rose, they may say it's a gift or claim it's for good luck. And once you take it, they demand money in return and they may become a little bit aggressive, or they may start making you feel guilty and give you a sob story. It's never a good idea to accept

unsolicited gifts. In our family we say only hugs are free and so a friendly no and no thank you, no grazie is usually enough.

Katy Clarke:

The third example that I wanted to give you is around fake tour guides and ancient Roman soldiers. In Italy, tour guiding is a licensed profession that is taken very seriously. Anyone offering guiding services should be able to provide you with their credentials in the form of a badge from the region that you are visiting. And as there is a shortage of guides, any decent guide probably would not be spruiking for work.

Katy Clarke:

I'd be very surprised if one of the local guides with the right credentials is standing outside these major attractions looking for work. So just be very aware the way to deal with this is to book your tours in advance. So you're not tempted by one of these persistent so called guides who may take your money and wander off with it, if you decide to engage them or give you a very subpar service. So, yeah, look out for those, and we have recommended companies that we work with that are really great at delivering you entertainment as well as delivering history and giving you the whole experience when you're in Italy. So it's really not worth paying for someone outside the front who may or may not have the right credentials. Another similar scam that we've noticed are people dressed up as Roman Centurions, this is in Rome, who offer you a lovely photo souvenir using your phone, and then they will not give your phone back unless you give them some outrageous sum, like €30 or €50. I feel like this is a fun photo, but I wouldn't pay more than €5 for it. And when I say I wouldn't, I can't say we haven't because we have, and even the most seasoned travelers fall for things when distracted. And in that case, you know, my kids were very excited to see a Roman Centurion and we just handed the phone over for the photo. I felt really silly, but it does happen, you know, and we've, I've got a story out of it, so that's good.

Katy Clarke:

The next one I wanted to tell you about is that you need to just be extra careful if you've just withdrawn cash. As the reality is in this scenario, you're definitely being watched if you're in a busy tourist area. Not definitely, but, you know, that's the time they know you've got a large amount of cash on you and it's maybe an easy target. As I mentioned in a recent episode, cash is not really needed in Italy, and I only take a very small amount out with me. And if I need to withdraw cash, I will do so at a large bank where there are indoor ATMs and security cameras everywhere. The standalone so called 'convenient ATMs' are where you'll find problems with targeting and card skimming and rip offs in terms of exchange rates and all sorts of things.

Katy Clarke:

So they are best avoided. And the last one I wanted to mention was taxis. Taxi drivers don't have the best reputation in most cities and Italian ones are no different. Somehow the card machine or meter isn't working and they want to charge you an exorbitant flat cash. The way to handle this is make sure the meter is on and you are able to pay by card before you take off. If you're picking up a taxi at the rank, It's never a good idea to flag taxis in Italy, because

it's not really the the culture there. They have taxi ranks. I prefer to use the local taxi apps like Free Now in Rome, which works like Uber to avoid this situation entirely. So you book and pay on the app, and there's no confusion.

Katy Clarke:

Lastly, I just wanted to take a quick second to talk about how to respond if you feel like you are being scammed or you're annoyed because I've noticed some pretty average behaviors from travelers when I've been out and about in Rome in particular. When we're traveling, it is normal to feel a little nervous and on guard as we're in an unfamiliar environment and things are a bit unusual and not as we are expecting when we're at home, but it's never okay to be rude or to make assumptions about people due to their appearance or ethnicity.

Unfortunately, when people are feeling a little bit unsure they can lose their judgement and sense of humanity, and I've seen some very, very rude behavior from tourists in Italy. Usually, a simple no grazie or no thank you is enough to get someone to move on their way. If someone is being more persistent and it's annoying, then you can say, Basta! which means 'enough', and they'll get the message. If you're really uncomfortable, find a police officer or the Carabinieri.

Katy Clarke:

You can't miss them because they look very striking in their uniforms. They're very visible at most major sites in Italy and are used to responding to these situations. And remember, not all people offering to sell you something on the street are trying to scam you. There are a lot of people in every major city around the world doing it tough and we should have some empathy. As travellers, we are among the very privileged majority who are able to travel internationally for leisure purposes and not simply trying to survive. So as I mentioned just now, a polite no thank you is the way to go in most occasions if you don't feel like engaging.

Katy Clarke:

So in summary, a recap now of the key points that I've mentioned. Be aware of pickpocketing scams and how to protect yourself. We've given you a few examples here and, you know, there's plenty more and the reality is most of these are annoyances and they will not result in any major financial damage. You're gonna be pretty unlucky to get hit. Stay safe when you're in the major tourist areas and on public transportation. This is where things are likely to go wrong, and prepare by making sure you have a good plan for carrying your belongings. And lastly, know how to get help if you need it. You can always call on the police in Italy, and, you know, they really wanna make sure tourists have a great experience, so they're there to help you. So the last thing that I wanted to say that while it is important to be cautious, Italy is such a beautiful and welcoming country that millions of people actually well over 10 million English-speaking travelers each year go very safely and enjoy every little bit of it. So just prepare a little and make sure you know what to expect when you get there, have a plan to keep your belongings safe, and you'll have a great time.

Katy Clarke:

Grazie, thanks for tuning into Untold Italy, I hope you found this episode helpful. You'll find a summary of these tips and a link to the products I mentioned in the episode show notes at untolditaly.com/243.

And as I mentioned at the top of the show, we'd really appreciate if you subscribed to our podcast and / or shared it with fellow travelers or left us a lovely review. That's all for this week. Safe travels and ciao for now!